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'*Gott mit uns*': Reflections on some partisan theologies

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The idea that God sides with particular groups as they try to achieve their political goals by way of violence has emerged and re-emerged throughout the history of the Christian Church. This article examines some of these occasions where partisan theologies led to inhuman actions justified by a self-identified divine cause. The purpose is to explain how the motto, 'God with us' (*Gott mit uns*), was used to justify inhuman actions and selfish goals and that Christians should be hesitant to design a theology on the foundation of this idea and to further a certain political cause with a divine purpose. The central theoretical argument of this investigation is that the dictate *Gott mit uns* leads to partisan theologies that can be misused to justify inhuman policies and practices. Four theologies are selected as examples: the Puritan theology in the colonial America of the 17th century, Reformed theology in the Dutch colonisation of the South Africa and the formation of apartheid, the theology in the Reichskirche in Germany in the 20th century and liberation theology in the developing world in the 20th century.

Introduction

The idea that God sides with particular groups in their efforts to achieve their political goals by way of violence has emerged and re-emerged throughout the history of the Christian Church. The empire of Constantine claimed God as the god of the empire in whose name they could rule and expand (Walker et al. 1992:137). In the Medieval period, the same idea led to many political upheavals of which the emergence of the Holy Roman Empire was the most distinctive episode (Cairns 1982:191). After the Reformation and in the time of modernity, Christians performed many actions under the slogan: 'In the name of God'. In this respect, the process of colonisation of vast areas of the unknown world comes to mind. In many instances, Christian churches provided moral support and theological justification for the political processes of colonisation and saw this expansion of the Western culture as an opportunity to fulfil a missionary task (see Latourette 1953:1205). Under the guidance of the dictum 'God is on our side', indigenous populations were brought under colonial rule – many times with cruel and immoral means. Even slavery was justified and practised in the name of God.

This article examines some of these occasions where partisan theologies led to inhuman actions justified by a self-identified divine cause. The purpose is to explain how the motto, 'God with us' (*Gott mit uns*), was used to justify inhuman actions and selfish goals and that Christians should be hesitant to design a theology on the foundation of this idea and to further a certain political cause with a divine purpose. The central theoretical argument of this investigation is that the dictate *Gott mit uns* leads to partisan theologies that can be misused to justify inhuman policies and practices. Four theologies are selected as examples: the Puritan theology in the colonial America of the 17th century, Reformed theology in the Dutch colonisation of the South Africa and the formation of apartheid, the theology of the Reichskirche in Germany in the 20th century and liberation theology in the developing world in the 20th century. Because of its blatant form as it manifested in the theology of the Reichskirche, the German expression *Gott mit uns* is used in the title and the further discussion in this article.

Puritan theology in colonial America

The Puritan Movement started in England as a reaction to doctrinal ecclesiastical developments within the Church of England. A group of the Puritans moved to America to escape persecution and to seek religious liberty. Their intention was also to establish 'a theocratic Bible commonwealth' (Walker et al. 1992:574). They adhered to strict Calvinism in both doctrine and church polity. Cartwright (1535?–1603) laid the foundation for Puritan church polity by advocating the

Note: The collection entitled 'Christina Landman Festschrift', sub-edited by Wessel Bentley (University of South Africa) and Victor S. Molobi (University of South Africa).

appointment of elders for discipline in each parish, the election of pastors by their people, the abolition of offices such as archbishops and archdeacons, and the reduction of clergy to essential parity (Walker 1992:545). In contrast to the structures of authority in the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of England, they stressed the authority of the local congregation and the church council based on the *jure divino* of Presbyterianism. This decentralisation of authority and their particular view of the doctrine of the covenant eventually influenced their political beliefs, which came to fruition in the colony they established.

These principles and their foundations were clearly expressed in the Mayflower Compact (1620), where the Puritans state that they have:

> … undertaken, for the glory of God and advancement of the Christian faith, and honour of our king and country, a voyage to plant the first colony in the Northern parts of Virginia, do by these presents solemnly and mutually in the presence of God, and one of another, covenant and combine ourselves together into a civil body politic, for our better ordering and preservation and furtherance of the ends aforesaid; and by virtue hereof to enact, constitute, and frame such just and equal laws, ordinances, acts, constitutions, and offices, from time to time, as shall be thought most meet and convenient for the general good of the colony, unto which we promise all due submission and obedience. (Bradford 1620:1)

Tuininga (2018:1) describes how the Puritans appealed to traditional Reformed doctrines of covenant, law, Israel, providence, spirituality, missions and social hierarchy to provide theological justification for their complicity in genocide, slavery and warmongering. In this respect, their ideas about the covenant and law were prominent. They founded human relations on a particular interpretation and promotion of the idea of God's covenant, especially the idea of the 'covenant of works' and the 'covenant of grace', which included the so-called half-way covenant that was said to apply to baptised non-members (Kidd 2005:459).

