

Review Article

—

Besprekingsartikel

Stephen C. Volz, *African Teachers on the Colonial Frontier: Tswana Evangelists and their Communities during the Nineteenth Century*

Peter Lang, New York, 2011

293 pp

ISBN 978-1-4331-0949-2 (hardcover),

ISBN 978-1-4539-0156-4 (eBook)

US\$76.95 (both)

Fiona Vernal, *The Farmerfield Mission: A Christian Community in South Africa, 1838–2008*

Oxford University Press, New York, 2012

358 pp

ISBN 978-0-19-984340-4

US\$78.00

Richard Elphick, *The Equality of Believers: Protestant Missionaries and the Racial Politics of South Africa*

University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, Durban, 2012

437 pp

ISBN 978-1-86914-239-1

R335.00

Southern African Christianities and Mission Effort under Review

Natasha Erlank*

The three books under review exemplify key trends in the writing on missionaries in southern Africa in recent years. I will discuss each book separately, then go on to discuss how each of them speaks to the other and also to the broader field of Christianity as it manifests at present. While all three of the authors are based in the United States, they differ in that two of them are relatively younger scholars, while Elphick has had an illustrious and diverse career. All three books are well written, and it is pleasing to see a range of publishers turning their attention to both Christianity and mission in the history of southern Africa. Both Vernal's and Volz's books are available electronically, although it is a pity to see that the e-books are the same price as the hardcover editions. All books are available in hard cover in their print edition, and none of them is particularly affordable. This is a concern

* Natasha Erlank is a professor in the Department of Historical Studies at the University of Johannesburg. Her research interests include the history of missions and mainstream Christianity in Southern Africa, as well as work on the politics of gender and tradition. She also works in the field of South African public history. Thank you to Gerald Groenewald for some very insightful and generous comments.

How to cite this article:

Erlank N. Southern African Christianities and Mission Effort under Review. *Historia*. 2015; 1(1), Art. 10 pages.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2309-8392/2015/v60n1a9>

because it limits the ability of African libraries to purchase copies of either the hardcover version or the e-books.

Stephen Volz's contribution to this essay, based on his PhD thesis, is an examination of the work and lives of Tswana evangelists in the nineteenth century. *African Teachers on the Colonial Frontier* is a detailed study of the spread of Christianity in Tswana communities in a broad swathe from what is now the Free State province of South Africa, across North-West Province and into northern Botswana. Volz's unifying thread is work in Tswana-speaking communities where the London Missionary Society (LMS) and also the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society (WMMS) began an evangelisation effort that was almost immediately surpassed in its success by the work of "African teachers". The book begins in the early nineteenth century, working with roughly a century's worth of material. It consists of six chapters, the first of which serves as an introduction. The following three chapters, which constitute the bulk of the text, concern themselves with the work of Tswana evangelists, firstly in the south-eastern parts of South Africa and later in northern Botswana. Each chapter has substantial endnotes, evidence of Volz's detailed archival work.

Volz' first chapter examines the origins of mission work amongst Tswana-speakers in what is today the Northern Cape, South Africa, beginning with mission work among the Barolong and Bathlaping. This chapter covers material that will be familiar to readers of the early history of the London Missionary Society, and its interior missions, but from the point of view of the African evangelists, which leads to a focus inward on the mission and not, for instance, outward towards LMS politics centred on control of the Cape. In this way, it forms a welcome contrapuntal narrative to other work on evangelical effort in the region, but focusing on that from the point of view of the European missionaries.¹ In 1801, two evangelists – the British missionary, William Edwards and the Dutch-Khoe Christian, Jan Kok – settled separately amongst the Bathlaping. Kok, who was working amongst groups of Khoe across the border from the Cape Colony, was typical of what Volz describes of the first African evangelists in the areas; sustaining himself and his party through trade and links with local communities, and taking advantage of his ability to communicate with the local Tswana in order to evangelise further amongst them. By contrast, Edwards appears to have been less committed to evangelisation, and his mission lasted only a few years.

