

Puritanical and apocalyptic-minded American missionaries in southeast Africa – a contrast with Bishop John William Colenso

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Abstract

Six couples of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) arrived in Natal, southeast Africa in 1835 – three from north of the Mason-Dixie Line and three from the south – all six indelibly etched with a Puritan consciousness and worldview. Utilising a two-prong strategy – from West Africa and southeast Africa – the ABCFM wanted to Christianise and civilise all of “dark” Africa, and thereafter to celebrate together with other European mission societies somewhere on a central Africa mountain top. They perceived their mission to be one of urgency because the end time was near. A cosmic spiritual battle between God and Satan was forming. The God-elect were to take up their battle stations, and together with Him, wage aggressive war against Satan and his kingdom. Prior to the impending final judgment, their objective was to utilise whatever means necessary to pluck and save as many souls as possible from Satan’s bondage. They were determined to do this irrespective of and with disregard to Zulu indifference to the missionaries’ Christianising and civilising message and appeal.

Twenty years later, 1855, the Church of England’s bishop to Natal, John William Colenso and his family arrived. Colenso was an individual influenced greatly by the literary critic Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834) and the biblical criticism of Frederick Denison Maurice (1805-1872), particularly, the 1860s *Essays and Reviews*. He applied himself diligently to the task of learning the Zulu language, and in close daily contact with Zulus, particularly his friend, William Ngidi – sought to listen and respond to their many questions. This was in contrast to the Americans, who seemed to learn the language mainly so as to speak and instruct. Patience and a work of small things characterised Colenso’s missiology. With a consciousness shaped by the Church of England rather than Puritanism or pietism, Colenso and some of his colleagues perceived God as friend and father rather than judge. In turn,

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this favourable perception of God positively affected their attitudes toward the Zulus, as well as any and all methods and means used in converting them to the Christian faith.

Introduction

For the first time since the opening of the Christian dispensation, for the first time since the dispersion at Babel, God has made a large portion of the world to cease from the strange isolation of its several parts, and to become known and accessible to his people. With our railroads, our steamships, our telegraphic wires, our power presses, our commerce and commercial exchanges, our sciences and arts, our geography, our personal security; with no more Gothic or Vandal invasions to drive back the tide of civilization; nor False Prophet, nor Man of Sin, as we may hope, again to deceive on the large scale of nations; – who can doubt, that the “fullness of the time”; for blessing the earth with the gospel has come, and that this great work forms the grand mission and business of the churches and Christians of our day?¹

This paper seeks to illustrate how, through their own writings, missionaries of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) engaged in a mission of haste and insensitivity to the cultural, religious and social life of Zulus in southeast Africa. This was due in no small part to a prevailing consciousness and belief in an imminent end time. In the end, the Americans’ so-called civilising and Christianising mission was rarely if ever motivated by an unblemished sense of benevolent concern for the spiritual, let alone the total well-being of the “heathen” Zulu, but proportionally about performing one’s own duty to God so as to secure a personal sense of eternal certainty and newfound identity – one crafted upon the negative antithesis of the black and savage African. A brief comparison is conducted with former Church of England missionary, Bishop John William Colenso.

The nineteenth century was an age of immense transition from a predominantly communal, agrarian life, to an individualistic and over-populated urban one. Competition, struggle and survival became watchwords, poignantly expressed by British philosopher, Herbert Spencer’s “survival of the fittest”. Overnight it seemed that Church of England minister, Thomas Malthus’s 1798 theory assumed prophetic ascendancy – that unless checked

¹ Rufus Anderson and R. Pierce Beaver, eds., *To Advance the Gospel: selections from the writings of Rufus Anderson* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 64. Text of 1837.

by war, famine, disease or moral restraint, populations increase faster than food production. Struggle and competition were accentuated in England, where the population trebled between 1830 and 1870. And between 1820 and 1920, as many as 38-million Europeans immigrated to America, resulting in a global imprinting of European ancestry.²

Shocking impressions

Nineteenth century life has been likened to living “between two worlds, one dead and dying, one struggling but powerless to be born ...” or as quoting British historian and essayist, Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881), “[an age] destitute of faith and terrified of skepticism.”³ Some characteristics of the age have already been noted. Of particular note, however, given the Euro-African encounter in southeast Africa (Natal), it was an age of shocking first impressions, simultaneous with a loss of Euro-American individual and collective identity, resulting in a subsequent – if even unconscious – search for new ones.

According to Winthrop Jordan, F.A.P. Barnard Distinguished Professor of Afro-American Studies at The University of Mississippi, in his magnum opus *White over black: American attitudes toward the Negro 1550-1812*, whites encountered blacks at almost precisely the same time as they encountered apes. Unfortunately for blacks, this led to rabid European speculations, which incorporated centuries-old traditions with the coincidence of simultaneous contact between apes and Africans. It resulted in a correlation of similarities between the “man-like beasts and the beast-like men of Africa”.⁴ Or as Jordan notes, “If Negroes were likened to beasts, there was in Africa a beast which was likened to men.”⁵ Over time, Africa’s allure – and disgust – derived in part from the European perception of a place of unrestrained sexuality without any attending censorship; simultaneously a place “publicly deplored, often privately envied”.⁶

The shock of initial encounter with blacks is noted in American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions missionary Josiah Tyler’s memoir: “Our wives ... were fearfully shocked by the sight of the savage-looking natives, and doubtless sympathisers with the pioneer missionary ladies [to

² J. P. T. Bury, ed., “The Zenith of European power 1830-70”, in *The New Cambridge Modern History* (London: Cambridge, 1960), 10, 2; Carl N. Degler, *Out of our past; the forces that shaped modern America* (New York: Harper, 1959), 274.