The covenant of works was explained as God's covenant with all people. It enables them to fear God because of creational gifts, or natural law. This covenant is also called the 'covenant of creation'. This covenant is made with every living creature and offers no promise of salvation (VanDrunen 2014:13). This covenant of works brings about in all people a moral conscience, not to appease God in any way or to earn redemption, but to motivate all people to live morally and to prevent society from falling into chaos. The covenant of works also gives all people the responsibility to live a humble and virtuous life because of the fear of the Lord and his judgement. Humanity is thus responsible to God and all culture must be characteristic of the fear of the Lord. Disobedience to God by unbelievers can evoke the judgement of God upon them. The early Puritans observed the Indian tribes through this lenticel. They expected the Indians to live a humble and god-fearing life because they should know God and be responsible to him because of the covenant of works.

Furthermore, they founded human relation on the covenant of grace. The covenant of grace describes God's covenant with his elected people. In the Old Testament, it was the people of Israel and in the New Testament the church of Christ. This covenant is not based on any appeasement of God by way of 'good works' but is solely founded in the free grace of God in Christ. Believers are called upon to accept the free grace and the atonement of Christ by faith and to live a godly and holy life out of gratitude. This covenant theology defined divine-human relations (Johnson 2005:130). The two covenants therefore constituted two communities: the Christians and the unbelievers. The Christians become the 'in-group' and the unbelievers the 'out-group'. The two covenants divided people into the mode of 'us' and 'them'. The Puritans set themselves up against the 'pagans'. They saw their task, as the chosen people, as creating a holy city (Slater 2014):

> Early settlers in New England envisioned their 'city on a hill' as a divine destiny and understood their obligation to eradicate heretics or those opposed to God's will that they should erect their pious community. (p. 49)

God is on the side of his chosen people and actions against 'the other' can thus be judged as a justified holy cause. Their intention to establish a Christian body politic, as stated in the Mayflower Compact, was seen as a divine plan for government.

The Puritans's idea of government and jurisprudence strengthened the tendency to create social stratification. The Puritans believed that political officials were required to appropriate and apply natural law into positive law. They equated natural law with the Decalogue and thus described the magistrate as a custodian of both tables of the Decalogue (Witte 2007:308). However, the Puritans conceived the church and the state as two separate covenantal entities, but these entities should be two coordinate seats of godly authority and power in society. They are 'twins' (Witte 2007:309). Christ reigns in both. Government officials were expected to have a godly character and had to be models of spirituality and morality for the community. Officials in church and state could only occupy their offices for limited periods to prevent self-gain. Furthermore, in both church and state, they did not consolidate all forms of authority in one person, but rather in separate offices, with the commonwealth having a distinct responsibility. They advocated the development of legal codes and clear statutes so that magistrates could not proceed according to their own discretions. On the foundation of their covenant theology, they accepted a federalist structure of government for both church and state. The church was divided into semi-autonomous congregations loosely conjoined in democratically elected synods and assemblies. The state was divided in semi-autonomous town governments, each with their own internal structures of executive, legislative and judicial authority, but conjoined in a broader colonial government. They also advocated the democratic election of both church and state officials (Witte 2017:315–317). In this way, they aimed to develop holy communities.

The covenant theology of the Puritans created a peculiar kind of spirituality. Besides the establishment of social stratification and the insider-outsider character of society, they expected a godly behaviour of the Indian population surrounding them. Their idea of natural law and the 'covenant of works' determined their view of outsiders. They expected the Indians to be humble, respectful and willing to submit their lives to the Christian God. In their effort to create a Christian colony, they claim God for their cause and the justification of their actions. This spirituality led to the atrocities during the Pequot War of 1637 – a war the Puritans believed was ordained by God (Slater 2014; Tuininga 2018).