While Kok and Edwards' efforts lasted only a few years, their example was taken up in the following decade, the 1810s, by other European and indigenous missionaries. In 1816, a party under the leadership of James Read senior, but including several established Khoe evangelists, attempted to establish a more permanent mission at Dithakong. After meeting with resistance from the

1. Through a series of edited collections of diaries and personal papers, Karel Schoeman has brought the lives and careers of individual missionaries to life, including many who worked amongst the Sotho-Tswana. See K. Schoeman (ed.), *Huis van Die Armes: Die Berlynsse Sendinggenootskap in die OVS, 1834–1869* (Human & Rousseau, Cape Town, 1985); K. Schoeman (ed.), *The British Presence in the Transoranje, 1845–1854*, Vrijstatia 13 (Human & Rousseau, Cape Town, 1992). Also, for mission-centred narratives, see J.W. de Gruchy (ed.), *The London Missionary Society in Southern Africa: Historical Essays in Celebration of the Bicentenary of the LMS in Southern Africa, 1799–1999* (David Philip, Cape Town, 1999); J.C. Wells, "Curing the 'Public Evils': The Contested Terrain of Male Missionary Sexuality in Early 19th-century LMS Missions at the Cape of Good Hope", *Le Fait Missionnaire*, 11, 2001, pp 45–75.

Bathlaping, the mission party retreated to Griquatown. Volz observes that the European and African missionaries explained their lack of success differently; Jan Hendrick, one of the Khoe evangelists, explaining that the effort was impolite and premature, while the European members blamed the Bathlaping, whom they saw as steeped in sin and hostile to the Gospel. So, as Volz points out, the different backgrounds of evangelists affected, right from the beginning of sustained mission effort in this region, not only the success of missions, but also reasons that the missionaries adduced for the success or failure of their efforts. Caught up in this scenario, African evangelists who often themselves occupied interstitial positions in society, neither European nor Tswana, struggled valiantly to make the small gains they did. These figures, just like translators and interpreters (which many of them also were) were mediators – not just of language, but also of cultural worlds and mentalities.

In the next chapter, Volz examines the spread of Christianity and the methods through which it spread amongst the southern Tswana in the period following the exploratory missions of the early nineteenth century. Examining the role of young men in particular, he looks at the interplay of literacy and orality in the spread of faith. Much labour was spent in the middle part of the century attempting to reduce the various Tswana dialects into written form which could encompass translations of the Bible. In this process, as Volz points out, mission squabbles over translation protocols often obscured the work of Tswana labour, both to assist in translation and to provide help in type-setting and printing. Once hymnals and the New Testament became available to converts, the books and the printed word were treasured, not just for their content but also for their form. As Tswana evangelists worked with these written texts, they also helped to translate ideas better shaped to the page into oral dialogue that could be shaped according to local practice. As Volz notes, “An early Tswana term for “read” was buisa (cause to speak), linking reading and speaking as single activity” (p 81).

Volz outlines some interesting differences in evangelisation between an early period, roughly 1800–1860, when Tswana evangelism centred on working in local communities in the south, with a later period after 1840, when the word of God was spread along trade routes to the north-west through evangelists allied to and operating as traders in the more northern parts of Botswana. These different contexts had an impact on how evangelists found themselves located in their communities, and how Christianity interfaced with local power structures.

In the chapter on evangelism among the Northern Tswana, Volz pushes our knowledge of mission activity in this region into new territory. This is an area of mission endeavour not studied much, and his treatment of the methods of evangelisation brings to mind some of Roger Beck’s early work on missionary-traders.² Southern Tswana Christians carried the word of God north with them on trade routes, and as these were taken over by Tswana leaders in the north-west, the message the traders carried was incorporated into local practice, so that trade and faith became assimilated together. Volz examines here the critical role of Tswana chiefs in the spread of Christianity. Expansion to the north-east was more difficult because of the presence of Boer commandos in the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek, who had claimed roles of authority amongst the local Tswana communities.

