

The crisis of the Church of Sweden Mission among the Zulus during the 1880s

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Abstract

After the destruction of its original station at Oscarsberg near Rorke's Drift in the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879, the Church of Sweden Mission gradually developed its programme of evangelism and social ministry under the leadership of Otto Witt during the 1880s. However, Witt underwent a spiritual crisis and gradually became disillusioned with the missionary strategy of his Lutheran agency. His criticism of its emphasis on establishing mission stations and their schools went hand-in-hand with his increasing focus on itinerant evangelism, the imminent Second Advent of Jesus Christ, and a de-emphasis of educational work that ran counter to the Lutheran confessionalism of the Church of Sweden Mission. This brought Witt into conflict with its leadership, causing an internal crisis and eventually leading to his departure from this Lutheran organisation. Despite this setback, it weathered the storm and emerged from it with new initiatives leading to *inter alia* an emphasis on ministry to urbanised Zulus in Natal and, eventually, on the Witwatersrand.

Introduction

Swedish Lutheran missionary endeavours in southern Africa endured numerous internal disputes and other tribulations between their beginning in the 1870s and the early twentieth century, before the missionaries in question turned much of their attention to questions of race relations, especially in urban areas. After its belated entry into the Zulu mission field in 1878 (more than three decades after the Norwegian Missionary Society had initially undertaken evangelism there) and the disruption of its initial progress there caused by the Anglo-Zulu War, and, more specifically, the destruction of its station at Oscarsberg near Rorke's Drift in 1879, the Church of Sweden Mission (CSM) endured yet another major crisis in the alienation of its chief

missionary to the Zulus, the controversial Otto Witt, who had done much to build up the programme before the war erupted and again to reconstruct it during the early 1880s.

The implications of Witt's acrimonious departure went beyond the retardation of progress in the work of the CSM, which would eventually become quite extensive in Natal and Zululand, reaching its regional geographical apogee when Swedish Lutherans began to establish stations on the Witwatersrand immediately after the conclusion of the Second Anglo-Boer War (also known as the Second South African War) in 1902. The story of Witt's alienation from the mission whose work he led during its early years along the Buffalo River is not merely about the tribulations of the CSM, but has implications for such broad interdenominational themes as the history of forms of missionary endeavours in southern Africa, the international proliferation of millenarian eschatology, the unfolding of Pentecostalism as an international spiritual movement, and the influence of the renowned Andrew Murray on his contemporaries.

Despite its historical significance, not least in terms of conflicting strategies for evangelising part of southern Africa and nurturing new churches among its indigenous inhabitants, this crisis has never been given its due in scholarly literature. Probably owing to the departure of Witt from and subsequent criticism of the CSM, it is even minimised in the standard histories of that organisation by Norenus¹ and Karlgren.² Furthermore, it is all but ignored in Tore Furberg's commendable study of the relationship between the Church of Sweden and its missionary endeavours, and in some respects Furberg appears to have misunderstood the contours of Witt's theological evolution and evangelistic efforts.³

In the present article I shall take steps towards filling this lacuna in the scholarly literature and revising what has been published on the topic. I shall begin by describing Witt's missionary endeavours and how they evolved after the Anglo-Zulu War, then turn to his spiritual crisis of the 1880s, discuss how his disagreement with aspects of Swedish Lutheran mission strategy placed him at odds with the board of the CSM and, finally, relate these matters to his eventual alienation from that organisation.

Establishing and re-establishing the Swedish Lutheran Mission to the Zulus

Born in 1848 at Malmö, in an area where pietism was strong in the Church of Sweden, and educated in theology at the University of Lund, from which he graduated in 1875, Witt served briefly as a pastor in the Church of Sweden before his call to southern Africa as the CSM's first missionary in 1877.⁴ There is no evidence that his theological views deviated from the confessional orthodoxy of Swedish Lutheranism prior to his arrival on the

mission field or, for that matter, for several years thereafter. Witt did not establish the Swedish Lutheran mission among the Zulus by himself. Very shortly after reaching Natal he was joined by two colleagues, Carl Ludvig Flygare (1834–1883), who had served the theologically conservative German Hermannsburg Mission for a decade beginning in 1866 and left it amicably,⁵ and Frans L. Fristedt (1846–1929), a disputatious young pastor who recorded his disapproval of non-Lutheran Protestant traditions almost immediately after disembarking in Durban and reported that a shipboard conversation with a Dutch Reformed *dominee* had convinced him of “the perfection of the Lutheran confession and its superiority to that of the Reformed”.⁶

