

# THE CULTURO-HISTORICAL AND PERSONAL CIRCUMSTANCES OF SOME 19th-CENTURY MISSIONARIES TEACHING IN SOUTH AFRICA

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## Abstract

*Broadly speaking, two approaches to missionary education in South Africa can be distinguished: a facts and figures approach featuring mainly the historical facts, statistics and other data concerning this period in education, and a rather more critical approach intended to prove the point that missionary education was instrumental in alienating the blacks from their traditional cultural heritage and in employing black labour in the class-dominated capitalist society of South Africa. A third approach is followed in this article: the period of missionary education is approached by way of an analysis of the prevailing Zeitgeist in South Africa, Europe and elsewhere early in the 19th century and of the concomitant philosophical and theological trends at the time. The personal motives and circumstances of the missionaries are also scrutinized. By following this approach a fuller and more illuminating view of missionary education in the 19th-century is assured, a view which can fruitfully be applied in conjunction with the other two approaches.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The educational contribution of the missionaries in South Africa is to a greater or lesser degree usually described in one or both of the following ways. Either it is described in terms of the historical data, concentrating on the growth in the numbers of converts, pupils, schools, teacher training (institutions), financial matters, and so forth (cf. Behr & MacMillan, 1971; Behr, 1978; Coetzee, 1963; Horrell, 1961; Horrell, 1963; Horrell, 1968; Horrell, 1970; Pells, 1954; Malherbe, 1925; McKerron, 1934; Loram, 1917); or it is portrayed in terms of critical remarks concerning the contribution of missionary education towards bolstering the apartheid system of education in South Africa. Following the latter approach, it is pointed out that missionary education was a form of separate education, divorcing the indigenous peoples from their traditional culture and values, preparing them as the labour force of the preponderant capitalist economical system of the whites by forcing upon them all kinds of manual work and technical training (cf. Nwandula, 1988).

The validity of these two views of missionary education is not contested, although both of them may be regarded as not portraying the full picture of missionary education. The historical facts and figures as well as criticism are not always presented against the background of the broader historical context of the era of missionary education in South Africa (ca. 1800 - 1953). Seldom does one for instance find that the missionary work in Southern Africa is portrayed against the background of the philosophical and theological developments in Great Britain and Europe as well as the concomitant demographical and anthropological developments in Southern Africa (i.e. the Great Trek and the Difaqane). All of these phenomena are actually described in education publications, but seldom in relationship with one another as historical processes of cause and effect.

The second way of portraying missionary education, viz. the critical view, also does not do full justice to this period in the educational history of South Africa, since it makes use of historical data and circumstance to prove a point which can only be regarded as valid in an altogether different social and political context (cf. Charlie Nwandula, 1988 and Steyn, 1990). Although it may be factually true (in terms of the method of historical analysis coined by Marx and Engels) to state that the missionaries through their educational work contributed to the present capitalist-labour class distinctions in present day South African economical and social structures, such a view does not portray the historical situation in its entirety. It uses history to prove a point, a practice which the historian frequently encounters and should recognize. In this article another angle will be followed in order to supplement the description of the history of missionary education thus far available in the previously mentioned approaches. Taken on its own, the approach followed in this article can of course also be criticized for one-sidedness. However, it is presented with the distinct aim of presenting another view of missionary education and by doing this hopefully to gain a fuller and more complete view of missionary education in South Africa. The chosen angle has the shortcoming of not presenting the factual data of this era in education in chronological order, nor does it wish to argue a point. Its basic aim is to describe the personal motives of some of the missionaries against the background of the *Zeitgeist*, the philosophical and theological spirit of the period of missionary education.