2. R.B. Beck, “Bibles and Beads: Missionaries as Traders in Southern Africa in the Early Nineteenth Century”, *Journal of African History*, 30, 3, 1989, pp 211–225.

In his fifth chapter Volz examines the conflicts in thought and practice that arose as Tswana evangelists attempted to negotiate the differences between Christian belief and theology, and Tswana thought. This chapter turns on experiences of conversion, modelling the different ways and processes through which Africans converted to Christianity. In his final chapter, Volz turns to what is commonly understood as a shift in mission attitude in southern African in the later-nineteenth century: the European mission attempt to reassert control over what were viewed as unruly African Christian communities. The section from page 253 onwards acts as a conclusion for the volume.

The book is clearly written and meticulously researched, based principally on a reading of primary mission sources including the archives of the LMS and WMMS. Volz's principal concern in the book is to show African agency at work. Each chapter begins with a personalisation of this theme through a reconstruction of how Tswana evangelists might have imagined key moments in that history. Unlike previous studies of Tswana Christianity, which were often limited to single chiefdoms or kingdoms, Volz's examination takes in the breadth of Tswana-speaking territory. Initial work was often conducted by Khoe and Griqua evangelists around the European-established mission stations, where many of the early African teachers were young men from relatively elite clans. While European missionaries may have established stations that constituted a core around which the first evangelists laboured, the first evangelists worked independently of them and were tied more into local political systems than into the world of the missionaries. Volz makes the point that evangelists and Christianity operated within a net of Tswana beliefs, practices and chiefly power much more – at least before the later-nineteenth century – than they did within a European context. However, while Volz's examples of African agency at work are both evidence of careful research, filling in detail not previously covered in other studies of evangelisation in the region, and convincing proof of the role of indigenous agency, his rhetorical commitment to foregrounding that agency feels overdone.

Both Volz's book and Fiona Vernal's study of Farmerfield Mission, which is also based on doctoral work, are relatively close studies of mission communities (this is something that distinguishes their work from *The Equality of Believers* discussed next). *Farmerfield*, like *African Teachers on the Colonial Frontier*, extends our understanding of the Wesleyan Mission effort in the nineteenth century. While Volz's research concentrates on experiences of Christianity within a common language group, Vernal's work looks to those who experienced one particular Christian denomination. *Farmerfield* differs from that of other studies of the Wesleyan effort in the Eastern Cape through her focus of a residential mission community situated within the Cape Colony from its founding. More recent mission studies have tended to focus on more widely-spread mission communities. Vernal's research returns to a theme in much earlier mission studies in South Africa: mission initiatives centred on residential mission communities, especially those of the Moravians and the LMS in the Cape Colony.³

In *The Farmerfield Mission*, Vernal traces the rise of a WMMS community in the Cape Colony. The study examines the lives and practices of a community of African Methodists on a mission station to the near south-east of Grahamstown,

3. J.M. Sales, *Mission Stations and the Coloured Communities of the Eastern Cape, 1800–1852* (Balkema, Cape Town, 1975).

South Africa, from the station's inception until the restitution programme of the 1990s which saw the land returned to former residents and their descendants. Generational shifts and changes are a prominent thread in the book, a welcome reminder that stations are neither static nor even unified communities. Vernal's study is one of the few to cover such a wide range of time, an indication not only of the longevity of the mission community, but also of a direction which might fruitfully be followed in other mission studies.⁴ Indeed, her study shows the way in which issues of faith can be tied to other critical historical currents, like the sociology of displaced communities and the politics of land.

Vernal begins her study with a very useful summary of the literature on missions, situating the later-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century evangelical effort in the context of British colonial effort, not only in South Africa but in other British colonial centres. Since the publication of two articles charting the progress of mission history in southern African in the mid-1990s (those by Norman Etherington and Elizabeth Elbourne), as Vernal herself notes, the situation in respect of writing on missions has changed dramatically. This review article charts some of those shifts through the books it is reviewing.⁵

The book is divided into three sections. The first constitutes a background to British mission efforts in the later-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries in general and in the Cape in particular; the second section is a more detailed focus on Farmerfield in the nineteenth century; and the last section charting the trajectories of Farmerfield residents in the twentieth century, including two chapters which detail how residents were removed from the station when it was declared a black spot to the incongruously named Mimosa Station outside King Williams Town. The final section also examines the effects of land restitution at the end of the 1990s for residents, constituting one of the most trenchant examinations of the effects of restitution that I have seen.