While Fristedt and Flygare toiled elsewhere, Witt established Oscarsberg near Rorke’s Drift. Initially it differed little from many other Protestant stations among the Zulus at that time. Witt preached in a small chapel, visited people in their *kraals*, and offered rudimentary instruction in literacy and other subjects to a few employees and other interested Africans at Oscarsberg. After approximately a year, however, the station was the site of one of the most memorable battles of the Anglo-Zulu War. Witt was compelled to leave only hours before it began, although after a stay in England and Sweden he would return with his family and rebuild the station. That phase of the work of the CSM has been dealt with in detail and need not be described here.⁷ Although the number of converts inched up slowly, Oscarsberg *redivivus* became a thriving institution which, in addition to a chapel, soon boasted a school and a girls’ home under the leadership of a matron from Sweden, Ida Jonatanson, who arrived there in 1884.⁸

Educational ministries, chiefly to children but occasionally open to adults, were widely regarded by both nineteenth- and twentieth-century missionaries as highly important elements in their strategies for reaching and influencing Africans. Accordingly, it was believed that parents could be made more receptive to the Gospel if their children received instruction on a regular basis. At a very early stage in their individual histories, schools were therefore opened at a large number of stations. The government of Natal began to include the Oscarsberg school in its annual round of inspections after awarding a monthly educational grant of £2 to Witt in 1885.⁹ When the inspector visited Oscarsberg late the following year, he found seven boys and nine girls enrolled in its school. Of these sixteen children, ten of whom were over twelve years of age, an average of eleven attended on all of the 203 days on which instruction was given in 1886. Seen through British colonial eyes, the results they attained were modest. Eleven of the children were taught exclusively in Zulu, whereas English served as one medium of instruction for the other five. To the inspector’s dismay, none of the pupils could read English, and only six were “able to write a fair small hand”. Only four of the young Africans could “work sums up to simple subtraction”; none had arithmetic skills beyond that level. The children’s most significant educational

progress was apparently on the practical front: fourteen of them had learnt to do “plain sewing”. The inspector also noted under the culturally revealing rubric “Means taken to encourage conformity with European habits” that the teachers encouraged “cleanliness and tidiness”, but he did not express the extent to which the children were adopting these ostensibly European characteristics.¹⁰

The Oscarsberg school continued to receive satisfactory reports, though hardly high marks, and remained a central institution at the station through the 1880s while Witt was based there, although during the latter half of the decade he was increasingly absent on evangelistic tours. Robert Plant (1844–1921) inspected Oscarsberg in 1888. Twenty-four children were then enrolled, only seven of whom had attended for at least two years. Five of these “passed Std. I creditably”; most of the other young Zulus were still acquiring the rudiments of reading, writing, and arithmetic. All, however, received instruction in singing and the Bible. Plant concluded that the school was “fairly satisfactory” and praised Witt as a man who “appears deeply interested in its success”.¹¹ What this Anglophone bureaucrat whose reports influenced the colonial government’s purse strings could not realise was that Witt had long subordinated educational work to his programme of itinerant evangelism in a consequential change of missionary strategy.

Within the CSM, however, that shift of emphasis away from the creation and administration of stable institutional life at Oscarsberg had been known, and had become increasingly worrisome, for a number of years. It would affect not only Witt’s view of his calling, but also his attitude towards conventional mission stations at a time when a conservative, ecclesiastical trend was discernible in the CSM. In December 1885 he reported to Henry William Tottie (1856–1913), who was both the secretary of its steering committee in Uppsala and a lecturer in ecclesiastical history at the city’s prestigious university, that he had changed the emphasis of his missionary strategy. “I find it increasingly clear how utterly necessary it is for us missionaries to visit the black people in their homes and what a great blessing that can be. Therefore, I have been out amongst the people much more often in recent times”, he explained. Witt did not pretend that this was a new element in his ministry; he merely indicated that he was devoting significantly more of his time to an activity in which he had engaged from time to time for several years. Witt described in some detail how he rode from *kraal* to *kraal* and proclaimed the Gospel wherever the inhabitants lent him their ears. His account sheds very little light, however, on how he evangelised people.¹²

Witt’s spiritual crisis

Concurrently with this shift, in 1885 Witt underwent a profound spiritual crisis which eventually had far-reaching consequences for his theology,

missionary practice, and personality. It set Witt on a different road in his spiritual odyssey, and it soon made a perceptible mark on the CSM's work in Natal. There is no firm evidence of any specific foreshadowing of the transformation of Witt's spirituality in 1885. Admittedly, evidence pertaining to his spirituality is sparse for the preceding years. Nevertheless, a few observations can be made. First, apart from assertions which he made in his unreliable and tendentious memoirs, there is no compelling reason to believe that Witt seriously questioned the fundamental tenets of his birthright Lutheran tradition before 1885, although he may of course have done so without recording his doubts. In any case, he frequently referred to his use of Luther's *Small catechism* when imparting the Christian doctrines to both Zulu children and adults at Oscarsberg. Moreover, Witt had seen his work bear several fruits at Oscarsberg since returning in 1880. There was a very small but growing congregation of baptised Christians at the station, and other converts were preparing for baptism. Witt's school attracted Zulu children, and he had succeeded in attracting some adults to special evening devotions. A children's home for girls was expanding rapidly, and the CSM had approved the construction of a separate building to accommodate it. In Ida Jonatanson, Witt had a devoted and hard-working colleague. Compared with the Norwegian Lutheran missionaries and the tribulations they had endured in establishing stations and gathering congregations in both Natal and Zululand prior to 1880, Witt had been an effective missionary at Oscarsberg.

