

PL LE ROUX, DUTCH REFORMED MISSIONARY, ZIONIST PREACHER AND LEADER OF THE APOSTOLIC FAITH MISSION OF SOUTH AFRICA, AND THE ORIGIN OF SOME OF THE AFRICAN INDEPENDENT CHURCHES IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

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Abstract

African Independent Churches in Southern Africa consist of two major categories, Zionist and Ethiopian churches, with a third minor category of Messianic churches. Other researchers prefer to make a distinction between a religion of the Book and a religion of the Spirit, these churches varying along a continuum between the two. This article focuses on the Zionist churches and the role played by Pieter L Le Roux in the establishment of a segment of these groups and churches. Le Roux was, initially, a missionary for the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) before joining the Zionist movement initiated by John Alexander Dowie from America. Later he joined the Pentecostal movement of John G Lake and Thomas Hezmalhalch. His involvement with black leaders led to the establishment of a conglomeration of groups from both Zionist and Pentecostal (or 'Apostolic') backgrounds.

1 INTRODUCTION

African Independent Churches (Africa Initiated or African Instituted Churches – AICs) are growing steadily in Southern Africa. Projections show that 35% of the black population were members of this movement of diverse groups and churches in 2000. More people belong to this group than to any historical denomination in South Africa (Hofmeyr 1991:260).

The AICs consist of thousands of groups and churches. Some groups, such as the Zionist Christian Church (ZCC), have more than a million members while many groups have less than a hundred followers. These groups are sometimes characterised as separatist, nativistic, chiliastic, messianic, and syncretistic (Crafford 1985:2). Not one of these terms is effective in describing the movement as a whole and it is better to investigate and describe each group or grouping of churches on its

own. Cochrane (1994:209-210) remarks that "the widespread interpretation of the African independent churches as an essentially syncretistic religious phenomenon made it easier to ignore them, theologically as well as practically".

AICs are the result of indigenous people's contact with Christianity, and Westerners' proclamation of the gospel in the different forms in which the denominations 'dressed' it. In many instances, the indigenous person's background, which obviously includes his or her experience of traditional religions and culture, determines his or her relationship with the new religion. This led to a unique expression of Christian faith that could not be accommodated in traditional denominations.

For instance, in traditional religion forefathers play a role in the origin of illness, in the same way that witchcraft and magic play a determining role. A person falls ill because of a transgression or infringement of a rule, while health is a sign that a person has good relations with the different definitions of relationships.

2 TYPOLOGY OF AICs

Sundkler's 1961 typology of the AICs as consisting of two major categories of Zionist and Ethiopian churches, with a third minor category of 'messianic' churches is still accepted, though with some modifications (Kiernan 1990:9). Kiernan's own suggestion is that a distinction should be made between a religion of the 'Word' or 'Book', and a religion of the 'Spirit', these churches varying along a continuum between the two. The 'Book' religion as opposed to 'Spirit' religion demands literacy and education, and is synonymous with socio-economic advancement. In these churches is found a greater sense of orthodoxy, a more normative system of relationships and hierarchies, and discrimination against women. In contrast, 'Spirit' religion favours women in leading roles, especially as prophetesses, and is generally more innovating and less discriminatory. The Ethiopian churches are patterned on the Protestant churches from which most broke away. The Zionist churches tend towards Pentecostalism and healing practices.

West (1974) distinguishes between churches of the law and churches of the spirit. His typology locates churches in relation to the active presence or absence of the Holy Spirit on the one hand, and whether the churches are under black control on the other hand. Zionist churches are those under black control with an active presence of the Spirit, while Ethiopian churches are those under black control with an absence of Spiritual presence. Churches not under black control with an active Spiritual presence he calls 'Pentecostal missions', and those

not under black control without active Spiritual presence he labels 'most other missions'.

A noticeable shift in the way the indigenous churches are interpreted has taken place in the last decade or two. "... religious independency is now viewed less as a negative reaction (a form of protest or withdrawal) on the part of the powerless to intolerable deprivations and more as a positive and potentially rewarding response to the demands of an urban environment" (Kiernan 1990:77).

