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The missionary as government agent on the Eastern Frontier: 1818-1830

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THE MISSIONARY AS GOVERNMENT AGENT ON THE EASTERN FRONTIER: 1818-1850

by

D. Williams.

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It was hardly coincidental that the investigation of the material for the writing of this thesis should have commenced at the same time when the finishing touches were probably being administered to a little pamphlet entitled "The Role of the Missionaries in Conquest" by Rudolph Mojeke. To those in close contact with the trends of thought which prevail today amongst militant and moderate African Nationals one of the most striking features is the lack of sympathy with Christian teachings and with those who administer such; and hence institutions which are built on the belief that Christianity should be the foundation stone of education fall into the scope of this anathema. It was because of this anti-Christian tendency which prevails today in the mind of the African intent upon materialising his nationalist aspirations that I became interested in the roots of the feeling; where did it originate and is there justification for such an attitude? The pages which follow contain a small contribution towards answering these questions.

On reading this thesis and comparing it with "The Role of the Missionaries in Conquest" some significant differences are evident. In the pamphlet these seminal years of contact between the missionaries and the Bantu which I have examined in detail are dismissed briefly. To the best of my knowledge there has been no detailed work done on this topic during this period, and the few references given by Mojeke show that his research is very superficial. I fail to see how one can produce a so-called documented presentation of the operations of the missionaries throughout the course of South African History when the first years of contact with the Bantu are virtually neglected. This approach implies that the many currents and cross-currents which emerge therefrom are not fully understood. I also fail to see how a full survey of such a wide topic can be embarked upon when the necessary monographs by competent scholars in this field have still to be written. To subscribe to conclusions from

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superficial readings of relatively uncharted areas of South African History under the influence of emotional nationalism tends towards distortion and misrepresentation of facts.

It was Professor Eric Walker who said:

> "... the history of South Africa must still be written either from the European or from the Bantu point of view. A good deal has been and is being done from the former standpoint, but Bantu history has still to be written fully and fairly .... But when and if this Bantu history is written we shall have to be prepared for shocks. We shall have to remind ourselves that what is sauce for the white geese is sauce for the swarthy gander. Just as we talk eloquently of our Native Question and are rather surprised when educated Bantu speak of us as their European Question, so we, who have rightly enough described the Bantu in our history as an external force pressing upon our society, must expect to see ourselves portrayed as a force pressing, often with disasterous effect, on Bantu society. The strain of mental readjustment will be heavy, but doubtless very good for us" (1).

It appears that such a movement is already under way, but it is to be regretted that it should take the form of a coup de main, couched in a Marxist framework, against Europeans and the Western Civilisation in general and against the missionaries in particular. Unemotional reasoning without subscribing to preconceived conclusions is perhaps the only method of establishing a standard of historical scholarship which will stand the test of time.

Two features emerged from the study of the topic of the thesis. The first was that the much maligned Lord Charles Somerset had certain virtues and was not as short-sighted or as muddle-headed as some historians tend to imagine. If I have erred too greatly towards imputing sanity and foresight to him, then it is in unwitting reaction to the past which has made Lord Charles one of the "bad kings" of South African History. The second feature is that the time has come for a drastic revision of the role played by the missionaries in the history of South Africa. That the latter tendency should have commenced in the form of pamphleteering literature which is bound to have a large circulation amongst a people untrained to distinguish between fact and misrepresentation

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(1) "The Critic", January, 1935, p. 69: "A Zulu Account of the Bulwer Massacre" by Eric Walker.

is regrettable. The effect will be that the missionaries (and therefore present church and missionary institutions) will be well-nigh discredited and their work rendered abortive should African Nationalism gain a firm hold on the Bantu masses. If revaluation must take place it must be that which sees the missionary operating in his historical setting, in a world where very little thought was given to the supposition which is freely bandied about today that the European consciously dispossessed the Bantu of their land and reduced them to slavery. Such an attitude presupposes a grave lack of knowledge of historical processes.

I hope, therefore, that this study will be a contribution towards a better appreciation of the problems which confronted the missionaries, a peephole through which the shortcomings of some missionaries must be viewed. It is not an apology for missionary labours nor an attempt to whitewash them; it is an honest attempt to reach some ~~contemporary~~ truth about a certain phase of the development of the society contained within the confines of the sub-continent, in which missionaries, the Colonial Government and the Bantu play the leading roles.

It is not the role of the historian to apportion blame whose he states on what premise he formulates his judgments. In the revaluation of the role of the missionary on the Eastern Frontier during the years 1818-1850 I have tentatively suggested that one may apportion blame in one case only. In the historical process man is constantly faced with challenges which demand decisions. In making those decisions he must be able to reflect upon the ultimate consequences of these decisions with regard to the future well-being of society, for the "good" of society, for its smooth functioning; in short, a choice between "right" and "wrong" decisions with regard to the happiness of one's fellow creatures. Should the person, in making this decision, foresee certain consequences, and still make the wrong decision, he is guilty. If he does not, unwittingly, or cannot, make the right decision, then he is acquitted. Essentially it is a personal choice of action dependent upon the future reactions

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of the body social about one.

By this standard, then, do I judge whether a missionary made a "good" or "bad" decision. Did he, in making that decision, provide cause for future 'anarchy, trouble and confusion', as Brind put it. In the ultimate analysis, did he exercise the instrument of forethought with regard to the good of society? Hence the evidence must be consulted to determine whether this conflict which precedes decision took place. Where no such evidence is available, the moral judgement must be suspended, even if indefinitely.