Part one of the book begins in Britain with the evangelical movement, before shifting its emphasis to the Cape and the Eastern Cape in particular. It looks in broad detail at the establishment of Wesleyan mission stations amongst the Xhosa, drawing on the work of scholars like Hildegard Fast to set the scene for what is to follow.⁶ In part two, Vernal moves into a more detailed discussion of Farmerfield itself. In the chapter, "A Selected Class of Natives", Vernal examines the way in which white missionaries attempted to harness both the ideological power of the notion of a more well-to-do class of residents, as well as their productive power as labour, into the service of firstly the mission, but secondly the white community surrounding it. William Shaw, the Wesleyan superintendent who selected the first occupants of Farmerfield was quite clear that he wanted Africans

-
4. Kerry Ward has followed a similar trajectory in her work on the Moravian Station, Mamre. See K. Ward, "Links in the Chain: Community, Identity and Migration in Mamre, 1838–1938", in N. Worden and C. Crais (eds), *Breaking the Chains: Slavery and its Legacy in the Nineteenth-Century Cape Colony* (University of the Witwatersrand Press, Johannesburg, 1994).
 5. E. Elbourne, "Concerning Missionaries: The Case of Van der Kemp", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 17, 1991, pp 153–64; N. Etherington, "Recent Trends in the Historiography of Christianity in Southern Africa", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 22, 1996, pp 201–19.
 6. H.H. Fast, "'In at One Ear and out at the Other': African Response to the Wesleyan Message in Xhosaland 1825–1835", *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 23, 2, May 1993, pp 147–174.

who could exert themselves either in service of the mission, or as providing a pool of labour for the surrounding districts. He was also interested, not only in their labour, but the fruits of their labour as well, preferring to restrict entry to Africans who owned cattle or goats. His was a vision of an affluent but humble mission community under the wise leadership of God and his representatives on earth, the Methodists.

To this end, he recruited the first residents, who began relocating to the new community from early in 1839, although the WMMS only gained formal title to the land in May 1839. Many of the first residents were Tswana speakers, reflecting the changing population in the Eastern Cape in the 1830s. The chapter then details the establishment of the mission and its first few decades. However, by the 1870s, the mission was struggling, burdened by a vision of how the station ought to operate, rather than a realistic assessment of deteriorating economic conditions in the surrounding region. As Vernal notes, "As a 'selected class' of Africans, the tenants of Farmerfield represented a new phase in Methodist evangelical expansion, and a novel turn in mission enterprise in the Cape in general ... The vision of Farmerfield was such an idealistic elaboration of missionary goals, and such a concerted effort to avoid the pitfall of pioneer missions, that the tenants were both liberated and burdened by what was expected of them" (p 137). In a sense, these burdens and expectations form the content of the following two chapters, chapter five dealing with how the residents managed and understood their faith, and demands on their faith, and chapter six examining missionary disillusionment with the failure of their Farmerfield ideal. As Vernal shows, their estimation of failure was predicated on measurements of tenant behaviour, and lapses in "proper" Christian behaviour, an assessment that was by no means shared by the tenants themselves.

While Vernal's middle section is richly researched, and discusses in sympathetic detail the connection between African Christians and white missionaries, it is the latter section which really maps a new direction in studies of African Christianity. The last three chapters trace the station through the twentieth century, examining WMMS attempts at reform in the first part of the century, followed by the removal of 1962. Farmerfield residents were removed to a piece of "bushveld" or forest outside King Williams Town, with scant building material and cattle weakened by a trek first to Grahamstown and then to Mimosa Park. At Mimosa Park, the residents found themselves living outside of the kinds of security offered by living on a mission station, including the rules of conduct which had governed their behaviour, even if very few of them paid attention to these rules. Life at Mimosa Park was extremely difficult.

