

Missions and the Law
of
Unintended Consequences

The great missionary movement which burst out of Protestant Europe and North America in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries forms a prime example of the workings of 'the law of unintended consequences'. In the international sphere, for instance, it would be argued that having set out to covert the world to Christianity, Christians themselves (or at least those of the 'mainline' variety) were eventually converted to the view that the whole idea of conversion was wrong – a development which is explored further later in this chapter. Certainly, when they started working in South Africa, early missionaries would never have anticipated that their work would lead to the formation of an entirely new brand of Christianity such as that found in the AICs. Moreover, if one takes the revisionist view that the missionary work was the forerunner and consolidator of white control over South Africa, then it is also true that its unintended consequence was that it threw up forces which played a leading role in bringing an end to white control in the late twentieth century.

This is not to deny that in the mid-twentieth century, churches in South Africa by and large supported, rather than challenged, the

apartheid regime which had commenced in full force with the advent of the Nationalist government in 1948. That, of course, was clearly the case with the Dutch Reformed Bloc of churches. While the AICs tended to be politically quiescent, the churches of the Ecumenical Bloc, whose integrationist theology should have made them implacably and actively opposed to apartheid, evinced an ineffective degree of opposition which was confined to words rather than deeds. For this they have been roundly criticised.¹ But while these critiques are valid enough, historians who follow this line are themselves open to criticism for their tendency to reify entities such as the 'English-speaking churches' and bodies such as the SACC and in sociological terms: to adopt a 'structural' rather than an 'action' approach.

While it is often convenient to speak of structural entities as if they are 'actors' directed by an intelligence and talk, for instance, of 'the SACC' doing this or that, the action approach would see the SACC as an arena in which a host of different forces, including abstract concepts such as history, theology and ideology as well as human agents with differing interests, ideas and opinions jostled and contended for recognition and dominance. One of the chief arguments of this study is that the official actions of the SACC have to be understood against a background of its changing composition in terms of its member bodies and the interests, ideologies and theologies of those who dominated in its counsels at different periods. Thus 'the SACC' of 1968 was certainly not the same body as that of 1988; the changed stances of the organisation over that period, it will be argued, were a result of both new and different people and churches coming into it, and of political struggles for dominance within its ranks. No full understanding of the actions – or inaction – of 'the SACC' or, in fact, of any of its predecessor bodies or constituent churches can be gained without knowledge of the factors and forces within them.

One of the forces acting on Ecumenical Bloc churches in South Africa which, I contend, has received insufficient attention from both local and foreign historians are developments in the international missionary and ecumenical spheres. For that reason this chapter is devoted to sketching a history of the missionary movement and its consequences – so many of them unintended – which only incidentally includes developments in South Africa.

The great era of missions

There is abundant literature on the origins of the international missionary movement in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in Western Europe and the United States of America. Among recent scholars, Elbourne and Ross (1997) have pointed to economic and political as well as religious motivations.² An aspect that has received increasing attention is the Western assumptions of cultural as well as religious superiority which formed part of the driving force behind the missionary movement. While scholars such as de Kock have cogently argued this point,³ perhaps there is no need to go further than some of the simple doggerel of the famous missionary hymn by Reginald Heber (1783–1826):

Can we, whose souls are lighted
 With wisdom from on high,
 Can we to men benighted
 The light of life deny?

From many an ancient river
 From many a palmy plain.
 They call us to deliver
 Their land from error's chain.

In Foucauldian terms, these verses fascinatingly encapsulate that discourse prevalent in the Western world, which both motivated and reinforced missionary effort. Here are all the assumptions

of social and cultural superiority which made Western Christians ('lighted with wisdom from on high') believe they were on an errand of mercy to the inhabitants of the mission fields, who were bound by 'error's chain'.

Still, historically the idea of converting the heathen was nothing new to Europeans. Their forebears had been converted by missionaries who had ventured forth from the old Roman 'civilisation' into the 'barbarian' lands of the north. During the medieval period, religious orders such as the Franciscans and Dominicans saw mission as a primary focus,⁴ while after the charting of sea routes from Europe to Asia and the Americas in the late fifteenth century, Spanish and Portuguese Catholics cited the 'missionary imperative' as a prime justification for the imposition of their rule on enormous tracts of territory. Indeed, when the Spanish State was too weak to enforce its territorial claims, as in California in the eighteenth century, it relied on missions to extend and defend its colonial interests.

After the Reformation, however, the mission idea had been practically forgotten in Protestant Europe and by extension, North America, where priorities centred on the establishment of State churches, the drawing up of creeds and doctrinal formulae, and the enforcement of newly fashioned orthodoxies.⁵ Which is not to say there were no mission impulses among non-Catholics. The German Moravian Georg Schmidt, for instance, established the Genadendal mission station in South Africa in 1737, well before the start of the modern missionary era.

The rekindling of Protestant interest in missions in the late eighteenth century was not met with universal approval. When the young William Carey, later to become one of the most famous missionaries to India, raised the question of missions at a conference of Baptist ministers in Northampton in 1786, he was told: 'Sit down young man. When it pleases the Lord to convert the

heathen, he will do it without your help or mine.⁶

The Anglican Church Missionary Society, which was to become one of the most powerful and influential bodies of its kind in the world, faced passionate opposition from the church hierarchy after it had been founded in 1799. Its leading figures were refused an interview with the Archbishop of Canterbury when they sought to explain to him the aims and objects of their new society.⁷ This resistance on the part of church establishments led to the first of the great unintended consequences of the missionary movement, namely the establishment of new churches in mission fields; many of whom were based either covertly or overtly on ethnic or cultural lines. Herein lay the seeds of much future division.