³ Walter Edwards Houghton, *The Victorian frame of mind, 1830-1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957) 10, 96.

⁴ Winthrop D. Jordan, *White over black: American attitudes toward the Negro, 1550 – 1812* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1968), 30.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁶ Christine Bolt, *Victorian Attitudes to Race* (London: Routledge and K. Paul, 1971), 136.

Sandwich Islands] ... who shut themselves up in their cabin, saying, 'we cannot live among such people'.⁷

First impressions were not only shocking due to their sheer suddenness and prior lack of equal comparison, but also in part because of the prevailing Elizabethan notions of colour. The colour black had come to denote the anti-thesis of civilised virtue, as evident in the sixteenth century *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of black,

Deeply stained with dirt; soiled, dirty, foul ... Having dark or deadly purposes, malignant; pertaining to or involving death, deadly; baneful, disastrous, sinister ... Foul, iniquitous, atrocious, horrible, wicket ... indicating disgrace, censure, liability to punishment.⁸

For Puritan and pietistic conscious people – themselves in search of new-found social and religious identity – the convenient black “savage” and “heathen” became an easy “aid to navigation”, an “exercise in self-negation”, a “social mirror”, whereby Europeans could “discover attributes in savages which they found first but could not speak of in themselves”. For as Andrew Sinclair rightly noted, “the unknown is usually the enemy, while the misunderstood is always the savage”.⁹

Tragically for Africans, whereas Europeans were in a privileged position of power to shape their identities upon the social mirror of the so-called savage and heathen “black other”, the latter were by fateful default consigned to view themselves by the mirror of coercive subservience to the white person’s mood, ideas, beliefs and actions.¹⁰ Ultimately, tragically, it resulted in “the phenomenon of making difference into identity”.¹¹

Puritan American consciousness

As Europeans encountered cultures and peoples different from themselves, they more often than not assessed the “different other” from a restricted, dialectical, two-fold perspective. Through one lens they assessed difference

⁷ Josiah Tyler, *Forty Years Among the Zulus* (Boston and Chicago: Congregational Sunday-School and Publishing Society, 1891), 24.

⁸ Christine Bolt, *Victorian attitudes to race* (London: Routledge and K, 1971), 131; Winthrop D. Jordan, *White over black: American attitudes toward the Negro, 1550 - 1812* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1968), 6-7.

⁹ Andrew Sinclair, *The Savage: A history of misunderstanding* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1977), 20.

¹⁰ John W. Blassingame, *The slave community: plantation life in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 200.

¹¹ Tite Tienou, “The invention of the ‘Primitive’ and Stereotypes in Mission”, *Missiology*, 19 (1991), 298.

by the yardstick of Anglo-Saxon culture; an arrogance born of accustomed privilege and power, and not atypical to Congregational minister, Josiah Strong, who stated of Anglo-Saxons in the 1880s – they were “destined to dispossess many weaker races, assimilate others, and mould the remainder, until, in a very true and important sense, it has Anglo-Saxonized mankind”.¹²

Through the other lens, they viewed the different, non-European other by a frail consciousness and insecure identity derived from a strict religious worldview, that of Puritanism,¹³ in which the world was divided into two types of people: Christian and heathen. Common Puritan perception of the heathen mind is evident in “so liberal” a person as American Board Secretary, Rufus Anderson:

Scarcely a ray of light reaches it [mental condition of the heathen world] from sun, moon, or stars in the intellectual and moral firmament. Mind is vacant, crushed, unthinking, enslaved to animal instincts and passions; earthly, sensual, terribly debased.¹⁴

The Puritan’s mind was singularly focused on heaven. The world and earthly matters were perceived to have been sold to Satan, and therefore corrupt and thoroughly evil. Life, therefore, was lived for the singular two-fold purpose of acquiring signs and character assuring individuals of their own “electedness”, and that of replicating saints.

The Puritan mind’s anxious search for evidence of electedness necessitated an acute and ever vigilant self-consciousness and self-discipline. The extent of the Puritan’s obsession is noted of American Board missionary, Daniel Lindley’s wife Lucy, by his biographer Edwin Smith:

She was always in a state of anxiety about them [her children], their health and spiritual welfare. Her introspection was painful in its intensity. She was morbidly conscientious. She who was so transparently good was always lamenting her sins. The memory haunted her of the wide sleeves she wore when a girl, wasting stuff that might have been sold to feed the poor. It troubled her for days when she found that a tradesman had

¹² Thomas F. Gossett, *Race: The history of an idea in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 180, 187-8.

¹³ Alan Simpson, *Puritanism in old and new England* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1955), 99: “Everyone who inspects the national consciousness of Englishmen and Americans today finds Puritanism a part of its makeup, whether the inspection is made by ourselves or by strangers who look at us with the incredulity – sometimes kindly, sometimes irritated – of visitors from another world.”

¹⁴ Rufus and Beaver, eds., *To advance the Gospel*, 36, 99.

given her ten cents too much change: "I must return it. He must see that I am honest" ... When she saw Mary playing cards it threw her into a state of prostration that lasted for days. That one of her boys should go to the theatre, that two of them should spend a rainy morning in the holidays at a billiard table, she took to be sure signs that they were on the road to perdition ... Sincerely religious, always pouring out her heart in gratitude for blessings bestowed upon her, religion brought her little joy and serenity. Not a happy woman; but noble in her high sense of duty and her unconquerable spirit.¹⁵

The Puritan's future hope and present obligation was encapsulated in a "covenant of grace". That is, Calvin's strict doctrine of salvation – God alone is the initiator and giver of salvation; man is incapable of doing anything to attain it – had evolved over the few centuries of time, and with the interpretive help of Calvin's disciples, such that a portion of human effort to attain salvation was feasible. If there was even a microscopic element of faith residing in the soul of person, he or she had a "duty" – with an attitude of "benevolent disinterest" – to nurture and cultivate this "slightest seed of grace".

