

**“TRUE LIES”: AMERICAN MISSIONARY SAYINGS IN SOUTH AFRICA
(1835–1910)***

Daryl Balia
New College
University of Edinburgh
Edinburgh EH1 2LX
UK
daryl.balia@ed.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

The nineteenth-century missionary enterprise in the United States was given an enduring African dimension when six men and their families left for Southern Africa in 1834. Here they succeeded in establishing missions stations along the eastern coastline of Natal, where their main objective was to convert the Zulu king Dingaan and establish self-supporting indigenous churches among his people. Motivated in part by guilt over complicity in slavery, but also by a burning desire to save the heathen world, the missionaries carried with them a view of Africa that would be severely challenged by their new converts. There was a distinct lack of urgency to establish a native ministry, despite the principle of self-government which was consistently upheld as critical for successful missions. Africans were considered to be living in the muck and mire of sin, with no moral backbone, and having no conception of a God. How American missionaries in Africa, then, might have contributed to the mythological world of make-believe that characterized so much of the propaganda of Christian missions is the subject of this article.

Introduction

American theological students preparing for missionary service at Oberlin College, Ohio, were once told by their Church History lecturer, “Though you

* Funding for research leading to this publication was provided by the Research Enablement Program, a grant program for mission scholarship supported by the Pew Charitable Trusts, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA, and administered by the Overseas Ministries Study Centre, New Haven, Connecticut, USA.

may be stalwart Congregationalists here, you will be bishops when you get into the foreign-mission field.”¹ Such young men and women, who so willingly left family and friends behind to enter foreign countries in remote parts of the world, constituted the almost highest form of Protestant piety in nineteenth-century America. Considered heroes and martyrs of their time, they were without equal in choosing to put on “the whole armour of God” and engage in battle with the “principalities and powers” in the darkest of heathen abodes. Of course, one should not assume that the lust for power was part and parcel of such missionary zeal, just as one may assume the motive of “disinterested benevolence.” There was, however, no prescription about which methods and techniques were to be employed, nor were specific instructions given about how the missionary was to avoid becoming the evangelist, pastor, treasurer, school teacher, Sunday school superintendent, seminary teacher, linguist, and sometimes, undertaker and sexton as well, all at the same time. For as the unsettled William Wilcox discovered after many years in South Africa, “it is certain that missionary work cannot be begun in such a field as this without the missionary’s assuming more or less autocratic power.”²

How and why this power came to be consciously used, democratically withheld, and unwittingly abused is the subject of this paper. The most obvious site of struggle in the exercise of *autocratic power* was in its actual distribution, that is, by those wearing the noble badge of ordination to decide who, and most critically when, those among the savage converts were ready to share some of its divine blessings. To believe in America’s “manifest destiny” as the hope of the world required the missionary to believe his own innovative propaganda about other religions and cultures, especially those untouched by the Christian gospel. The matter of what the missionary chose to believe about the country he was destined to serve, its peoples, its religion, and its customs, is also worthy of close scrutiny. Explication of this narrative is important, for it caricatures a context embedded with both fiction and fact, out of which would be born Christian saints and romantic exiles who appeared in the flesh in American churches to tell of their tales in far-off lands.

The American Zulu Mission began in 1835, with the arrival of six missionaries and their families in South Africa. They had been sent by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, an interdenominational missionary agency formed in 1810. In motivating “why the churches of our

1. W. C. Wilcox, “The American Zulu Mission in its Relation to the African Congregational Church,” *South African Deputation Papers*, American Zulu Mission, Natal, South Africa (1904): 9.

2. Wilcox, “The American Zulu Mission,” 9.

American Israel should send the gospel of Jesus Christ to the nations, who are sitting beneath the darkness of paganism," the Board pointed out in its first missionary paper that Christianity was a universal religion which made "no distinctions of age or sex, of rank or condition, of nation or colour, of intellectual endowments, or civil cultivation."³

This organization had by 1833 sent out 93 ordained missionaries to various parts of the world, of whom 50 were Presbyterian, 41 Congregationalist and two from the Reformed Dutch Church. According to one of them, Lewis Grout, popular opinion held in America at the time was that Africa's "chief characteristics were barren plains without inhabitants, rivers without water, and birds without song."⁴ Maps which he had studied put most of the continent down as "one great, dead blank, and marked as 'unexplored,' 'an unknown region,' 'supposed to be an elevated desert'."⁵

Africa, it should be noted, had been an object of American missionary ambitions ever since theologian Samuel Hopkins and his Rhode Island colleague, Ezra Stiles, proposed in 1773 to send Negro ex-slaves as evangelists to the continent; a call that was revived in 1801 by a New York religious journal to convert blacks under white leaders in order to "practice and recommend Christianity in the sight of the heathen."⁶ No Negro missionaries appeared after several years, and despite the fears of many White Americans about their capacity to cope with the extreme climatic conditions, a tentative start was made in West Africa first and then South Africa.