The conflictual process of restitution constitutes the final chapter. Vernal traces what happened to many of the Farmerfield families who were removed to the Ciskei after black spot removals in the 1960s when the station was declared white. In the 1990s the land restitution process opened up a way for former residents to return to the land, but in a situation in which many were intensely conflicted about another removal. Families who had established themselves in Mimosa Station were concerned about what would become of them once they returned to Farmerfield, and how a generation who had grown up not knowing farming would now need to learn to farm with no equipment and experience.

The *Equality of Believers*, while continuing with several of the themes established in Vernal's and Volz's works, differs substantively from them. The first two books reviewed represent an inward look into the fortunes and shaping of mission communities, whereas Elphick moves outside the confines of particular stations and societies to examine the broader relationship between the origins of racial domination in South Africa and the place of Christianity therein. The book, which Elphick has been working on since the late 1990s, represents the net effect of the many connections existing between evangelical organisation in South Africa in the early twentieth century, and the way in which these contributed to and challenged state thinking about race and the place of the African. Probably the most significant of the three studies reviewed here, the book unfortunately loses its central point in the wealth of detail it covers. As Elphick describes it, the book:

... demonstrates that most missionaries in South Africa did not straightforwardly advocate an extension of racial equality from the spiritual to the social realm. Black Christians, to the contrary, tended vigorously to assert that equality in the eyes of God should evolve into social and political equality. The whites (sic) missionaries' relationship to the doctrine they had introduced was immensely complex – an intricate interplay of advocacy, subversion and downright hostility. Most significantly, and most consequentially, the broad vision of apartheid, designed explicitly to thwart the drive toward racial equality, originated in part, among missionary leaders of the Dutch Reformed Church (p 2).

The book, in three parts, traces the beginnings of missionary effort in southern Africa through to the 1960s, and the split in the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) over the place of African members within the church. While the earlier section of the book repeats much of what is already known about the origin of protestant missionary effort in South Africa, Elphick's middle section begins to look at what he refers to as the Benevolent Empire, a coalition of white mission effort, including the DRC and some of the key mission societies, which acted to help determine state policy towards Africans in the early twentieth century. Elphick describes this sub-contracting of needful welfare services by the state to white missionaries working with black Africans. This was possible, because following a policy known as the social gospel, early twentieth-century missionaries had moved beyond evangelisation into a realisation that, in order to succeed, their efforts needed to address social and economic issues of the day.

While the mission societies, represented in an umbrella body called the General Missionary Conference before the 1930s, and the Christian Council of South Africa after this point, were intensely patriarchal and patronising in outlook, this attitude in fact brought them into conflict with the state after the 1920s. As the state, under first the PACT government and J.B.M Hertzog, moved to cut back on African access to land and African rights (including the Cape franchise) the mission societies began to protest state action. Mission testimony to the Native Economic Commission in 1932 shows a clear division between state intent and how missionaries viewed sustainability in the reserves. Elphick also shows how Christian liberalism in the first half of the century was in the process of segue from being an initiative of individual societies to established church bodies, like the Anglican Church. While the book covers the period until the 1960s, the bulk of it centres on the period from just before the First World War until just after the Second. During this period the DRC moved from a pro-missionary stance to one in which the majority of its synods were opposed to black participation in the church.