## **2. THE ZEITGEISTLICHE BACKGROUND**

Missionary education in South Africa should firstly be judged against the background of the Difaqane, the 'diaspora' of the tribes of Bantu-speaking peoples in Southern Africa roughly between 1820 and 1840. For reasons which need not be discussed here, the tribes began a period of marauding, warring, killing and dispersal unknown in their history up to that point in time (i.e. the beginning of the 19th century)(Lye, 1972;

Muller, 1987; Nurse *et al.*, 1985; Omer-Cooper, 1975). This 'diaspora' served two purposes, or rather had two consequences: firstly, it estranged many people from their traditional homes and cultures and inculcated a spirit of willingly, unwillingly, knowingly or unwittingly accepting foreign cultural and religious influences. It caused a spirit of cultural and tribal disintegration and a preparedness to absorb new ideas and influences. Because of this, the Bantu-speaking tribes were as it were ready to listen to and absorb the new religious and cultural ideas expounded by the missionaries who started working among them just as the Difaqane truly got under way.

The Difaqane also had a second effect, viz. that of emptying the interior (the Highveld north of the Orange River) of inhabitants, making it possible for the Boers of the Great Trek out of the Cape Colony to enter into this relatively uninhabited area and settling at random in areas formerly belonging to the Bantu tribes. The joint impact of all these Europeans (Boers and missionaries) was culturally and religiously devastating for the Bantu tribes and individuals who fell victim to these influences. The Boers were practically all Christians, and together with the efforts of the missionaries the Bantu people were Christianized by them. Because of the disruption of their traditional way of life and economy through the Difaqane the blacks were virtually forced into labour in the employment of the whites, a state of affairs reinforced by the missionaries who concentrated on training their converts and other blacks around the mission stations for purposes of labour in the service of whites. The missionaries' purpose in doing this was to improve the life-style and standard of living of the blacks (Moffat, 1969:104; Moffat, 1842:284; Chirgwin, 1927:26,60; Philip, 1838:xxx-xxxi; letter written by missionary T.G. Messen, 1820; Anweisung, 1837:27,36,39; Missionsordnung, 1936:27).

The joint impact of the missionaries' endeavours and the Boers' influence on the blacks was probably not foreseeable at the time (Dickson, 1974:221; Ross, 1986:36): the blacks were not only divorced from their traditional religion, culture and life-style through the Difaqane, but they were also forced willy-nilly into the European culture, religion and life-style because of the proximity of the missionary and the dominant Boer influence. The main aim of the missionaries in their contact with the blacks was to christianize them and to spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ among the heathen (Steyn, 1990:54). The main aim of the Boers was probably not so lofty and sublime: they were farmers finding themselves in possession of large tracts of land on which to farm, and they required the services of labourers. The roaming blacks fitted nicely into this niche, also providing in a need of the blacks themselves: a place in which to settle permanently and safely with a constant income in terms of money and in natura (Davidson, 1969:229; Kruger, 1958:17-8; Thompson, 1960:114-5; Loram, 1917:17 *et seq.*; Behr & MacMillan, 1971:388).

The *Zeitgeist* prevailing in Southern Africa therefore favoured the efforts of the missionaries, and explains the degree of success which the missionaries attained in christianizing and 'civilizing' the blacks (Ellis, 1844:12-3). However, the *Zeitgeist* (Rotenstreich, 1973:535) in Southern Africa was counter-balanced at the time by *Zeitgeistliche* developments in Great Britain and Europe.

The French Revolution was based on the liberal slogan of freedom, equality and fraternity. The spirit of the revolution spreaded spontaneously all over Europe, but was expressly furthered through the conquests of Napoleon Bonaparte (Lovett, 1899:4; Ellis, 1844:1-2; Althausen, 1965:10; Grundler, 1923:7). Wars for freedom from Napoleon's French in countries like Germany inspired a patriotic spirit which coincided with the *Erweckungsbewegung* in that country (Richter, 1924:1; Lehmann, 1974:8-9). (This is in contrast with Pietism a century earlier, which was non-patriotic to a degree.) The *Erweckungsbewegung* (Althausen, 1965:155), from which many German missionaries to Southern Africa came, was enhanced and strengthened by the spirit of patriotism (Menzel, 1978:11-12; Richter, 1924:1). The same however, could not be said for the influence of the evangelical Lutheran Church in Germany: because of the *Aufklärung* (see following section of this article) this church lapsed into dogmatic orthodoxy, and all forms of affective (emotional) religious experience were avoided or derided. This meant that the *Erweckungsbewegung* could expect no support from the orthodox church.

