

Strange are the ways of Zion: a coloured Zionist pioneer

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Because the missionary contribution of African evangelising pioneers remains for the most part an untold story, honour cannot yet be given where honour is due. 'The story of the black pioneers of the [19th century] South African missionary history has never been properly told. Most often the white missionaries received all the attention, whereas the black co-workers were relegated to the shadowy background' (Crafford 1991:vii). This essay will suggest that the same holds true of some pioneers of the 20th century. The story of one such trail-blazer of the Gospel, William Louw, as related by his son and successor, is told in the first part, while a reflection on four dimensions of the story follows in the second.

The story, which was told in Afrikaans, was recorded during three interviews. It was then translated into English, edited and returned to the story-teller until he was satisfied with the contents. The latter also responded to a questionnaire used for a broader research project in the Cape Flats. An effort was made to maintain the narrator's tenor, style and perceptions as far as possible. The word 'coloured' (*kleurling* or *bruinmens*) is not used by either the storyteller or by the recorder in a derogatory sense but, in the words of the former, 'as the language of the time'. Some explanations and translations are given in brackets.

Here follows the narrative of John William Louw, William Louw's son.

The backdrop to a dramatic life

Some of Cecil John Rhodes's soldiers took indigenous wives during their campaign to the north.¹ Their descendants became a new 'coloured' people

1 The British South African Company had occupied Mashonaland, conquered Matabeleland, and thus laid the foundation for a new country, Southern Rhodesia.

who had civil rights and who settled in the Mara area at Buysdorp, founded by the sons of the legendary Coenraad de Buys. The Kruger government oppressed the Buys people and did not allow them the status of whites. They were classified as coloureds (*kleurlinge*). Although they adopted some of the customs of the local black people, they never felt at home among them. For example, they never worshipped 'the old people' (ancestors). Calvinistic principles were transmitted to them by Robert Moffat, who visited them on his missionary journeys.

William Louw (the father of the John William Louw who relates the story) was born in 1904 or even earlier. He tells how he saw the very first train arrive at nearby Louis Trichardt and was also one of the Buys *volk* (people). Although people with this surname were a large majority, the Buys people included others such as the Louws, Pieterses and Jansens. The Buys *volk* were salt diggers and traders in the Soutpansberg region. The Louws traded with the Lemba and the Venda as far as Beitbridge and learned many of their customs. Their trade in hides, sheep and salt, which they stored in self-made earthenware pots, was extended by oxwagon to Punda Maria, Nelspruit, Komatipoort and even up to Lourenço Marques (Maputo). It was on these journeys that William, as a leader of oxen, learned the finer points of wagon transport. The Buys people were not large-scale farmers.

The father of William Louw, Kleinbooi, had joined forces with the British in the Anglo-Boer War. He was married to a Lovedu woman and was involved in the building of the first telephone line between Pietersburg and Fort Edward in what later became the Elim region. During the war the Louws preserved good relations with their white Potgieter neighbours (they were still corresponding in the late 1970s), and even had an unwritten agreement with them about pasturage. There was no racial discrimination. They also had much in common: apart from their shared humanity and religion, they slaughtered, grazed and hunted together. All this took place on the farm Doornhoek, to the east of Bandelierskop. By this time many Afrikaans farmers had been impoverished by the British confiscation of their cattle.

William Louw travelled extensively during World War I (1914–1918). From Pietersburg he went to Cape Town by goods train and from there by boat to Walvis Bay. He enlisted in the British army as a volunteer and worked as a wagon driver and repairer, and he travelled across the continent as far as Dar-es-Salaam. On his way he learned Shona and Swahili. He returned by the same route.

After being honourably discharged in 1918, he decided not to return to farm life but rather to settle in Johannesburg. There he became a professional boxer. After having being told the *muti* that would assure his success was much stronger in Durban, he left for this coastal city. One day a *sangoma* on the beach addressed him by his name and also revealed his life's ambition, which was to become a champion boxer. He was given water in a can and told to kill his own blood-brother with a spear if he wished to be strengthened sufficiently to fulfil his ambition. He paid what was due but was not happy with the instruction.

The turning point

Then, as the sun rose one Sunday morning while he was walking alone on the beach adjoining the Umgeni River, he saw a group of Zionists. He followed them to where they were baptising in the river. The spirit then told him to be baptised. The leader at first refused but Louw eventually convinced him that the baptism should take place. He then left the group.

For a whole week he wandered in the sugarcane fields to the north of Durban. Here he received the call to preach the Gospel. He returned to the railway hostel in Durban, where he was charged with trespassing. At first he was classified as insane until a Roman Catholic priest who examined him found that he was not insane but spiritually inspired.