The origins of the South African expedition can be traced to a letter written in March 1832 by a student at Princeton Theological Seminary, John B. Purney, to Dr John Philip, superintendent of the London Missionary Society who had been resident in the Cape since 1820. Purney sought information about Africa and "the hundred millions of the degraded and oppressed race," as he and other students who had resolved to serve as missionaries were "turning our eyes with deep interest towards that continent. All the followers of Christ are bound to send divine truth to the ignorant Ethiopians."⁷ Such concern for Africans was

3. Missionary Paper No. 1, *View of the Missions of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions* (Boston, 1824), 19.

4. Luther M. Keneston, *The Autobiography of the Rev. Lewis Grout* (Battleboro, VT: Clapp & Jones, 1905), 21.

5. Ibid.

6. Quoted in C. J. Philips, *Protestant America and the Pagan World: The First Half Century of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions 1810–1860* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969), 206.

7. D. J. Kotze, ed., *Letters of the American Missionaries* (Cape Town: Van Riebeeck Society, 1950), 22.

motivated in no small part by their hope “that in a few years the long enslaved sons of Africa will be liberated and sent home to the land of their fathers, carrying the comforts of civilization.”⁸

Purney acknowledged to Philip that “Our forefathers and countrymen have stolen thousands from their native land, and we are partakers of this guilt unless some adequate return is made. Nothing suitable to such complicated wrongs can be done but to send healing streams of salvation to all her numerous tribes.”⁹ The notion of America’s obligations to Africa was still being echoed in 1862 when the American Board’s senior secretary, Rufus Anderson, admitted that the American churches “owe to Africa a debt which nothing except the gospel of the grace of God can ever cancel.”¹⁰

Again in 1889, the Board’s foreign secretary, Judson Smith, was claiming that the gospel was owed “in *some heightened sense* to people upon whose helplessness and innocence the nations to which we belong have brought such frightful evils and such nameless woes” as slavery.¹¹ Philip wrote back to Purney at length and urged the churches of America to send a mission to South Africa where the coastal territory occupied by the Zulu chief Dingaan presented “a noble field for missionary labour.”¹² He also recommended a mission to the interior part of the country occupied by Chief Moselekatsi and the Matebele people. American missions to Southern Africa were therefore the result of these “strong representations” from Philip “along with a desire for a more healthful African climate than was to be found in the equatorial regions.”¹³

Native Ministry

Among the many instructions given to the American missionaries bound for South Africa was one urging them to consider “the measures to be adopted to raise up native assistants in sufficient numbers for the mission.”¹⁴ By 1878, a full forty-three years after the South African mission commenced, there was only one ordained African minister serving in the field! If the American

8. Kotze, *Letters of the American Missionaries*, 22.

9. Kotze, *Letters of the American Missionaries*, 23.

10. Rufus Anderson, *Memorial Volume of the First Fifty Years of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions* (Boston: ABCFM Missionary House, 5th ed., 1862), 237.

11. Judson Smith, *The Evangelisation of Africa* (Annual Meeting, American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, Boston, October 16, 1889), emphasis original.

12. Kotze, *Letters of the American Missionaries*, 33.

13. Anderson, *Memorial Volume*, 240.

14. Kotze, *Letters of the American Missionaries*, 48.

missionaries were to be believed, the fault lay with the native people as they were "completely uninterested in producing ministers and without any idea of the function and meaning of the pastor."¹⁵ The missionaries further concluded that Africans "were without wisdom to select properly qualified persons for the office," apparently preferring "some early convert with social prestige in the community rather than a younger man who had more education and 'spiritual attainment' " for pastoral office.¹⁶ If what the missionaries said about the natives is true, a comparison with St. Paul's view on the matter might prove helpful. He was happy to ordain men as elders who were members of the Church to which they belonged, and who were not ordinarily young but, instead, "men of high moral character, sober, grave, men of weight and reputation."¹⁷ We may conclude, as Roland Allen does, that Paul "must have been satisfied with a somewhat limited general education" and not content with ordaining one elder per church but several instead.¹⁸ Clearly, then, the views of the natives about ordination would appear to have been more in line with the biblical practice than those expressed by the missionaries. When Mbiyana Ngidi was ordained in 1873, after a probation period of some seventeen years, his achievement was due largely to him having "manifested real knowledge of scripture, and his soundness on all doctrinal points."¹⁹ In addition, he was supposedly "on the side of the missionaries regarding 'Ukulobolisa' (bride price) and took a strong stand regarding beer parties and practices from which other evils arise."²⁰ A combination of these factors made Ngidi a "safe man to ordain," yet he, ironically, deserted the mission some years later.