The only direct source of information about Witt's spiritual crisis is the autobiography he wrote in the early 1920s. That document must be read largely as a tendentious *apologia* in which he defended the tortuous spiritual path he had followed, one which had led him away from his Lutheran heritage and eventually brought him to Pentecostalism. In any case, Witt did not depict his ministry as having been entirely futile. "I had a small group of Christians whom I had led into the evangelical Lutheran church in the usual manner, i.e. through instruction and sprinkling", he conceded. He also mentioned that many of the "heathens" in the area had been willing to send their children to the station for instruction. Witt emphasised that the children's home was a special point of light at the station, an institution at which the girls were taught "not merely knowledge from books but also better customs than what they saw in their heathen homes."¹³

Writing more than three decades later, Witt described his crisis in detail and how Ida Jonatanson had helped him to overcome it. In a conversation with him in June 1885, she had recounted her attainment of spiritual peace. At a revival meeting in Sweden, the preacher had proclaimed that if anyone desired to accept the atonement for his or her sins which God had offered as satisfaction for all godlessness, namely the blood of Jesus, "such a soul could be completely saved at once". Jonatanson had thanked God for

providing this simple way of salvation, and, in Witt's words, "at the very moment when she believed in the blood, peace came to her heart, and she rejoiced at entering the Kingdom of God". The young Swedish woman's simple testimony struck a chord with Witt, who professed that for many years he had sought unsuccessfully to enter the "kingdom of peace" through missionary work. Jonatanson's evangelical message, which was arguably in closer harmony with the central Lutheran tenet of passive righteousness and justification by faith alone than was Witt's approach of seeking God's peace through missionary endeavour, seemed to fit his spiritual longing. "Now there suddenly appeared to me a prospect of having all my old sins expunged by free grace and being allowed to begin afresh under new conditions", he recalled. During a sleepless night he experienced what he obliquely called a "fearful struggle" and decided to relate his personal spiritual history to Jonatanson. The following day Witt tearfully poured out his soul to his female confessor, emphasising that he felt like a hypocrite because he had preached "words which I did not believe". Jonatanson consoled her sobbing colleague by assuring him that even hypocrites could convert and be saved and that she had known a pastor in Sweden who had "given himself to God" only after having served in a church for several years.¹⁴

One of the first and eventually most significant changes Witt's spiritual crisis brought about was in his concept of salvation. Even though the evidence of the crisis is thin and circumstantial, it nevertheless leads one to wonder whether both Jonatanson and Witt had been influenced by the general neo-pietistic tendencies which characterised much Swedish Lutheran theology and church life during the nineteenth century. Among other things, Witt had laid great emphasis on the subjective elements of the pietistic *ordo salutis*, such as awakening and conversion. When Witt mentioned this to Jonatanson, she had protested that "God accepts the sinner as he is, and precisely at that point lifts him up from the depths of sin and places him on the solid rock." In other words, where Witt, possibly speaking from a pietistic heritage, had emphasised sanctification as the primary element of salvation, Jonatanson, perhaps reflecting a more orthodox Lutheran background, stressed justification. Witt countered that he had frequently sought to confess his sins, but that they had seemed too numerous to be forgiven. Again Jonatanson assured him that forgiveness was divine, and that for God no number of transgressions was too great, provided they were confessed. "These blessed words released me from a predicament", recalled Witt. "My difficulties concerning the way of salvation were taken away in an instant, and I realised that it was not a question of enumerating the sins I had committed, but rather of simply confessing that I was fallen, lost, and needed to be saved."¹⁵

Other new emphases in Witt's thought and practice

When one turns from Witt's retrospective *apologia* to the letters he wrote during the period of his spiritual crisis, one finds evidence of other important dimensions of the matter. These documents testify to an increased emphasis on itinerant evangelism, discouragement with evangelistic tours, and a new interest in the imminent Second Coming of Christ. Yet his correspondence from 1885 contains no explicit reference to his spiritual crisis. He appears to have withheld from the steering committee of the CSM the inner turmoil he was then experiencing. To be sure, that kind of material rarely found its way into the publications of missionary societies, and Witt's letters to *Missions-Tidning*, the periodical of the CSM, are no exception. Jonatanson also discreetly maintained silence about the matter.