Not everyone agrees. Kruss (1985:12) concluded that Zionist churches often reflect some form of resistance to oppression. Pato investigated Zionist practices in the Eastern Cape and in 1990 he wrote that these churches "reflect a process in which the Zionists negotiate and renegotiate their human identity and power to live in a disrupted and estranged environment" (Pato 1990:13). These studies were conducted many decades after the origins of the movement and do not necessarily explain the earlier period.

Kruss (1985:74) identifies three different periods in which independent churches historically took different forms, corresponding with South African social history. She claims that each form can be understood as the most fitting form of religion for that particular period, and each represents one branch of the indigenous churches, namely the Ethiopian movement, the Zionist movement, and its subcategory, the Zionist-Apostolic churches (cf Cochrane 1994:211-213). In the opinion of this writer, her argument sounds rather forced.

3 ZIONIST MOVEMENT

This article focuses on the second group, the Zionist movement. Traditional denominations normally did not emphasise healing as part of their proclamation. When Zionism came to South Africa, with its emphasis on healing as an integral part of the gospel, indigenous people were attracted to it. It linked up with the religious world in which they grew up. It also led to the formation of many independent churches that use the term 'Zionist' as part of their name and the theology of divine healing as part of their practice. In the words of one AIC prophet: "This is not a church, it is a hospital" (Sundkler 1948:220).

Another important issue in traditional religions is the taboo, the prohibition against visiting certain places, doing certain things and touching certain items. Zionism is characterised by taboos. The use of tobacco, alcohol in any form and pork meat is prohibited. Indigenous people connected to this way of thinking believe that these taboos are (in a way) based on the Mosaic torah (Nel 1992:71).

Traditional religions believed in the powers of amandla and umoya (spirits). Spirits play a determining role in people's lives. These powers can destroy people, even innocent people. But they can also be harnessed to the benefit of the wise man or woman who knows how to manipulate them. The manipulation of powers consists of intricate rites. Traditional Christian denominations in South Africa have negated the spirit world, even though the New Testament itself recognises it. Zionism, and the Pentecostal movement that grew out of it, emphasised the powerful working of the Holy Spirit as well as the influence of evil spirits. In the AICs Umoya is recognised as the One who facilitates healing as well as deliverance from evil spirits.

For indigenous Christians Old Testament rites have great attraction and are connected to the religious world out of which they come.

The interesting fact here is that, owing to the connection between individuals the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC), reformation theology influenced the origins of the Zionist and Pentecostal movement to a considerable degree. This article investigates the interplay between the Dutch Reformed Church of the nineteenth century and the origins of the Zionist and Pentecostal movement in South Africa of the twentieth century. I then consider the role that the Zionist and Pentecostal movements played in the origins of some of the important divisions of AICs.

4 INTERPLAY BETWEEN THE DUTCH REFORMED CHURCH AND THE ZIONIST MOVEMENT: P L LE ROUX

4.1 Le Roux as a Dutch Reformed Missionary

The initial force behind the Zionist movement was an apocalyptic church in the United States, the Christian Catholic Apostolic Church in Zion, under the leadership of John Alexander Dowie (Cochrane 1994:214). Chappell (1983:286) describes Dowie as "a flamboyant and persuasive healing evangelist who focused his ministry almost exclusively upon the practice of faith healing ..." Dowie posed two presuppositions that determined his proclamation and practice of healing: Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever; his will and might are unchangeable; and illness like sin is God's enemy, the devil's work (Chappell 1983:300).

However, the father of black Zionism was Pieter L Le Roux (Sundkler 1976:31; Horn June 1984:3; Burger 1987:222).