Pre-war tensions between the Puritan settlers and the Pequots (a local Indian people) paved the way for war. Several murders of settlers and provocations by the Pequots, including blasphemy of the Christian God, fuelled an act of revenge. The contest reached its apex at the engagement at Fort Mystic. The fort was burned down and most of the Pequot died an agonising death in the flames. Few survived. The burning of Fort Mystic was God's vengeance in the eyes of the Puritans. Puritan men saw themselves as doing the work of God to combat the satanic presence of the proud Pequots, who rejected and mocked both Christianity and God himself (Slater 2014:59). Slater (2014) described the deeper reasons for the actions of the Puritans as follows:

> Over the course of the 1630s the Puritans increasingly associated the Pequot nation with sin and pride. These behaviors derived from what Puritans characterized as an excess of arrogance and a distinct absence of humility, behaviors not only antithetical to Christianity but unpardonable when exhibited by those too proud to humble themselves before the Puritan God. As representatives of Satan in the wilderness, the Puritans contended, the Pequots simultaneously rejected God and behave both in a proud and insolent manner. (p. 38)

This portrayal of the culture of the Pequots justified genocide in the eyes of the Puritans.

For the Puritans, the Pequots represented a tangible embodiment of Satan and many Puritan tracts extolled the virtues of spiritual combat against Satan and his minions on earth (Slater 2014:48). The jump from spiritual warfare to real warfare was small. One of the military leaders of the battle, Major Mason (1736), remarked that the attack against the Pequots is an act of God:

> … who laughed at his enemies and the enemies of his people to scorn making (the Pequot fort) as a fury oven. This did the Lord Judge among the heathen, filling (the Mystic) with dead bodies. (p. 30)

Their actions were the result of the fact that they took possession of God and their 'Godly' cause justified the means of a destructive war.

The war the Puritans waged against the Pequots was based on religious grounds and this event is a clear example of how a partisan theology inspired by the motto 'God is on our side' can lead to immoral and violent means. Their theology of the covenant and their views on law and religion created a view of the Pequots as the 'other' and of the war against the tribe as divine. In this way, inhumane actions were promoted in the name of God.

The same tendency can be discerned in the South African history two centuries later where another manifestation of the covenant theology emerged in the theology of the *Voortrekkers* (the movement of Dutch settlers to the interior of Southern Africa). Here too, political policies were formulated within the framework of 'God with us'. This similarity will be discussed in the next section.

The theology of the Voortrekkers in South Africa

In South Africa, the 19th century is, among others, known for the migration of white colonists and immigrants into the interior of the country. These movements included the migration of Dutch settlers from the Cape Colony and an influx of British settlers after developments in the international relations between the European colonial powers (see Davenport 1997:53). These movements and eventual settlements led to many skirmishes with the indigenous black tribes, of which the wars between settlers and Zulus can be regarded as the most important. Theology played an important role in inspiring these moves and the conflicts with indigenous peoples. For the purpose of this article, the theology and political ideas of the Dutch settlers (*Voortrekkers*) are considered as it culminated in the Day of the Vow and the war against the Zulu people at *Bloedrivier* [Blood River].

The ancestors of the Voortrekkers resided in the Cape Colony from the time of the occupation of the Cape of Good Hope by the Dutch commander Jan van Riebeeck in 1652. Just like the Puritans in New England, the settlers were deeply involved in the theology of the Reformation, especially the Dutch version of Calvinism as formulated by the Synod of Dordt (1618–1619) in the Netherlands (Pillay & Hofmeyr 1991:250). Furthermore, they were influenced by the Dutch Second Reformation of the early 18th century. At the Cape, the settlers established a Reformed Church along the lines of the State Church in the Netherlands (Pillay & Hofmeyr 1991:250). In their Reformed theology, the concept of the covenant played an important role, just as in the case of the Puritans in New England. After the British occupation of the Cape Colony, the Voortrekkers regarded themselves as enslaved people and longed for the freedom in the Promised Land – the interior of South Africa. The Voortrekkers resolved to move away from British occupation in the 1830s, and in several groups, they moved to the north into territory where several more African ethnic groups resided. While the black occupants owned and divided the land on a communal basis, the Voortrekkers regarded the land as *terra nullius*,[1] in other words 'no man's land', because no title deeds according to the European fashion existed (Vorster 2007:56).

1.The colonial powers of that time regarded unregistered land and 'wide open spaces' as *terra nullius* [no man's land] and, as a result, claimed it while it in fact was a tribal land. This land was divided into farms with new deeds, and in this way tribes were dispossessed.