While still in Durban he met certain Irish missionaries, among them a Mr Dowrie, who adhered to Zionist teachings. Because Louw knew the Zulu language and customs, he was used as interpreter in the Durban region between the years 1920 and 1922.

He then returned to Johannesburg with a new vision. Standing under a large tree in an open square next to the Newlands police station, he preached – using Dutch, Zulu and Sesotho Bibles – in such a manner that many were converted. It is clear that his aim, in this informal situation, was not to gather as many converts as possible for a following of his own. Because his motive was not to expand an existing church but to convert souls, he sent the new converts to their local churches. Louw himself was at this time under the aegis of another (that is, other than the Irish) group of white missionaries. It was among these missionaries that he met some of the later well-known African Indigenous Church (AIC) leaders such as Mahlangu, Shembe,

Lekganyane and Marole. The various Zionists in the group, who were mostly migrant labourers, held services together each Sunday. Louw was at that stage a cook for a Jewish family. (Being a boxer he used to train by running the family's chickens to a rabbi for kosher slaughtering!)

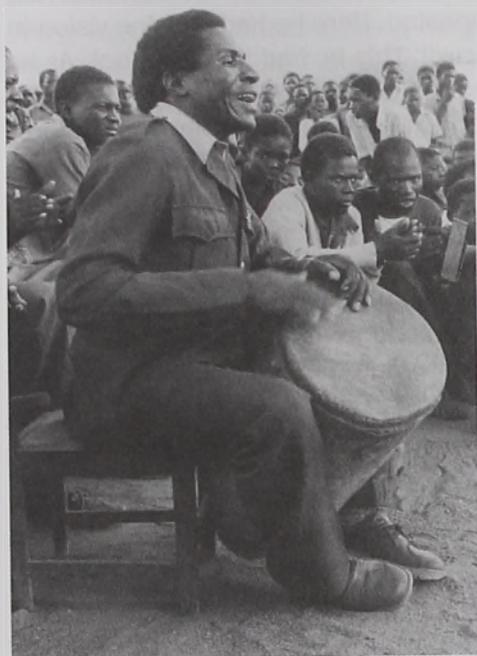
Although during the 1922 strike Louw sympathised with the strikers, he began, from this time, to experience the various forms of suffering and humiliation caused by racial discrimination. Thus, for example, racial discrimination in church circles prohibited him as a black man from greeting white women with a handshake. While the members of the white Apostolic Faith Mission were racially biased against blacks, the adherents of the Latter Rain Mission (the *Blourokke*) were faithful to Zionist teachings and so were consequently more sympathetic towards blacks.

At this time Zionist and Pentecostal teachings were the same, although the latter had been modernised. Both the *Blourokke* and Zionists upheld Old Testament laws, prophesied but did not consult the ancestors, and supported the afflicted according to Bible prescriptions (although some Zionists did practise divination).

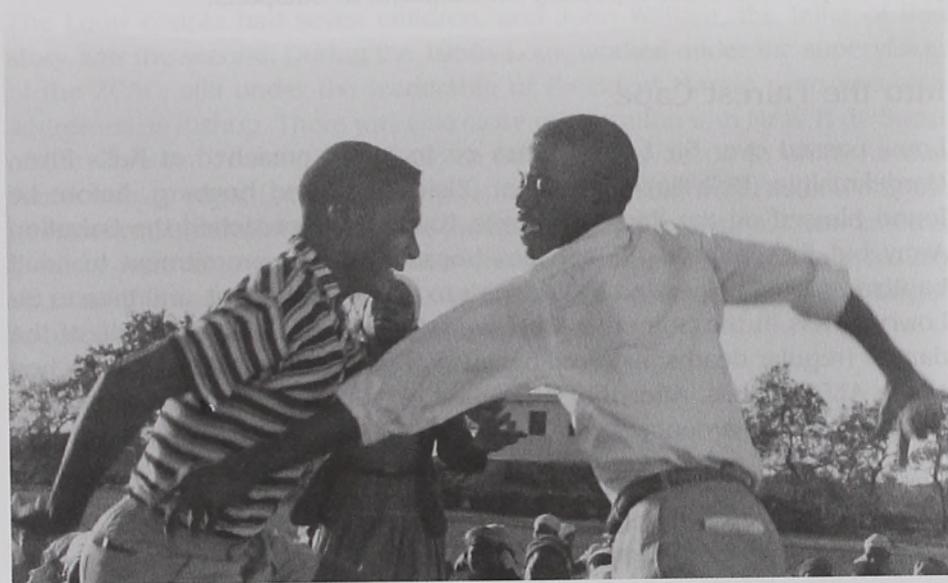
Lukas Thangeni Marole (1887–1974) then left for his home at Sibasa in Venda. On 28 August 1923, he and other leaders such as A Mphagi, J P Jivhuho and P Tshikalanga, founded an independent black church, the Zion City Apostolic Church (ZCAC), at Khalale (Phiphidi) in the vicinity of Tshilidzini, better known as Beuster.