Le Roux was born in 1865 in Wellington and was a member of Andrew Murray's Dutch Reformed assembly. He taught at a school in Oudtshoorn and Jacobsdal. When his wife died during the birth of their first child, Le Roux went back to Wellington where he taught at the secondary school. Murray encouraged him to enter the ministry. Sundkler (1976:14) is of the opinion that "(T)he relationship between these two men is one of the subtle turning-points in South African church history." Le Roux completed his studies at the Mission Institute in Wellington, and went to Wakkerstroom in Mpumalanga in 1890. While learning the Zulu language, he ministered for nearly two years in the mission assembly of Greytown. On 11 April 1893 he was ordained as missionary of the DRC in Pietermaritzburg. Andrew Murray himself preached at this service. Wakkerstroom was the second black assembly of the DRC in Transvaal with its own ordained missionary.

The church building where services were held was called 'Zions Kerk', derived from the songbook used in the services, the Moravian 'Zions Liedere'.

During this time Le Roux became interested in the subject of divine healing, and studied the books written by his mentor, Murray. He contacted an old friend of his in Johannesburg, Johannes Büchler, to get more information on the practice of healing. Büchler had started an assembly for Dowie's Zionist church in Johannesburg in 1895 and in his preaching, emphasised divine healing. During 1897 Büchler visited Wakkerstroom and the two ministers shared their convictions with each other. Büchler brought along copies of Dowie's monthly magazine, *Leaves of healing*. Le Roux was deeply influenced by this magazine, as were the many Boer people who were detained in concentration camps during the Anglo Boer War.

Le Roux then wrote a letter to Murray in which he stated that he and his wife had become convinced never again to use any kind of medicine. He also mentioned that the local Missionary Commission, functioning under the aegis of the local white church board, had severe misgivings about this proclamation of the doctrine of divine healing. "Yet, the question is whether this 'Glad Tiding', as you call it in your little book, can any longer be hushed up", he wrote (Sundkler 1976:19).

Murray replied in December 1897 that he had met Büchler and experienced him as a man of strong faith and convictions, even though he (Murray) could understand that Büchler might give offence (Sundkler 1976:21).

During 1898 Le Roux and Murray continued their correspondence with each other, leading to Murray's reply in November 1898 advising Le Roux that it might be wise to wait a while with certain truths given the

fact that not all believers are at the same level. By holding back on the doctrine of healing, Le Roux might open the door for other essential aspects of the gospel, although Murray admitted that it might be dangerous to suppress this 'heavenly truth'. Murray advised Le Roux to contact the Missionary Commission with the proposal that he would not push the issue. Sundkler is of the opinion that: "This was the most helpful and merciful suggestion from the very best man in the church ... Yet, it was not mercy but truth that Le Roux wanted" (Sundkler 1976:21; Horn June 1984:4).

At the same time Le Roux became convinced of the baptism of believers, a matter that further complicated relations with his employee (Sundkler 1976:21).

During this conflict, a well-known white woman of Wakkerstroom was being treated for a serious psychiatric illness, to no good effect. She was eventually transferred to a hospital in Johannesburg, whereupon Le Roux advised her family to take her to B uchler's church for prayer. She was immediately healed and, upon her return to Wakkerstroom, many people started asking questions about divine healing, a subject that was completely ignored in the local DRC assembly.

In the end, Le Roux agreed not to speak out on the subject, but then his fifteen-month old daughter became seriously ill. Her parents wouldn't allow her to take any medicine. One of Le Roux's co-workers, Charlie Sangweni, prayed for the child after Le Roux had lost all hope of her recovery, and the child was healed (Burger 1987:222). Le Roux saw this as a sign that he should no longer keep quiet about what he believed, namely, that healing was part of the very heart of the gospel. In October 1900 he resigned from the DRC. At the time the Transvaal was caught up in the Anglo-Boer War, and the Missionary Commission requested that he fill the position till the end of the war (Personal handwritten notes, AFM Archive). During this time, Le Roux openly preached on subjects such as divine healing, the giving of tithes, the taboos of tobacco, alcohol and medicine and the necessity of the baptism of believers. In January 1901 he notified the DRC that he would no longer minister the baptism to babies. "I can never again baptize a child. I must cut off from all my family and friends. I am in heart and soul Afrikaner and this makes it that much harder" (Sundkler 1976:24).