Even by 1891, Josiah Tyler was reminiscing about his "forty years among the Zulus" in the belief that, "There are no instances in which educated Zulus have attained to distinction in divine knowledge,"²¹ and, "[t]hough they can talk eloquently and pray as if inspired from above, they do not all possess that *moral backbone* which is desirable."²² These observations by Tyler and his colleagues seem odd compared to some of the sermons actually preached by some of the native converts. On the occasion of Daniel Lindley's departure from the

15. A. F. Christofersen, *Adventuring with God: The Story of the American Board Mission in South Africa*, ed. Richard Sales (Durban: Julia Rau Christofersen, 1967), 57.

16. Christofersen, *Adventuring with God*.

17. Roland Allen, *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours* (London: Robert Scott, 1912), 135.

18. Allen, *Missionary Methods*, 135.

19. Christofersen, *Adventuring with God*, 57.

20. Christofersen, *Adventuring with God*, 57.

21. J. Tyler, *Forty Years Among the Zulus* (Boston and Chicago: Congregational Sunday School and Publishing Society, 1891), 171.

22. Tyler, *Forty Years Among the Zulus*, 176, emphasis original.

mission field in 1873, after thirty-eight years of service in South Africa, one native sermon went as follows:²³

Brothers and sisters, we can but weep, for today we are but orphans. Our father and mother are now dead to us. Our hearts are all too full of grief for many words. Who will wipe away our tears now? Who will toil for us as patiently and bear with us in love as they did?... Their leaving is caused only by the sickness of our mother [Lindley's wife]. She can work for us no longer; she has worked too hard. Others will be kind to them and take care of them, but they will not find any children to love them better than we do... Let us review the past a little. It will do us good. Turn to the old deserted home under the Inanda Mountain. There is no spot to us on earth like that. There we were boys, when our father came with his wagon, and commenced building his house. There we saw one and then another believing and building on the station. There we were taught and felt our hearts growing warm with love to God and to his Son. A few weeks ago I rode past that loved and beautiful place. My heart was full of old memories. I saw the bush where we went and made our first prayer. We hardly knew what made us pray. We were naked, ignorant herder boys. I said, 'Who is this now riding on a good horse, with a saddle and a bridle? He is well dressed, so that this cold wind is not felt. Verily, it is the same herder boy! What a contrast! And where is he going? To see his children, who are in two large boarding schools, one at Amanzimtote, the other here at Inanda.' Did we in those days, when we knew not how to hold a book,—knew not which side was up or which was down,—think it would be all like this today? No; really, no. Goodness and mercy have followed us. See how we have increased! Look into our houses; see what comforts! Our cup is running over... We must put on the whole armour and work more earnestly, for we have to take up our father's work. May this mantle fall on us, and may we salt our work as he sated his by a blameless example... We have come to hear our father's last words, and to bury him. So we will send the money over the sea, that others may not bury him. This is the only way that we can show that we are his children. Let us henceforth live in peace and love as children in one family should do. It will then prove that our mother and father did not spend their lives in useless work. Above all, let us earnestly pray that we may have this gathering together once more, but not on earth. We want it to be in heaven. There our tears will all be wiped away.

Such eloquence and inspiration were not enough to convince the American missionaries to abandon their extremely cautious approach in creating a native ministry. Instead, many believed that, "The objection to instituting a full native pastorate *at once* is that perhaps a half of those thus ordained lose their mental balance and so conduct themselves as to forfeit the respect of both the missionaries and the Christian natives alike."²⁴ The African converts were growing

23. Tyler, *Forty Years Among the Zulus*, 177, as reproduced by Tyler.

24. Revd Holbrook to Dr Judson Smith, March 9 and October 29, 1889. Quoted in

increasingly impatient with missionary intransigence on the matter and decided to form their own organization for evangelistic purposes in 1849. They proposed sending John Hlonono to establish a church at Chief Umusi's place and sought further guidance, but received no support from the missionaries to do this. In 1860, Umbiyana Ngidi offered himself as the first native candidate for ministry. He was placed in "a thickly populated but wild and inaccessible region" but soon established a church with a growing membership, to the envy of his superiors who had secured fewer conversions. Unlike them, he

did not concentrate his efforts on the small band of converts at his station. Every Friday he went out to the kraals to hold religious services, and very quickly established an out-station with five or six converts. He involved the converts in his work, and when he was absent, some preached and taught at the station while others went out to preach in the kraals.²⁵

Ngidi's achievements were the subject of glowing tributes paid by Josiah Tyler, who admitted that he knew of no White missionary who had achieved such rapid results in so short a time. Tyler was convinced that an African missionary would, in many respects, be better able to minister to Africans. When Tyler was asked, subsequently, why Ngidi was not brought forward for ordination, he replied, "He lacks education. He is I believe a good man and has been successful as a missionary, but he not received sufficient knowledge to give him the *character* we desire to see in ordained missionaries."²⁶

Even the economic arguments for a native pastorate might have been convincing, but only to those at headquarters it seems. In a discussion document read at a special meeting in New York in 1842, the chief obstacles to mission were identified as distance, climate and expense. England was supposed to have overcome the same in her conquest of India by the employment of native troops. "We too must have native troops in our spiritual warfare" went the refrain, and, "Why not have as numerous a body of native evangelists, as can be directed and employed."²⁷

It was estimated that the cost of educating a thousand young people in India, out of which could arise two hundred native preachers who would be supported with their families, was about \$25,000. This was the average required to

J. M. Chirenje, *Ethiopianism and Afro-Americans in Southern Africa, 1883–1916* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), 19.