The 'three-self formula'

As a result of the indifference and opposition of church leaderships to missions, those clergy and laity interested in the subject set up mission societies as para-ecclesiastical bodies which could provide an organisational and financial base for their new enterprises. Similar societies to promote special interests, ranging from the abolition of slavery to the establishment of Sunday schools, were commonplace at the time. Although they would not have been seen as anything extraordinary, in fact, the mission societies were indeed extraordinary in terms of church history. Never before had this type of ecclesiastical organisation existed, and for the next hundred years Protestant Christianity was characterised by a split between what was seen to be the work of the church and that of missions. Thus emerged what became known as the *church/mission dichotomy*. That not only had theological and organisational implications, but also racial implications. *Church* became associated with Christians in the white, Western world and *mission* with people of colour in areas of the world that had been colonised by these Europeans.

The racial division was emphasised by another novel development on the mission fields: the emergence of indigenous churches which were seen as entirely separate entities from the churches of the West. Up to that stage of Christian history, new converts had simply been incorporated into the existing churches. In contrast, the initial opposition of some Protestant churches to missionary work and the fact that several of the mission societies at first operated on an interdenominational basis, meant that converts could not be incorporated into existing structures, but had to be organised into new ecclesiastical entities.

That mission societies had set out to convert the 'heathen' without giving serious thought to how their new converts would be organised, is evident, for instance, from the 'Fundamental Principle' of the London Missionary Society (LMS) (founded in 1797), which was pronounced to be:

not to send Presbyterianism, Independency, Episcopacy or any other form of Church order or Government . . . but the glorious Gospel of the Blessed God, to the heathen; and it shall be left (as it ought to be left) to the minds of the persons whom God may call into the fellowship of his Son from among them to assume for themselves such form of Church Government as to them shall appear most agreeable to the word of God.⁸

This was an expansive aim, but also a rather ridiculous one. Not only did it wish away denominational rivalries, but the expectation that fresh proselytes would be able to make the judicious choices envisaged was unrealistic to say the least. Thus, once they began working on foreign fields, mission societies found they had to establish new churches to cater for their converts. This proved so successful, that in a comparatively short space of time 'church planting' became not a by-product, but a major aim of many missions.

Fairly early in the nineteenth century a well-developed mission theology of church planting emerged, being associated with the names of the general secretaries of the two largest mission societies at that time, Rufus Anderson of the American Board Mission and Henry Venn of the Anglican-based Church Missionary Society (CMS). Although on opposite sides of the Atlantic, the two men were in regular contact and influenced each other's thinking.⁹ Anderson may well have been ahead of Venn; it is noteworthy that when American Board missionaries arrived in South Africa in 1835, they brought with them a fully-fledged theology of church planting.

They concentrated their work in Natal, home of the Zulu people. In terms of their strategy, it was the Zulus themselves who, after being converted, were planned to be the chief agents of the Christianisation of the whole of Africa.¹⁰ However, it was Venn who, in 1854, gave the clearest expression to what became known as the *three-self formula*. The object of the CMS, he declared, was 'the development of Native Churches, with a view to their ultimate settlement upon a *self-supporting, self-governing and self-extending system* [original emphases].¹¹ Once these 'three-selves' had been achieved in any one area, the mission would then be withdrawn and move to new areas. Venn used the expression 'euthanasia of mission' to describe this process.

The euthanasia-of-mission idea was remarkable in that it was based on the assumption that indigenous Christians were perfectly capable of running their own churches without any help from missionaries. In other words, it emphasised what is best expressed by the Afrikaans word *selfstandigheid*, or more clumsily in English, 'indigenous selfhood'. That this idea found wide favour even among non-Christians is indicated by the way it was taken up a century later by both Chinese Christians and the Chinese Communist government who, after 1949, together euthanased missions and then ecumenised their converts by bringing them all

together in one, State-sponsored church. This church was named *The Three-Self Patriotic Movement*. Catholics were organised in a 'Three-Self Catholic Patriotic Movement', from which the word *Roman* was excised – this was seen as a Chinese church which was separate from Rome. The communists, of course, represented a strong undercurrent of Chinese nationalism, and thus the use of the 'three-self' terminology can be seen as part of their emphatic rejection of both Western missions and Western paternalism.¹²

Although, as related later, early efforts to put the three-self formula into practice had largely failed, none the less, over time it did produce some positive results. The formula's emphasis on indigenous selfhood and self-sufficiency meant that in South Africa, those bodies which followed the three-self formula, namely the Dutch Reformed Bloc and the mission societies, produced a visible array of impressive indigenous leaders much sooner than the multiracial churches of the Ecumenical Bloc, which did not follow the three-self formula. Long-lasting white dominance in these churches tended to obscure the leadership qualities of all but a small handful of blacks.

Still, the historical aftermath of the three-self formula produced a plethora of paradoxes. Firstly, as will be demonstrated, the three-self formula fitted in well with the intellectual bases of apartheid and particularly its later form of 'separate development' than the black leaders of the Dutch Reformend Bloc. One such leader was Dr Alan Boesak who 'led the charge' in one of the most critical phases of the anti-apartheid struggle.