4.2 Le Roux as a Zionist Missionary

In March 1903 Le Roux's resignation as missionary and member of the DRC was accepted. He joined the South African branch of Dowie's Christian Catholic Apostolic Church in Zion (Sundkler 1976:28). A J Kropholler was appointed missionary in his stead in the DRC Wakkerstroom black assembly (Sundkler 1976:24).

In a letter to one of the Zulu members of the Wakkerstroom assembly, Le Roux explained the reasons for his resignation. He rejected the DRC's doctrine of healing because it found the use of medicine acceptable and because he believed in Exodus 15:26, which states that the Lord is the One that heals. He also quoted Matthew 8:17. He also wrote that it was his opinion that each one should stay in the church where he or she is happy, but he personally had become convinced of the truth of the proclamation found in the Zionist Church. He bore no grudge against the DRC (Bezuidenhout 1988:10).

Early in his ministry in Wakkerstroom, Le Roux had been told about a black woman who left one of his services because she was unable to give expression to her feelings and experience (Sundkler 1976:7). Le Roux now tried to create a new form of worship service where his members would be able to give expression to their own experience of religion. He sensed that Africa's people had their own rhythm and expression.

Three-quarters of the members of the assembly joined Le Roux's new Zionist assembly (Burger 1987:111). The Le Rouxs were ostracised for their decision and they held their services in a tent. They had to leave their parsonage and nobody was prepared to offend the local DRC minister and help the family. Le Roux asked permission to buy a piece of land, but this was not allowed. The reason given by the authorities was that it was not permissible for large groups of blacks to assemble. In the end Le Roux bought land from money he received as his share from an inheritance. Sundkler (1976:27) judges that "his real objective was the foundation of a Zion, a Christian settlement to be the first Zion and holy place in Southern Africa".

Le Roux's Zionist group was characterised by their accommodation to indigenous habits and beliefs. The worship was lively and loud and the clothing colorful. Processions became an integral part of the liturgy. A characteristic was apocalyptic visions with the resultant expectation of the imminent second coming. Several of the members also had the experience of speaking in tongues. In time the liturgy changed completely, from the more formal one characteristic of the DRC tradition of the time to one where people clapped hands, danced and ran around in circles. Prophecy also became important. One of the most prominent leaders, Daniel Nkonyane, declared that he had received the gift of prophecy (Bezuidenhout 1988:15).

In Dowie's 'Leaves of Healing' the photographs show Dowie and his co-leaders in the same clothing that priests of the Old Testament wore. Dowie's Zionism read the Old Testament on the same level as the New Testament and, on an *ad hoc* basis, made the Mosaic laws applicable

to believers' lives. The Wakkerstroom members liked the idea of white garments with green belts and the other clothing used for different processions and at different occasions.

During the period 1903 to 1908, while he was a Zionist minister, Le Roux established the Zionist movement in Southern Africa. His policy of creating and investing in strong indigenous leadership resulted in the countrywide influence that this movement would exercise during the following century.

Le Roux preached the fourfold gospel of Dowie, of repentance and forgiveness of sins, baptism with water, sanctification, and premillennialism (Synan (1925)1980:xx). No writings of his have been preserved, but the influence of his training in reformation theology probably served to determine the general contents of his teaching.

At this stage the local farmers confronted Le Roux, who taught their farmworkers not to use either alcohol or tobacco. Workers were paid with cheap wine and tobacco, and Le Roux's members would no longer accept this (Burger 1987:223).