Missionary travels

William Louw left Johannesburg and temporarily joined an enthusiastic team of evangelists who were working not far from his home town in Venda. They no longer depended on the help of those whites on whom they had previously relied for supervision. Louw and Marole, in cooperation with Lutheran missionaries, then translated a German book of songs and psalms, *Nyimbo dza Pesalima*, into Venda. (The seventh edition of this work was printed at the Morija Printing Works in 1973.) As a mark of appreciation for their translation, they received a bell from Germany, which in 1939 was used in a church building at Sibasa. This 'German bell' aroused suspicions against the Zionists during World War II, and so had to be removed until after the war was over!



A theology of celebration: throbbing drums, dancing feet and song as Zionists give expression to a liberative Gospel message



After he had returned from Venda, Louw, as a helper and interpreter, went with white Pentecostal missionaries (the Apostolic Faith Mission and the *Blourokke*) from Johannesburg to Kroonstad. Here he had a divine vision in which he received the call, 'Go southward!' This he had to do on foot. As he walked, he preached at Brandfort, Bloemfontein, Clocolan, and in Lesotho before returning to Bloemfontein. His next preaching journey took him to Springfontein, Bethulie, Aliwal North and over the Stormberg mountains into the Transkei. At Sithebe (Engcobo), he found the Anglicans resistant to the Zionist message. While in the Transkei, he used the opportunity to learn Xhosa. At Lovedale (Alice) he reported to some missions who had adopted the practice of evangelising people but of not following up on conversions. He met AIC leader James Limba at East London and discovered that there were policy differences between them regarding the Sabbath and the growing of beards.

While still on his way to Cape Town, Louw preached in Port Elizabeth. At Van Staden's River Mouth, he stayed in a shelter, but a voice spoke to him and said, 'Proceed, on foot!' He met some Griquas from Kokstad who had strong evangelical inclinations and a dream to found their own *volkstaat* (a land of their own). He travelled with them to Kranskop (Knysna) but later left them for Uniondale, and then Swellendam, and then the Rûens region, where he found a temporary job transporting bags of corn by oxwagon. Here he preached to labourers, especially on Sundays, at outspans.

Into the Fairest Cape

Louw passed over Sir Lowry's Pass on foot and preached at Kuils River, Hardekraaltjie (Bellville), Elsiekraal (Elsiesrivier) and Koeberg, before he found himself on the Parade in Cape Town. He approached the Salvation Army but they refused his services because of his commitment to adult baptism. At first he was led by the spirit to a place at Retreat, and then to Sir Lowry's Pass in the Somerset West area. This was in 1927. In spite of the danger (regular deaths occurred because of poisonous gases), he preached at the AECI hostels. After that he settled on a plot at Somerset West as a milkman and a gardener.

One Saturday he saw a group of drunks returning from a popular drinking place. They were Shangaans from the Transvaal, employed on the Vergelegen wine farm. They caught his interest, and he was able to preach

to them because he had learned their language during his salt-trading days in Mozambique. Afterwards Louw met the owner of this famous farm (Vergelegen), the British mining magnate Sir Lionel Phillips (who had built the cableway on Table Mountain in 1929). Louw was encouraged by Lady Phillips to 'get the farm on godly lines again' (for evidence of this, see the testimonial signed by her and dated 1 April 1936). At this time he was appointed as the team leader of the men who removed bush at Kirstenbosch, which also belonged at the time to Sir Lionel. Thus Louw's first congregation consisted of Shangaans and coloureds who spoke Afrikaans. He and his old acquaintance, Marole, now referred migrating converts to each other as they left for either the Cape Flats or for Venda.

In 1938 William Louw became acquainted with Dorethea Magdalena Daniels. At the time she was residing at the parsonage of the Rev Isak Steyn of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church at Somerset West, a man with whom Louw shared friendship and many ideas. After he married Dorethea in the Dutch Reformed Mission Church in 1938, the couple moved to the farm Knorhoek at Sir Lowry's Pass. He worked as a farm labourer and evangelised by bicycle in Stellenbosch, the Hottentots-Holland basin, and also in areas as far afield as Paarl and Malmesbury. Besides working as an evangelist, he worked as a 'garden boy' (as a certificate given by a Mr H A MacArthur dated 1 July 1950 testifies).