At the same time English evangelicals felt the urge to perform good deeds, and this urge was reinforced by the philanthropist and romanticist movement (Ellis, 1844:5) and Wesleyanism/Methodism (Ross, 1986:10, 33). Because of the co-incidence and confluence of all these influences and movements, many associations spontaneously came into existence with the express purpose of serving the fellow-man (Lehmann, 1974:7-9). The great expeditions by explorers like captain Cook and others brought to light the fact that there were many other people on earth who up to that point in time had not had the opportunity of hearing the redeeming Gospel of Jesus Christ (Ellis, 1844:5). The philanthropic urge and the religious fervour of many Europeans found a direct outlet in the philanthropic associations mentioned above, and in the spontaneous creation of missionary societies late in the 18th and early 19th centuries (Lehmann, 1974:9).

In this way the *Zeitgeistliche* developments in England and Europe meshed with those in Southern Africa. In the same way also the philosophical and theological developments in Europe meshed with the *Zeitgeist*, as will be shown in the following section.

### 3. THE PHILOSOPHICAL AND THEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND OF MISSIONARY EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

As was alluded to in the previous section, certain philosophical and theological developments in Britain and Europe served to explain the nature of missionary education in South Africa in the 18th and 19th centuries. Concomitant with the *Zeitgeistliche* facts of the explorations of sea-farers and discoverers since the 15th century and the realization that there were many heathen still to be converted to Christianity, was the advent of Renaissance-Humanism and eventually also of the Protestant Reformation, one of the direct consequences of the humanistic discovery of the dignity of the human being (Ross, 1986:33). Strangely enough, the churches of the Reformation did not pay the necessary attention to the matter of missionary work, possibly because of intra-ecclesiastical pre-occupation with dogmatic questions. In humanistic circles, on the other hand, rationalism gained hegemony in philosophical thinking (Ellis, 1844:5; Enklaar, 1988:12; Boneschansker, 1987:14,23,31; Richter, 1924:1,4,28; Althausen, 1965:2,8,13; Anon., 1823; Lehmann, 1974:10,11; Grundler, 1923:7; Ziegler, 1857:5), and this tendency was reinforced by the development of a mechanical world view (La Mettrie, Wolff and others) due to discoveries in the area of natural science (Weborg, 1986:187 *et seq.*). Rationalism gained its zenith in the philosophical views of Wolff, Spinoza, Leibnitz, Locke and especially in Descartes' world view and anthropology (*Cogito, ergo sum*)(Weborg, 1986:188-9; Althausen, 1965:8).

In theological circles the reaction to rationalism was two-fold: on the one hand theologians reacted to this philosophy in which human reason ruled supreme as the only and central principle by reiterating the value of human dignity and especially demanding acknowledgement for the affective and conative aspects of being human. In this form of reaction they were able to revert to 18th-century Pietism for moral and material support (Halle, Francke, Spener and the Moravian Brothers sect of Graf von Zinzendorf)(Dickson, 1974:18; Walters, 1884:23-4; Ellis, 1844:3; Enklaar, 1988:50-1; Dah, 1983:7-8, 25; Menzel, 1978:12; Boneschansker, 1987:14). The other reaction to rationalism in theological circles was equally interesting. In evangelist circles (in Germany especially in the Lutheran Church, and also in the Netherlands) the rationalist spirit was not rejected as in the case just described. On the contrary, a form of ecclesiastical rationalistic orthodoxy developed, concentrating on dogmatic questions and endeavouring to penetrate to the answers in the spirit of the *Aufklärung* (rationalism). A kind of secondary reaction followed this orthodoxy in ecclesiastical circles: a new revivalist movement came into existence (cf. Methodism in England, and the *Erweckungsbewegung* on the Continent), also harking back to Pietism, and claiming acknowledgement for the affective aspects of the human being (Menzel, 1978:11; Boneschansker, 1987:14,23,25; 31-2; Richter, 1924:1,4; Althausen, 1965:1-2).