During May 1904 Daniel Bryant, Dowie's new missionary to South Africa, visited Wakkerstroom. Büchler had become disillusioned with Dowie's megalomania when he visited Zion City, and consequently resigned. Bryant was sent in his stead to South Africa. Bryant and Le Roux led a procession of hundreds of black Zionist members through the streets of Wakkerstroom. Bryant also baptised 141 persons in the river, including Le Roux and his wife. This was "the first Zion baptism for Africans in South Africa" (Sundkler 1976:38). On 31 July 1904, Le Roux was ordained as elder of the CCAC, and his wife as an evangelist. Bryant trusted Le Roux to such a degree that when he visited America for ten months in 1906, he left his Johannesburg assembly in Le Roux's care. Given the large area Le Roux's ministry had to cover, he trained deacons and elders to stand in for him when he was not available. Le Roux thus created strong leadership under his black members, several of which served fulltime with him. When Le Roux was working in Johannesburg (ie while Bryant was on leave in America for ten months), these leaders cared for the different segments of the Wakkerstroom congregation.

At one stage Le Roux returned from Johannesburg to find that the members at Wakkerstroom were divided. The one group wore white garments, the other ordinary clothes. Le Roux was disappointed and said that visions were at the heart of the problems. He disciplined the people without acknowledging the indigenous person's need for the visible, perceptible, external ritual. Le Roux described the emphasis on clothing as a Roman Catholic influence, but the subsequent movement of AICs has proven him wrong.

4.3 Le Roux the Pentecostal Missionary

Le Roux spent more and more of his time in Johannesburg while his wife, as an evangelist, cared for the assembly in Wakkerstroom. She was assisted by the competent leaders trained by her husband and herself. As a result, and over a period of time, Le Roux's influence on, and interest in the Zionist work in Wakkerstroom, faded as a result of his contact with the Pentecostal movement.

While Bryant was on his way to America he met two Americans who were on their way to South Africa. John G Lake and Thomas Hezmalhalch had been associated with Dowie's Zionism but, like B uchler had become disillusioned with Dowie. They visited Seymour's revival at Azusa Street, Los Angeles in 1906 and were baptised with the Spirit and spoke in tongues.

They felt the calling to take this new message to Africa. They arrived here in May 1908. Their aim was to reach black people, but they were 'hijacked' by the Zionist assembly in Johannesburg, a group with largely white members. Members of that assembly heard them preaching and invited them to speak at their own worship service while their leader was away. "So now Pentecost hit South Africa" (Sundkler 1976:52). Lake and Hezmalhalch did not leave again and, in the end, the white Zionist assemblies in Benoni and Krugersdorp also joined the new church when it was created. Sundkler (1976:51) emphasises correctly the continuity between Zion and Pentecost.

Within a few weeks Le Roux visited Johannesburg to meet the two American missionaries. What he saw in their ministry convinced him that the Pentecostal message of baptism in the Spirit with tongues was part of the gospel. He was also baptised in the Spirit and joined the AFM as a member. At first he saw the only difference between Zion and Pentecost as the speaking in tongues. In his own words, "Zion taught immersion and divine healing, but not Pentecost" (Hollenweger 1972:120).

B uchler did not join the new movement, but Le Roux and Archibald Cooper, later leader of the Pentecostal Mission, called the Full Gospel Church of God from 1920 on, did. For Le Roux, joining the new movement meant leaving Zion.

According to Sundkler (1976:53), "... much of the crisis experienced in the following years by African Zionists was directly or indirectly connected with le Roux's departure". The Zionist movement lost its leader, even though several of the resulting groups were influenced by the Pentecostal message, as can be seen by the occurrence of

speaking in tongues. The Zionist groups also emphasised, as a rule, the role played by the Holy Spirit in their liturgy and piety.

Back home Le Roux explained to his members that he supported the Pentecostal movement and had joined it. His members in Wakkerstroom had no problem accepting the new aspect of his preaching and many of them were also baptised in the Spirit. They, too, had no problem in joining the new church. But they would not accept any change to their name. The term 'Zionist' was too precious for them. A compromise was reached in which the work in Wakkerstroom was recognised as 'The Zion Branch of the Apostolic Faith Mission' (Burger 1987:225).

Lake was pleased that Le Roux had joined the church because of Le Roux's link with the work under black people, which was Lake's primary aim in coming to South Africa. Lake even continued the support of five pounds per month to the Le Rouxs, as the Zion Church had done (Minutes of the Executive Council, 17 September 1908).