25. Myra Dinnerstein, "The American Board Mission to the Zulu, 1835–1900" (unpublished DPhil thesis, University of Columbia, 1971), 145.

26. Dinnerstein, "The American Board Mission to the Zulu," 152, emphasis original.

27. *The Essentially Progressive Nature of Missions to the Heathen* (Special Report by Prudential Committee to ABCFM Board, January 1842), 9.

maintain about twenty-five missionaries and their families in that country. Similarly, a ten-year course of education for five indigenous Indians would not exceed the costs of sending one married missionary to that country.²⁸

White missionaries in South Africa, it appears, were all too conscious about their growing social status in the rapidly changing society to be swayed by such economics. Many preferred, instead, to dwell on the important role they perceived themselves to be playing in gaining land and other concessions from the colonial authorities. As it happened, the American ones working on the Natal coastal area found themselves caught in the midst of land-grab between Dutch and British settlers. Newton Adams welcomed the British intention to reoccupy Natal in 1842, claiming that, "We may now consider the native population of this country as permanent and safe under the protection of the English government."²⁹ He might have included the missionaries themselves as objects of such colonial protection for they were invited not long thereafter to serve on a commission to investigate land claims and make recommendations. Not surprisingly, their day of glad tidings would come when they were allowed to expand out onto large tracts of land granted to them in order to establish "mission reserves" where they were able to increase their economic authority.

In these isolated domains the missionary ruled as "chief" with authority to parcel out land to his new converts in order to sustain their agricultural livelihoods, but also to offer refuge to all those fleeing the dictates of their traditional rulers. One could well argue that the thought of being independent, self-sufficient and in charge might have come naturally to those reared in Congregational polity. The hierarchical structure of authority that developed on mission stations was, therefore, one that set the missionary up to be "Lord of the manor." Having fortified his sense of security and superiority in an otherwise alien land, the "rightful and exclusive judge" was gifted to decide on what constituted the requisite evidence of piety in order to discern who might and might not be considered to belong to the Kingdom of God. It would be some time before the new spiritual "babes" would be ready to assume that role in any

28. *The Essentially Progressive Nature of Missions to the Heathen*, 9.

29. Letter of Newton Adams, February 15, 1842, *Missionary Herald* 38 (1842): 341. Clifton Phillips notes that, "it was the British who saw in this policy of *apartheid* or segregation the surest method of preserving the Bantu race. The Americans had an opportunity to help shape this program in 1846" when the missionaries served on the land claims commission. He concludes that, "Just as the London [Missionary] Society earlier had approved complete segregation as a solution to racial conflict, planting their missions in areas set aside for native reserves, the Americans co-operated fully in a scheme two of their number had had a hand in drawing up" (Phillips, *Protestant America and the Pagan World*, 220–21).

concerted way. For now, though, it was enough that "we do sometimes invite to our tables the native preachers, but we do not wish them to expect such favours."³⁰

Zulu Religion

If Protestant Christians had taken unto themselves the responsibility for preserving public morals in America, that sense of responsibility now shifted to foreign missions. Not only would this act as a device to use in the raising of funds, but it placed the missionary as guardian of Western civilization wherever the "idoltrous" nature of pagan religion held sway. All evidence of Zulu character and culture had to be swept away and replaced, for "there is nothing worth preserving in the native tongue. They would be no poorer to lose it. They have no books, no literature—no history."³¹ Still, missionary accounts of Zulu religious beliefs differed greatly. Others were willing to concede the existence of "UmVelinqangi" or "uNkulunkulu," who had created the world, human beings and all creatures.³²

God was not to be prayed to, approached directly or worshipped. The spirits of the departed ones ruled the spiritual world and could be propitiated in times of sorrow, sickness and death. There were "medicine men" who served as spiritual agents and through their use of charms, spirits and plants were expected to see off sickness, disease and mental anguish. According to one observer, "the missionary physician's first problems are the result of his encounter with an animistic, communal society in which the native believes that pain, disease, deformity, accident, and death—indeed, all physical and mental conditions—are the work of spirits."³³ Unseen forces were usually at work in the world for or against a person's well-being and it was, therefore, wise to live an upright life. Others, such as the infamous Anglican Bishop John William Colenso (who had arrived in South Africa in 1842), went further and believed that there must be an element of nobility in Zulu culture upon which the missionaries had to build. Just as the ancient Israelites knew God as both Yahweh and Elohim, so

30. Wilder to Clark, August 6, 1874. Quoted in Dinnerstein, "The American Board Mission to the Zulu," 196.

31. Wilder to Anderson, September 12, 1856. Quoted in N. Etherington, "An American Errand into the South African Wilderness," *Church History* 39 (1970): 66.