There is yet another paradox: while the three-self formula was very congenial to the ideas which unerpinned apartheid, it would also have fitted in very well with the ideas of the black consciousness movement which emerged in South Africa from the late 1960s onwards. Over half a century before this, the General Missionary

Conference in South Africa stated the following at its founding conference in 1904:

This General Conference of Missionaries in South Africa considers that the establishment of Native Churches is the true aim and end of Christian Missions, and these ought to be truly African in character, so as to become the authentic expression of African Christianity.¹³

That the three-self idea resonated among black Christians in the AICs is evident in the way one of their most articulate protagonists in the early part of the twentieth century, the Rev L N Mzimba, used it to justify the founding of 'Ethiopian churches'. Their aim he said, was 'to plant a self-supporting, self-governing and self-propagating African Church [which] would produce a truly African type of Christianity suited to the genius and needs of the race, and not a black copy of any European Church'.¹⁴

However, all of this was far in the future. In the nineteenth century, the three-self formula was later subjected to severe theological criticisms¹⁵ and seemingly proved disastrous when Bishop Adjai Crowther, an indigenous West African, was entrusted with the control of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) work in West Africa in 1857.¹⁶ That he did act in accordance with missionary ideas of how this should be done, led to this experiment being adjudged a failure. However, it would be truer to say that on the score of self-organisation, the three-self formula itself was flawed, because like the 'Fundamental Principle' of the LMS cited earlier, it was predicated on the idea that Western forms of organisation and bureaucracy were 'natural' and could easily be absorbed and practised by anyone. Yet as Weber might have pointed out, Western forms of bureaucracy and rational organisation designed to produce efficiency, were rooted in the capitalist economic order of Western Europe.¹⁷

Moreover, the essentially impersonal attitudes required in Western bureaucracy were not easily reconciled with the more communal forms of organisation prevalent in societies outside Europe and North America, where the concept of 'efficiency' was not given high societal priority. However, the CMS experience in West Africa together with another failure of *devolution* (the word used to denote the handing over of control of churches to local, indigenous people) in Tinnevely in South India,¹⁸ contributed to a reaction against the ideas of Venn and Anderson in the second half of the nineteenth century. That reaction was strengthened by other factors such as the onset of a more conservative theological climate¹⁹ and the rise of nationalism and imperialism in Europe which, when reinforced by social-Darwinism,²⁰ often translated themselves into paternalism at best, and crude notions of racial superiority at worst. The convergence of these forces as well as the growth of the mission societies which created increasing bureaucratisation of their structures, inevitably created resistance to the changes demanded by a policy of devolution.²¹

However much it was deprecated in practice, the establishment of 'native churches' remained, in the words of the 1910 World Missionary Conference, 'the hope and aim of all our work'.²² A South African Methodist participant in that conference, the Rev John Gould, reported:

There was great urgency shown for the early recognition of the growing self-consciousness of the young Churches and the importance of these developments as churches indigenous to the soil in which they grew, and not as importations of a foreign religion. The conference recognised the superiority of the native church as a mission agency because . . . the native speaks the language of the non-Christian people . . . knows the minds of the non-Christian people [and] attests to what the Gospel will do for them individually and socially.²³

The Venn–Anderson formula represented the thinking of the British and American-based missions. It was also taken up enthusiastically in South Africa by the NGK, which had begun its missionary work early in the nineteenth century. The three-self formula, as mentioned earlier, provided a very comfortable base for the apartheid theology which developed in this church. This also drew strength and comfort from similar and indeed much stronger ideas to those of Venn and Anderson which had appeared in Europe. These ideas of Lutheran theologians had a particularly Germanic character in that their definition of *indigenous* churches was synonymous with the establishment of ethnically based churches. The first notable thinker in this regard was Karl Graul, founder of the Leipzig Missionary Society, who had even earlier than Venn declared the aim of Lutheran mission to be the establishment of *Volkskirche* ('ethnic churches'). He envisaged that in these churches whole peoples rather than individuals would be converted.²⁴ This thinking was expanded by another German Lutheran, Gustav Warneck (1834–1910), the founder of the new theological discipline of 'missiology' training institutions and the retention of folk customs which were not incompatible with Christian practice.²⁵

This 'ethnic theology' spread beyond the Lutheran missions and, in time, became characteristic of most European continental missions, including the Paris Evangelical Mission and the Swiss Reformed Mission, both of which operated in South Africa. Ethnic theology was even more fully apparent in the German Lutheran missions which, as will be described later, divided their work structurally along ethnic lines.

Although they did not dominate the South African mission field, overworked, European continental missions such as the Berlin, the Hermannsburg Missions, the Paris Evangelical Mission Society and the Swiss Evangelical Mission played a significant role in attempts to Christianise African people. The churches estab-

lished by these missions had a membership of close on a million in 1975 and their ethnic basis is very apparent from the list of SACC churches given in Table 2. The geographical component in the names of each of the 'Evangelical Lutheran' churches reflects that the work of each of these was based on a different ethnic group. The same is true of the two Moravian churches listed and also the Tsonga Presbyterian Church, which took its name from the Tsonga-speaking people on whom the Swiss Evangelical Mission had focused its work.²⁶ Their ethnic base meant that these churches were seen by some in the early twentieth century as falling naturally within the Dutch Reformed rather than the Ecumenical Bloc and, indeed, for a time it was 'touch and go' as to which bloc they would join.²⁷

In contrast to its favourable reception in the Dutch Reformed Bloc, the three-self formula was either ignored or rejected outright by the major churches of the Ecumenical Bloc. Any moves towards the formal establishment of separate indigenous churches or even branches of the two giants, the Anglican and Methodist churches, were actively resisted. One result was that the churches of this bloc became isolated from the international missionary movement in which the results of the three-self theology were to lead to some very important developments as the twentieth century progressed.

Aftermath of the missionary movement

In a global context, the history and aftermath of the missionary movement can be divided into three periods.