What stands out more than anything else in Witt's evangelism in the wake of his spiritual crisis is his emphasis on the imminence of the Second Coming of Christ. The sources of his millenarianism are not known, but various British and American millenarian theologies were beginning to make a significant impact on Scandinavia during the 1880s, and it is plausible that some of those currents which washed ashore there also reached Oscarsberg. What prompted Witt to begin to emphasise the Second Advent in 1885 (if in fact this new emphasis in his proclamation stemmed from that year, as appears to be the case) is unknown. One possible explanation lies in the minor explosion of Swedish and other Scandinavian millenarian literature during the 1880s, perhaps most notably in this context works by the respected Swedish Lutheran theologian and promoter of missions Peter Fjellstedt and the globe-trotting Swedish-American evangelist Fredrik Franson (1852–1908). Both had published millenarian works in 1881, and it is conceivable that one or more of their books had come into Witt's hands. It is also quite plausible that Witt had read millenarian treatises by British theologians, although again we cannot be certain about the lines of influence. At any rate, his emphasis on the imminent return of Jesus Christ, linked with his itinerant evangelism, dovetailed with his growing criticism of the CSM's emphasis on the development of mission stations and their schools.

This is also true of another emphasis which emerges even more vividly from Witt's contemporary descriptions of his evangelism during 1885, namely a more marked willingness to separate the Gospel from the cultural trappings of European civilisation. He was no more successful in this effort than most of his colleagues in the CSM and counterparts in other missionary societies, yet one can discern a turning point which proved consequential. Witt seems to have begun to see more clearly that the willingness of some Zulus who had resided at or near mission stations to build houses in what he liberally called a "European style" did not necessarily mean that they had undergone an inner spiritual transformation. In an illustrative incident,

Witt visited such a home and discussed Christianity with its inhabitants. To his dismay, one of its male residents promised to believe in Christ if Witt would first give him a shirt and trousers, declaring that he could not live as a Christian without such attire. The perplexed Swede blamed European missionary strategies for this misunderstanding. "It is difficult to help our black friends to overcome the false notion that clothing makes one a Christian, a notion which unfortunately the Christians themselves imparted, because often the only difference between them and the heathens is their clothing." This misunderstanding prompted Witt to assert that "it is absolutely necessary to preach a free Gospel, preach pure grace through faith and avoid saying 'you must do this or this, you must not do that or that'. Faith must come first, then sanctification."¹⁶ In this insight and the adoption of this attitude may have lain part of the germ of Witt's increasingly critical attitude towards secular education as part of missionary work.

Witt did not discuss the emphases in his theology and spirituality in 1885 with many people outside the CSM. However, he candidly expressed his views about ecclesiastical missions and their tendency to lose their vigour and become ends in themselves in letters to the Student Missionary Society (SMS) in Uppsala, which contributed funds to the work at Oscarsberg. In November 1885, for example, Witt confided to the secretary of the SMS that while he still loved the Church of Sweden, "I do not believe in ecclesiastical activity which lacks life or in [unintelligible word] ecclesiastical institutions where they inhibit life and hinder its development." This is hardly a statement Witt would have made to sponsors had he not perceived a tendency in that direction at Oscarsberg or felt that his own work as a missionary should proceed in a direction which differed from what had become the conventional Lutheran one. He emphasised that "one must make a distinction between working for the church and working for the Lord Jesus", and thought he had followed both paths amongst the Zulus. It is highly plausible that by the latter Witt was referring *inter alia* to his willingness to go beyond structured work at Oscarsberg and engage in itinerant evangelism on both sides of the Buffalo River as opposed to limiting his activities to religious and educational functions at the station. Witt also revealed that he had made the mistake of "going to the mission field to find Jesus instead of being driven there by gratitude for having found him". He assured the SMS that largely because of *kraal* evangelism his own efforts were bearing more fruit than previously, and that approximately a dozen Zulus whom he had evangelised were on the verge of professing faith in Christ.¹⁷

The possible influence of Andrew Murray

The question of what lay behind Witt's change of strategic direction has never been satisfactorily answered. The Swedish missiologist Tore Furberg

attributed much of his theological transformation and emphasis on itinerant evangelism during the latter half of the 1880s to the influence of the renowned Dutch Reformed pastor Andrew Murray. This attribution, however, appears to be exaggerated and involves various historiographical problems. Relying largely on Witt's error-ridden memoirs and a letter Witt had written to Tottie in 1887, Furberg declared that after coming into contact with Murray, who was then travelling about southern Africa on an evangelistic tour, the Swedish missionary heeded the Dutch Reformed *dominee's* prompting and began to conduct open-air revival meetings at Oscarsberg.¹⁸