Both these reactions were characterized by religious fervour and the realization that what Christians had received in grace through the redeeming work of Jesus Christ had to be communicated to and shared with the heathen in the parts of the world which had up to then been discovered. It should be kept in mind that the 18th and 19th centuries were characterized by the construction of colonial empires by European powers, and that the situation was therefore well suited for missionary work in the colonies (cf. Moffat, 1842:506-7; Philip, 1838:viii; especially Ross, 1986:33,36; Curti, 1967:490).

All these developments in philosophical and theological terms also coincided with the development of the social and theological phenomenon of philanthropism (Ellis, 1844:2; Lovett, 1899:3; Martin, s.a.:54; Dah, 1983:11; Philip, 1938:xxxiv; Menzel, 1978:11; Curti, 1967:486 et seq.; Nuttal, 1978:231; Lehmann, 1974: 12) in especially evangelical circles (Wallis, 1976:x; Ross, 1986:3,4,9,10,34,35,37; Etherington, 1978:4,5; Lang, 1941:9; Curti, 1967:491; Nuttal, 1978:231). Philanthropism demanded that social justice be done to all people(s), and in this respect the 'poor heathen' (an expression frequently used at the time) came into specific consideration.

A study of the missionary education period in South Africa reveals a confluence of developments in philosophical and theological circles which forms the background for a proper understanding of this era. It is against this background that the personal motives of the missionaries should be assessed, and it is also against this background that the period of missionary education in South Africa has to be evaluated today.

#### 4. THE PERSONAL CIRCUMSTANCES AND MOTIVES OF MISSIONARIES IN SOUTH AFRICA

A study of the (auto-)biographies of the missionaries in the late 18th and 19th centuries reveals that they mostly came from the labour class (cf. Ross, 1986:2 regarding Dr. Philip), and that most of them did not qualify for theological training to become regular preachers and pastors in their own communities (Wallis, 1976:xi). Many also experienced financial problems, and training to be a missionary seemed a God-sent opportunity for many a young man feeling the drive to preach the Gospel to the heathen. Most of these men felt the urge deep within themselves to be sent to the heathen for this purpose (cf. Dickson, 1974:18; Petrick, 1919:22 et seq.; Philip, 1838:xxxii-xxxiii; Moffat, 1969:15), an understandable phenomenon when viewed against the *Zeitgeistliche*, philosophical and theological backdrop of the 18th and 19th centuries. According to documents from these centuries (cf. for example the *Anweisung*, 1837; *Anweisung*, 1859; *Missionsordnung*, 1936; *Prüfungsordnung* (part of the *Missionsordnung*, 1936); *Grundordnung*, 1956; Statutes of the Berlin Mission, 1824;

Anon., 1855 - a document of the Dutch Missionary Society) the training of the prospective missionaries was fairly rigorous and demanding, and the paternalistic tone characteristic of the communications by the missionary societies to their prospective missionaries can be ascribed to the fact that the societies paid for their training. The prospective missionary could expect no fixed and guaranteed salary from his missionary society, and missionaries were enjoined to develop their stations into a state of (semi-)independence from the societies themselves (which were themselves dependent on the generosity of the public) (Lovett, 1899:574; *Anweisung*, 1837:35,36; *Missionsordnung*, 1936:26-27). This explains why missionaries had to resort to native labour at the stations, and had to concentrate on training the converted heathen in technical subjects and the various trades. They supposed that in this way they could procure financial independence for themselves and the station, and ensure a better living standard for their converts in the employment of whites in the vicinity of the station (Moffat, 1969:104,108; Chirgwin, 1927:26, 60). Also, the missionaries could expect no pension on retirement.