The age of comity

In what I have termed the *first phase*, otherwise known as *the age of comity*, mission agencies entered into loose agreements with one another for co-operation and more particularly to sort out spheres of operation between themselves. *Comity* has been de-

scribed as a 'survival tactic' by missions which, very often faced with hostile climates and populations, found co-operation better than competition.²⁸ This gave rise fairly early to missionary 'conferences'; co-operative bodies which met on a regular basis, in both the home bases of missions as well as on the mission fields. The first 'home-based' missionary conference was formed in London in 1819,²⁹ while the first recorded comity agreement on the mission fields was that between Methodist and LMS workers in Tonga in 1830.³⁰ Localised missionary conferences appeared in India in the 1850s and in 1860 the first of a series of international missionary conferences was held in London.³¹ These first-phase co-operative efforts which prevailed during roughly the first century of the missionary movement were based on purely pragmatic considerations; the promotion of organisational unity between the different bodies working on the mission fields was not envisaged.

The 'survival tactic' nature of early efforts at comity in South Africa is evident from the fact that they first emerged in Natal. Not only had the Zulu people there proved highly resistant to missionary efforts, but also since nine out of the sixteen missionary agencies working in South Africa by 1880 were in this territory – it was one of the most crowded mission fields of the subcontinent, with the 'resulting evils of duplication, wasted energies, overlapping and ruffled tempers' in the words of du Plessis.³² Thus in 1881 members of the American Board Mission set moves afoot which led to the formation of the Natal Missionary Conference in 1884; the first of its kind in South Africa.³³ The rush of mission agencies into the country as a whole over the next two decades extended the problem of overcrowding and, once again, the American Board took the initiative in the formation of the GMC in 1904.³⁴ A priority item on the agendas of this body over the next 20 years was an attempt to sort out spheres of influence between the various missions and churches which made up its membership.

The aims of the GMC, as set out in its constitution, were of the pragmatic nature mentioned earlier. They included the promotion of 'co-operation and brotherly feelings between different Missionary Societies' and 'the speedy and effective evangelisation of the Native Races of South Africa'. The GMC's mode of operation reflected this pragmatic basis. While participants in its conferences were listed under their denominational missionary affiliation, they attended in a personal capacity and not as delegates. For reasons that will be made clear later, this point was strongly insisted on by members of the CPSA, who stayed away from GMC meetings between 1906 and 1912 because the officially adopted constitution of 1906 contained the word *delegates*; they did not return until it had been replaced with the word *members*.³⁵ The meetings of the GMC were purely consultative, the organisation having no executive powers. While an elected Executive and specialist committees met between its general conferences, it had no full-time staff.

The GMC constitution stated one of the five objects of the organisation to be: 'To keep ever in view the goal of establishing self-supporting and self-propagating Native Churches in South Africa.'³⁶ At its founding meeting, the GMC heard a paper delivered by a French missionary of the Paris Evangelical Mission, the Rev E Jacottet, which he commenced by remarking that it was scarcely necessary to dwell on the principle 'that the foundation of a Native Church is the aim and end of all missionary work'. Jacottet put forward a typical Warneck model 'native church', arguing that it should be separate from white churches and that Europeans should 'not try to bend the native mind to their own mode of thought . . . but respect his national or racial characteristics'.³⁷ His views, set out at length, met with the approval of the conference as is evidenced by the unanimous acceptance of the resolution lauding the establishment of 'native churches' cited earlier.

Opinion among missionaries was not as unanimous as the voting for this resolution might seem to suggest. In the light of what will be argued in the next chapter about the mission theologies of both the Methodist Church and the Anglican CPSA, which specifically rejected separate black churches, it is difficult to understand how their representatives could have voted for this resolution.

Moreover, the Scots Lovedale missionary, Brownlee J Ross, openly opposed Jacottet when Jacottet argued his point on the pages of the *Christian Express*. Ross quoted Cape politicians as saying: 'In the Cape we refuse to consider the colour of a man's skin if he is a good citizen.'³⁸ This was a significant clash of views. Ross as a typical 'Cape liberal' was arguing against what he saw as racial segregation implicit in the idea of a native church. In later years, their opposition to racial segregation brought the liberals into conflict not only with the proponents of apartheid, but also with those of black consciousness. Still, in time, Ross's view prevailed over Jacottet's both in the GMC and later in the CCSA, although Jacottet's views were much more representative of those dominant in the international missionary movement.

The era of councils

On the international scene the onset of 'second-phase' ecumenism can be dated from the holding of the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh in 1910; a seminal event in modern church history. As had been mentioned, there was a series of international missionary conferences after 1860, which were organised on the same loose and pragmatic basis as the GMC. The Edinburgh conference broke new ground by appointing a 'Continuation Committee' as well as a full-time secretariat, thus establishing a continuous basis for organisational co-operation. Among the steps taken by this Continuation Committee towards providing closer links between those working on the mission fields was the launching of a scholarly publication, the *International Review of*

Missions (IRM). This, in the words of the great ecumenical architect, John Mott 'from the beginning exercised leadership in its studies of fields and problems, in its . . . contribution of the evolution of the science of mission and its prophetic calls'.³⁹ Mott played a leading role in the inspiration and organisation of the Edinburgh conference, at which he was elected president of the Continuation Committee. After that conference he undertook a tour of mission fields in the Far East, as a result of which several national 'Christian councils' were established.⁴⁰ These councils embodied a significant development of the old missionary conferences in that they included churches as well as mission societies in their membership. The Christian councils, equipped with full-time secretariats wielding executive power, represented a much more active and aggressive type of co-operation than that of the era of comity and were, in fact, an expression of the growing strength of Christianity in the mission fields. In 1921 these Christian councils, together with various mission societies, were given a global linkage with the formation of the IMC with Mott at its head.

