Interpreting Suffering: Theological Rupture and Democratic Advancement in South Africa and Rwanda

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In 1994, Rwanda and South Africa each emerged from prolonged periods of violence and political upheaval: Rwanda in the aftermath of the genocide against the Tutsi, and South Africa through its first multiracial general election, which formally ended apartheid (Nelson, 2002-2003, p. 69; Schliesser, 2018, p. 1). Despite these parallel moments of rupture, the role played by Christian churches in advancing democracy by supporting popular movements and opposing authoritarian governments diverged sharply. In South Africa, prominent Christian actors, especially youth movements such as the National Catholic Federation of Students (NCFS), the Catholic Students Association (CASA), and the YCS, increasingly opposed apartheid and became central participants in the democratic transition (Bate, 1999, pp. 7-8). In Rwanda, by contrast, churches largely supported the Hutu elites' government and became complicit in genocidal violence (Aguilar, 2009, p. 25). Although colonial rule had structurally embedded Christianity within systems of political authority in both countries, the churches' behavior toward democracy during moments of crisis cannot be understood solely through institutional incentives or strategic adaptation to political regimes. In contexts of extreme political violence, the church's stance on democracy is inseparable from how it interprets collective suffering, negotiates its relationship to state power, and situates salvation within periods of mass atrocity and political upheaval (Aguilar, 2009, p. 25).
Comparative studies of religion and democracy often explain church behavior in terms of its institutional alignment with or opposition to the state. In "Rendering unto Caesar," Anthony Gill offers one of the most influential articulations of this approach, stating that churches support or resist democracy primarily based on rational calculations within a competitive religious marketplace, rather than on moral or theological commitments such as social justice (Gill, 1998, pp. 12-13). Gill's framework captures important institutional dynamics, such as the strategic negotiation of church–state relations and the preservation of ecclesiastical authority, but it fails to explain why churches shaped by similar colonial legacies, operating under divinely justified authority, and facing comparable political constraints responded so differently to democratic transitions and episodes of mass violence.

By foregrounding competing scriptural interpretations and the theological narratives used to legitimize or challenge democratic values, I argue that church–state relations surrounding democracy must be examined theologically, not solely institutionally. That divergence

and convergence between church and state cannot be explained primarily by rational-choice incentives, as Gill suggests, but must instead be understood through the church's theological interpretation of suffering and historical responsibility (Aguilar, 2009, p. 15). Comparing South Africa and Rwanda, the analysis shows that where Christianity interpreted suffering as a call to historical responsibility and critically re-evaluated its relationship to state power on moral-theological grounds rather than instrumental ones, churches emerged as democratic actors (Borer, 2014, p. 126). Suffering was theologically abstracted into obedience and deferred salvation, thereby grounding ecclesial authority in structural power, churches aligned with authority and undermined democracy (Safari, 2020, pp. 885-886).

Anthony Gill's comparative analysis in "Rendering unto Caesar" offers valuable insights to understand church-state relations under authoritarian rule. By framing churches as rational actors within a competitive religious marketplace, Gill accounts for their historical alignment with political authority when state backing ensured monopoly status, financial security, and social influence (Gill, 1998, p. 55). Under colonialism, when religious privilege and political authority were mutually reinforcing, churches had strong incentives to support authoritarian regimes and discourage democratic participation (Gill, 1998, pp. 22-23).

Both South Africa and Rwanda conform closely to this logic during the colonial period. In South Africa, the Dutch Reformed Church sacralized racial hierarchy and political exclusion, rejecting egalitarian democracy as contrary to divinely ordained social order (Vosloo, 2023, p. 406). Political authority was presented as ordained by God rather than derived from the will of the people, which framed obedience to the state as a religious duty rather than a democratic choice (Tirykian, 1957, p. 393-394). Tiryakian explains that voting was not seen as a political right but as a spiritual responsibility given by God. Only those considered spiritually mature could vote. Because spiritual maturity was defined by white Christian standards, Africans were excluded from political participation.

Similarly, in Rwanda, Catholicism became an extension of Belgian colonial governance (Schliesser, 2018, pp. 3-4). The church in Rwanda engaged in ethnic politics. Ethnicity became a central element of missionary strategy, used to identify and target elite groups for conversion (Schliesser, 2018, p. 4). Therefore, missionaries could exert significant influence over political leadership, privilege elite rule, and denounce mass participation as dangerous and social-

ly destabilizing. In both cases, Christianity functioned as a pillar of colonial authority, legitimating hierarchical and explicitly anti-democratic political orders. In this colonial context, Gill's rational-choice framework is not only plausible but also persuasive. Under colonial rule, churches benefited from legal privileges, educational monopolies, and close institutional ties to state power, which positioned them as key intermediaries in governance. Alignment with authoritarian regimes was therefore a rational institutional strategy: it ensured access to resources, social influence, and political protection, while discouraging mass political participation that could threaten both colonial authority and ecclesial dominance. If Gill's theory were sufficient, however, similar post-colonial pressures should have produced comparable church behavior in both cases, given that countries experienced authoritarian rule, political instability, and the erosion of colonial religious privilege.