Missions, then, acquired a new motivation. It became viewed as a self-imposed sacrifice or spiritual poverty, whereby a "probable saint" (because no one knew for sure) acquired a "sign" of electedness by participating in and preparing for the day of the "fullness of the Spirit". Saving souls or evangelism was the sole basis for incorporation of the ABCFM in 1812:

propagating the gospel in heathen lands, by supporting missionaries and diffusing a knowledge of the Scriptures; that the Board have confined their efforts to this one great object, and that a regard to our sacred trust requires us to pursue the object with undivided zeal, and to guard watchfully against turning aside from it, or mixing any other concerns with it ... our appropriate work is to propagate the gospel among the unevangelized.¹⁶

¹⁵ Edwin William Smith, *The life and times of Daniel Lindley (1801-80): Missionary to the Zulus, Pastor of the Voortrekkers, Ubebe Omhlope* (New York: Library Publishers, 1947), 425.

¹⁶ "Annual Meeting of the Board Regarding a Memorial on Slavery", in *The Missionary Herald* (1842), 424-5.

Fear, fire and “the fullness of the Spirit”

The American Board viewed their mission work with all urgency and as a method in “plucking brands from the burning”. In a plea for missionary reinforcements, Lindley wrote to Anderson: “If by your instrumentality and that of your agents, the people of this region are to be pulled out of the fire, we must all work with the system and zeal of firemen.”¹⁷

Thoughts and fear of fire and an imminent final judgment and end time were pervasive in America and in parts of Europe. There were a variety of factors contributing toward this widely held perception of living in the last days. In America and from the 1740s, Great Awakening revivalists, George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards popularised through their preaching and writings the idea of a not-too-distant millennial reign of Christ and his disciples. This idea was further championed and popularised by Edward’s disciple, Samuel Hopkins, who in 1793 wrote *A system of doctrines contained in divine revelation, explained and defended*. Of particular note, was a section entitled “A treatise on the millennium. Shewing from scripture prophecy, that it is yet to come; when it will come; in what it will consist; and the events which are first to take place.”¹⁸

Further agitating the already anxious American and European minds were other social, political and religious disturbances. The French Revolution (1789) and resulting Napoleonic Wars (1803-1815) gave impetus to American homegrown agitators such as Jedidiah Morse and Timothy Dwight, who alarmed Americans with a shrill cry against impending liberalism, and its accompanying “isms”, such as resurgent Catholicism, atheism, nominalism, universalism, Mohammedism, and any other “ism” one might envisage.

Morse and Dwight were themselves influenced by former Edinburgh professor John Robinson’s 1798 *Proofs of a conspiracy against all the religions and governments of Europe*, which alleged that clandestine groups

¹⁷ Anderson and Beaver, *To advance the Gospel*, 126. See also Daniel Lindley to Rufus Anderson. Port Natal, 1840. Most ABCFM missionary and mission correspondence, journals and reports have been copied and placed on a microfilm entitled *Papers of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions*. The individual missionary letters and journals quoted in this paper have been taken from microfilm reels 149, 174, 175, 176, and 177. The total microfilm collection of all ABCFM missions and stations encompasses over 800 reels. According to the ABCFM index, microfilm reels that contain South African missionary correspondence include: 149, 174-212, 216, 220-222. Letters, extracts, journal entries, reports, etc., of American Board missionaries were also taken from *The Missionary Herald*, available in microfilm format.

¹⁸ Samuel Hopkins, *A treatise on the millennium* (Boston: Isaiah Thomas and Ebenezer T. Andrews, 1793, reprint 1972 by Arno Press), 104, 145-6. All quotations from Hopkins’s *A treatise on the millennium* are from the 1972 reprint of the original 1793 edition. The language of the 1972 reprint, however, retained the antiquated, archaic language of the 1793 version.

had embarked on intentional and coordinated campaigns to undermine all religious and political authorities and establishments. Morse and Dwight's primary weapon of choice was literature – *The Panoplist*, begun in 1805, the primary purpose of which was to “arouse the slumbering forces of orthodoxy ... and to assail all the insidious foes of the faith once delivered by John Calvin”.¹⁹ By 1818 *The Panoplist* had become *The Missionary Herald*, missions' magazine of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions.²⁰

It was thought that accompanying the end time, or the advent of “the fullness of the Spirit”, would be both a purging of the church and providential signs throughout the world of God having made a free and easy access to every land – a levelling the mountains and bridging the oceans.²¹ Many Christians in America and Europe believed they were living in the sixth vial of Revelation – the final and cosmic battle between God and Satan at Armageddon. 1866 had even been prophesied as the advent of the millennial reign. War, battles and judgment were imminent, as conveyed by Anderson's sermon of 1837 entitled “The time for the world's conversion come”:

Should we take the wings of the morning, and fly millions of leagues beyond our globe, we could by no means thus escape from the responsibility that has come upon us; for we know our duty, and we can never be as though we had not known it. We should be held and treated, wherever found by ministering angels, as deserters from the army of the Lord of hosts. God's Word, and Spirit, and Providence now all concur in the command to publish the gospel to all the nations; and if we refuse, the blood of perishing nations will cry against us. This is the age for the work, and we are the people to do it. From this warfare Christ will give us no discharge. It by no means follows, that we shall be saved in the neglect of this work, because our fathers were. Our circumstances differ wholly from theirs.²²

¹⁹ Oliver Wendell Elsbree, *The rise of the missionary spirit in America 1790-1815* (Williamsport: The Williamsport Printing and Binding Co, 1928), 87, 92.