While this was the first international ecumenical body, its constitution precluded it from including discussions on 'faith and order' or matters of doctrine, among its activities. In other words, Christian councils were forbidden to include discussions on church unity in their deliberations. This was largely due to the influence of the Anglo-Catholic Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG) – one of the most powerful mission societies in the world which, at that time, was strongly opposed to any moves towards church unity and saw discussion of doctrinal issues as the first step in the direction of such unions.⁴¹ Thus, although second-phase ecumenical unions were stronger and more effective vehicles of united Christian action than their first-phase counterparts, they remained essentially pragmatic and co-operative efforts.

The CCSA, established in 1936, reflected typically second-phase characteristics. Its membership was opened to 15 mission societ-

ies and 9 churches in comparison with the 21 mission societies and only 5 churches represented by members on the GMC. In addition, the CCSA had a full-time secretariat. However, as with the IMC, its constitution laid down that: 'It shall not be within the scope of the Council to consider questions of ecclesiastical faith and order which represent denominational differences.'⁴²

The ecumenical movement

The 'third phase' of the historical development of the missionary movement was characterised by a striving for Christian unity. This contrasted sharply with the 'arms-length' approach of the relationships between different Christian bodies in the missionary councils and the Christian councils in the first and second phases. They were superseded in the third phase by councils of churches. Typical of these was the SACC, the aim of which was stated in its constitution to be: 'To foster that unity which is God's will and gift to his Church.'

This drive for Christian unity was yet another unintended consequence of the missionary movement. It arose from the fact that, for the first time since the Reformation, those on the mission fields found themselves in close touch with other Christians, whose thinking and theology had been a mutually closed book in Western countries. The rediscovery of their commonalities set in train events which were to swing the whole focus away from mission and onto church unity. Besides stimulating co-operation between missions, the Edinburgh Missionary Conference had also given rise to greater efforts towards united action on the part of the churches. In 1925, under the aegis of Bishop Nathan Söderblom of the Swedish Lutheran Church who had attended the Edinburgh conference, the Life and Work movement was founded, which aimed to give the churches a common platform for social service. Two years later, another Edinburgh participant, Bishop C H Brent of the Philippines, launched the Faith and Order movement in

Lausanne, Switzerland, which decisively broke with the bases of the IMC in that it was set up specifically to discuss questions of doctrine with a view to promoting church unity. In 1938 these two movements joined in a WCC-in-formation which, having the two elements of unity and service as its basis, gave the lead on third-phase ecumenism. Its proponents actively sought not only to bridge divisions between churches, but also to promote 'structural unity', that is, to unite churches. The outbreak of World War II prevented the establishment of the WCC itself until a decade later. However, after 1948 it was increasingly to dominate the international ecclesiastical scene.

Here one may note in passing that while developments on the South African scene mirrored the three phases of the international movement, this happened at a much slower pace during the mid twentieth century. Whereas the international missionary movement had entered second-phase ecumenism in 1910, in South Africa that development was not formally recognised until 26 years later. While third-phase ecumenism was effectively launched on the world scene in 1938, it took another 30 years for this to become an accomplished fact in South Africa. This country moved back into the ecumenical mainstream only after black South Africans – the products of missions which originally had followed the three-self formula – took control of the SACC in the last decades of the twentieth century.

The euthanasia of mission

Although the establishment of 'native churches' remained the overall aim of missionary work before World War I, it was seen as a distant goal; the more important immediate object being that stated at the Edinburgh conference, 'the evangelisation of the world in this generation'. In the light of the speed of Christian advance on the mission fields, this was seen as a realistic goal. John Mott, in his final address to the conference as its president, expressed

the confident spirit on the missionary movement with the words: 'The end of the conference is the beginning of conquest.'⁴³

World War I, however, brought what has been termed *the great century of missions* to an abrupt end. Instead of marshalling Christian forces for a final assault on the bastions of heathendom, the Edinburgh Continuation Committee found its major task after the outbreak of war in August 1914 to consist mainly in holding the missionary movement together and providing for 'orphaned missions' cut off from their European bases. Not only did the war disrupt missionary administration; it also fatally undermined the claims of the Christian West to moral superiority over the religions of Asia and Africa. The post-war period was characterised by the burgeoning of liberal theology which called into question the justification for missions.⁴⁴ Non-Christian religions were no longer seen as the main 'enemy' of the missionary movement; rather they tended to be accepted as allies in the struggle against what missionaries perceived to be the threats posed by new forces of secularism and nationalism.⁴⁵

It was in an attempt to co-ordinate missionary thinking in the face of this changed situation that the International Missionary Conference called its first international conference in Jerusalem in 1928. Many changes of emphasis in comparison with the Edinburgh conference were apparent here. One of the most prominent was the place and attention accorded newly emergent 'native churches' which, from that time on, were given the title of 'younger churches'.⁴⁶ This was due to a different basis of representation at the two conferences. While the Edinburgh conference had been a meeting of representatives of mission societies, the one in Jerusalem was made up primarily of representatives of national Christian councils. This difference reflected a rapidly changing world situation. That, in turn, was reflected in one of the major reports of the conference, which focused on 'The Relations Be-

tween the Younger and Older Churches'. One of the IMC general secretaries, W L Warnshuis, noted in this report:

Churches that are in an ecclesiastical sense autonomous now exist in almost all parts of the world. Such names as the Church of Christ in China, the Lutheran Church in India, the Church of Christ in Japan, the South India United Church, the Presbyterian Church in Brazil and the Churches or Provinces of the Anglican Communion in India, China, Japan and South Africa and other titles suggest how the development of ecclesiastical organisation and the growth of Christian Churches in all these lands has resulted in the transfer to these "national" churches of ecclesiastical government and their independent control by themselves of all their own ecclesiastical affairs.⁴⁷