Witt wrote two reports of the encounter. In one, published in the CSM's periodical the following year, he indicated that Murray had advised him to "try to imbue the people with the truth through a series of revival meetings". He did not specify whether these were at Oscarsberg or elsewhere.¹⁹ In a private letter to Tottie, however, who had met Murray in the Cape during his inspection of the CSM field in 1886, Witt stated that he had heard Murray not near Oscarsberg, as Furberg would have it, but in Biggarsberg, well to the west of his station, at services for Afrikaans-speaking farm people. Several of these Boers had requested Witt to come to their properties and preach to their Zulu employees.²⁰ This does not, of course, exclude the possibility that Murray may also have encouraged him to hold special services at Oscarsberg.

Whatever the precise details of their encounter may have been, one should not exaggerate the common ground between Witt and Murray, which was minimal. Both the general shape of the latter's ministry and the emphases of his "special evangelisation" set him apart from the independent course which the Swede followed increasingly in the late 1880s. Witt eventually abandoned his station to devote his ministry largely to itinerant evangelism, whereas Murray remained principally a man of the parish. But even in terms of their evangelistic activities they were to some extent a study in contrasts. Murray emphasised *inter alia* the necessity of adequate preparation in a congregation, the value of follow-up meetings, and the desirability of holding a lengthy series of meetings in one place. Witt's loose evangelisation in Zululand and immediately south of it near the Tugela River included practically none of these desiderata, all of which necessitated a higher degree of structure and co-operation with established congregations than he was in a position to have. Theologically, there is no evidence that Witt was at all familiar with Murray's increasing emphasis on continuing sanctification.

Tottie's inspection of the field in 1886

In April 1886 the steering committee of the CSM decided to send Henry William Tottie to Natal to inspect its field there and investigate the

possibilities for extending it into occupied Zululand, which the British had not yet officially annexed. Writing from Cape Town, he echoed the call of many missionaries for the imposition of a *pax Britannica* in Zululand which would allow evangelisation to proceed under more favourable conditions than had hitherto been the case there.²¹ Tottie then continued via Durban to Oscarsberg and environs, where he spent three weeks observing Witt and the other CSM personnel. This Swedish missionary official also met representatives of the Norwegian Missionary Society and certain Anglophone Protestant agencies. In very broad terms, Tottie's observations and vision for the future of the CSM field led to his overarching conclusion that "the steering committee of the CSM must adopt firm regulations for its missionaries with regard to several matters which until now have been left up to the individual missionary and adopt various policies which have been proven to be beneficial and healthy for other missions to this people".²²

Tottie set this and his other conclusions forth in a report of 101 pages submitted to the CSM steering committee in February 1887. It highlighted the tension between the conservative, structured, long-term approach to missionary governance and strategy on the one hand and Witt's increasingly independent and, in Tottie's eyes, *partly* idiosyncratic approach to evangelism on the other. In retrospect, it is obvious that Witt either had to conduct his ministry more fully in line with policies with which he disagreed, or leave the CSM.

Tottie's interaction with Witt gave him little reason to believe that the CSM's first representative in Natal should remain in its service. He conceded that Witt was linguistically talented, but noted that some of the other missionaries with whom he had spoken had criticised his Zulu translations of Swedish hymns and the Church of Sweden manual. Tottie therefore recommended that if Witt rendered further materials into Zulu, another missionary should be asked to review the translations before they were printed.²³ What concerned Tottie far more, however, were the consequences of his spiritual crisis in 1885. He declared that as one result of this Witt had fallen under the influence of unspecified "Reformed writings" and subsequently "developed in a Methodist, ultraprotestant direction". Precisely what Tottie meant by the latter assertion is not clear from his report. In any case, nothing in Witt's known writings indicates that he had accepted Wesleyan concepts of sanctification. How much Tottie knew about that branch of Protestantism is impossible to ascertain, but he declared categorically that Witt's position was "neither Lutheran nor ecclesiastical". As a church historian, Tottie was suspicious of Witt's belief that the literal text of the Bible was normative without regard for the historical development of Christianity. Going beyond strictly doctrinal matters, Tottie also found it regrettable that Witt had again begun to pass severe judgements on his colleagues in the CSM and other Lutheran missions in southern Africa who

did not question the orthodoxy of their evangelical tradition. Tottie did not seek to guess where Witt's spiritual odyssey would lead. He believed that Witt's position in 1886 was only a transition, but feared that Witt's "inconsistent character and unpredictable mood" might spur him in a completely unorthodox direction. On the other hand, Tottie found hope in Witt's stated desire to be regarded as a Lutheran.²⁴

Tottie also feared that Oscarsberg faced a difficult future, owing in part to Witt's personality. Tottie praised Ida Jonatanson as "a good acquisition" for the CSM who was performing commendable service by teaching four hours daily at the school and administering the children's home at the station. He expressed concern, however, that she was being overworked and that in the long term her health might thus be impaired. "It is therefore all the more necessary", Tottie declared, "that Witt and Josef [ka Makata, a Zulu evangelist] assume some of her responsibilities at the school".²⁵ Witt, however, was not inclined to do so, preferring to devote an increasing amount of his time to evangelism away from Oscarsberg.

