
Every now and again you pick up a book that’s hard to put down. This is one of them and it’s not because it’s light reading. On the contrary, but the reflective writer has addressed the serious matter of equality amongst believers in contextual perspective of turbulent politics in peace and war, clashing worldviews of religious, ideological and cultural contraries, yet still giving a fair reading to even rather daring and contentious solutions or proposals of such as he outlines his convincing argument in a balanced and academically sound way.

The preaching of the Christian gospel of God’s promises of salvation and eternal life with him and the community of saints fell on fruitful ground. Amazing results were achieved. People were converted from the old and vain ways of the ancestors to the saving Christian faith, although the original colonists and most of the political powers at the Cape of Good Hope did not see this as their task and mission. However the missionaries did and the response to the meagre input was extra ordinary and shaming to our small faith/belief.

The stories of missionary Georg Schmidt are quite fascinating. There are several stories related in this book about how people of the Khoisan, the San and Xhosa were called to be members of Christ’s church and congregation in the most marvellous and awesome ways. Some grew old in this new faith, like old Helena (or Magdalena), others lost it again like Cupido Kakkerlak. Stories of a large variety of missionaries too. Strict Germans, charismatic Dutchmen, paternalistic Englishmen to mention but some of the many touched on in this good read. Some missionaries stayed with the colonists, some assimilated with their congregations like the Johannes Theodorus van der Kemp, others left disillusioned and hopeless like Georg Schmidt mentioned above.

1 http://www.upress.virginia.edu/title/4384
I’m proud to stand in this long line of missionaries and pastors of the church and very grateful for Elphick to describe them as the saints and sinners they are. This is no blue-eyed whitewash, neither is it a police charge sheet either. He describes the point of departure at the outset of this South African church- and mission history:

*To early missionaries ... the gospel affirmed that Africans were potential brothers and sisters in Christ. They believed that African languages were the most appropriate instruments of evangelization and that African preachers were the most effective heralds of God’s word. These convictions challenged white settlers’ confidence that Christianity was a badge of their own superiority and their charter of group privileges. A measure of respect for non-Western cultures and egalitarianism was implicit in the missionaries’ purpose and in their doctrine. These were not the only implications that could be drawn from evangelicalism, nor always the most influential. Yet they would always remain a challenge, and sometimes a rebuke, to the massive edifice that Protestant missionaries would build up in South Africa. (Pg.17)*

This book lays out a truly fascinating study based on solid, meticulous and substantial research of tenacious issues challenging theologians, churches and society in Southern Africa over three centuries. There are 66 pages of notes, which proved very helpful and encouraged further reading as did the comprehensive bibliography of another 30 pages. The wide-ranging index of 20 pages is another resource for swift orientation and ongoing enquiry and research. The very convincing treatise has been excellently packaged and presented as it runs like a smooth and broad river throughout the 18 chapters traversing South Africa’s somewhat troubled history since 1652, keeping my attention at a high throughout and making this book a real page-turner and a definite favourite on my bookshelf, which I will continue to recommend to potential readers.

Every chapter starts off with a short introduction of the issue at hand in the following pages and it also closes off with something of a concluding summary and outlook, what it to be expected next in the following line-up. This helps to keep the thoughts together and focussed on the ongoing discourse. This impressive layout is further highlighted with asterisks, promoting further understanding and comprehension of the developing thought progress in this historical line up one chapter of the other.
The author divides the historical period of nearly 400 years\(^2\) into 3 main sections:

1. The missionaries, their converts and their enemies.
2. The benevolent empire and the social gospel.
3. The parting of the ways.

Coming from a Lutheran background steeped in Hermannsburg-Bleckmar life and lore, I read the numerous references by Elphick to Lutherans from Hermannsburg\(^3\), Unionists from Berliner, Moravian Pietists – all of them Germans and with more or less close ties with Germany, very attentively.\(^4\) For example his reference on page 19, that

... among the German Hermannsburg missionaries in 1885. 68.9 percent had fathers who were farmers or agricultural laborers, 11.1 percent fathers who were craftsmen, and 15.6 percent fathers who were laborers.