The concept of the *native church* was refined and developed in Jerusalem into that of the *indigenous church*. The conference, in its discussions, 'was reminded again and again . . . that freedom and self-determination were marks of the true life of the Church of Christ, and must be looked for and welcomed'.⁴⁸ In the definition of a *living and indigenous church* agreed to by the conference, there was no mention of the three-self formula. Its concepts were subsumed in the six elements of the definition. Four of these points were largely theological; but the other two are of importance to the theme of this study. The first laid down that the indigenous church would give expression to its Christian faith in its worship and service when its customs, art and architecture incorporated 'the worthy characteristics of the people'. The second was that the church would actively share its life with the nation in which it found itself.⁴⁹ The first point did more than merely echo Warneck's theology; it evidenced the willingness of the missionary movement to concede that there were indeed 'worthy characteristics' in the cultures of non-Western peoples and that, in fact, those cultures were to be as much respected as that of the West. In other words, the Jerusalem conference signalled that Western notions of cultural and, by implication, religious superiority, were

disappearing. The second point reinforced this new trend in that it constituted a blessing of the nationalisms emerging in the Third World. These two points, as shall be pointed out, stood in sharp contrast to thinking in Ecumenical Bloc churches and missions as it was developing in South Africa at that time.

One of the most important trends in theological and ecclesiastical developments highlighted by Jerusalem was summed up by an official IMC rapporteur when he pointed out that the world mission of Christianity was more 'church centric', with foreign missions 'dropping into insignificance', because Christian work and service were increasingly related to the church.⁵⁰ This was an early pointer to the resolution of the mission/church dichotomy and its importance lies in the fact that it was the 'younger churches' of the Third World which were of the main driving forces behind the development. The representatives of those churches made such a strong impression in Jerusalem, that a participant from South Africa, the Rev Max Yergan (who was actually an African – American sent to work with the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) in South Africa for a number of years), afterwards reported that they comprised half the delegates present although they, in fact, constituted only a quarter of the gathering.⁵¹ As J H Oldham, one of the secretaries of the IMC and a leading figure in the ecumenical movement, stated, there could no longer be any doubt that these churches 'had acquired experience, maturity and leadership to make them equal partners in the work of evangelisation in non-Christian lands'.⁵²

An equally significant development was that noted by the president of South Africa's GMC, the Rev James Dexter Taylor of the American Board Mission, at its 1928 meeting. The Jerusalem conference, he stated, had made it clear that the emphasis in the missionary movement was no longer geographical. Old missionary attitudes had passed, as had the slogan 'the evangelisation of the world in this generation'. The new, broadened view of evangelisation

included the responsibility of the church 'to touch and save the whole of life, and not merely that which is called soul'. For South Africa this meant that the focus of attention had swung away from the older missionary preoccupations with the distribution of mission territory and resources; the world church, as the Jerusalem conference had shown, was 'interested to know how South Africa was meeting the test of Christian brotherhood in her inter-racial relationships, what impact the Church was making upon the problems of social injustice'.⁵³

The movement of the 'younger churches' into the centre stage of the international missionary scene was given further emphasis at the next conference of the IMC at Tambaram, India, in 1938, the central theme of which was 'the upbuilding of the younger churches as a part of the historic Christian community'.⁵⁴ This time, 250 of the 471 participants were drawn from the younger churches⁵⁵ and it is noteworthy that neither the titles of the five main topics for discussion at Tambaram nor of the twenty subsections under these headings contained the word *mission*, while *missionary* appeared only once. Even the term *younger churches* was already going out of fashion, as was noted in a group which stated that to discuss some technical questions 'we may need to use such terms as older and younger churches, but our whole emphasis must be on the universality and the solidarity of the church of Jesus Christ'.⁵⁶ Thus long before the next great IMC conference held at Willingen, Germany, in 1952, the IMC had already pronounced against the dichotomy between mission and church, although it took a long time for the idea to be fully accepted. At Willingen, for instance, the term *younger churches* was used at the head of a statement especially prepared by delegates from those churches who said:

We are convinced that missionary work should be done through the Church. We should cease to speak of missions and churches and avoid this dichotomy not only in our thinking but in our actions. We should speak about the mission of the Church.⁵⁷

The IMC of course, did not represent 'the Church' – it represented second-phase Christian councils which had mission work as their *raison d'être*. However, until the WCC was established in 1948, the IMC remained the chief international ecumenical body on which these churches were represented, albeit indirectly, through national Christian councils. Even after that the IMC – drawing its constituency from the old mission fields – was far more representative of indigenous churches in the Third World than the WCC which, having been founded in Europe, was dominated by Western churches.

In South Africa, there was very little evidence of the growth and strength of indigenous churches which were visible in the IMC. This thought occurred to several South African participants at IMC conferences. The Tambaram conference, for instance, inspired Dexter Taylor to express 'some criticisms' of the CCSA in an article in the *South African Outlook*.