Not surprisingly, the learned Tottie devoted much of his evaluation of Oscarsberg to its religious and secular educational work. He was not particularly pleased. Tottie had ample opportunity to observe the instruction of six baptismal candidates whom Witt taught for an hour almost every weekday. Tottie saw little in his pedagogy to commend it. He reported that "as a teacher Witt does not possess any noteworthy qualities" and found his practice of going through the *Small catechism* every month for a year particularly uninspiring. The fruits of such catechetical endeavours confirmed Tottie's initial impression that Witt's methods were impoverished. The familiarity of recently baptised Zulus with fundamental doctrines of Christianity varied immensely, but Tottie generalised that it was unimpressive. He also concluded that on the basis of the conduct of recently baptised Zulus, "Pastor Witt, driven by unsound and exaggerated optimism, has admitted heathens much too quickly to baptism in some cases."²⁶

Tottie directed his most scathing criticism of Witt's endeavours as a missionary towards his administration of the school at Oscarsberg. Before Jonatanson arrived in 1882 to assist him, he asserted, Witt's management of the incipient educational programme there was "characterised by disorder and laziness", and there was no regular catechetical instruction. Her arrival had allowed Witt to shift from ineptness to exploitation. In Tottie's opinion, he had exploited her by burdening her with nearly all of the teaching. When he had complained to Witt about this, the latter had allegedly replied that he was "much too good to teach in a school". Tottie, for his part, believed that pedagogically the veteran missionary was not good enough. Like countless other nineteenth-century missionary administrators, Tottie regarded educational work as a vital component in the propagation of the Gospel and of European efforts to elevate the cultural niveau of non-European peoples.

Witt, however, viewed this supposed symbiosis differently. “Above all else”, reported Tottie, “he wishes to emphasise that educational work lies outside or [at least] beside the task to which God has called him, namely itinerant evangelism.” Furthermore, Tottie believed that Witt did not have the full confidence of Zulus in the vicinity and that many of them therefore refused to send their children to Oscarsberg to be educated. If that were not enough, Witt wrote to him while Tottie was *en route* to Sweden and informed him that he did not believe the school should accept money from the government. “I do not believe that it has ever been the will of the Lord that we request state aid,” he intimated. “His works of love are best done through voluntary contributions of love by his children.” Witt predicted that the school would lose its public support, but he seemed to welcome that eventuality. He expressed his conviction that God would thereby spare him from having to teach at Oscarsberg.²⁷

On the other hand, Tottie evaluated Witt’s *kraal* evangelism positively and suggested that Swedish Lutheran endeavours to evangelise the Zulus should involve more work apart from conventional stations.²⁸ In other words, Tottie was by no means categorically opposed to Witt’s itinerancy. Rather, his grave concern was that by devoting most of his professional time to itinerant evangelism, Witt was neglecting both educational and religious work at Oscarsberg.

Witt as missiologist

While the gap between Witt’s personal missionary strategy and that of the CSM leadership widened, he remained within the organisation and presumably regarded himself as a sufficiently theologically orthodox Lutheran. At the same time, he spelt out his missionary theology and perspectives on evangelism in a book published in Stockholm in 1887. The volume, entitled *Kristus i hedningarne, härlighetens hopp* (Christ amongst the heathens, the hope of glory), was also a defensive reaction to the criticisms Tottie had levelled at him. The thematic scope of the volume is broad, but only a few of its topics were of immediate relevance to his unfolding alienation from the CSM.

One of these concerned the relative importance of mission stations and itinerant evangelism. Witt’s desire to cross the Buffalo River into what had been the Zulu kingdom was as keen as ever, and he defended his goal of proclaiming the Gospel there. “It has often been asserted by opponents of Zulu missions that no other heathen land is more replete with mission stations than Zululand,” he stated. “It is nevertheless certain that while Zululand has many missionaries, it has few if any evangelists, and the latter are precisely what are needed.”²⁹ In this statement inhered a transparent defence of his

gradual shift to itinerant evangelism and a concomitant minimising of the value of conventional activities at stations.