The Louw couple had seven children, and John William, the teller of this story, was the second. During the 1950s Louw worked under the supervision of the ZCAC, still under the leadership of President Marole, who was also addressed as Bishop. There was also close cooperation with Mr W H de Swart of the Christian Assemblies, to which Louw endeavoured to unite various Pentecostal groups. Later Louw developed a friendship with Pastor J J Louw (no relative), a prominent leader of the Apostolic Faith Mission. Louw and the Zionists were also present at Mossienes (Oostersee), where Pentecostals such as the Latter Rain Mission, which did not associate with the larger Apostolic Faith Mission, gathered in a small hall.

On the Cape Flats

In 1954 the Louws moved to Philippi on the Cape Flats. They lived at Sherwood Park (Manenberg) which at that time was still a farming area. Louw did evangelistic work among the clay-diggers at Borchers Quarry (near the

present-day Cape Town Airport), and he worked as a gardener in Kenilworth. At weekends he travelled by bicycle, bus or train to do evangelistic work. As an octogenarian he baptised converts at Princess Vlei.

Black and brown converts were ministered to separately, although they did at times have common gatherings at which interpretation was used. It was difficult to gain access to Nyanga township, although Louw had permits to enter and to use wine at Holy Communion services. When a group of blacks broke away, they discovered that they no longer had the use of wine for communion. Some used Coca-Cola as a substitute; others used beetroot water. Strange things have happened on the way of Zion! (*'Snaakse dinge het op die Sionspad gebeur.'*)

The second generation

Bishop William Louw died after a cerebral thrombosis and was buried on 21 June 1990 at 'Die Klip' in Retreat. Representatives from a large number of churches attended his funeral. His son, John William (the storyteller), took over the mantle of leadership of the ZCAC in the Western Province area. His administrative and academic abilities were sorely needed at this stage because the growth of the church had stagnated. The coloured members were eager to build a church at Nova Park. Funds, however, were short, and the coloured and Xhosa groups did not cooperate on this issue. Prior to 1988, the leader of the ZCAC at Nyanga, President M Anton Mgeese, held meetings in a shack situated at NY28. House-to-house visitation was undertaken and the church found some followers at Site B, Khayelitsha, where President Fumba held services at the school of which he was the caretaker.

After Mgeese died in 1988 and William Louw in 1990, the struggle for leadership of the ZCAC in the Cape caused a schism. Even before they passed away, Mgeese cast suspicion on Louw, insinuating that he had no time for the Xhosa members. The affair took a racial turn (*'dit het 'n rassistiese dingetjie geword'*) and Mgeese virtually started his own church within the ZCAC. After the two leaders had died, some of the aspiring leaders secretly went to the headquarters at Sibasa in Venda. Instead of debating the matter openly, they first separated and then obtained authorisation from the church's leadership. There were now two separate groups of the same church in the Cape area. More branches sprang up, only to have members

become disillusioned after a while. Many of them later returned to the fold. But the younger Louw had a difficult time in keeping the various branches together.

At the moment, groups of the ZCAC exist at Mitchells Plain, Nomzamo (Strand), Elsiesrivier and Kuils River, as well as further afield at De Doorns, Colesberg, Queenstown, Barkly East, Elliot and Umtata. The branches south of the Gariep have a total of some two thousand members. Close contact is maintained with Archbishop Jonas Luhadima at Sibasa, the current overall leader of the Church. [End of narrative.]

A chip off the Zionist block

Besides the obvious Pentecostal influence, the ZCAC in general and William Louw in particular have, to some degree, been affected by Lutherans and Calvinists. In this respect they are somewhat different from most other AICs, which exhibit fewer Western influences. It is characteristic of the ZCAC that traditional African beliefs and customs do not have the power to influence the members of the church as deeply as is the case among Zionists.

Louw realised that his dual ministry, pastoring coloureds and Africans, was no easy task. Each group had its particular characteristics. 'The Coloured does not dance with his stick [*kierie*], he dances the Cape dances which he knows.' But he was able to maintain unity by being flexible. Although he did not discard Western hymns, he used the traditional Venda tunes and rhythms, combined with words from the Psalms, to create a new songbook. On the other hand, the coloured groups were allowed to make use of modern instruments such as keyboards and guitars during services.

Traditional African marriage customs were respected despite the difficult problems this acceptance caused for Louw. Some of the leaders who had more than one wife insisted on senior positions in the church. His policy concerning polygamy was to tolerate it but gradually to lead people to new convictions.