Steytler (2000:1) explains that traditional or customary law always recognised different tribes' land ownership. The tribes' history of occupation and control of territory determined its land ownership and other land rights. Communal ownership was the order of the day. Land was owned by tribes and large families under the leadership of a chief. Terreblanche (2002:260) refers to this phenomenon as 'semi-feudalism'. The idea of individual land ownership and the *terra nullius* doctrine that originated during the rule of colonial powers was strange to the African mindset. In fact, traditional law did not recognise individual rights. Individual land rights were not regarded as independent rights, but derived rights that were dependent on the ownership of the tribe to which the individual belonged. Shared tribal rules determined the individual's access to the land held in common. If the tribe lost ownership, all the derived individual access rights also disappeared (Steytler 2000:2). Africans did not understand why a single person could own land exclusively, while others have no claim to use the land. The different views on property rights resulted in severe conflicts between the black and white people in South Africa.

One of these battles took place in Natal at Blood River. In this battle, the influence of the Reformed theology of the Voortrekkers became visible. As they regarded themselves as 'people of the covenant', they entered into a vow with God beforehand. They promised that if God gave them a victory over the Zulu nation, their descendants will keep the day (16 December) as a Sabbath and they will erect a house for the Lord in the area. They won the battle and since then the Day of the Vow was honoured in South Africa. This lasted until 1992, when the incoming democratic government changed it to the 'Day of Reconciliation'. A 'House for the Lord' was later erected in Pietermaritzburg, the capital of the later Natal colony. After the defeat at Blood River, the Zulu people lost their land and they were eventually housed in reservations by the British colonists. The victory at Blood River initiated the expropriation of indigenous land.

Several theological motifs played a role in the conduct of the Voortrekkers. Firstly, they acted on the Calvinist idea of a theocracy (Pont 2000:604; Strauss 2001:817). Calvin operated in Geneva with the idea of a Christian state where the members of the church and the citizens of the state are the same people with the sign of baptism. The task of the church is to promote the Christian life and worship and the task of the state is to be the custodian of the pure (Reformed) religion and to protect the state church. This idea was embedded in the influential Belgian Confession (article 36) and the Westminster Confession (article 23) (see Beeke & Ferguson 1999:230–231). The state is thus perceived as a Reformed state. The theocratic ideal of Calvin and his contemporaries was nurtured by the pietistic theologians of the Dutch Second Reformation in the 17th and 18th centuries. The Voortrekkers were in their isolation very much dependent on the spiritual leadership of the writers of the Dutch Second Reformation. The idea that featured in the Netherlands was 'the whole nation under the whole Word of God' (Strauss 2001:816). This idea was very much alive in the world view of the Voortrekkers and their ideals for the kind of society they intended to establish in the interior of South Africa.

Secondly, the Voortrekkers, just as in the case of the Puritans in New England, regarded themselves as the people of God's covenant. As covenant people, they had to separate themselves from the indigenous people and had to establish a Christian republic. God was viewed as being on their side as the people of the covenant in their endeavours to set up a Christian nation.

Thirdly, the Exodus motif was a motivating idea for their emigration to the north. They identified with the Israel of the Old Testament. Just like Israel moved to the Promised Land as the covenant people of God, the Voortrekkers saw themselves as moving under the guidance of God to the promised land of freedom from British colonialism. The extent to which the idea of the covenant and the Exodus motif played a role in their theology and political idealism is apparent in the speeches of the later president of the South African Republic, Paul Kruger. In several of his speeches, he identified the new nation with the people of the covenant of the Old Testament and he found their actions in the Exodus motif (Kruger 1952:101).

Fourthly, the idea of a vow to God played an important role in the theological thinking of the Voortrekkers. They believed that a vow to God in a time of distress is appropriate. However, the conditions of the vow should be regarded seriously. When a vow is made with God, the people are obliged to keep their end. This principle was founded on Psalms 76:12 and Ecclesiastes 5:4. They entered into a vow with God before the battle of Blood River with the expectation that God will be on their side against the power of the indigenous Zulu people. The idea that God will be on their side became apparent at the time of the South African war against British imperialism, when the descendants of the Voortrekkers confirmed that God would be on their side just like the war at Blood River (Pont 2000:598). The Day of the Vow is commemorated every year on 16 December. At the centenary of the Day of the Vow in 1938, the Great Trek was honoured, and this event became an important catalyst for Afrikaner nationalism in the early 20th century. Among others, the commemoration of the vow led to the propagation of a 'God is on our side' theology among the white Afrikaners in South Africa (Snyman & Barnard 1992:113).