Witt did not deny that mission stations could serve a purpose in the field, but he insisted bluntly that to restrict missionary endeavours to them was to leave “the vast masses of the people outside their influence”. The increasingly peripatetic evangelist observed that apart from the relatively few people who resided at or very near the stations he had found the “deepest ignorance” of the Gospel amongst the Zulus. Moreover, missionaries could best gain the trust of the indigenes by taking the message of salvation in Jesus Christ directly into their homes. Going beyond human arguments for *kraal* evangelism, Witt played what he probably thought was his highest rhetorical card by stating that to wander from place to place seeking to propagate Christianity was “in literal accordance with His own way of acting and with the plan which His own apostles followed according to His will”.³⁰

On the other side of this coin was Witt’s disparagement of mission schools – another thinly veiled response to Tottie’s critical attitude. Rather than attack the CSM’s educational programme directly, he defended his shift of emphasis from the school at Oscarsberg to itinerant evangelism by declaring that there had been an inversion of priorities. From Witt’s perspective, the CSM, like many other missions, had committed a fundamental error by giving primacy to the establishment of its schools in the hope that by influencing children it could eventually gather churches. “The school has great importance on the mission field”, he countered, “but not during the first period.” Witt reasoned that amongst “raw people of nature” like the Zulus, “the school ought to proceed from the church, not the church from the school”. The logic he employed to substantiate this assertion consisted of little more than Witt’s belief that in the absence of a decidedly Christian voice the introduction of “civilisation” to Africa, usually involving alcohol and firearms, was destructive. He also declared that “Sodomite abominations” developed at those mission stations where secular ministries, such as educational work, ran ahead of the proclamation of the Gospel.³¹

Another theme in *Kristus i hedningarne* revealed his growing alienation from the mainstream of Swedish Lutheran theology and missionary strategy. This was his budding interest in millenarianism. Extensive research done in the United Kingdom, the United States of America, and Europe during the 1970s and 1980s has cast a great deal of light on the attention paid on both sides of the Atlantic during the fourth quarter of the nineteenth century to the anticipated Second Coming of Christ. As has been demonstrated by Ingemar Lindén,³² Frederick Hale³³ and other scholars, various kinds of millenarianism had become fairly well known but by no means universally accepted in Scandinavia by the 1880s. It is difficult to ascertain precisely who influenced Witt’s eschatology at that time, and a detailed discussion of this aspect lies outside the scope of the present study.

Whatever its sources were, there is clear evidence that the seeds had been sown when Witt wrote *Kristus i hedningarne*. He placed missionary work in general into an eschatological context by citing Romans 11 and Revelation 2. Witt explained that his and others' endeavours to propagate Christianity were only an early step in the ultimate plan of salvation. Before this could be achieved, he believed, the heathens would have to be converted. Witt harboured no illusions that all would accept Christ. Rather, he asserted that "by the 'perfection of the gentiles' we must understand a sufficiently large number of gentiles who are chosen for the preparatory work, before the time of the real harvest comes." Like most other millenarians, Witt was convinced that the Second Coming would occur "very soon". "God's seventh day is beginning to dawn", he asserted. Witt made the standard assertion that "signs of the times" pointed to the imminence of Christ's return but gave no explicit indication of what he was interpreting as such portents.³⁴ The further development of his millenarianism would come in the 1890s when he wrote a short book on the subject.³⁵ What is significant about the core of it, which he presented in 1887, was that his conviction that the Second Advent was imminent militated against the creation of long-term institutions at mission stations.

Witt's departure from Oscarsberg and the CSM

Witt continued to divide his attention between Oscarsberg and neighbouring areas, apparently gradually devoting more of his time to itinerant evangelisation. His wife's health was failing, and his children needed more education than was readily available near the station. A call to Durban may therefore have seemed providential when it came from a struggling Scandinavian immigrant church there in 1889.

That essentially and officially non-Lutheran congregation stood closer to Witt in terms of theology and the shape of its ministry than did the orthodox Lutheran CSM. It had originated shortly after a few dozen Norwegians, some of whom were Baptists, settled in Durban in 1879. There they met other Norwegians as well as Swedes who were refugees from the Anglo-Zulu War. Witt's colleague in the CSM, Carl Flygare, had briefly ministered to them at that time, but returned to his post after the war. When the church was officially constituted in 1882 or 1883,³⁶ the majority of its members probably came from the Scandinavian state churches, as the new body was designated "Lutheran" and its constitution stipulated that its leaders be in that tradition and declared that the *Augsburg Confession* would be its theological norm. Not all the members accepted this. By 1886 they had become numerically strong enough to demand that the congregation delete "Lutheran" from its name and references to the *Augsburg Confession* from its

constitution. Precisely when Witt initially came into contact with this church is unknown, but in any case he had become acquainted with it by 1889.