Unlike other Zionist churches, the use of woollen girdles tied around the wrists, stomach or neck was not allowed (see Makhubu 1988:83). A member who claimed to have been given such wool 'by a prophet from Canaan' would be approached in a pastoral spirit and instructed from Scripture. Members and even leaders continually visited diviners (*toormanne*), who were said to

have control over water spirits which were able to strengthen one. Here too, teaching from Scripture was used to combat this practice. Matters that all Zionists were required to rectify and eliminate included slaughtering animals for ancestors, polygamy, and beating their women. To equip men for the ministry, Louw used a method of informally training leaders, and this produced visibly good results. He did not support local ecumenical councils because he considered them to be politically tainted and he wanted to keep a distance to be able to preach the Gospel to all people.

The narrator, J W Louw, responded as follows to questions about mission and indigenization:

Many Zionists feel that certain things from the old tradition must be included [when they become Christians]. They retain much from their culture, just as customs such as the burning of children were taken over from the Jebusites in the time of Moses. Their whole world is one of spirits and spooks, a world of fables such as that of *Alice in Wonderland*.

The gradual teaching of biblical principles is necessary for these people to discover what is essential and [in order for them to know] that their relation with Christ does not depend on whether the colour of one's cloth is red or yellow. We have to continually emphasise that Christ is not in the wool, dance, wind, or in a stick. We have to tolerate and teach.

The Zionist mission is to reveal the Gospel to people in the most simple manner. We have the means to consider world mission. All we can do is to walk on our feet as far as we can (*met die voet loop so ver jy kan*).

AIC perspectives

The names of some great AIC leaders occur in the Louw narrative: Elias Mahlangu, one of the Zionist church fathers who hailed from P L le Roux's group at Wakkerstroom – the very first black Zionists; Ignatius Lekganyane, of the largest of all these churches in South Africa; Isaiah Shembe, founder of the biggest Zionist church among the Zulus (see Sundkler 1976:60, 66, chapter 5); and James Limba, leader of the *Ibandla likaKrestu*, which, in 1970, was the sixth largest of these churches. The name 'Dowie' mentioned

by the narrator might have been confused with that of American J A Dowie of Zion City, Illinois, USA, who founded the Christian Catholic Church in Zion in 1896. Dowie himself never visited South Africa (Sundkler 1976:14), which suggests the credibility of the name 'Dowie'. One does not easily find references to Lukas Marole in the relevant literature.

The Louw narrative is an example of the use of oral sources which, in terms of AIC historiography, have become an indispensable tool. Whereas researchers of African history and church history often supplement archival material with oral sources, AICs would prefer to supplement oral sources with written ones (Pretorius 1995:63–76; 119–122). Because sources are limited, the challenge is to save from oblivion thousands of stories such as Louw's. In such a manner 'mosaics', building blocks, will be manufactured for the revision of AIC history.

Because Louw's church is an indigenous church, it is useful for situating the ZCAC within the broader Independent Church movement. Is this church exceptional and, if so, in what respect?

In comparison with the same phenomenon among blacks, church independence among coloured people is not very evident. According to the 1951 census, only 4,5% of coloureds belonged to Christian groups other than mainline churches. Ninety-seven per cent of the former, that is, of all Independents, were Pentecostal-type churches (Gerdener 1958:142). (For notes on the Volkskerk van Afrika and the Calvinist Protestant Church of South Africa, see Schlosser 1958:59–70; Barrett 1968:286–287.) Figures based on the 1980 census indicate that, once again, 4,5% of the coloureds were adherents of 'African Indigenous Churches', a term which is unfortunately not defined (Kritzinger 1989:22). (For comparison with the 1951 figure, the 1,9% denoted as 'Apostolic faith' should be added, thus totalling 6,4%.) Compare these findings with the 29,3% of blacks belonging to AICs (Kritzinger 1989:22), and the difference becomes striking.

Why is church independence in South Africa more popular among blacks than among coloureds? Aeschliman (1986:211), who studied fifty independent groups of coloured people on the Cape Flats over a period of seven years, argues convincingly that, after the arrival of the whites, they were included in the religious practices of the dominant group, 'Thus they have no unique religious tradition such as that with which the black peoples of South Africa are so richly endowed'. He adds that the well-known division into

Ethiopian- and Zionist-type churches proposed by Sundkler could not be used for the coloureds because such a distinction is 'appropriate to a synthesis of traditional Christian and traditional African religion, the latter influence being virtually absent from the religion here described'.