32. A. W. Lee, *Charles Taylor of Zululand* (London: Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, 1930), 12.

33. E. S. Reuling, *First Saint to the Zulus* (Boston: American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, 1960), 19.

too did the two Zulu names mentioned above refer to the one Supreme Being in Zulu culture. John Mbiti, who undertook a comparative study of the various “concepts of God in Africa” to prove that “African peoples are not religiously illiterate,” believed the Zulu conception of God’s omnipotence to have been framed in political terms, where God is recognized as more powerful than the Zulu nation and well capable of subduing their enemies.³⁴ Mbiti takes to task foreign observers who insist that “for African people God is ‘too remote’ and virtually excluded from human affairs.” Rather, he holds to the view that God in Africa generally is both near and far, and that while transcendence may be something difficult to grasp, “it must be balanced with God’s immanence.”³⁵

For the American missionaries, though, nothing could be further from the truth, as they could not conceive of the presence of any concept of God among the Zulus. In their minds, Zulu “superstitions hardly deserve the name of a religion. Their ideas are extremely low and debased.”³⁶ The heathen were considered to be living “in the grossest moral darkness, in a state of entire alienation from God” and in regard to temporal things, “they are degraded, oppressed, rendered poor and wretched by their vices, and subjected to the domination of sinful passions.”³⁷

Such views were seemingly contradicted by what the same missionaries were encountering in their study of the Zulu language. The Reverend J. L. Doehne, for example, was so impressed by the “completeness of its construction” that he believed it to be “the language of a race possessed of far higher cultivation than the Kafirs at present.” He noted that the names *uNtulo* and *uNwaba* “bear some kind of record of the fall of man,” *umkovu* “alludes to the resurrection of the dead,” while the words *inKosi* and *ukwetyama* “represent a fragment of an old idea of atonement.”³⁸ Theological questions posed by King Dingaan, when he first encountered George Champion, included whether “men knew anything about God before Christ came, and why God did not stop all sin and misery.”

In the same journal entry, Champion surprisingly wrote as follows: “We have found no trace of religion.”³⁹ Champion was not the first messenger of

34. J. Mbiti, *Concepts of God in Africa* (London: SPCK, 1970), 9. See also his *Preface*.

35. Mbiti, *Concepts of God in Africa*, 12.

36. American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, *Zulu Mission: A Condensed Sketch, 1835–1898* (Boston: ABCFM, 1898), 6.

37. Missionary Paper No. 1, *View of the Missions of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions*, 19.

38. J. L. Doehne, *A Zulu-Kafir Dictionary Etymologically Explained with Copious Illustrations and Examples, Preceded by an Introduction on the Zulu-Kafir Language* (Cape Town: G. J. Pike’s Printing Office, 1857), x.

39. S. E. Champion, *Rev George Champion Pioneer Missionary to the Zulus: Sketch of his Life*

the gospel to Dingaan, as Allen Gardiner, a retired captain from the Royal Navy, had undertaken a solitary journey to the Zulu kingdom shortly before Champion had arrived.⁴⁰ Instead of finding "an angry people" ready to kill, Gardiner was greeted by laughter, music, dance and poetry. Dingaan was found to be a man of fine artistic talents, having designed costumes for dancing women and composing songs that were chanted. Gardiner succeeded in converting no one, but his conversations with Zulus were quite revealing. He was informed that God had commanded lamentations to be made over the dead. Gardiner also discovered that the Zulus had no priests, no idols, no castes. "Where is God?" they asked. "How did he give his Word? Who will be judged at the last day? What nations will appear? Will mine be there? Shall I live forever if I learn his Word?"⁴¹ Gardiner might have been more sympathetic towards traditional Zulu religion, believing perhaps that points of contact could be established to facilitate Christian conversion, but such an outlook was as foreign to the American emissaries as to the rest of the Victorian missionaries labouring in South Africa at the time.

Zulu Customs

In 1868, the American Board sent a letter to the South African missionaries advising that their proper work "is to introduce the new divine life, not the forms it shall assume," one requiring "time and patience" as a "morality enforced upon unwilling minds is of little value." The missionaries were not expected to "bring up our native Christians to our standard at once" and cautioned, "Your work is not to make American but Zulu Christians. The great thing is to bring men to Christ not to change their social customs, their national usages, or lead them to adopt all the practices of civilized nations in their domestic life."⁴²

On the matter of polygamy, in particular, the American Board saw no need for positive action on its part but held the "opinion" that the evidence of

and Extracts from his Journal 1834–8 (New Haven, CT: Tuttle, Morehouse and Taylor Press, 1896), 32.