Of course Dutch, English and American missionaries feature far more prominently in the South African history, also denominationally Anglicans, Wesleyan, Dutch Reformed and Scots societies predominated over and against the “largely silent Lutherans”\(^5\). Hopefully one day, somebody will follow Elphick’s outstanding lead and write a history of roman catholic missions in an equally excellent fashion. He has succeeded to keep an open mind towards these minority groups on the outskirts of the main flow and well beyond the English realm, which is important as these provinces, countries and states under Afrikaans control and following the lead of German opposition against British influence worldwide, had a great influence on the development of separate development and apartheid in the course of the latter century investigated.

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\(^2\) He starts off the Introduction on Page 1 with the heart rendering story of Krotoa (“Eva”) just after 1562 and ends of his conclusion on Page 325 with the so promising consultation at Cotesloe in 1960, which failed so dismally.

\(^3\) Without a reference and somewhat out of the blue Elphick continues to spread the fallacy, that Louis Harms was promoting his missionaries to lead celibate lives as they lead their congregations and missions stations. He writes “Louis Harms … wished… the villages… (to be) subject to the spiritual guidance of celibate pastors”. (Pg.23) I had never heard this before and Missionary Heinrich Vogens emphasized, that this was not true.

\(^4\) Elphick refers to Lutherans (3x), Hermannsburg missions (3x), Louis Harms (1x), Haccius (1x), Hartenstein (1x); Berlin Missionary Society (12x) Siegfried Knak (4x) and his book “Zwischen Nil und Tafelbaai” (1x), Bapedi Lutheran Church (1x), Christian Keysser (1x), Bruno Gutmann (1x), Evangelische Missionslehre (Warneck 1x), Gustav Warneck (5x); Martin Kähler (1x), Nazism (5x), Gunter Pakendorf (1x); Moravians (6), Gnandendal (4x) and the book by Krüger “The pear tree blossoms”; Georg Schmidt (6x), von Zinendorf (1x)

\(^5\) Pg.112. A bit earlier Elphick had explained “some Berliners had trouble speaking English.” This would have held true even more for the Hermannsburg missionaries.
It is fascinating to see, that although the Hermannsburg Lutherans came late onto the scene and the Bleckmar missionaries pitched even later, many of their struggles and challenges had already been experienced beforehand and in quite similar patterns. That goes to show, that these problems were probably more contextually determined than being specific issues and concerns of these pastors and missionaries from rural Lower Saxony.

The first part on the missionaries, their converts and their enemies is again subdivided into 6 parts, which are a very good introduction and preparation to understand the later development. Here already most of the future ideas have their origin. Here Elphick uncovers a lot of noteworthy history and does so in a dense and never boring fashion.

1. The Missionaries: From Egalitarianism to Paternalism.
4. The Political Missionaries: “Our Religion must embody itself in action”.
6. The Revolt of the Black Clergy: “We can’t be brothers.”