It is precisely in this statement that one is able to perceive the uniqueness of the ZCAC: *it was able to combine elements of the universal Christian tradition and the traditional African culture (including religion) into a whole and to maintain this synthesis*. A survey of Zionism in the Cape Flats indicates that the ZCAC seems to be a typical Zionist church: the organisation, inter-church cooperation, mode of service, practices, schisms, in short, the ethos of this church has much in common with most other Zionist churches. One may note, for example, the difficulty which black Zionists had at a certain stage when trying to obtain wine (see Sundkler 1976:281–282). Of a list of 24 practices common to Zionists (used for a broader survey), only two were unusual: the use of woollen girdles and sticks, and the use of *isivasho* (a mixture of water with soap, ash, salt, etc). The latter was forbidden in the church law of the founder, a document which is revered alongside the Bible, the highest authority imaginable. One wonders whether the founding fathers of the ZCAC discerned these areas as critical points where the Christian and traditional religions diverged? The exception that proves the rule is the one that tests it, not the usual use of 'proved'.

A fuller study of the ZCAC that includes the African and the coloured centres of gravity of this church might provide useful clues for solving the mystery, 'How can Christianity authentically be communicated to African traditions?'

Historical dimensions

Bishop J W Louw's narration of some noteworthy events of his father's life is an orderly account that follows a clear chronology. Far-reaching historical developments were taking place in South Africa during his lifetime (1904?–1990). Louw's storytelling is to a remarkable degree consistent with and situated in some of the major events and movements of 20th-century South African history. This includes British imperialism, Kruger's government, the Anglo-Boer War, South Africa's involvement in both World Wars, the General Strike of 1922, migrant labour, and the gradual ascendancy of racial discrimination.

Secondary aspects of the narrative can easily be corroborated by authoritative sources.² The information on Phillips' ownership of Kirstenbosch and his building of the Table Mountain cableway is not quite accurate, however.³ Such evidence adds credibility to Louw's storytelling, though.

On the other hand, there are major inconsistencies that could detract from the narrative's dependability. After his conversion in Durban, Louw lived in Johannesburg during 1922 and 1923. He met some of the leaders at this time, notably Mahlangu, Shembe and Lekganyane. But information provided by Sundkler (1976:62–63) indicates that Mahlangu was in Johannesburg at the time but was occupied with keeping his own church (founded prior to 1914) together. Therefore the impression given by the narrative that he was part of a loose group of Zionists who held services on Sundays is not substantiated. Shembe did stay in Johannesburg when he was baptised by W Leshega, but that was from 1906 to 1911 (Sundkler 1976:164, 169). As he had established his own church village, Ekuphakameni, in 1916, it is not conceivable that he was living in Johannesburg between 1922 and 1923. Lekganyane lived in Basutoland between 1920 and 1925 (Sundkler 1976:66; Schlosser 1958:185). Louw was said to have met Limba in East London. This was after 1923 and a few years before 1927, when Louw arrived at Cape Town. In reality Limba was in Cape Town from 1914 until 1927, in which year, according to Mqotsi and Mkele (1946:108), he moved to the Eastern Cape Province. In spite of this, one should remain open to possibilities and explanations of what may seem to be discrepancies; some of these leaders, for example, may have briefly visited the places where they are said to have met Louw.

2 For example, Buester was one of two missionaries who established the first Berlin Mission station in Venda in 1872 (for the place called 'Buester', close to where the ZCAC was founded, see Du Plessis 1956:348–349). The 'Griquas from Kokstad' were most likely some of the migrants who had left Griqualand East in 1918 to settle at Plettenberg Bay (SESA 1973, vol. 5:357). An explosives factory had existed at Somerset West since 1902, see SESA 1973, vol. 3:173. For Sir Lionel and Lady Florence Phillips' ownership of Vergelegen, see Postma 1996:34.

3 After Rhodes owned Kirstenbosch, it became part government land. However, in 1913, Phillips initiated legislation which led to the formation of the Botanical Society and the establishment of Kirstenbosch Garden (SESA 1973, vol. 6:406; Tucker 1995:49). The cableway was indeed opened in 1929 with A. Hennessy as founder and chairman of the Cableway Company (SESA 1973, vol.2:650). As prominent guests, Phillips and his wife were present at the opening ceremony on October 4 (Rosenthal n.d.:66). In both instances, Phillips, a first-rate engineer and a nature lover, played a significant role.

Another major incompatibility has to do with Louw's age. Rhodes' campaign took place in 1890 (Groves 1955:35; SESA 1973, (9):318-31). In terms of the narrative, Kleinboo Louw would have been born after 1890. His son William is said to have been born 'in 1904 or even earlier'. This implies that Kleinboo fathered William at the age of fourteen or younger and that William enlisted in the British army (in 1914) at the age of ten or a little older.