40. Allen Gardiner wrote his own "Narrative of a Journey to the Zoolu Country in South Africa" (London: W. Crofts, 1836).

41. Quoted in Norman Etherington, "Kingdoms of This World and the Next: Christian Beginnings among Zulu and Swazi," in *Christianity in South Africa: A Political, Social and Cultural History*, ed. Richard Elphick and Rodney Davenport (Cape Town: David Philip, 1997), 90.

42. Dinnerstein, "The American Board Mission to the Zulu," 170.

polygamists being admitted into the church by the Apostles was inconclusive. For the missionaries “on the ground” so to speak, more decisive action would be required as polygamy was understood to present “a giant obstacle to the elevation of the Zulus” who “are so attached to this abominable custom that nothing would so arouse their opposition to English authority as legislation which would aim at its extirpation.”⁴³

New converts were usually required to put away all but one wife, and in the Umsunduze rules formulated to enforce this practice, it was stated that “No one who is a polygamist shall be received into any one of the churches connected with the American Zulu Mission.” The drinking of beer (*Utshwala*) was also banned, even at wedding parties; plus there were prohibitions on the smoking of marijuana (*Intsangu*) and any form of living together of couples before marriage.⁴⁴ The requirement to put away all but one wife was felt by Bishop Colenso to be “unwarranted by Scripture, opposed to the practice of the Apostles, condemned by common reason, and altogether unjustifiable.” A public dispute ensued with extensive arguments being made both by Colenso and Lewis Grout, writing on behalf of the Mission. Grout viewed Zulu married life as “one of the grossest immorality from beginning to end” and polygamy as a bedrock for “adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness,” and “witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, envyings, drunkenness, revellings, and such like.”⁴⁵

In the absence of a policy directive, Daniel Lindley did not hesitate to express his view that *lobola* was “the foundation of the structure of native society” which “has been productive of a world of good. If today one word from my mouth would instantly annihilate the custom,” he said, “I would not speak that word.”⁴⁶ Some of Lindley’s colleagues might have agreed, as they were aware that polygamy

carries with it a certain security for the woman and gives her a place in her husband’s regard. Because of this the native women, even those who have been educated in our mission schools, are solidly behind the custom. They say, “Unless our husbands pay *lobola* for us, they will have no respect for us.” If a wife is

43. Tyler, *Forty Years Among the Zulus*, 117, 119.

44. These rules were formally adopted at a meeting of the American Zulu Mission at the Umsunduze Mission Station, and were henceforth known as the “Umsunduze Rules” (Christofersen, *Adventuring with God*, 62–63).

45. Lewis Grout, *An Answer to Dr Colenso’s ‘Letter’ on Polygamy by an American Missionary* (Pietermaritzburg: May and Davis, 1856), 101.

46. *Ibid.*, 168.

ill-treated by her husband, she may return to her home, and the chief will rule that her father may keep her and the cattle, too.⁴⁷

The Umsunduze rules were adopted after Lindley’s times and also included, most controversially, a clause prohibiting converts from any indulgence in the practice of *lobola*. “Never before had there been so much argument and never before had the missionaries fought so hard for their points,” but it seems at a cost, with some opponents being removed from church membership and others being relieved of their positions of authority.⁴⁸

The ingenious and original interpretations of the freshly translated scriptures, as alluded to earlier, would have included the Old Testament as well where clear parallels were drawn by the native converts to show that their customs were not condemned. If they argued their point with “zeal and boldness,” it was probably because they knew that they enjoyed the support of the Cambridge-educated Bishop Colenso. It is likely that the missionaries used the resurgence of customs as an excuse for withholding ordination from deserving candidates but, as Dinnerstein notes, “no amount of legislation was able to prohibit customs which the converts themselves approved.”⁴⁹ This was to be the case, at least until the turn of the century, but until then, the missionaries would continue their battle of winning Zulu hearts and minds to the American way of living.

Conclusion

By 1895, in the face of much prolonged resistance to change, the American Board directed the missionaries to establish self-supporting and self-propagating churches, an instruction which they were obliged to read out to all their native congregants. Mission policy was subsequently redefined to “utilise, to the fullest extent, the native Christian constituency in Natal, educating and training it for pioneer work in the new territory.”⁵⁰ The tide had turned quite significantly, or so it seemed. In providing an overview of the account of the history of the American Board, Fred Goodsell, a former Board secretary himself, recognizes that “the missionaries were interpreters of distant lands and people to their fellow citizens at home. How America regarded the rest of the world, and how

47. R. E. Phillips, *The Bantu are Coming: Phases of South Africa’s Race Problem* (New York: Richard R. Smith, 1930), 108.

