Since 1652 Dutch, German and French colonists arrived at the Cape of Good Hope to find a new place for themselves under the African sun. In the words of Afrikaans lyricist Johannes Kerkorrel: they came to ask for food and water and stayed for so much more. These groups of colonists later blended into the Afrikaner people, with its own history, language (Afrikaans), internal tensions, cultures and subcultures. The history of the Afrikaner people is filled with ambiguities. It is inseparable from the legacy of colonialism and slavery. As elsewhere in the world, European colonists subjugated the indigenous peoples with military and economic power. They conquered the land with determination, sweat, tears, blood and a Calvinist sense of calling. And then they fell in love with the land. Traditionally, Afrikaner people have a deep sense of rootedness in the land. Many Afrikaners are able to trace their ancestors back for up to twelve generations. Afrikaans poets such as Leipoldt and Boerneef express a deep love for the land in beautiful and humorous nature poetry.

Since 1806, the colonial conquests of the Afrikaner people were overshadowed by those of the British. This led to a quest for political independence and further colonial conquests. The evils of British imperialism blinded most Afrikaner people to the evils of their own colonial conquests. The “Great Trek” of 1832, the formation of two Boer republics, the discovery of diamonds and gold and the Anglo-Boer war (1899-1902) followed. Together with the rise of Afrikaner nationalism, the apartheid era (1948-1994) represents a brief but tragic episode when Afrikaners managed to exercise political power yet again.

The notion of “Afrikaners” is a highly contested one. It is not necessarily the preferred self-description of all Afrikaans-speaking people of European descent. This category would also have to include many Afrikaans-speaking “coloured” people who trace their complex biological and historical roots to the indigenous Khoi and San, Malay slaves, European
colonists and Nguni tribes. The term “Afrikaner” is often used in a narrower sense to refer to those who maintain Afrikaner nationalist sentiments, or even narrower, to those who strive for political independence. It will be used here, somewhat imprecisely, in a broader sense, i.e. to refer to all people who were classified as “white” under apartheid rule and whose home language is Afrikaans.

Most Afrikaners belong to, or used to belong to, reformed churches of Dutch origin. The notion of “Afrikaner theology” is more complex though. In an important article on “The roots and fruits of Afrikaner civil religion,” David Bosch identified three dominant influences on the religious beliefs of Afrikaners. This includes the staunch Dutch Calvinism of Abraham Kuyper (who asserted that every inch of society must come under God’s reign), the deep pietism of Scottish and Dutch evangelicalism, and neo-Fichtean romantic nationalism. These streams were blended into what Bosch labelled "Afrikaner civil religion".

Afrikaner theology should not be equated with apartheid theology that emerged in the 1930’s in an attempt to legitimise the emerging socio-political dispensation at that time. The latter should be understood as one somewhat esoteric manifestation of the former. Apartheid theology was based on the notion of the divine orders of creation in the neo-Calvinist cosmology of Dooyeweerd and Stoker. It assumed that each order of creation was sovereign within its own context. The existence of different racial groups was treated as one of these orders of creation. The different races were ordained by God to be “apart” from one another from the very beginning. They are not only distinct from one another; they should also be kept apart, hence the socio-political dispensation of apartheid/apartness.

Afrikaner theology, especially in its more recent forms, should be understood as a broad spectrum of reformed and often deeply evangelical theologies that emerged from these historical roots. In religion and in politics, Afrikaners have seldom been a homogenous people.
What, then, is the relationship between Afrikaner theology and nature? A few comments will illustrate the moral ambiguities in this regard.

In many ways, the history of the Afrikaner people forms a trajectory in the interpretation of Gen 1:28. The command to “subdue” and to “rule” over the earth provided them with a strong sense of calling. Afrikaners became fruitful and multiplied and they literally subdued the land, its indigenous peoples, the slaves, and the often-harsh agricultural conditions. They built dams to “tame” the rivers and to provide water for agriculture and new towns in a water scarce country. They hunted the wildlife, some to the point of extinction. The felled indigenous trees (especially yellowwood and stinkwood) to provide timber for building material and furniture. They built roads and railways to gain access to remote areas. They planted crops in areas that were not suitable for agriculture. They occupied the land and marginalized the land claims of other peoples and of other living species. The way in which they ruled the land was not always compatible with their love for the land.

The disastrous environmental legacy of the apartheid period has been well documented. The creation of squalid urban townships has led to air and water pollution, a lack of sanitation and waste removal, contagious diseases and localised overpopulation. These conditions still affect the living conditions and health of millions of South Africans. Forced removals under apartheid led to a very high population density in former "homelands" or Bantustans. This created a vicious circle of poverty and malnutrition, overgrazing, deforestation, soil erosion, the disruption of river systems and further poverty. In addition, indigenous peoples were marginalized on land that was earmarked for nature conservation, game parks and eco-tourism (for the wealthy). The ideology and theology of apartheid allowed these conditions to deteriorate unabatedly for decades.

The command to rule over the earth in Genesis 1:28 is indeed ambiguous. For many Afrikaners it has the more positive connotations of stewardship, of being the land's caretakers,
of "tending the garden," of earthkeeping (Gen 2:15). This has fostered an environmental ethos among Afrikaners where emphasis is placed on using resources wisely and frugally. Accordingly, the environmental "track record" of Afrikaner people, on the land that they have occupied, is quite satisfactorily. This applies to the prudent use of farmland, numerous exemplary nature conservation projects and to urban landscaping. Indeed, Afrikaner people are rooted in the land and many are deeply committed to the land that they inhabit.

Traditionally, the self-understanding of Afrikaner people was expressed in the stereotype of a rugged but honest farmer who lives close to nature in a harsh environment. This sense of being close to "nature out there" has been retained in an urbanised context. Many Afrikaners families and the youth (who can afford it) spend their holidays and weekends closer to nature, e.g. at pristine beaches, on mountain and hiking trails, touring the countryside, on game safaris, on hunting and fishing expeditions, or on outstretched farms. The irony is that the environmental consequences of this quest to experience nature "out there" are seldom recognized. The longing for tranquillity is also undermined by the quest for ever-greater adventure and excitement. As a result, this longing for nature does not manage to counter an increasingly consumerist culture but actually reinforces it.

The quest for experience and adventure has a religious parallel. Since 1994, many Afrikaner Christians have opted for an apolitical form of Christianity. Many, also those who remain within reformed churches, are lured towards more experiential forms of religious expression that are more and more influenced by Pentecostal spiritualities. This does not offer much hope to counter the greedy and vulgar forms of consumerism than seem to possess many Afrikaners and that can only alienate people from nature.

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Further Reading