In the post-colonial period, South Africa and Rwanda faced intense political violence, contested state legitimacy, and the erosion of religious monopoly. Churches in both contexts confronted growing moral and political pressure, alongside uncertainty about their institutional position in rapidly changing societies (Safari, 2010, pp. 880-881; Vosloo, 2023, pp. 408-409). From a rational-choice perspective, these conditions should have encouraged similar strategic adaptations for preserving ecclesial influence and institutional survival. In South Africa, the Church opposed the apartheid regime and emerged as a central actor in the democratic struggle, risking fierce repression (Bate, 1999, p. 2). In Rwanda, by contrast, the Church remained closely aligned with political authority and, in many cases, became complicit in mass violence, with churches themselves serving as sites of genocide (Longman, 2001, p. 163). This divergence, therefore, cannot be explained solely by institutional incentives. Comparable structural pressures existed in both cases, yet they generated opposite ecclesiastical responses, suggesting that deeper theological and ideological factors influenced how churches interpreted their political obligations.

The divergence between South Africa and Rwanda emerges most clearly in how Christian churches theologically interpreted suffering: either as a call to historical responsibility requiring action within the world, or as obedience within a divinely sanctioned order that deferred justice beyond history. As Aguilar argues, abstract approaches to church-state relations that focus exclusively on institutional structures and political incentives obscure this distinction (Aguilar, 2009, p. 15). By

treating suffering as a contextual by-product rather than as a source of moral action or inaction, such approaches risk banalizing violence and overlooking theology's capacity to shape political imagination (Aguilar, 2009, p. 17).

In Rwanda, this theological failure manifested in the normalization of obedience, hierarchy, and political accommodation (Longman, 2001, p. 181). As Longman demonstrates, Christian churches were implicated in the 1994 genocide not only through silence or inaction, but through longstanding practices that legitimized authority, ethnic hierarchy, and political maneuvering (Longman, 2001, p. 182). Moreover, as Gill would argue, religious competition in Rwanda did not push the church toward democratic reform. Instead, it reinforced the church's alliance with the state. Faced with internal dissent and competing voices, church leaders prioritized protecting their institutional authority and preserving their vision of the church. In doing so, they aligned themselves with the state, even as it pursued genocidal policies. Although Hutu and Tutsi worshipped within the same churches, which suggests no obvious institutional incentive to support mass violence, churches remained embedded in colonial patterns of authority that prioritized regime alignment over moral rupture (Longman, 2001, pp. 166-167). From a rational-choice perspective, Gill would interpret this behavior as a strategic response in which churches sought to preserve institutional privilege by aligning with the Hutu-led regime engaged in mass violence. The loss of moral authority and of Tutsi church members would thus be understood as less costly than breaking with authority. Yet this explanation remains inconsistent for three related reasons. First, by translating mass killing into a matter of institutional costs and benefits, it analytically neutralizes the moral and theological significance of violence. Second, it insufficiently accounts for the historical continuity between colonial regimes of violence and post-independence legacies of grievance, which shaped the Hutu-Tutsi conflict and structured the moral authority of the Church within it. Finally, by treating alignment with power as institutionally rational whenever it sustains authority, even if that implies violence, it cannot explain how and why churches might rupture with inherited forms of structural violence rather than reproduce them.

The Rwandan churches' reproduction of colonial modes of authority after independence needs to be socially and historically situated to avoid minimizing violence. Rather than abolishing the colonial racial framework separating Hutu and Tutsi, post-independence politics reversed its hierarchy. The co-

lonial privileging of Tutsi elites was replaced by the political dominance of Hutu, reproducing the same ethnic logic of exclusion and providing the ideological foundation of new grievances (Longman, 2001, p. 169). Because both ethnic groups continued to participate in church life, and Christianity was the predominant religion, ecclesial authority was not socially challenged but rather socially reinforced. The church's incapacity to oppose violence was not rational but theological. Obedience remained a theological virtue, merely redirected from one ethnic elite to another (Schliesser, 2018, p. 5). The fact that churches became a site of mass killing despite their moral authority highlights the complex role that church institutions and discourse played in the events leading up to and during the genocide. Rather than challenging the violence, many church authorities failed to mobilize their moral influence to condemn the killings, reinforcing existing structures of obedience and authority. In this sense, the Church's responsibility lies less in directly instigating violence than in its inability to confront it through its moral and institutional authority.

In South Africa, by contrast, churches gradually came to recognize the inseparability of history and salvation. Taira explains how, grounded in Christ's apparent failure on the cross, the Church can find, in faithfulness to the Gospel, the need to risk for failure rather than prioritize success of limited moral significance (Taira, 2018, p. 26). Christian commitment becomes grounded in faithfulness, even when it demands sacrifice, loss, or suffering. Drawing on a theological reading of Jesus' crucifixion, Aguilar explains how a tragic death, caused by political and religious authorities, can become salvific insofar as it reveals a life given for others within history (Aguilar 2009, p. 17). Christian leaders in South Africa came to understand that deferring justice to the afterlife was theologically inconsistent with this interpretation of suffering (Tutu, 1983, p. 6). Instead, suffering was reinterpreted as a demand for solidarity, resistance, and historical responsibility (Borer, 2014, p. 126). Given that over seventy percent of South Africans identified as Christian, church organizations became central actors in the anti-apartheid struggle.