As Müller (2015:116) indicates, the developing Afrikaner nationalism centred around two important ideological issues: the formation of the Afrikaner nation as the people of God who has the divine calling to shed the light of Christianity to all other groups in the country, and the maintenance of racial purity. White people should not intermarry with black people and a system of racial segregation along the lines of the southern states in the US was seen as feasible. Furthermore, South Africa was perceived as a 'white man's country'. These ideas were especially promoted by D.F. Malan who later became the first Prime Minister of Apartheid South Africa (Müller 2015:125).

It would be fair to state that the theology of 'God with us' that formed the foundation of the events at Blood River and that was founded on the idea of theocracy, the covenant, the status of the people of the covenant and the Exodus motif was a very important contributing factor to the ideology and policy of apartheid in the 20th century. To a large extent, the events at Blood River and the mythological meaning attached to it formed the identity of the Afrikaner nation, and this identity played an important role in the formation of apartheid (Wolff 2006:153). The 'God with us' theology of the Voortrekkers is thus another example of how a claim on God for a particular purpose can distort Christianity and can lead to an immoral and inherently violent ideology.

The third theology 'God is on our side' under discussion is the Nazi theology in Germany in the 1930s.

Nazi theology in Germany in the early 20th century

The most potent example of a partisan theology based on the dictum *Gott mit uns* emerged in the 1930s in Germany. Many theologians in Germany attempted to synchronise the basic idea of National Socialism with Christianity (Dietrich 2007:83; Eldridge 2006:151). It led to the creation of Aryan Christianity, which was, according to Heschel (2001:79), a form of redemptive antisemitism. It advocated German liberation from the Jews under the banner *Gott mit uns*. The implementation of Aryan Christianity within the institutional Protestant church was the goal of the pro-Nazi German Christian Movement. It reached its zenith in 1939, with the establishment of an antisemitic research institute named the *Institut zur Erforchung und Bezeitigung des jüdischen Einflusses auf das deutsche kirchliche leben* [Institute for the Study and Eradication of Jewish Influence on German Church Life] (Heschel 2010:1). In the general election of the *Reichskirche* in 1933, these German Christians, assisted by effective government propaganda, gained an overwhelming majority (Praamsma 1981:98; see also Eldridge 2006:152).

This pro-Nazi faction within the German protestant church soon claimed a membership of 600 000 pastors, bishops, professors of theology, religious leaders and laity. It attracted about a quarter and one-third of Protestant church members. They organised themselves after the model of the Nazi party, placing a swastika on their logo, giving the Nazi salute at their rallies and celebrating Hitler as sent by God (Heschel 2010:3). They also applied the Aryan paragraph, which entailed that all Christian Jews would be removed from leadership positions in the church.[2] The institute made a concerted effort to identify Christianity with nationalist-socialist antisemitism by arguing that Jesus was an Aryan who sought the destruction of Judaism (Heschel 2001:40). In the spring of 1939, the Godesberg Declaration was drafted, which stated that National Socialism carried forward the work of Martin Luther and would lead people to a true understanding of the Christian faith (Godesberg Declaration 1939:1). They especially embraced Luther's anti-Jewish rhetoric (Eldridge 2006:155). De-Judaising was seen as a continuation of the Christian faith. The way in which this movement endeavoured to identify Christianity with Nazism is evident in the logo that the German Christians used (see Figure 1).

Three viewpoints characterised this Nazi theology: the idea that Christianity is primarily a reaction to Judaism, the idea that Scripture should be cleansed of all forms of Judaist ideas and a new type of Christology. The institute's publications tried to prove that the Jews had always been aggressive and threatening. Judaism continued to be violent and dangerous and the goal of Jesus was to save the world and fight against Judaism (Heschel 2001:86). This was seen as the reason why the Jews crucified Jesus.

Scripture had to be purified of all Jewish influences and that included the Old Testament and the theology of Paul. Supporters of the movement insisted that God revealed himself not only in Scripture and through Jesus, but also in nature and history. God's revelation in nature and history implies that race and the purification of the Aryan race was part of God's sanctified divine plan. Drawing on God's supposed revelation in nature and history, they developed a natural theology of racial superiority and inferiority.[3] LaCocque (1996:160) is of the opinion that National Socialism was a naturalistic religion that drew on relations based on blood, kinship (natural or mythical), birthrights and allegiance to a political party and ideology. Influenced by this natural theology, these Christians viewed the establishment of a purely Aryan people's church as a God-inspired mission that must be completed when the political climate was favourable (Eldridge 2006:159). In this endeavour, God would be on their side. According to Praamsma (1981), one of the leaders of the German Christians, Krause, declared at a large meeting in the German Sports Village:

> We must purge ourselves of all that is non-German in liturgy and confession, and of the Old Testament with its Jewish morality of rewards and of stories about cattle-dealers and pimps … When we call attention to the parts of the gospel that speak to our German heart, the essential teachings of Jesus, which agree unreservedly with the requirements of National Socialism (and we are proud of that), shine forth lucidly and brightly. We should be on our guard, therefore, against exaggerated pictures of the Crucified One. We have no use for a leader who is a god enthroned far away: what we need is a fearless warrior … Hero-worship should become the worship of God. (p. 98)

2.This movement was opposed by the Confessing Church, which came into existence after the adoption of the Barmen Declaration, with Barth as a prominent figure. He was critical of the theological legitimation of politics or the state (see Rasmussen 2007:155). The Barmen Declaration refuted the Nazi ideology and the attempt to combine Nazi ideology and Christian doctrine. One of their influential members was Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who became famous not only for his theology but also for his active opposition to Hitler (see Metaxas 2010:55). This article does not explicate the ideas and actions of the Confessing Church because these are not part of the aim and focus of this article, which is to explore four models of partisan theologies, of which the German Christian Movement is one.

3.Barth severely criticized the idea of natural theology and its underlying hermeneutics. He viewed the idea of an additional revelation of God besides his revelation in Scripture and Christ as the main source of the idolatry of Nazism (*see* Brunner & Barth 1946). The idea of revelation in nature and history opens the door for all kinds of secular ideas and ideologies to creep into the heart of Christianity. This is what happened with the theology of the Christian Movement in Germany in the 1930s.

Source: Wikipedia, n.d., *Flag of the German Christians (1934)*, viewed n.d., from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/German_Christians

FIGURE 1: Flag of the German Christians (1934).

On 06 May 1939, at the Wartburg Castle so famous in the history of Luther, the institute published its own version of the New Testament. This edition was purged of Jewish references and, according to Heschel (2010:13), ready for the Nazi Reich. Some theologians attempted to remove the Old Testament from the Bible, while others argued that the Old Testament should be retained because of its strong message of the nationalism of Israel that can be presented as an example of what German nationalism should be like. The institute published and promoted articles and documents with the aim to Christianise Nazism and it used awkward methods of interpretations that ran along racial lines:

> With members who were leading scholars of theology, professors and instructors at universities throughout the Reich, the Institute provided a scholarly and religious mantle for a politicized antisemitism that mirrored the Propaganda Ministry's rhetoric in describing the war a defense against an alleged Jewish war on Germany. In offering proof that Jesus was not a Jew but an opponent of the Jews, Grundmann (a prominent German theologian) allied the Institute's work with the Nazi war effort. (Heschel 2010:13)

To make the theology of the institute and the German Christians more acceptable, the argument was promoted that Jesus was not a Jew, but an Aryan struggling against Judaism. With reference to the historical development of this argument in the 19th century German theology of, among others, Delitzsch and Lagarde, Jesus was portrayed as a rebel against Judaism who deliberately called himself a Son of Man to escape any association with the Jews (Heschel 2010:88).

Many of the theological faculties at German universities had professors who were supporters of the German Christian Movement and they promoted this idea of Jesus in their scholarship and teaching. Some chaplains serving in the German armed forces were also members of this movement. Of the more or less thousand chaplains in the war, many echoed Hitler with their own views about the Jews, Communists and other purported enemies of the Reich. In her study of the role of the Chaplaincy in the war, Bergen (2001:128) explains that although many chaplains maintained a low profile in condemning the atrocities of the war, some were supporters of the war and openly endorsed Nazi goals. They preached a 'de-Judaised' form of Christianity. Potential chaplains needed approval from military authorities, church officials and the Gestapo. Therefore, clergyman with even a hint of pro-Jewish sentiment or resistance to the Nazi ideology and the war in their records stood no chance of appointment (Bergen 2001:133). The theological justification of the ideology of Nazism popularised the dictum *Gott mit uns*. How this dictum featured at the time of the war is evident from the logo used by German soldiers on the buckle of their belts (see Figure 2).