Louw is reputed to have crossed the continent from Walvis Bay to Dar-es-Salaam as a wagon driver and repairer in service of the 'British army'. Possibly British army is mentioned instead of the South African army because they were allies in the war effort against Germany. Coloureds were involved in both campaigns.⁴ But would the South African army use oxwagons to transport supplies from one theatre of war to another over such a vast distance and under such circumstances while much more efficient conveyance by ship was available? In 1917 a steamer took a mere five days from Dar-es-Salaam to South Africa (Reitz 1933:156). Neither the South African National Defence Force nor the South African National Museum of Military History, nor authors such as Rayner and O'Shaughnessy, Deney Reitz, J J Collyer and J A Brown offer anything to substantiate the narrative on this point.

It is generally accepted that oral sources 'present a unique set of problems' (Pretorius 1995:66). One of these problems that is common in the oral traditions of many AICs is that different forms of distortion take place. Many of the accounts of the origins of churches are essentially mythical and reflect much of the self-image of such churches. Peires (1981:172-173) has shown that such myths should be viewed metaphorically, as summaries or interpretations of past events, rather than literally, as straightforward narrations of events that actually occurred. Furthermore, distortions could be caused by the transposition of setting, aetiological error (the assignment of cause from the present), lack of time depth, or telescoping (the reduction of several events into a single story).

Narratives such as Louw's do have limitations in terms of reliability and one should appreciate this fully.

4 Referring to the East African campaign, Brown (1991:42) mentions that a 'large number of Cape Coloured men had already served in the German South West African campaign as artillery and transport drivers . . . and on other non-combatant duties'.

Two factors in the biographical particulars of the narrative reflect serious contemporary social realities: the senior Louw's unending efforts to earn a living (as no fewer than ten types of employment are mentioned, the sceptic might even call him a drifter), and racial relations. Discrimination on grounds of colour is found early in the narrative. The Buys people were not allowed the status of whites and were classified as coloureds. In spite of this, the Louw family later maintained a lasting unbiased relationship with some of their white Afrikaans neighbours at Bandelierskop. Again, it is unlikely, given the time and place (the Anglo-Boer War, the far Northern Transvaal), that amicable relations would be possible between the family of Kleinbooie Louw, who joined the British forces, and their Afrikaner neighbours. The story reflects how, at least since 1922, discriminatory practices were part of church life. The apparently unimportant forbidding of black men to extend a hand of greeting to white women may be seen as a symbol of what was developing on the broader social level. Louw's friendship and cooperation with blacks and whites suggests that he often took the role of a go-between, and implies a reconciler.

As for the quality of the narrative, besides the historical discrepancies there are a few aspects that raise questions. First, the translation and production of a hymnbook calls for high standards of linguistic, poetic and musical skills. Would the German Lutherans have been contented with craftsmen who obviously lacked the training for such a major task? Second, why is the period of 36 years (1954–1990) describing William Louw's ministry so brief and blunt compared to the elaborate and vivid account of the previous 40 years (1914–1954)? Third, to what degree is the narrative coloured by J W Louw's insight into and knowledge and perceptions of Xhosa culture?

There are two important issues related to the Louw story but scarcely mentioned in it, and which should not be overlooked. First, the famous LMS missionary Robert Moffat is referred to in connection with the Buys people. However, nothing is said about Dutch Reformed Church missionaries Alexander MacKidd and Stephanus Hofmeyr, who were pioneers in the Soutpansberg area. Not only did they have considerable influence on the Buys community but the Buys people – in spite of a rebellion caused by, among other reasons, tensions between coloureds and blacks – made a memorable contribution to the mission work of the DRC in Northern Transvaal and Zimbabwe (Crafford 1992:72–74, 90–100; Hofmeyr 1890:chapters 2, 8, 11 and 12; Maree 1962).

The legendary Coenraad de Buys is referred to at the beginning of the Louw narrative. De Buys (or simply Buys), the founder of the Buys people, has been described as one of the most significant and turbulent characters who ever lived in South Africa (Maree 1962:42). His resumé includes being a descendant of the French Huguenots; outlawed by the Cape Colony in the 1790s; under the patronage of the Xhosa Chief Ngqika; friend, confidant and interpreter of the LMS missionary Dr J T van der Kemp (a Bible presented to Buys by him became a treasure of the Buys people); is said to have taken the sister (or niece) of the Matabele chief Mzilikazi as one of his women; is said to have been the white man who taught the great Zulu leader Dingiswayo European ways of fighting and trading; anticipated the Voortrekkers by twenty years and became the first white settler in the Transvaal; his descendants became the Buys people.