Our worst weakness as a Council in my opinion is the small scope we give the African church in our affairs. We have not a single African on our working Executive and only two I believe on the larger.⁵⁸

The continuing divergence between thinking in South Africa and that in the outside world was evident in the fact that the crucial Willingen conference of 1952 attracted practically no attention in South Africa itself. Even the *South African Outlook*, which proclaimed its purpose to be 'a journal of missionary affairs', carried no reports on Willingen other than a preliminary notice about its date and venue, in contrast to its very full coverage of earlier IMC conferences. The fullest reporting on Willingen was made in the *Christian Council Quarterly* published by the CCSA, a rather dull four-page leaflet which circulated to barely a thousand readers.⁵⁹ The secretary of the CCSA, the Rev Arthur Blaxall, who was one of the two South African delegates at Willingen, confirmed the

lack of local interest, and reported that after his return from the conference, he received only two invitations to speak on it from local churches.⁶⁰

After the formation of the WCC in 1948, indigenous Third World churches were increasingly attracted to its membership, which offered them direct representation as individual bodies, and this fact was calling into question the conciliar basis of IMC membership.⁶¹ In addition, the 'younger churches' were also having a profound impact on theology in the IMC, as is evident in their statement quoted earlier which urged an end to the separation of mission and church. All this pointed to a readiness to contemplate, if not the 'euthanasia' of missions, then at least to the 'euthanasia' of the IMC. The WCC formed an obvious replacement body for that organisation. In fact, the two had been working closely together ever since 1937, when the IMC general secretary, J H Oldham, arranged the Oxford Life and Work Conference which led to the establishment of the WCC-in-formation the following year. In 1946 they had established a joint Commission of the Churches on International Affairs, began co-operative social service through the WCC's Department of Inter-church Aid in 1952, and two years later integrated their study departments.⁶² In 1949 they were jointly responsible for creating the East Asian Christian Conference, a regional counterpart of the WCC in that area, as well as for the creation of another such body for Africa in 1958, the All-Africa Conference of Churches (AACC).

These moves made the logicity of a merger between the IMC and the WCC on an administrative level obvious; such a merger was also becoming imperative in terms of theological developments. In July 1957 a joint committee, established to consider a merger, stated that the motivation for the move arose from the discovery of a 'long-forgotten truth that the *unity* of the Church and the *mission* of the Church both belong, in equal degree to the *essence* of the Church' [original emphases].⁶³ Thus the major item

on the agenda of the final IMC conference held in Ghana in 1958 was that it merge with the WCC. Although this met with some opposition, it was agreed to by a large majority. The merger finally took place at the WCC's third world assembly in New Delhi in 1961; the IMC being incorporated as the *Division of World Mission and Evangelism*, a name later changed to the *Commission on World Mission and Evangelism* (CWME) and finally to the *Commission for Dialogue with People of Other Living Faiths*. The significance of that shift will be explored in a moment.

Here it might be remarked that the questioning of the church/mission dichotomy which led to the IMC/WCC merger was based not only on theological issues, but also resulted from a drive to eliminate the issues of geography and race which had led to the dichotomy developing in the first place. Thinking here was encapsulated in the title of the CWME's first international assembly held in Mexico City in 1963, namely *Mission in Six Continents*. That pointed to the fact that Europe and North America were now seen to be as much of a mission field as Asia, Africa and Latin America.

That South Africa lacked the vigorous leadership role being taken by Third World churches in the IMC and later the WCC, was noted by a leading black Methodist, the Rev E E Mahabane after attending the final meeting of the IMC in Ghana. That was closely followed by the founding assembly of the AACC which, as noted earlier, was a joint creation of the WCC and IMC. While the 'erst-while dark continent is on the march,' wrote Mahabane on his return 'Africa south of the Zambezi is lagging behind, culturally, theologically and ideologically.'⁶⁴ Another Methodist, the Rev W Ilsley, spelt that out more explicitly:

It was obvious from the representation from other parts of the continent that they have advanced much farther than South Africa in placing responsibility on Africans for ecclesiastical leadership. Sir

Francis Ibiam, president of the Nigerian Christian Council, presided at that Conference with dignity and ability. Similar qualities were revealed in African Bishops, Canon and Ministers as well as those without handles to their names.⁶⁵

The AACC made clear its belief that the same qualities of leadership were present in South African blacks by appointing one of them, Dr Donald Mtimkulu of Fort Hare University, as its first general secretary and Mahabane as one of its vice-presidents. The Rev Arthur Blaxall, the secretary of the CCSA, wrote in his report, of a

general atmosphere of new found freedom, combined with intense struggle for even fuller life, which seemed in some way to affect the Assembly itself, the great part of its deliberations being concerned with realising that those who were called 'the younger churches' at Tambaram, in India, in 1938 are no longer young, they have come of age.⁶⁶

Blaxall, however, made no comment on the fact that there were practically no young South African indigenous churches present at this gathering.

The impact of Third World churches on the international ecumenical scene grew, if anything, as a result of the IMC/WCC merger in 1961. After that date it was evident that the centre of gravity in the WCC was moving away from the West. Reflecting this was that by 1968 almost two-thirds of the members of the 120-strong Central Committee of the WCC were drawn from these churches.⁶⁷ Third World churches in particular brought a new focus of attention on the nationalisms which were bringing the colonial era to a rapid close. This was evident in the words of an official rapporteur at the final IMC conference who observed:

It was stated by an African in our group: 'We want to be Africans, not black Europeans,' and an Indonesian said: 'We want to show that we are good nationalists and revolutionaries.'⁶⁸

Sentiments of that kind were not unwelcome in the WCC even during its first decade of existence when it was dominated by Western Churches. Many of its leading figures had been involved in resistance movements in German-occupied territory during World War II⁶⁹ and one of the greatest theologians of that era, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, was hanged nine days before the end of the war because of his participation in the 1944 bomb plot against Hitler. For this reason, nationalist revolutionary ideas emanating from the Third World Christians involved in anti-colonial struggles found a fertile seedbed in the WCC.