48. Christofersen, *Adventuring with God*, 63.

49. Dinnerstein, “The American Board Mission to the Zulu,” 175.

50. J. B. McCord, “Mission Policy,” *South African Deputation Papers*, American Zulu Mission, Natal, South Africa (1904): 5.

the rest of the world regarded America, was and is to large measure dependent upon the missionary enterprise.”⁵¹ The great century of Christian missions was drawing to a close and the missionaries believed they had much to celebrate, for having extended the reign of Christ to the ends of the world.⁵²

Americans exposed to Christian literature enjoyed a greater awareness of the heathen world, as fear of the unknown was supplanted by a tried and tested method of securing America’s interests—by means of evangelization. Potential enemies had become friends, and an ideology was created for the encounter with distant peoples, not just for political or commercial advantage, but Christian fellowship as well. The optimistic approach to foreign policy matters had been reinforced, and the effect of the mission movement on the public consciousness, witnessed in more generous financial contributions, was indeed immense. The missionary, though, was not primarily concerned with diffusing general information, as this was the responsibility and work of the American Board. Rather, he had to show his effectiveness on the field and, almost without exception, perpetually plead the case for more money and more colleagues to join him from abroad.

Success seemed always on the horizon, and it was only a matter of time before the final onslaught would usher in the blessings of civilization for all. Guilt about that “monstrous incongruity” created by slavery had to be pegged back, for as one David Stoddard once lamented as early as 1857, “We do not dare to let our converts know that slavery exists in America; for how could we reconcile it with our professions as a Christian nation?”⁵³ It would be a difficult task to measure the formative impact of the missionary enterprise on the making of the American mind on the ongoing perception of Africa. That the permanent, though perhaps untested and naive, impressions and images of the identity of the “Other” were formed in this process cannot be denied. George Champion was the first American to make contact with a Zulu king. What he

51. F. F. Goodsell, *You Shall Be My Witnesses* (Boston: American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, 1959), 2.

52. In a recent article, Paul G. Hiebert credits missionaries for having “sacrificed their lives to bring the gospel to people around the world” but faults them for the fact that “many took for granted the racial superiority of whites.” He then, curiously, citing Yale scholar Lamin Sanneh, proceeds to generalize that “the missionaries dignified the people, and helped them more than other westerners to *preserve* their cultural identities” (emphasis added). See his “Western Images of Others and Otherness,” in R. J. Priest and A. L. Nieves, eds, *This Side of Heaven: Race, Ethnicity and Christian Faith* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 105.

53. Quoted in Charles K. Whipple, *Relation of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions to Slavery* (repr.; New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969), 15.

and his colleagues were to write, subsequently, about their encounters with the Zulu people was widely published, both during their time and in later years. This paper could not have been written without these accounts.

The turn of the century marked the end of the great missionary era, but this was also a time when W. E. B. DuBois was making his famous dire prediction, namely, that:

The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the colour-line, the question as to how far differences of race—which show themselves chiefly in the colour of the skin and texture of the hair—will hereafter be made the basis to denying to over half the world the right of sharing to their utmost ability the opportunities and privileges of modern civilisation.⁵⁴

The American missionaries in South Africa generally focused their concerns on devising the best ways of communicating the gospel, yet as we have seen, not without denigrating Zulu religion, morals, culture and the capacity of native converts to assume leadership roles. Nothing mentioned about missionary conduct thus far would seemingly qualify as "naked racism," as their mindset does not show evidence of being infiltrated with a view that the "Other" was different from "us" in ways that were destined to be permanent. The differences of race were, nonetheless, accepted as a power advantage that was grasped by erstwhile proponents of Enlightenment ideals to the extent that the Western world believed it possessed the knowledge to deal effectively with the "race problem." The academic study of foreign missions was thus encouraged, as "it would lay bare the steps and the problems connected with the rise of savage, half-civilized, and even relatively advanced peoples into the family of nations," argued Edmund Soper, "with a civilisation based upon what we consider the only adequate foundation, the religion of Jesus Christ."⁵⁵

The next generation of emissaries to Africa would hopefully be less smug and obtuse about their own cultural baggage and the societal changes that lay in waiting; although not to the point of replicating the Colenso model of mission. For despite his professed liberal outlook, Colenso was patently satisfied with being the White "Father of people" who would gradually experience "that

54. August Meier, Elliot Rudwick and Francis L. Broderick, eds, *Black Protest Thought in the Twentieth Century*, 2nd ed. (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971), 56.