In spite of severe criticism against the theology of this movement from conservative circles in Protestantism, the movement of German Christians and their institute created a certain line of thought that was able to manipulate and exploit morality. Immoral actions against the Jews were sanctified in the name of the Aryan God. The idea of *Gott mit*

Source: Bowness Demon, n.d., *Gott mit unsm*, viewed n.d., from http://www.bowness.demon.co.uk/belt.htm

FIGURE 2: Nazi Belt.

uns provided moral justification for immoral policies and war actions. Nazi theology can be seen as the most potent form of a partisan theology that claimed God for a certain secular political purpose. Claiming God for a 'side' and purpose deforms Christianity. This has happened in several instances over the course of the history of the church. This deformation of Christianity in this case was so drastic that scholars called for a total review of Christian theology after the Holocaust (see LaCocque 1996; Von Kellenbach 2001). Just as in the case of the Puritans in New England and the Voortrekkers in South Africa, Christianity became the pawn of secular political ideals. While the first two partisan theologies injected the spirit of colonialism into the course of events in these two communities, the latter contributed, with other role players, to the worst form of antisemitism in the history of the world.

The last example of a partisan theology that is investigated is the liberation theology of the late 20th century with special reference to its slogan: 'God is on the side of the oppressed'.

Liberation theology in the late 20th century

Liberation theology was founded largely on the social analysis of the neo-Marxist philosophy and political theory of Herbert Marcuse (1898–1979) and the Frankfurter Schule. With reference to the philosophy of Marx (1818–1883) and Bloch (1885–1977), Marcuse viewed the Western establishment of his time as a 'one-dimensional society' (see Marcuse 1971). In his major work, he contends that Western society is a society without any freedom because people are oppressed by the institutionalised society. People are not free to live, but 'are lived' by the structures they live in (Marcuse 1968:7, 17, 149). Western democracies only perpetuate these structures. People are enslaved and oppressed and this oppression is deeply embedded in the one-dimensional society. The only path to liberation is the total overthrow of the one-dimensional society. 'Qualitative change is a change of the system as a whole' (Marcuse & Popper 1971:90). Freedom can only be attained when the enslaving institutions are radically changed. Liberation flows from social revolution (see Marcuse 1970; Marcuse & Popper 1971:10, 21, 90). Once liberation is achieved, only then can real happiness and peace be achieved. In this strategy of change, violence is acceptable because violence against the structure should be perceived as counter-violence against the inherent violence of the oppressing structures.

Marcuse's strategy of liberation was very influential in the ecumenical theology of the 1960s and the 1970s. This strategy was translated into theological-ethical language by firstly the black theology, the theology of revolution and later by the theology of liberation and was applied to all situations of oppression in the world. Theologians such as Shaull (1969:190), Sölle (1965:159), Castro (1968:77), Gutierrez (1974:223) and Cone (1975:138) contributed to this movement in modern theology. This movement opened the eyes of Christianity for the plight of poor, vulnerable and oppressed people and in this way exerted a positive influence on post-war ecumenical theology. However, these political theologies exhibit the same limitations as the other 'God-with-us theologies' under discussion. In this theological tradition, the line of thought is developed as follows:

Firstly, the concept 'sin' is defined in institutional terms. Sin is the breach of friendship with God and others and is a human, social and historical reality that originates in a socially and historically situated lack of freedom. 'Sin is evident in oppressive structures, in the exploitation of man by man, in the domination and slavery of peoples, races and social classes' (Gutierrez 1973:175). Sin is not a condition of the 'heart' and a description of the unholy life of individuals, but is a description of the condition of society, especially the society that is characterised by extreme poverty, oppression and enslavement. It is the society where the rich is supported by markets and social institutions and where the poor has no possibilities of improved conditions. Sin is structural sin. It is collective and resides in the one-dimensional society, such as the free-market systems of the Western world. Sin manifests itself where the rich become richer and the poor become poorer. Sin is not spiritual, but social.

Secondly, redemption is perceived as the liberation from structural sin. Redemption means freedom for the poor and oppressed. Redemption is essentially liberation. Like sin, redemption is also a social condition. Christ came as the liberator (Gutierrez 1973:176). Liberation is the gift he offered us. He initiated the growth of the kingdom. Therefore, his action of liberation should be seen as a second Exodus because he leads people out of the bondage of poverty and oppression. He was also the example of a liberator in his struggle against the oppressive systems of his time. Therefore, he was crucified as a freedom fighter against the tyranny of the Jewish and Roman oppression. Following in the footsteps of Christ means to be active in any struggle for liberation in

solidarity with the oppressed. 'Christology is not merely constructed by way of theories about Jesus or the post-Easter Lord, but by following Jesus in his solidarity with the poor' (Naude 2016:26). To place oneself in the perspective of the Kingdom means to participate in the struggle for liberation of those oppressed by others (Gutierrez 1973:203).