²⁰ D.J. Kotzé, *Letters of the American missionaries, 1835-1838* (Van Riebeeck Society Publications, Cape Town: Van Riebeeck Society, 1950), 6.

²¹ Rufus Anderson and R. Pierce Beaver, *To advance the Gospel: selections from the writings of Rufus Anderson* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 69.

²² Ibid.

Conquering and conquests – “benevolent” missions

At least for the ABCFM missionaries and its Board, the dominant mission focus was spiritual conquest. Missionaries were exhorted in their vocation as a

soldier of the cross ... to make conquests, and to go on, in the name of his divine Master, “conquering and to conquer”, committing the security and permanency of his conquests to another class of men created expressly for the purpose. The idea of *continued conquest* is fundamental in missions to the heathen, and is vital to their spiritual life and efficiency. It will doubtless be found on inquiry, that missions among the heathen have always ceased to be healthful and efficient, have ceased to evince the true missionary spirit in its strength, whenever they have ceased to be actively aggressive upon the kingdom of darkness.²³

Although conquest seems abrasive, even imperialistic from a twenty-first century perspective, it should be remembered that the common worldview then was that “The days are evil; they are sold to Satan and are captives to that hard master.”²⁴

In fact, this was an American Board missionary’s stated rationale and motivation for missions. If the heathen are not captives to Satan, and not at risk of eternal punishment, why engage in missions?

What else can feed his benevolence, and fire his zeal, but a belief in what the Bible says of their future prospects? Nothing strikes so deadly a blow at the missionary spirit, as the notion, that after all, the heathen are not exposed to eternal punishment ... I do not believe that Paul had any such notions of the salvability of the heathen ... And certainly nothing but the belief, that they are in a mass going down to eternal ruin, can keep modern missions alive.²⁵

²³ “The theory of missions to the heathen: a sermon at the ordination of Mr. Edward Webb, as a missionary to the heathen.” Ware, Mass., Oct. 23, 1845, in *To advance the Gospel: selections from the writings of Rufus Anderson* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 76.

²⁴ Henry Alexander Douglas, *Sloth* (Cape Town: Saul Solomon, 1860), 16, 18.

²⁵ Eli Smith, *The missionary character: an address delivered before the Society of Inquiry in the Theological Seminary in New Haven* (New Haven, April 1, 1840), 32-3.

Missions – like colonialism – was perceived, therefore, as a “benevolent imperialism”, whereby heathen souls could be rescued from the clutches of Satan and his dominion of deepest darkness.

Since it was believed to be the advent of the Spirit, Christians were exhorted to take up their battle stations. In England, regiments of young boys and girls were organised in local “Mission Crusader” clubs, all with the express purpose of “fighting for Christ and His Kingdom ... against the Evil one and his Kingdom”.²⁶ Similarly, the American Board literature reflects considerable military language: “What armies will be sent by the church into the empire of darkness, and what means will it put in requisition for the holy warfare!”²⁷ The analogy of Napoleon’s conquests were utilised as incitement and preparation:

They forget that the object for which the church is organized, is not so much the maintenance of fortresses already taken and garrisoned, as for universal conquest. And what are they but commissioned officers in this great army? Was ever an officer in Napoleon’s army, with which he would fain have subdued the world, commissioned with the understanding that he was of course to remain at home?²⁸

The war’s objective was nothing less than subjugation of hostile-to-God countries and peoples, so as to at least save some from the fires of hell:

In the process of subduing a country, while portions of the grand army are employed here and there, the main force is usually directed to some one or two points. When these are carried, then one or two others are selected for the more concentrated movement; and so on till the country is subdued.²⁹

A similarity between the missionary methodology of the American Board and the Church of England was their multi-pronged approach to spiritual conquest. Missionaries were sent to different compass points on the continent, and in mixed teams (physicians and preachers or evangelists) with the

²⁶ Anne Mackenzie, ed., *The net cast in many waters: sketches from the lives of missionaries* (London: Bemrose & Sons, 1870), 15.

²⁷ Anderson and Beaver, *To advance the Gospe*, 55.

²⁸ Eli Smith, *The missionary character: an address delivered before the Society of Inquiry in the Theological Seminary in New Haven* (New Haven, April 1, 1840), 4-5.

²⁹ C.J. Phillips, *Protestant America and the pagan world: the first half century of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, 1810-1860* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), 267.

ultimate hoped-for-objective of converting all of Africa for Christ and celebrating the victory on a Central Africa mountain top.

Our European brethren, also, of different denominations, whose line of march already extends across the continent on the south, will advance from that quarter; and the English Episcopal missions will advance from the wild mountains of Abyssinia; and our brethren of the same denomination at Sierra Leone, and those of various names at Liberia, will move us from the West: – and our children may hear of the meeting of these upon some central mountain, to celebrate in lofty praise Africa's redemption. Oh, what a meeting, what a day! And it will surely come; and Africa, all Africa shall rejoice in the liberty wherewith Christ maketh his people free.³⁰

Given the mission societies' militant-focused methodology, it is not surprising, then, that *The Missionary Herald* for instance contained a regular section entitled "Recent Intelligence" and "Foreign Intelligence". American Board missionaries in Natal often wrote of their missionary tours or excursions into the interior, away from the secure and comfortable confines of their mission stations, each time meticulously detailing numbers of villages, souls per village, proximity of kraals and villages to each other, and any and every other detail that might ultimately contribute to a future conquest of heathenism. Illustrative of this military-type reporting is a letter from missionary Lewis Grout to Board Secretary Anderson in 1852, in which Grout reported the existence of forty different tribes in Natal, with the Inanda reserve containing 1,176 kraals, which in themselves represented 5,214 huts.³¹

The "uncivilised" cultures, peoples and nations of the world were perceived to be so bound to Satan and his kingdom of darkness that of necessity missionaries' primary vocation was soldiering.