Between them, the three books touch on some of the key themes to emerge from the literature on missions and Christianity (understanding that Christianity extends beyond the historic mission churches) in southern Africa over the last decade. Here I will focus on four of the themes which appear in the works at hand: gender; greater texture in mission studies, including an extension of the chronological time-depth against which most missions are studied; African agency; and the public roles of faith.⁷

As noted by Vernal in her introduction the new “historiography emphasises a host of important arenas” including the “gendered dimensions of missionary activities”⁸ as well as “the roles of particular missions, missionary societies and missionary personalities” (p 6).⁹ The effect of this research has been a host of detail on the minutiae of mission station living, detailed and sensitive analyses of missionary personalities, and a greater appreciation of the fact that many of those personalities were African.¹⁰

I wish here to turn to Vernal’s point about gender, because it constitutes a key theme in writing since the 1990s about mission or mission-dependent and derived communities. *Farmerfield* contains a significant amount of material on a shift in gender roles for African men and women, and Elphick has a chapter on the missionary critique of African practices including those centred on sex and marriage. In chapter four, for instance, Vernal examines both the shift in gender roles that occurred as Africans became domesticated into the life of the station; with men assuming more of a role in food production as they moved away from masculine roles centred on hunting and herding. At the same time, Vernal also recognises that many of the station agricultural returns obscure the productive output of women’s labour, while missionary need for domestic labour brought women into roles within European households not open to men (pp 128–129). White missionaries were also triumphant about the extent to which they had

-
7. Other notable themes of recent writing on missions and Christianity include a focus on African theological cosmologies, or what might loosely be termed a religious subjectivity; and the politics of translation and writing, but these are not included in my discussion here.
 8. For example: N. Erlank, “Gendering Commonality: African Men and the 1883 Commission on Native Law and Custom”, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 29, 4, 2003, pp 937–953; F. Leach, “African Girls, Nineteenth-Century Mission Education and the Patriarchal Imperative”, *Gender & Education*, 20, 4, July 2008, pp 335–347; C. Petrusic, “Violence as Masculinity: David Livingstone’s Radical Racial Politics in the Cape Colony and the Transvaal, 1845–1852”, *The International History Review*, 26, 1, March 2004, pp 20–55; W. Urban-Mead, “‘Girls of the Gate’: Questions of Purity and Piety in the Mtshabezi Girls’ Primary Boarding School in Colonial Zimbabwe, 1908–1940”, *Le Fait Missionnaire*, 11, 2001, pp 75–99.
 9. For example (and not in any particular order) R.J. Houle, “Mbiya Kuzwayo’s Christianity: Revival, Reformation and the Surprising Viability of Mainline Churches in South Africa”, *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 38, 2, May 2008, pp 141–170; R.J. Houle, *Making African Christianity: Africans Re-imagining their Faith in Colonial South Africa* (Lehigh University Press, Bethlehem: PA, 2013); D. Maxwell, *African Gifts of the Spirit: Pentecostalism and the Rise of a Zimbabwean Transnational Religious Movement* (Oxford University Press, Harare, Zimbabwe; Ohio University Press, Athens Ohio; James Currey, Oxford, 2006); K. R  ther, “‘Sekukuni, Listen! Banna!, and to the Children of Frederick the Great and Our Kaiser Wilhelm’: Documents in the Social and Religious History of the Transvaal, 1860–1890”, *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 34, 3, 2004, pp 207–234; A.M. Stoner-Eby, “African Clergy, Bishop Lucas and the Christianizing of Local Initiation Rites: Revisiting the ‘Masasi Case’”, *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 38, 2, May 2008, pp 171–208.
 10. For example, J. McDonald, “Engrossing Example of the New Narrative History: A Living Man from Africa”, Book review of R.S. Levine, “Jan Tzatoe, Xhosa Chief and Missionary and the Making of Nineteenth-Century South Africa”, *Historia*, 56, 2, 2011, pp 200–203.

managed to get their converts to abandon traditional practices linked to gender, like initiation rites and rituals (pp 178–179). In *The Equality of Believers*, Elphick examines the extent to which debates about proper masculinity and femininity shaped missionary intervention in the early years. Missionaries were concerned about what they termed “The Vices of Heathendom” (a sub-title on p 77), and the way in which African sexuality often challenged Christian precept. In some instances this view worked to restrict African practices, but in others it was potentially a source of support for black women, when missionaries acted, generally as one, to promote measures to protect women’s virtue. Of course, whether black women appreciated these efforts is another matter.