They were reinforced by new theological currents, particularly that which went under the name of *missio dei* ('mission of God'). This had arisen during the 1950s out of the struggle to reformulate mission theology in the light of questionings of liberal theology and the emergence of the younger churches outlined earlier.⁷⁰ In terms of this theology, missions to non-Christian peoples were seen simply as one part of 'God's mission' which operated through secular as much as religious historical movements. 'No slogan was more often repeated during the 60s than the phrase "God is at work in the world";' observed Bishop Lesslie Newbigin, secretary of the IMC at the time of the WCC merger and later a leading figure of the latter body. 'Yet it could too easily be used to convey the idea that whatever seemed to be the dominant trend in society was in fact the work of God.'⁷¹

Against the background of the Vietnam war and the armed struggles against colonialism in Portuguese Africa and the then Rhodesia, one of the 'dominant trends' during that decade was the idea of violent, nationalist revolution. The WCC conferred unprecedented respectability on this idea at its Church and Society Conference held in Geneva in 1966. This conference, called up by the WCC to examine 'the problems of society in the modern world from the perspective of God's call to man [which would] help to develop a body of theological and ethical insights which

will assist the churches in the witness in contemporary history', was not made up of churchmen, but of 'experts' in social, political and economic fields, who had the task of speaking to the churches rather than for them. One of the major conclusions of this conference was that since political and economic structures were the most important determinants of human existence, revolutions aimed at replacing unjust with less unjust structures could not be automatically condemned.⁷² The IMC's Willingen conference of 1952, for instance, had pointedly raised the question as to whether there was a connection between the idea of Christian mission and practical concerns. Its theological study group had asserted that among the ways in which it was possible to see God exercising his sovereignty in the world was '*in the movements of political and social life*, where He both shows His judgement and also confronts whole societies with new opportunities for living' [original emphasis].⁷³

Thus it was not accidental that the major thrust of the theology of revolution in the WCC should have come through the CWME, which it will be remembered, was the old IMC. Theologians from the world outside Europe and North America dominated the WCC's 'theology of revolution'. Particularly noteworthy in this regard was an Indian theologian, M M Thomas who, among other activities, chaired the 1966 Church and Society Conference, and who was elected to chair the Central Committee in 1968. Thomas had first introduced the idea of revolution as a theological concept in the 1950s and, noted a commentator in the *International Review of Missions* in 1973, 'his political theology is through and through a missionary theology'.⁷⁴

The CWME's political theology was most clearly stated at its second international conference held in Bangkok in 1973. With the theme of 'Salvation Today', the conference defined *salvation* as meaning, among other things:

1. Salvation works in the struggle for economic justice against the exploitation of people by people.
2. Salvation works in the struggle for human dignity against oppression by their fellow men.

The CWME played a major role in the actualisation of that theology with the establishment of the WCC's Programme to Combat Racism (PCR) in 1970 to aid organisations struggling against racial oppression, whether those struggles were violent or not.⁷⁵ Two years later, the PCR caused something of an earthquake in both ecclesiastical and theological circles by making grants to groups fighting militarily to overthrow white colonial rule in Portuguese colonies in Africa as well as in Rhodesia. While the scope of the aid given through this programme was world-wide, the major donations were to 'liberation movements' in Africa.⁷⁶ This evoked a growing swell of positive response from black churchmen in South Africa, who were taking control of the major local third-phase expression of ecumenism, the SACC which played a significant role both in opposition to, and the final defeat of, apartheid.

While all this, once again, points to a major unintended consequence of mission, equally significant was the changing of the name of the CWME to that of the *Commission for Dialogue with People of other Faiths*. 'Mission and evangelism' had now been finally euthanased in a move that embodied a historical judgement on the missionary movement. Finally, the spiritual descendants of those Protestant Christians who had set out to convert the world, had themselves been converted and come to the conclusion that it was not the 'heathen' who had been bound by error's chain, but the missionaries themselves.

However piquant that unintended consequence of mission work, of more direct relevance to this study is that, as has been argued, it was the vigorous and radical influences of indigenous churches

planted on the old mission fields, which exercised a transforming influence on the WCC. However, it was precisely these influences which had been, if not lacking, then not very forcefully felt or expressed in the South African situation in the 1960s and early 1970s. A major reason for that was that while the number of indigenous Christians had grown enormously, the older, white-led denominations were the major players in bodies such as the SACC, which was still under the control of white liberals. Only when the 'three-self' idea was fully realised in a crucial group of ex-mission churches, which allowed indigenous people to take the reins of power in ecumenical bodies, did the Ecumenical Bloc begin to move back into the international mainstream and duplicate the radical stands of the WCC. At that stage the products of mission in South Africa had not only decisively begun to challenge the political and military superiority of the whites, but were equally decisively rejecting white claims to moral and religious superiority. While, as already remarked, most early missionaries would have been appalled, proponents of the 'three-self' idea would have had less reason to be so: the working of the law of unintended consequences is likely to be most clearly in evidence after the application of euthanasia.

Notes

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19. Hewitt, *The Problems of Success*, 421.

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22. H Lefever, 'The Preparation of Missionaries, 1910 and 1960', *International Review of Missions*, vol 60, 282.
23. *The Methodist Churchman*, vol 11, no. 7, 16 August 1910, 1.
24. D J Bosch, *Christian Mission in Theological Perspective*, 134.
25. Lefever and Beyerhaus, *The Responsible Church and Foreign Mission*, 45–9.
26. P Harries, 'Exclusions, Classification and Internal Colonialism: the Emergence of Ethnicity Among the Tsonga-speakers of South Africa,' in *The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa*, ed. L Vail (London and Berkley 1989).
27. Why they decisively turned away from the Dutch Reformed Bloc after World War II is detailed in Chapter Five.
28. Bosch, *Christian Mission in Theological Perspective*, 134.
29. Lefever and Beyerhaus, *The Responsible Church and Foreign Mission*, 45–9.
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