Zulu indifference and mission aggression

Time did not seem to allow for any method except direct and aggressive assault. In fact, Anderson advocated that wherever missions and missionaries

³⁰ Extracts from "The instructions of the Prudential Committee, given to the Rev. John Leighton Wilson, at Philadelphia, on the 22d of September, Will explain the nature and objects of the mission", in *The Missionary Herald*, November (1833), 402.

³¹ Lewis Grout to Rufus Anderson, Umsunduzi, September 1852 (Papers of the American Board of Commissioners for Board Missions).

ceased to be “actively aggressive” upon the domain of darkness, there it remains unhelpful and inefficient.³²

Aggression did not necessarily equate to overt evangelism. It did seem to mean, however, that the imminent end time justified any and whatever means required. The Americans eventually recognised that the Zulus were not only indifferent to the missionaries’ perceived irresistible Bible preaching and teaching, but on occasion deliberately relocated away from the mission stations in order to avoid it. Once this evasion tactic was identified, however, missionaries adjusted and employed a strategy of dispersal so as to effectively snare those Zulus who tried to evade conversion

should we concentrate our forces, we might eventually find ourselves in the center of a circle while those whom we wished to benefit had fled to the circumference to avoid those very influences we wish to exert over them.³³

Zulu indifference was interpreted for a long period by American missionaries as one sign among many that the end time was imminent and that it reflected the long-anticipated and necessary final struggle of Satan against the impending reign of God.³⁴ This interpretation of matters is evident in missionary correspondence:

The hatred and opposition to the gospel is I think increasing among the people generally. Some are trying to move from the stations, and get away from it as soon as possible. But you know that opposition to the cause of Christ is no new thing. We expect it. In fact, it is one of the encouraging signs, that the Spirit of the Lord is at work. It is the greatest, though not the only, encouragement I have yet seen at my station.³⁵

It also appears in missionary Josiah Tyler’s perspective on Zulu indifference:

This opposition probably arises from the war our missionary brethren have been waging against the baneful system of polygamy, which prevails here to a great extent. It may be regarded as a favorable indication, rather than otherwise, for it

³² Anderson and Beaver, *To advance the Gospel*, 76.

³³ American Zulu Mission to Rufus Anderson, Umbilo 1850 (Papers of the American Board of Commissioners for Board Missions).

³⁴ Annual Report of the American Zulu Mission, Port Natal, to Rufus Anderson, 12 September 1849 (Papers of the American Board of Commissioners for Board Missions).

³⁵ David Rood, to Rufus Anderson, Ifafa, 25 March 1849 (Papers of the American Board of Commissioners for Board Missions).

is evidence that the Spirit of God is at work in the hearts of the people.³⁶

“Necessary” humiliation of the Zulus

Zulu “stupid indifference” to the gospel, as an American missionary described it, eventually so angered and exacerbated missionaries in Natal – not only the Americans, but at least also the Anglicans and the Norwegian – that they accepted that while the war is spiritual in nature, it did not mean God was opposed to utilising physical means to subdue rebellious people and nations. An 1860 excerpt from the *Norwegian Mission Tidings* revealed the general Norwegian Mission Society missionary feeling:

To human eyes it looks as if this people only through material and political humiliation can be brought to their knees and taught to seek something higher. Their political and spiritual universe is such an integrated whole that it will scarcely break up without serious shocks ... As now they seem to be too well off, the tribes that live under the yoke of the Dutch people seem to offer a more prepared ground for the seed of God’s World.³⁷

Although it appears true to state that the majority of missionaries as well as their respective home mission society boards were in favour of this “humiliation thesis”, there were individual exceptions, including Bishop John W. Colenso, and an NMS missionary, Nils Astrop, who seems to have been influenced by Colenso’s writings.³⁸ Colenso’s perspective will be elaborated on shortly.

From the missionaries’ perspective, Zulu indifference was a symptom of an underlying malady, that of pride and vanity – both especially repugnant vices to the Puritan conscious, whether displayed in humans or animals. Daniel Lindley commended both the demise of Zulu “ignorant pride and superiority”, as well as the death of a “tiger” [leopard].³⁹ Of the leopard, Lindley wrote, “I resolved to attack him – his impudence was too great, and

³⁶ Josiah Tyler to Rufus Anderson, Esidumbini, 29 June 1850 (Papers of the American Board of Commissioners for Board Missions).

³⁷ Jarle Simensen, ed., *Norwegian Missions in African History*. Vol. 1: *South Africa 1845-1906* (Oslo: Norwegian University Press, 1986), 202.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 227, 229.

³⁹ Daniel Lindley to Rufus Anderson, Port Natal, 12 March 1840 (Papers of the American Board of Commissioners for Board Missions).

he deserved chastisement.”⁴⁰ Similarly, American Board missionary Hyman A. Wilder wrote,

When we tell them of the advantage of civilization – and of the happiness and comfort and skill and wonderful works of Christianized nations it seems to excite only a brief stupid amazement and reverence, but awakens no emulation, no desire to be different from what they are.⁴¹

Dissolution, disintegration and dispersal of the Zulu kingdom by force came to be seen, therefore, as a providentially legitimate and condoned “last resort” to Christianise and civilise the Zulus prior to Christ’s return. Forceful dispersal of the Zulus would then effectively end Zulu pride and result in humility – a necessary prerequisite to the introduction and acceptance of the “Good News”. American, Silas McKinney wrote three decades prior to the war of 1879:

They are in a transition state, breaking away from the Zulu nation, and dissolving into little bodies, and coming together again in new forms, and thus placing themselves in positions most happy for the successful introduction of the gospel.⁴²