African Teachers, though rich in other ways, passes up what could be such fruitful opportunity to probe the play of masculinity in the lives of Tswana evangelists. Derek Peterson considers the role of gender in what is one of the more significant pieces of writing on African Christianity in the last decade.¹¹ Stephen Miescher’s *Making Men in Ghana* charts closely the association between constructions of masculinity and the place of Christianity in that multifaceted construction.¹² While Volz discusses gender in the chapter on conversion (pp 193–195) he pays little attention to gendered patterns of conversion. Paul Landau has shown in his influential study of Tswana Christianity amongst the Ngwato that women were central to Christian evangelisation and its acceptance. While Volz’s study extends much further than the Ngwato, it would have been helpful to consider more this central argument in Landau’s work.¹³ Further, while Volz is very careful to note the difficulties of working with sources authored by Europeans, and the importance of working across them in order to reconstruct Tswana activity, it is possible that their masculine authoring might have obscured some of the more complex European gender dimensions present in mission households.¹⁴

A second theme touched upon by both Vernal and Volz concerns the role of indigenous agency in evangelisation in Africa. Building on the publication of Elizabeth Elbourne’s *Blood Ground* in 2001, a number of studies since have examined the indigenisation of Christianity.¹⁵ Like Robert Houle’s *Making African Christianity*, considering the spread of Zulu Christianity, Volz’s research shows the extent to which Tswana evangelists were instrumental in spreading Christianity amongst the Tswana.¹⁶ This work also echoes Peterson’s *Creative Writing*, on Christianity amongst the Gikuyu, making African agency a focus of work across the continent. The debate stems from a major historiographical shift over the last two decades, the shift emanating from the publication of the Comaroffs’ work on

-
11. D.R. Peterson, *Creative Writing: Translation, Bookkeeping, and the Work of Imagination in Colonial Kenya* (Heinemann, Portsmouth and New Haven, 2004).
 12. S. Miescher, *Making Men in Ghana* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 2005).
 13. P. Landau, *The Realm of the Word: Language, Gender and Christianity in a Southern African Kingdom* (Heinemann, Portsmouth, 1995).
 14. See for instance W. Urban-Mead, “Dynastic Daughters: Three Royal Kwena Women and E.L. Price of the London Missionary Society, 1853–1881”, in J. Allman, S. Geiger and N. Musisi (eds), *Women in African Colonial Histories* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2002, pp 48–70. Also W. Woodward, “The Petticoat and the Kaross: Missionary Bodies and the Feminine in the London Missionary Society 1816–1828”, *Kronos, Journal of Cape History*, 23, 196, 2004, pp 91–107.
 15. E. Elbourne, *Blood Ground: Colonialism, Missions, and the Contest for Christianity in the Cape Colony and Britain, 1799–1853* (McGill-Queen’s University Press, Montreal and Kingston, 2002).
 16. Houle, *Making African Christianity*.

the southern Tswana. It also, as Volz notes in his work, relates more generally to a reaction in historical writing to the postmodernist turn of the 1990s. While many studies of the 1990s were based on white-mission authored texts, and so spoke to the concerns apparent in those texts, more recent work has moved away from framing itself only in relation to those concerns. In one way this reflects a shift from a more deconstructive approach to one rooted in social history, with a focus on the bottom-up nature of African Christianity.

If Vernal's work shares an emphasis on agency with Volz's work, her book also takes the role of missionaries and African Christianity into key twenty-first century historical debates, the texture I referred to earlier. Following Cheryl Walker, Vernal's account of removal and restitution adds a human dimension to the outcomes of restitution which are not always apparent in the literature. "[I]t is important to assess what happened to the land and to people after land expropriation to understand how these lost histories impact on the feasibility of South Africa's land restitution agenda" (p 194). Vernal's focus on the difficulties attendant on removal and restitution speaks to a larger concern for the politics of land in African Christianity.