The South African Council of Churches (SACC) and the Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference (SACBC) were gradually politicized through sustained engagement in civil society and escalating confrontation with the apartheid state. Initially limited to cautious statements condemning human rights violations, both organizations developed a pattern of overt political action aimed at the dismantling

of apartheid and the establishment of a democratic South Africa, which they came to view as inseparable from their Christian mission. By the late 1890s, Christian activists were leading protest marches, boycotting elections, and coordinating with banned liberation movements. This shift was decisive: it grounded the agency's role in finding salvation in present action rather than passive endurance, transforming political engagement into a theological obligation rather than a strategic choice.

The points where the white settler church and the mission church intersected inevitably gave rise to theological conflict. These encounters exposed the moral contradictions of apartheid and of the church silencer. The church was forced to confront apartheid more directly.

As South African churches progressively disentangled themselves from state authority, they assumed significant risks, including repression and the loss of privilege (Nelson, 2002-2003, p. 68). At the same time, they encouraged the oppressed to claim political agency, reframing democracy as part of Christian responsibility. This development cannot be explained solely by rational-choice logic. Black Catholics already constituted the majority of church membership, meaning that democratization did not promise greater institutional dominance (Bate, 1999, p.2). Instead, as Bate shows, the Church underwent internal contestation and democratization, challenging its own hierarchical structures and redefining legitimacy in terms of participation and accountability (Ibid, 1999, p.3). Such transformations directly contradict Gill's assumption of the Church as a unitary, stable institution pursuing institutional survival. In South Africa, opposition to the state was not irrational in light of the eventual sanctions, but theologically necessary for the Church to remain morally coherent within its historical context.

Ultimately, by comparing South Africa and Rwanda, it has been demonstrated that institutional incentives and strategic adaptation alone cannot account for the divergent trajectories of church-state relations. While Anthony Gill's rational-choice framework convincingly explains church behavior under colonial rule Though, Anthony Gill's rational-choice framework remains useful in defining the Christian church's role in the context of racialized colonial rule, with religious privilege, educational monopoly, and political authority at play, his arguments can do little in explaining unique post-colonial trajectories. The South African and Rwandan cases reveal that the decisive factor shaping church behavior towards democracy was not institutional competition, but theology: specifically, how

suffering, authority, and salvation were interpreted within the context of history. Under colonialism, Christian churches in both countries functioned as pillars of political authority. The Dutch Reformed Church, in South Africa, sacralized racial hierarchy and framed obedience to the state as divinely ordained, while in Rwanda, Catholicism became an extension of Belgian rule, legitimating elite governance and discouraging mass political participation. One of Gill's arguments, asserting that churches act as rational institutional actors to preserve their monopoly, is persuasive, in this regard.

However, the post-colonial period presents a theoretical puzzle that Gill's framework cannot resolve. Following independence, both South Africa and Rwanda experienced authoritarian governance, political instability, escalating violence, and internal moral reflections. From a rational-choice perspective, such conditions should have produced comparable strategic adaptations aimed at preserving institutional survival. Yet, in South Africa, churches increasingly broke with the apartheid regime and emerged as central actors in the democratic struggle, despite risks of repression and loss of privilege. By contrast, in Rwanda, churches remained aligned with political authority and, in many cases, became complicit in genocidal violence. This divergence cannot be explained through institutional incentives.

The analysis reveals that the divergence between Rwanda and South Africa is most pronounced in the theological interpretation of suffering by Christian churches. In Rwanda, suffering was abstracted into obedience within a divinely sanctioned social order, with salvation deferred to a future beyond history. This framework normalized hierarchy, ethnic exclusion, and political accommodation, rendering violence morally unintelligible rather than morally disruptive. As Longman and Aguilar demonstrate, the Church's failure was therefore theological rather than merely political: scripture was mobilized to confirm social order rather than to interrogate it. The Church did not rupture with colonial structures of authority after independence but reproduced them.

In South Africa, by contrast, churches gradually came to recognize the inseparability of history and salvation. Drawing on the Gospels and Christ's crucifixion as a death caused by political and religious authorities and meaningful as a life given for others, Christian leaders rejected the deferral of justice to the afterlife. Suffering was reinterpreted as a demand for solidarity, resistance, and historical responsibility, grounding salvation in present action rather than passive endurance.

Crucially, this transformation involved

internal ecclesial change through which authoritative church power was challenged, and political action was re-grounded in scripture and belief. Both cases demonstrate that the Church does not operate as a stable or unitary actor, but rather as one that is sensitive to social context and civil mobilization in its pursuit of theological coherence when interpreting this reality through God's values. Church survival, in this sense, becomes less dependent on state support than on the Church's capacity to act in ways that are theologically consistent and morally credible to ensure present agency.

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