Aldin Grout, the only American Board missionary to have lived in Zululand, echoed his colleague’s statement: “This Zulu nation as such is extinct. This I have been looking for ever since I left the Zulu country.”⁴³

Unappeal of the missionary appeal

Given prevailing missionary and mission society attitudes toward the “indifferent Zulus”, which became most apparent in the mid-to-latter nineteenth century, one is inclined to question why and what would have attracted or persuaded anyone to convert to a contradictory, irreconcilable, and unbecoming faith, as preached and modelled by most mission societies’ personnel of this period? Of course, mission society correspondence and records bear testimony that numerical Christian growth in Natal and Zululand

⁴⁰ Edwin William Smith, *The life and times of Daniel Lindley (1801-80): missionary to the Zulus, Pastor of the Voortrekkers, Ubebe Omhlope* (New York: Library Publishers, 1947), 318.

⁴¹ Hyman A. Wilder, “Annual Report of the Umtwalume Mission Station, Natal, So. Africa for the year ending 7 June 1854” (Papers of the American Board of Commissioners for Board Missions).

⁴² Silas McKinney, *The Missionary Herald*, XLIV, 4, April 1848, 110.

⁴³ Aldin Grout o Green, Pietermaritzburg, 10 September 1844 (Papers of the American Board of Commissioners for Board Missions).

was negligible until the late 1800s. In 1857, twenty-two years after the first American missionary arrived in Natal, the reality of their grand plan of conquering Africa for Christ are reflected in Josiah Tyler's words, "With sorrow, we can report nothing at present from our station but spiritual deadness."⁴⁴ Even as late as 1885, at the Jubilee celebrations, the bleakness of American mission success among the Zulus was lamented:

The greater part of South Africa is in darkness ... The demon of lust watches for the simple and foolish, as the spider for the fly, and drags them into his net. A godless civilization has swept, like a tidal wave, over our stations, leaving a residuum of filth and infidelity sad to contemplate ... Our hope is in the rising generation.⁴⁵

So negligible was their conversion and Christianising efforts, that American personnel despairingly asked: "Must we hire them [Zulu] to come?"⁴⁶ which ironically, is what they and other society missionaries ended up doing.⁴⁶

In a letter of 1864 to request salary increases, Wilder wrote:

The greatest number of those who are now members of our churches, were first brought to listen to the gospel while in our service. At present the only way in which we can get any one in a heathen kraal under the daily influence of divine truth is by giving him employment as a servant. He is then willing to learn to read and to attend our religious services as a part of his daily duty. Some of our servants are paid more, and some less, per month – the average is about 10 shillings exclusive of food, which costs from 5 to 10 shillings more. We suppose there is not a member of the mission who gets through the year without expending, necessarily, from £35 to £50 for servants food & wages. For this we get back only a small return in garden produce and in the repairs effected on our buildings. Far the greater part of the service for which we have to pay, is just a dead, inevitable expense.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Josiah Tyler to Rufus Anderson, Esidumbini, 27 July 1857 (Papers of the American Board of Commissioners for Board Missions).

⁴⁵ *Jubilee of the American Mission in Natal, 1835-1885* (Maritzburg: Horne, 1886), 56.

⁴⁶ General Letter of American Zulu Mission, Umvoti, 20 June 1855 (Papers of the American Board of Commissioners for Board Missions).

⁴⁷ HA Wilder to Rufus Anderson, Inanda, 7 March 1864 (Papers of the American Board of Commissioners for Board Missions).

Apparently such missionary practice was part of the American Board's strategy, as evidenced by Anderson's remarks regarding the role of education and missions – taking into the shelter and confines of mission stations, heathen Zulu children for purposes of indoctrination into the pure faith. He said:

It is an essential feature of the plan, that the pupils be taken young, board in the mission, be kept separate from heathenism, under Christian supervision night and day ... a race of children with Christian ideas and associations, from among whom we may select our future pupils and candidates for ministry.⁴⁸

John William Colenso, an eccentric contrast

In contrast to ABCFM missionaries who anticipated and feared an imminent end time scenario and whose mission methods reflected this perceived urgency and fear, the Church of England's bishop to Natal, John William Colenso seemingly shared no such concerns. A comparison between the ABCFM missionaries' urgency and the Anglicans' patience, particularly Colenso's, will now be briefly noted.

Arriving to Natal in mid-century, first for an initial ten-week survey, Colenso quickly became a skilled linguist in isiZulu. In contrast to the Americans, who desired to learn the language so as to be able "explain to the people the way of salvation", Colenso learned it in such depth because he desired to engage the Zulus in discussion that went to the heart of their many questions.⁴⁹ His connectedness with the Zulus over time earned him one of two Zulu names: "Sobantu" (father of the people) and "Sokululeka" (father who brings freedom).⁵⁰ Such endearing names stand in contrast to how his own church and country came to view him. Excommunicated from the Church of England in 1866 over his perceived extreme liberalism – in no small measure acquired from the thought of literary critic Samuel Taylor Coleridge, as well as the writings of theologian, FD Maurice – Colenso was

⁴⁸ Anderson and Beaver, *To advance the Gospel*, 103-4.

⁴⁹ JW Colenso, "On the efforts of missionaries among savages." *The Anthropological Review* 3 (1865), cclix-cclx; William Mellen, "Journal of a Visitation of the Diocese of Natal in 1864." *Personal*, 1864, 21. See also, Jeff Guy, "Class Imperialism and Literary Criticism: William Ngidi, John Colenso and Matthew Arnold," in *Journal of Southern African Studies* 23/2 (1997), 219-41; Jonathan A. Draper, ed., *The eye of the storm* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2003).