55. E. D. Soper, "The Study of Missions," *Ohio Wesleyan University Bulletin* XII, 6 (November 1, 1913): 13–14. Quoted in V. H. Rabe, "The American Protestant Foreign Mission Movement, 1880–1920" (unpublished PhD thesis, Harvard University, Boston, MA, 1965), 834.

advanced Christianity, to which we in England have been brought.”⁵⁶ The next century of missions might become one where race mattered more than before, and not unexpectedly, when the American Zulu Mission would be plagued with attempts by native converts to secede and form their own churches free from missionary control.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Allen, R. *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours*. London: Robert Scott, 1912.
- American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, *Zulu Mission: A Condensed Sketch, 1835–1898*. Boston: ABCFM, 1898.
- Anderson, R. *Memorial Volume of the First Fifty Years of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions*. 5th ed. Boston: ABCFM Missionary House, 1862.
- Champion, S. E. *Rev George Champion Pioneer Missionary to the Zulus: Sketch of his Life and Extracts from his Journal 1834–8*. New Haven, CT: Tuttle, Morehouse and Taylor Press, 1896.
- Chirenje, J. M. *Ethiopianism and Afro-Americans in Southern Africa, 1883–1916*. Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1987.
- Christofersen, A. F. *Adventuring with God: The Story of the American Board Mission in South Africa*, ed. Richard Sales. Durban: Julia Rau Christofersen, 1967.
- Dinnerstein, M. “The American Board Mission to the Zulu, 1835–1900.” Unpublished DPhil thesis, University of Columbia, 1971.
- Doehne, J. L. *A Zulu-Kafir Dictionary Etymologically Explained with Copious Illustrations and Examples, Preceded by an Introduction on the Zulu-Kafir Language*. Cape Town: G. J. Pike's Printing Office, 1857.
- Etherington, N. “An American Errand into the South African Wilderness.” *Church History* 39 (1970): 62–71.
- “Preachers, Peasants and Politics in Southeast Africa, 1835–1880: African Christian Communities in Natal, Pondoland and Zululand.” *Royal Historical Society Studies in History Series No. 12* (London, 1978): 41.
- “Kingdoms of This World and the Next: Christian Beginnings among Zulu and Swazi.” In *Christianity in South Africa: A Political, Social and Cultural History*, ed. Richard Elphick and Rodney Davenport, 89–106. Cape Town: David Philip, 1997.
- Gardiner, A. “Narrative of a Journey to the Zoolu Country in South Africa.” London: W. Crofts, 1836.
- Goodsell, F. F. *You Shall Be My Witnesses*. Boston: American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, 1959.
- Grout, L. *An Answer to Dr Colenso's 'Letter' on Polygamy by an American Missionary*. Pietermaritzburg: May and Davis, 1856.
- Hiebert, P. G. “Western Images of Others and Otherness.” In *This Side of Heaven: Race, Ethnicity and Christian Faith*, eds R. J. Priest and A. L. Nieves, 97–110. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Keneston, L. M. *The Autobiography of the Rev. Lewis Grout*. Battleboro, VT: Clapp & Jones, 1905.
- Kotze, D. J., ed. *Letters of the American Missionaries*. Cape Town: Van Riebeeck Society, 1950.

56. Norman Etherington, “Preachers, Peasants and Politics in Southeast Africa, 1835–1880: African Christian Communities in Natal, Pondoland and Zululand,” *Royal Historical Society Studies in History Series No. 12* (London, 1978), 41.

- Lee, A. W. *Charles Taylor of Zululand*. London: Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, 1930.
- Mbiti, J. *Concepts of God in Africa*. London: SPCK, 1970.
- McCord, J. B. "Mission Policy." *South African Deputation Papers*, American Zulu Mission, Natal, South Africa (1904): 5–8.
- Meier, A. E. Rudwick and F. L. Broderick, eds. *Black Protest Thought in the Twentieth Century*. 2nd ed. New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971.
- Missionary Paper No. 1. *View of the Missions of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions*. Boston, 1824.
- Philips, C. J. *Protestant America and the Pagan World: The First Half Century of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions 1810–1860*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969.
- Phillips, R. E. *The Bantu are Coming: Phases of South Africa's Race Problem*. New York: Richard R. Smith, 1930.
- Rabe, V. H. "The American Protestant Foreign Mission Movement, 1880–1920." Unpublished PhD thesis, Harvard University, Boston, MA, 1965.
- Reuling, E. S. *First Saint to the Zulus*. Boston: American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, 1960.
- Smith, J. *The Evangelisation of Africa*. Annual Meeting, American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, Boston, October 16, 1889.
- Soper, E. D. "The Study of Missions," *Ohio Wesleyan University Bulletin* XII, 6 (November 1, 1913): 13–14.
- Tyler, J. *Forty Years Among the Zulus*. Boston and Chicago: Congregational Sunday School and Publishing Society, 1891.
- Whipple, C. K. *Relation of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions to Slavery*. Repr. New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969.
- Wilcox, W. C. "The American Zulu Mission in its Relation to the African Congregational Church." *South African Deputation Papers*, American Zulu Mission, Natal, South Africa (1904): 9–15.

Copyright of *Black Theology: An International Journal* is the property of Equinox Publishing Group and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.