In what was probably not a coincidence, when the CSM missionaries gathered for their periodic conference at Appelsbosch in July 1889 they discussed the possibility of extending their small field to Durban, which had attracted large numbers of Zulus. The minutes of that meeting do not indicate who proposed this expansion of the field or even whether Witt, whom one must suspect of suggesting it, was present. The assembled missionaries informed the steering committee of the CSM that they believed it would be desirable to resume some of the work which Flygare had undertaken there during the Anglo-Zulu War. They added, however, that if a CSM representative were stationed in Durban, he should limit his ministry to the black population of the city and Scandinavian seamen, and not become the pastor of the Scandinavians there.³⁷

This was the situation when Witt visited Durban in mid-1889. He briefly ministered to the congregation and became acquainted with some of its leaders. In August one of them, a Norwegian named Anders Gørven, wrote to Witt that “it would be a joy to us if God would allow you to come down here permanently”. Knowing that Witt’s primary calling was to evangelise indigenous Africans, Gørven emphasised that there were several thousand Zulu labourers in Durban and expressed regret that little missionary work was being done amongst them. Presumably unaware that relations between Witt and the leadership of the CSM had become severely strained, Gørven wondered whether the CSM would consider transferring Witt to Durban and continuing to support him there while he ministered to both Zulus and Scandinavians in the city. He concluded by requesting Witt’s permission to contact his superiors in Sweden about this matter.³⁸

Apparently Witt perceived in this offer at least a partial solution to his dilemma and thus acceded to Gørven’s request. Replying quickly from Oscarsberg, he declared that the call must have been divinely inspired because he himself had never considered moving to Durban. Witt emphasised, however, that he had been commissioned to do missionary work amongst “the heathens” and that it would not be easy for him to leave his “dear Oscarsberg”. He lessened the tension between his original commission and the Scandinavians’ call by reasoning that he could focus his attention on the Zulus in the city, chiefly in the evenings when they were not working. Witt emphasised that he would not regard himself as under the supervision of the Scandinavians in Durban, but hoped to continue his relationship with the CSM.³⁹ Presumably he believed that he and the leaders of the CSM in Sweden could find a *modus vivendi* which would allow him to remain in that organisation, devoting much of his time to urban evangelisation in harmony with his understanding of what the primary task of missionary endeavour should be.

Gørven, apparently satisfied with this affirmative if qualified reply, in his capacity as secretary of the Scandinavian congregation responded by writing to the CSM in October 1889. He explained the plight of the local church and the need for a pastor to minister to Nordic immigrants, seafarers, and black labourers. Gørven asked the CSM outright to consider transferring Witt to Durban. He did not, however, broach such vital matters as how Witt would divide his professional time or the extent to which the members of the Scandinavian Chapel were prepared to defray his salary.⁴⁰

In the end the proposed arrangement foundered when Witt unilaterally declared his independence from the steering committee and subsequently left the CSM. The Scandinavian Chapel continued without a full-time pastor, although Witt did in fact move to Durban and preached to its congregation. Witt entered the service of a new pan-Scandinavian missionary society bearing the misnomer “the Free East Africa Mission”, which evangelised Zulus both in Durban and near Stanger.⁴¹ He thus realised, if only temporarily, his vision of becoming an itinerant evangelist largely free of bureaucratic control.

Conclusion

Witt’s departure left the CSM with one less seasoned pastor in its southern African field, which it wished to expand. However, seen in its historical context, it is evident that the gulf between its confessionally orthodox Lutheran leadership and Witt’s receptivity to new theological currents, combined with his independent spirit and apparently growing aversion to centralised authority, made the breach inevitable. The extensive archivalia of the CSM for the 1880s do not suggest that people like Tottie found Witt’s departure regrettable. On the contrary, after it became obvious that he was on a different wavelength and was not evincing any willingness to adapt to the steering committee’s direction, including its policy of building up educational and social ministries at Oscarsberg and other rural stations, they had every reason to welcome his departure. To be sure, the CSM would lay plans for urban ministry during the 1890s, although the onset of the Second South African War necessitated a postponement of their implementation. By then Witt was long gone. As Frederick Hale has demonstrated in his study of Swedish Lutheran missions on the Witwatersrand, this CSM undertaking was initially aimed at ministering to young male Zulus who had become church members in rural areas but migrated to Johannesburg and areas nearby, and from an early stage it included a significant educational ministry component, something which Witt had deprecated.⁴² A new generation of Swedish Lutheran missionaries, both pastors and unordained personnel, brought the Gospel and its ethical ramifications to both rural and urban areas of southern Africa beginning in the 1890s. The Witt controversy reveals much about the

cleft between incompatible missionary strategies during an era when Christianity was proliferating rapidly in southern Africa.

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