Like Vernal, Elphick is also concerned with the political dimensions of mission activity. Elphick's book turns to another recent historiographical trend, one centred on the role and place of religion in colonial and post-colonial politics. While he and Volz share an interest in the public life of religion and its interface with structures of power (itself a significant new trend in writing on African Christianity), Elphick's work is firmly centred on the white South African state. Elphick is particularly concerned to demonstrate the role of missionaries as intermediaries between Africans and the state in South Africa's racial politics. His work forms a welcome counterpart to histories of black resistance, particularly the early history of the ANC and other nationalist protest organisations in South Africa. Elphick, through his charting of the intellectual history of Christianity's support – or lack thereof – for African rights, is another part of this very important strand of twentieth-century thinking.

What all these volumes show is the vigour and interest with which current studies of mission and African Christianity are being pursued. It is also interesting to see how the three authors tackle their subjects from different angles. All well-written and pleasingly free of typographical errors, the volumes demonstrate both a commitment to writing about these subjects and to challenging the ways in which these subjects have previously been written about. From Vernal's detailed and valuable micro-history, to Volz's broader sweep of Tswana Christian history, to Elphick's focus on the public lives of South African Christianity, these books signify a welcome optimism about this area of research.

Abstract

In this article I review three books which cover, from different directions, aspects of the history of missions and Christianity in southern Africa. These include debates about the indigenisation of evangelical effort, the role of gender in shaping missions, and the political force represented by Christianity. *African Teachers on the Colonial Frontier: Tswana Evangelists and their Communities during the Nineteenth Century*, by Stephen Volz, is a detailed study of the spread of Christianity in Tswana communities, and the role played by Tswana evangelists, in

a broad swathe from what is now the Free State province of South Africa, across North-West Province and into northern Botswana. *The Farmerfield Mission: A Christian Community in South Africa, 1838–2008*, by Fiona Vernal, examines the operation of a residential mission for Africans and Khoe in the Eastern Cape, South Africa. Vernal's work covers the period from the establishment of the mission, through the difficulties experienced during the early twentieth century and subsequent forced removals, as well as the resettlement of the descendants of former tenants through land restitution efforts in the early twenty-first century. Richard Elphick's *The Equality of Believers: Protestant Missionaries and the Racial Politics of South Africa*, discusses the role played by protestant Christian forces in the making and challenging of racial ascription and discrimination in South Africa from the late nineteenth century through to roughly the 1960s.

Key words: London Missionary Society; Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society; missions; Christianity; Botswana; South Africa.

Opsomming

In hierdie artikel bespreek ek drie boeke wat elk vanuit verskillende perspektiewe aspekte van die geskiedenis van die sending en Christendom in suidelike Afrika dek. Dit sluit in debatte oor die verinheemsing van die evangeliepoging, die rol van gender in die vorming van sendings, en die politieke mag wat Christenskap verteenwoordig het. Stephen Volz se *African Teachers on the Colonial Frontier: Tswana Evangelists and their Communities during the Nineteenth Century* is 'n gedetailleerde studie van die verspreiding van Christendom in Tswana-gemeenskappe, en die rol van Tswana evangeliste daarin, oor 'n breë area wat strek van die huidige Vrystaat-provinsie, deur die Noordwes-provinsie tot noordelike Botswana. Fiona Vernal se *The Farmerfield : A Christian Community in South Africa, 1838–2008* bestudeer die werking van 'n residensiële sendingstasie vir swartes en Khoe in die Oos-Kaap van Suid-Afrika. Vernal se studie dek die periode vanaf die stigting van stasie, deur die moeilike tye van die vroeë twintigste eeu en die daaropvolgende gedwonge verskuiwings, tot die hervestiging van die nasate van voormalige inwoners danksy pogings tot grondherstel vroeg in die een-en-twintigste eeu. Richard Elphick se *The Equality of Believers: Protestant Missionaries and the Racial Politics of South Africa* bespreek die rol wat verskillende protestantse Christelike groepe gespeel het in die skepping en bestryding van rassetoeskrywing en -diskriminasie in Suid-Afrika, van die laat negentiende eeu tot ongeveer die 1960's.

Slutelwoorde: LMS, WMMS, sending, Christenskap, Botswana, Suid-Afrika, geskiedenis