⁵⁰ Peter Bingham Hinchliff, *The Anglican Church in South Africa; an account of the history and development of the Church of the Province of South Africa* (London: Darton Longman & Todd, 1963), 64; Rees, Wyn, *Colenso letters from Natal* (Pietermaritzburg: Shuter and Shooter, 1958), 258.

posthumously ascribed the name “The Heretic” in a book of the same title, albeit Jeff Guy did not title the book with pejorative intent.⁵¹

In brief, there seemed to be a number of interconnected reasons, versus any single reason, why Church of England missionaries in general, and Colenso specifically, demonstrated – by the absence of militant and end time language in their writings – a general lack of anxiety toward an end time, and thereby, more patience toward Zulu indifference. Contributing factors to Colenso’s demonstrated patience toward, and eventual strong advocacy on behalf of Zulus, included his personal and theological understanding of God’s character and attributes; a familial view of redemption versus a courtroom drama before a punitive and unpredictable judge (God); a so-called liberal hermeneutic; Zulu language competence, and day-to-day life and work proximity to non-mission-station Zulus; and finally, Anglican liturgy, including multiple times per day recital of the opening stanza of the Lord’s Prayer, “Our Father” – the “our” conveying a daily consciousness of a universal and shared humanity with all people.⁵²

God: familial and fatherly

Due to the limitations of this paper, only Colenso’s understanding of God’s character and his perspective on salvation will be addressed. In contrast to the Puritan conscience that confessed God as father, yet perceived him to be an often whimsical and wrathful judge, for Colenso God was primarily friend and father. In fact, God was so essentially familial, for Colenso, that emotions were the distinguishing mark of being human. “It is not the outward form alone”, he wrote, “that makes the immeasurable difference between man and other animals. Wherever we find human affections, there we know we have got a human being”.⁵³

American Board missionaries were inclined to criticise the “heathen” (Zulu) children attending the American mission station schools for quickly reverting back to “heathen customs” (e.g., nudity) upon periodic return visits to their parents’ kraals. In contrast, Colenso interpreted such behaviour as a “sign of hope”:

If we wish to elevate, to educate, the latter [Zulu children] in a truly human manner ... No new ties to their teachers can or ought to take the place of their love to fathers and mothers,

⁵¹ Jeff Guy, *The heretic: a study of the life of John William Colenso, 1814-1883* (Johannesburg and Pietermaritzburg: Ravan Press and University of Natal Press, 1983).

⁵² JW Colenso, *A Sermon, St. Luke xi.2* (Pietermaritzburg: Cathedral Church of St. Peter’s, 1866).

⁵³ JW Colenso, *Ten weeks in Natal: a journal of a first tour of visitation among the Colonists and Zulu Kafirs of Natal* (Cambridge Eng: Macmillan & Co, 1855), 16-7.

sisters and brothers. How can they learn the Christian faith – trust in, and obedience to, a Heavenly Father – if they have begun by learning to despise their earthly parents?⁵⁴

Colenso differed strongly with most of the American Board missionaries over their incessant and uncompromising message regarding the perceived sinful depravity of the Zulus. The American exception was Aldin Grout and his wife, whom Colenso described as “friends together at once”.⁵⁵ The Americans were quick to attribute each and every Zulu vice as evidence of their being in bondage to Satan, but were reluctant, even unwilling, to similarly ascribe all Zulu virtues to God. In *A letter to an American Missionary*, Colenso stated:

I entirely differ from you as to the present moral state of the heathen. I believe that their deeds of kindness, justice, faithfulness, benevolence, are just as truly virtues – the fruits of God’s Spirit, and wrought by His Grace enabling them, – as the virtuous thoughts and actions of Christian men are. All human affections have a religious character; for they are such as we share with no beast or brute creature; they are such as we enjoy by virtue of our relations to Him, Who became one with us and took part with us in our nature, Who loved, rejoiced, sorrowed, and wept, as the Son of Man. And these affections, though cleansed and purified, in all true Christians, ... yet in all men, even in the heathen, are witnesses, however faint, of our high original, part of that image in which we were created, by which are shadowed forth to us on earth the invisible things of God.⁵⁶

A major distinguishing feature between American Board missionaries and Colenso, and one which significantly affected American attitudes toward and engagement with the Zulu “heathen”, was their understanding of God as Father.

For the Puritan-conscious Americans, God was confessed as Father, yet seldom if ever perceived in such warm, familial terms. Rather, God was viewed through a “Hopkinsian” lens, in which He was greater part wrathful-judge, than loving Father, intent on punishing the world – God will “rise out of his place ... to do his work, his strange work, to punish the world for their wickedness ... reduce and destroy mankind, so that comparatively few will

⁵⁴ JW Colenso, “On the efforts of missionaries among savages.”, cclxii.

⁵⁵ JW Colenso, *Ten weeks in Natal*, 254.

⁵⁶ JW Colenso, *A letter to an American Missionary from the Bishop of Natal* (Pietermaritzburg: Natal Guardian, 1855), 42.

be left”.⁵⁷ It was understood that only vigilant Christians would be safe when Christ returns like a thief in the night; only they will “keep their garments”.⁵⁸ The apostasy and destruction by God of millions of people in the pre- and post-millennium period would serve as a final and unforgettable object lesson for those elect saints fortunate to be saved. The lesson learned would be to

serve to set the total depravity, and the strong propensity of man to the greatest degree of wickedness ... and all faithful ministers and Christians; will make a new discovery, and greater than was ever made before, of fallen human nature, and of the great and desperate evil that is in the heart of man.⁵⁹