The time-range of the thesis was chosen with regard to the total existence of the office of Missionary as Government Agent in the land to the East of the Cape Colony, commonly referred to by contemporaries as Kaffirland or Caffraria. 1818 marks the year during which John Brownlee was appointed to the newly created office; 1830 is the year when William Ritchie Thomson (the only other missionary to hold this office), having resigned as Government Agent, took up his post as Minister at the Kat River Settlement. This is the only period during the history of the sub-continent that this peculiar office was operative. It was also the seminal period for the growth of certain attitudes on the part of the Kaffir towards the European, attitudes which still persist amongst the Bantu today.

In conclusion I would like to express my gratitude to the many people who helped, directly, or indirectly, with the production of this thesis: the staffs of the Government Archives and the South African Public Library, Cape Town; the Cory Library, Rhodes University College; the Library of the Students' Union, Pretoria; the Howard Pim Library, Fort Hare University College; and the Gubbins Library, University of the Witwatersrand. My thanks also go to Professor Hugh Chapman, of Fort Hare, who put me on the track of certain material, to Dr R.H.W. Shepherd for free access to manuscript materials in the safe-keeping of the Lovedale Missionary Institution, and Mr. T. Shepherd of Oxford, who is

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responsible for the cartography of what we believe to be the first accurate historical map of the Shumie area to date. Lastly I must thank Professor J.S. Kerwin for encouragement and exacting demands during many years.

D.W.

University College of Fort Hare.
October, 1963.

"I consider them (the missionaries) men like other classes, neither better nor worse. I know some of them to be very foolish and ignorant, apt to deceive you and the public by exaggerated reports of their efforts and their successes, as well as of the virtues and longsuffering of the blacks, and the vices and the cruelties of the whites; but I have found some most excellent men among them, for whom I entertain the most sincere respect. In fact, I feel that every attempt to civilise the barbarians and savages without the help of prudent, wise, Christian missionaries, will certainly fail; but they, on the other hand, will not succeed without the cordial co-operation of and with the Government; and these two forces, combined, however powerful, will not civilise unless they make the native chiefs the principal levers in the operations on their people. If we gain the confidence of the chiefs, they, with the power of the Government, and the efforts of the missionaries, will influence the masses, and improve the state of society; but if you undermine the power of the chiefs you may scheme and plan systems, but the end must be the extermination and bondage of the natives."

Andrius Stockmastrom: Autobiography.
Vol. I, pp. 245-246.

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that the Government Agency be completely severed from missionary enterprise - A civilian agent should reside outside Caffraria - Thomson and Lord Charles Somerset were both interested in the problem of intercourse with the Bantu - Macmillan's judgement of Somerset is harsh - Somerset never envisaged enduring separation of cultures - His scheme for interpreters an indication of this - Somerset's statement of 1825 on the "Neutral" Territory must be seen in the light of his scheme for "interior control" - With the appointment of Bourke an era of greater intercourse was actively inaugurated - The missionaries played an important role in building up interdependence - Macmillan underestimates this role - Thomson is forced to differ from Lord Charles on the subject of the role of missionaries as Government Agents after his experience at Chumie - His proposal for a "liberal institution" - Underlying idea: missionary activity must be separated from temporal authority - But his own previous statement seems to negate his theory - Thomson interviews Sir Lowry Cole in June, 1829 - Expulsion of Macomo arouses feelings which make Thomson's return to Chumie impossible - Thomson's last official circular - The formation of the Kat River Settlement - Thomson appointed to report on it - Read's infiltration into the settlement forces Government to appoint Thomson as minister there to counteract Read's influence - Last vestiges of Somerset's scheme of the missionary as Government Agent disappear - But failure of scheme not dependent upon resignation of Thomson - Other factors would probably have brought about its downfall - The passing of the autocratic regime - The passing of the sponsor of the system - The disfavour of the Kaffirs - Boyce's comments on what he believed to be the causes of the breakdown of missionary agency - Actually he was observing the effects of the breakdown - The experiment of missionary as Government Agent must be viewed as part of an evolution, from segregation to subjection of the Kaffirs by the Colony and ultimately by the Western European Civilisation .. .. p. 115.

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A review is necessary of the relationship of the missionary to secular Government - Troubles of opening years of nineteenth century on Eastern Frontier due to clash of rival cultures - Missionaries the representatives of another culture - He is a citizen of the world but has to rely upon the grace of secular Government authority - He is not only a missionary but the representative of an advanced civilisation - Thus he has to occupy himself with secular affairs in the process of integrating the two cultures - By organising tribes to accept the Gospel the missionary is concerning himself with secular affairs - To what extent then must he owe allegiance to temporal authority in return for its assistance? - In Thomson's case Government support welcomed - While missionaries rely on temporal authority it does not justify temporal authority making demands on missionaries - The missionary an ambassador of an advancing culture - But on the Eastern Frontier (1818-1830) missionaries were resented by virtue of mere fact of propagating Christianity - Undermines tribal authority and breaks down Kaffir institutions - There was on the other hand no need for the missionary, already unpopular, to make himself more so by alliance with Colonial Government - Missionaries are people apart, and this should have been realised by the Colonial Government - Has temporal authority the right to limit operations of missionaries to benefit society as a whole? - Solution appears absorption of missionaries, not limitation beyond the frontier - There is also the personal choice involved - Should Thomson have accepted the Government Agency

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Bibliography

Maps

(In folder at the end of the volume)

A. South Africa (adapted from Philip's "Researches in South Africa", Vol. II) showing the principal mission stations of the L.M.S., Glasgow Missionary Society, Wesleyans and Moravians in 1828.

B. The Eastern Frontier of the Cape Colony showing the frontier, the Ceded Territory and the missions established by the Glasgow Missionary Society and the Wesleyans by 1850.