Thirdly, humanity should be seen as a temple of God (Gutierrez 1973:190). However, in this universal presence of God, he is on the side of the oppressed (see Müller & Gutierrez 2015). His salvific actions are for the oppressed as the first option. The oppressed he blesses are those people living in real structural poverty. They inherit the kingdom. Gutierrez (1973) says:

> If we believe … that the Kingdom of God necessarily implies the re-establishment of justice in this world then we must believe that Christ says that the oppressed are blessed because the Kingdom of God has begun. (p. 298)

The notion of God 'on the side of the oppressed' or God's preferential option for the oppressed became the motto of liberation theology and other political theologies in their challenge against one-dimensional social structures.

Fourthly, conversion is seen as becoming active in social change. Conversion is turning to the neighbour engulfed in poverty. This view is expressed in one of the statements of the Kairos document that was issued in South Africa by the Institute of Contextual Theology in South Africa during the high tide of the struggle against apartheid in 1985. The document states *inter alia*:

> As far as the present crisis is concerned, there is only one way forward to Church unity and that is for those Christians who find themselves on the side of the oppressor or sitting on the fence, to cross over to the other side to be united in faith and action with those who are oppressed. Unity and reconciliation within the Church itself is only possible around God and Jesus Christ who are to be found on the side of the oppressed. (ICT 1985:22; see also Castro 1968:77)

Fifthly, just as in the case of the neo-Marxist philosophy of liberation, violence as a strategy of change is seen as legitimate. Violence against a one-dimensional oppressive system should be perceived as counter-violence or violence provoked by the system. 'No one can be violent in an unjust society' (Cone 1975:219). The use of counter-violence is acceptable and churches should support the violence of liberation movements in their struggle against oppressive regimes. That is the reason behind the World Council of Churches' support for the violent actions of liberation movements in Southern Africa in the last decades of the 20th century (World Council of Churches 1971:173).

As is the case in the other 'God-with-us theologies' discussed in this article, liberation theology with its preferential option for the oppressed ultimately leads to an ethical justification of the use of violence to achieve social change. This theology also gives birth to a revolutionary ecclesiology when it contends that just as God does, the church should also be on the side of the oppressed in their struggle against the enslavement by one-dimensional societies. In this process, the churches should condone the use of violence as a strategy of change is justified.

Conclusion

The following are the conclusions made by this article:

- The war of the Puritans against the Pequots in 1637 was based on religious grounds and is a clear example of how a partisan theology under the motto 'God is on our side' can lead to immoral and violent means. Their theology of the covenant and Puritan views on law and religion created a view of the Pequots as the 'others' and that the war against the tribe consequently had a divine character. In this way, inhumane actions were promoted in the name of God.
- It will be fair to state that the theology of the Voortrekkers in South Africa in the 1830s flowing from the idea of 'God with us' and underlying the events at Blood River was a very important contributing factor to the ideology and policy of apartheid in the 20th century. To a large extent, the events at Blood River and the mythological meaning attached to it formed the identity of the Afrikaner nation and this identity played an important role in the formation of apartheid. The 'God with us' theology of the Voortrekkers is thus another example of how a claim on God for a particular purpose can distort Christianity and can lead to an immoral ideology.
- Nazi theology can be seen as the most potent form of a partisan theology that claimed God for a certain secular purpose. To claim God for your 'side' and purpose deforms Christianity. Just as in the case of colonialism in New England and apartheid in South Africa, Christianity became the pawn of secular political ideals. While the first two partisan theologies injected the spirit of colonialism into the course of events in these two communities, the latter contributed, with other role players, to the worst form of antisemitism in the history of the world.
- As is the case in the above-mentioned 'God-with-us theologies', liberation theology with its motto of 'God is on the side of the oppressed' also gave birth to a revolutionary Christology and ecclesiology when it contends that just as God does, the church should also be on the side of the oppressed in their struggle against enslavement by one-dimensional societies. In this line of thought, violence is justified as a strategy of change.

All four of these theologies claim God for a certain cause. All four elevate certain groups in society for preferential treatment from God and the church. All four justify violence as a means of achieving a certain goal. All four left a heritage of a distorted idea of Christianity. Therefore, Christians should be suspicious of any theology claiming God for their own causes. *Gott mit uns* is a dangerous theological hypothesis.

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