Despite all these difficult working conditions, many missionaries reported for training and service in the mission field. Their (auto-)biographies, annual reports and personal correspondence reveal that most of them were fired with the urge to do good to other people and to convey the Gospel to the heathen. These documents reveal a depth of feeling which cannot be easily described, and a great deal of soul-searching (cf. Petrick, 1919:23-25). The latter is of the utmost importance since it reveals - in many cases in so many words - that the prospective missionary was aware of the fact that ulterior motives (apart from the calling by God to preach the Gospel to the heathen) might well play a role in the decision to become a missionary, and this was to be avoided at all costs. A famous example was that of Robert Moffat who even decided to forfeit marriage with Mary Smith (whose philanthropic and religious influence on him was undeniable) in order to become a missionary in Southern Africa (Dickson, 1974).

In the missionary field itself things tended to turn out a bit differently than in some cases romantically envisaged (Etherington, 1978:4 et seq.). The daily life of a missionary and his family more often than not was monotonously dreary and uninspiring. The blacks in Southern Africa were not all to be converted to Christianity in one generation, as the American Missionary Board found to their dismay (Etherington, 1978:24). The missionary, especially when initially establishing a station, was preacher, pastor, catechist, (secular) teacher, nurse, medical doctor, gardener, instructor in practical subjects and trades like building, carpentry, gardening, wagon-making and so forth - all at the same time (cf. Moffat's letter to the London Missionary Society dated 30 Jan. 1828; Dickson, 1974:102).

In performing all these functions and duties, the missionary acknowledged the key

function of education: the heathen had to be instructed in the teachings of the Scriptures and the ways of the Lord; they had to be taught to read, to write and to calculate, with the primary aim of enabling them to read the Bible and other religious literature for themselves; the converts, who tended to flock to the stations and to stay in the vicinity, had to be educated in hygiene and a moral way of life reconcilable with the teachings of the Bible; the converts also had to be trained in the trades of gardening, clothes-making and building in order to improve their personal standard of living in their traditional residential areas in the neighbourhood of the mission station, and also in other trades in demand by the white community in the vicinity (carpentry, masonry, blacksmithing, wagon-making, etc.). Also, knowingly or willy-nilly, the converts were influenced to accept the ways, customs, manners and morals of the Westerners, of whom the missionary was the epitome (Dickson, 1974:91; Walters, 1884:3,9; Moffat, 1842:22; Wallis, 1976: xi; Lovett, 1899:585; Shaw, 1839:7; Philip, 1838:vii; Philip in a letter dated 18 June 1838; Ross, 1986:36; Curti, 1967:490 - 492; Wangemann, 1868:29; Neander, 1823:3; Anon., 1823:17).

In this way the missionaries served, through their educative efforts and in conjunction with the circumstances in which the blacks found themselves at the time, as the instruments by means of which the latter were not only converted to Christianity but also converted to the Western culture and life style, and also converted to being a factor (especially as a labour force) in the white dominated capitalist economy of Southern Africa of the 19th century. The extraordinary educational significance of the missionaries in South Africa is also to be found in the fact that the missionaries were for a long time, up to 1909 and even to 1953, the sole suppliers of education to the blacks (state aid to education for blacks being mainly channeled through missionary education). Missionary education also set the pattern for the 'colonial education era' in black education (i.e. the period 1910- 1953, before the take-over of education for blacks by central government).

## 5. CONCLUSION

When viewing missionary education in South Africa from the vantage point of the prevailing *Zeitgeist* in the 18th and 19th centuries, of the philosophical, theological and social developments of that period, and from the viewpoint of the missionaries' personal motives and conditions, one gains an understanding of this era in South African educational history which can hardly be acquired only through one or both of the two other approaches described in the 'Introduction' to this article: viz. the analysis of the cold facts and figures of missionary education, and the use of historical facts to prove a point which only has validity with the advantage of hind-sight. The approach followed in this article, in conjunction with the advantages of the other two

approaches, could serve to supply a more complete and balanced view and evaluation of missionary education in South Africa.

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