A no lesser author than Jan Smuts, commenting on Sarah Gertrude Millin's historical novel on Buys, *King of the Bastards*, remarks that the hero of the book is portrayed as one of the greatest leaders South Africa has produced. 'There is something demonic about him. The way he dominated men and handled most difficult situations single-handed, his courage and resilience, and the way he rose again and again from what appeared irretrievable disaster to new enterprise and achievement, his domination of this phase of South Africa for more than fifty years . . . mark him out as one of the outstanding products of this sub-continent.' Such is the mould from which William Louw was cast.

Ecumenical aspects

The motive to plant or to expand the church generally or any denomination in particular is not strong in the narrative of William Louw. The ecumenical motive is much more prominent. Louw clearly had an ecumenical spirit, and his continued search for cooperation with fellow Christians is indicated by his contact with the Irish missionaries in Durban; the practice of sending his converts from the open square at Newlands to their own existing churches instead of 'stealing sheep'; his contacts with the white Pentecostal missionaries in Johannesburg, at the Apostolic Faith Mission, and Latter Rain Mission; his evangelising team of black Zionists in Venda; his contact with the evangelical Griquas from Kokstad, and the Lutherans through their book of songs and psalms; his friendships while at the DRMC at Somerset West; his efforts to unite some Pentecostal groups in Cape Town; the long-

standing support which he received from Cape Pentecostals. No fewer than sixteen different denominations, groups of churches or their representatives are mentioned in the narrative, mostly in positive vein.

Louw's major contribution was probably his uniting and maintaining the co-existence of the black and coloured members of his own church in a harmonious way. Given the differences in religious background, worldview and the separateness which apartheid encouraged, this was no mean achievement. Louw's exemplary relationship with white Christian groups extended from the early 1920s, when black AFM workers experienced discrimination, until his funeral in 1990.

Louw was not able or perhaps not even interested in initiating a permanent ecumenical structure, nor was he part of the mainline ecumenical organisations that constitute the ecumenical age in South Africa. However, his attitude of seeking cooperation and unity with other minor Christian groupings has borne lasting fruits, in particular in his own church and among Zionists generally. His son has inherited his ecumenical spirit.

Missiological reflection

When considering William Louw's missionary career, one is instinctively reminded of one of the greatest missionaries of all time, Paul of Tarsus. 'With Luke's estimate of the importance of Paul's conversion neither the historian nor the theologian can quarrel. We cannot imagine the spread of Christianity in the Roman Empire apart from the work of Paul' (Bruce 1974:209). While an in-depth comparison of the two is not justified, certain elements in J W Louw's story are found in the Lucan narrative on Paul, despite the more than 18 centuries that separate them. In both cases we find the following:

- Important years of preparation, which were of immense value for their later ministries
- Dramatic conversions (on the road to Damascus and in the sugarcane field of Durban), which proved to be pivotal
- Extended missionary travels, in most cases on foot (*'loop met die voet tot sover jy kan'*)
- A great variety of 'market-places' (Acts 17:17-18), public platforms from which Gospel preaching was launched

- A so-called tentmaking ministry (cf Acts 18:3) – Louw was a true ‘jack of all trades’
- An ability to be at home in more than one world.

Paul belonged to three worlds: orthodox Judaism, Hellenistic culture and Roman citizenship (Bruce 1974:209; Dowley 1977:64). Louw was likewise a person of both the African and Western worlds. Besides the eight African languages, including his mother tongue, Afrikaans, the narrative cites his knowledge of various indigenous cultures. Louw also realised that there were limits to the contextualisation of the Christian message. This is shown, for example, by his negative attitude towards the consulting of ancestors and the slaughtering of cattle for them, the smelling-out ceremonies, and the visiting of diviners. The wisdom and tact with which he managed a flock of members with different worldviews is one of his most significant missionary and ecumenical achievements.

In spite of the similarities between Paul and Louw, there are also obvious differences. (Only two striking ones are cited here.) Whereas Paul was ‘given the best education in his ancestral traditions that contemporary Judaism could provide’ (Bruce 1974:209), Louw had a quite diverse background, ranging from Calvinistic principles to the gruesome assignment the *sangoma* gave him to become a champion boxer. While Paul enjoyed the coveted privilege of Roman citizenship, Louw (like his Buys ancestors) had to struggle against all the disadvantages and hardships of being part of ‘God’s stepchildren in the colour pattern of South Africa’ – to quote again from Jan Smuts (Millin 1950:v).

Conclusion

Indeed, the ways of Zion are strange! Not only are trivial matters such as the substitution of Coke or beetroot water for the wine of the Holy Communion evidence of this, but more fundamental issues, such as the mutual influence and blending of the Christian and traditional African religions, become relevant in a story such as this. Valuable lessons are to be learnt from the exceptional narrative of William Louw. And by telling this story to a wider audience, honour is finally given to whom honour is due.

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