For Colenso, and perhaps Henry Callaway or other Anglican colleagues, there was no such apparent and equal fear of God. Nor was there any evident excessive concern over their ultimate fate or present secure standing before God. Utilising a commonly visible African analogy, Colenso viewed salvation from the perspective of a mother’s anxious and all-embracing love, intent on securing her child to her back at all costs; rather than, from the perspective of a newborn, who has to ensure all by herself that she cling tightly to her mother’s back lest she fall off. Colenso stated:

It is not our zeal, our faith, our prayers, but our Father’s love that keeps us from evil ... But as the mother loves to feel the gentle pressure of the hand of her little-one, to feel its faint struggling in answer to her own deep yearnings, so our God desires that we shall “feel after Him that we may find Him”.⁶⁰

Colenso was not hesitant to speak against those missionaries who sought Zulu conversion through an appeal to fear and fire:

The profession of Christianity had been very much hindered by persons saying that the world will be burnt up – perhaps, very soon – and they will all be destroyed. They are frightened, and would rather not hear about it, if that is the case.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Samuel Hopkins, *A treatise on the millennium* (Boston: Isaiah Thomas and Ebenezer T. Andrews. Original edition, 1793), 143-4.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 148-9.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 157.

⁶⁰ JW Colenso, *Natal sermons: second series of discourses preached in the Cathedral Church of Saint Peter’s, Maritzburg* (London: N. Treubner, 1868), 346-7.

⁶¹ Colenso, *Ten weeks in Natal*, 99.

Patience, a divine and missionary attribute

Patience was perceived by at least Colenso, Callaway and colleague Robert Robertson to be an attribute of God's character, resulting from the very core or essence of God's character – parental love. Among Church of England missionaries, the only identifiable urgency I detected related to the political realm, not the religious. That is, the English governing authorities required a seven shilling tax per Zulu hut, yet did not provide at the same time, any "civilising means" whereby most Zulus could acquire this mandated cash tax. Meanwhile, the Zulu population was growing exponentially. Subsequently, Colenso expressed fear that an "outbreak of their passions" might ensue if neglected further.⁶²

Although the Anglicans expressed a similar grand vision of Christianising all of Africa and celebrating somewhere in the central interior, from the outset this triumphal optimism was muted, with Colenso remarking that their work would be a "day of small things ... to be completed by another generation".⁶³ His former friend and colleague, Henry Callaway, citing reasons for homeland disinterest and non-involvement in missions – one of which reasons was impatience; – said God's work often takes generations,

before the truth has taken possession of the general mind. At no time and under no circumstances can human minds be taken by storm. How many centuries has it taken for Christianity to leaven European society? ... Before we speak of the want of results in heathen countries, we should carefully consider the results in our own.⁶⁴

Likewise, in a farewell sermon of 1873, Robertson spoke against the tendency among many Christians to hurry God's work by seeking out "quick returns" on the assumption that "thousands are perishing". Although he also shared the belief in thousands of souls perishing in the interim, nevertheless, he called such quick-return Christians "shallow thinkers" – persons who disregarded both their own history, as well as the fact that Jesus' life bears testimony to God's insistence on slowness.⁶⁵

⁶² Ruth Edgecombe, ed., *J.W. Colenso - Bringing forth light: five tracts on Bishop Colenso's Zulu Mission* (Pietermaritzburg and Durban: University of Natal and Killie Campbell Africana Library, 1982), 18.

⁶³ JW Colenso, "On the efforts of missionaries among savages", cclxi.

⁶⁴ Henry Callaway, *Missionary sermons, a sermon on the Great Commission, Mark 16:15* (London: George Bell, 1875), 51-2.

⁶⁵ Robert A. Robertson, "A farewell sermon", Ed. Eaton Square at St. Peter's, at the Anniversary of the Mackenzie Memorial Mission, held on 20th March, 1873 (Eaton Square at St. Peter's, London, 1873).

Conclusion

The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions and its missionaries to Natal were driven, motivated, guided as it were, by a Puritan consciousness that interpreted the evil world to be in its last days. A cosmic battle was believed to be underway and all Christians had been summoned to take their battle-ready positions against the forces of evil and darkness. Victory was certain, but it would come at a great cost in lost souls – both heathen and Christian. Simultaneously, although they confessed belief in a heavenly Father and God of love, and saw themselves as elect saints, this confession was not a conviction, but rather a protection against the stresses and anxieties of the time – vulnerable and tenuous identities, that required for daily validation a “different, heathen Other”. It was understood there would be significant “collateral damage” in terms of lost souls and displaced people and cultures, yet this was providentially tolerable given the inestimable worth of the “elect soul” – those privileged souls who survived the millennium and its judgment intact and secure.

In stark contrast was Colenso. His personal and studied experience of God evidenced itself in a missiology of patience and small things. He disagreed repeatedly with American Board personnel on numerous issues ranging from Zulu cultural practices of polygamy and *lobola* to theological notions such as God’s character and the nature of salvation. In addition, he understood his own faith and religion to be dynamic, such that it was incomplete until it had been tested, tried and adapted by other peoples and cultures. Accordingly, his own faith and its attending assumptions were shaped by the questions and worldview of the Zulus whom he went to Christianise. So-called liberal influences – the thought of Samuel Coleridge, the writings of Frederick Denison Maurice, and corrupting Zulu questions – resulted in his excommunication from the Church of England, and subjected him to constant taunt, as reflected in a poem printed in *The Natal Witness* by British poet and critic, Matthew Arnold (1822-88), “A Bishop there was of Natal, who had a Zulu for a pal, said the native ‘Look here, ain’t the Pentateuch queer?’ Which converted my Lord of Natal.”⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Jeff Guy, “Class, imperialism and literary criticism: William Ngidi, John Colenso and Matthew Arnold.” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 23, no. June: 219, in *The Natal Witness*, 1863.