The 2\textsuperscript{nd} main part bears the heading: “The benevolent empire and the social gospel”. This period covers the heyday of protestant missions in Southern Africa. In hindsight it seems as if the strong movement towards assimilation of the missionary converts into the Christian Church by the ever-growing missions, was also a reason for the backlash of “white fear” and the concerted opposing effort from the nationalists to rather confirm, entrench and extend their ideas of desired segregation along racial lines rather than go with the mission flow. They strove to have the gospel legitimacy of Christian equality in church and mission slowly and progressively eliminated. Elphick emphasizes that this more often than not was also a joint-effort by Afrikaans (and German) forces striving actively and most determinedly against British/English pre-dominance politically, socially, culturally and theologically. Rather this growing alliance of Afrikaans/Germans and including evermore Englishmen too, were opposed mainly to what they perceived as English and American pragmatism, social gospel, theological methodism and liberalism, because these were understood as prime agents of secularisation and urbanisation, which was apparently destroying their own traditional
values, principles, ideals and doctrines. Jan Smuts claimed that the dissolution of the “native system” would “if unchecked” lead to “universal Bolshevism and chaos.”6 Therefore the striving against unification and assimilation of different races, cultures and nations under singular British leadership was vigorously rejected and opposed by these nationalists and segregationists. Differences and variances were emphasized and proudly proclaimed – even at the cost of the gospel call to unity.7 Obviously Anglicans (and even Roman Catholics) did not have these qualms. For the first it was the King/Queen first, for the others Rome and the Pope. Here the chapters of this 2 part, which is like a hinge between the missionary past and the segregationist future:

7. The “Native Question” and the Benevolent Empire
8. A Christian Coalition of Paternal Elites
9. The Social Gospel: The Ideology of the Benevolent Empire
11. The Enemies of the Benevolent Empire: Gelykstelling8 condemned.

The third and final part three is titled “The parting of the ways.”

The last and final part of this masterful study covers the tragic “parting of the ways”, although for some of the main role players it was much more a triumph of their most revered desire and passion. In hindsight it seems quite heart-breaking that a majority of “white people” in power could strive for a solution, which would consciously keep out, discriminate against and short-change the overwhelming majority in the land represented by “black people” in politics, education, business, trade and industry and in the church and mission anyway. It is but small comfort, that there were considerable numbers in all sectors of South African society and not only amongst the missionaries, who would oppose this segregation too. Still it remains a sad fact, that evangelical missionaries played a crucial, decisive and very active role in inventing “Apartheid”.9

6 Page 167.
7 “History ought therefore to be understood as the unfolding of conflicting ideals” Pg.171.
8 Equality
9 This reminds me a lot of St. Paul’s judgement: “For I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge.” (Rom 10:2 NIV) and of Jesus comment in the gospel of St. John: “They will put you out of the synagogue; in fact, the time is coming when anyone who kills you will think they are offering a service to God.” (Joh 16:2 NIV)
Of course turning history back is no option, but there remains a lot to be done in a more or less valiant attempt to counter-act and hopefully finally overcome the damage of this segregationist legacy in the years to come. The dismal failure of the Cottesloe meeting should serve as a bitter reminder, that even good, fair and reasonable men are in danger to be overcome by the powers that be. This should not discourage from facing up to the truth of the gospel and striving for its fruitful flourishing in faith and life, but rather motivate to carry on this struggle even more determinedly and faithfully. The 7 chapters of this last part are definitely worth reading and studying too:

12. A special education for Africans?

13. The abolition of the Cape Franchise: A “door of citizenship”

14. The evangelical invention of Apartheid.


16. The stagnation of the social gospel.

17. The abolition of the mission schools: A “second door of citizenship”.

18. A divided missionary impulse and its political heirs.

The last word goes to Richard Elphick as he concludes this classic in South African mission history. He writes:

In the anti-apartheid movement there were many who were not Christian, and many not religious at all. Yet Christian actors were seldom absent, Christian voices seldom silent. When, in 1994, South Africa escaped the widely anticipated “bloodbath” and the apartheid regime gave way to a multiracial democracy, the largely forgotten activities of the missionaries deserved more credit that they got. In its own time, it is true, the Benevolent Empire had achieved only minor successes in deflecting and mitigating white supremacy. It had repeatedly failed to halt the government’s march to segregation and apartheid, and in some cases, had actively abetted it. Yet it had nurtured a common language and allegiance among leaders of diverse races and ethnicities, and in difficult circumstances had kept alive the hope that the equality of all persons in the eyes of God could be translated into a just and equitable social order on earth.” (Pg. 326)

Dr. Wilhelm Weber

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