In February 1910 Le Roux was co-opted as a member of the Executive Council, the executive body of the Workers' Council. The Workers' Council served as the church's synod. In 1913 when Lake returned to America (never to come back in spite of his promises to the contrary), Le Roux was elected as president. In a letter to Lake the Executive Council notified him of the election: "You will be glad to know that what the Lord revealed to you in the Spirit has come to pass and Bro. Le Roux has been chosen President of the Mission" (Minutes of the Executive Council, 13 November 1913).

At the same meeting of the Workers' Council Le Roux was also elected as the superintendent of missionary work. At this stage the AFM followed the same model of missionary work found in Afrikaans churches, where whites supervised any missionary work. 'Missionary' work was defined as the proclamation of the gospel amongst non-whites, while the term 'evangelism' was usually reserved for the same work under whites (Chetty & De Kock 1996:71). Until his retirement in 1943, Le Roux dedicated his life to missionary work, and especially to training black leaders.

Initially blacks and whites attended the first services held by Lake and Hezmalhalch together (these services were held in the Central Tabernacle, Bree Street, Johannesburg). Even earlier than this, in the Zionist movement, whites and blacks were not separated during worship services in Johannesburg. Elijah Molutango described the result of Bryant's work: "There was no fellowship between the whites and the blacks. As for me, I have found the True Love which does not separate

brethren because of difference in the colour of their skins. In all Africa such love has not been known" (Sundkler 1976:40).

As early as 30 July 1909 the minutes of the Executive Council read, "In future, the baptism of Whites, Coloured and Natives shall be separate". Segregation determined the way the AFM would arrange its assemblies in future (Anderson 1996:118).

At this stage some of the best of Le Roux's former Zulu co-workers left the AFM and established their own groups. They felt that Le Roux had dropped them at a critical stage. Daniel Nkonyane and Elijah Mahlangu were the most prominent of these leaders.

At first, Nkonyane took over the leadership in Wakkerstroom. He had worked alongside Le Roux from 1890. He looked for a white to take Le Roux's place. Edgar Mahon, formerly a captain in the Salvation Army, baptised by BÜchler, served for a short while in Wakkerstroom. He bought land for Nkonyane's work at Charlestown, and Nkonyane changed the name of his church to Christian Catholic Apostolic Holy Spirit Church in Zion (with Holy Spirit added to Dowie's name).

The AFM took Nkonyane's ordainment certificate away because he left the church. Other leaders did not leave but stayed loyal to Le Roux; 1911, there were 350 black and 150 white ordained preachers in the AFM.

For Le Roux, president of the AFM from 1915 to 1943, the many schisms in the black work must have been very painful. The reasons for the schisms can be found in several factors: the segregation policy of the AFM, the ambitions of the black leadership, and the indigenisation of the religious experience of black people. Sundkler (1976:43-67) discusses the many splinterings in the Zionist movement.

Hollenweger (1972:102) argues that the AFM left black pastors without any support. "From about 1915 onwards the African pastors of the Apostolic Faith Mission were either left to themselves or made themselves independent. This is something which at the present day is very embarrassing to the leaders of the Apostolic Faith Mission and which they deny, although it is perfectly obvious from their own records." He (Hollenweger 1972:122) even calls the Zionists 'Pentecostal African churches'. F P Möller, then leader of the AFM, is of the opinion that Hollenweger simplifies the matter. "All the Bantu (sic) groups as mentioned in your book are not Pentecostal. It is also a gross mistake to classify all ecstatic African groups under Pentecost. Their ecstasy can be better explained in the light of their heathen background" (Hollenweger 1972:171).

In his study of AICs in the Transkei, Pretorius (1985:9) remarks: "The historical dependence of the Zionist churches upon the early Pentecostal mission activity seems to be indisputable." Pretorius claims that white Zionism is one form of Pentecostalism, and acts as catalyst for the beginning of black Zionism. Transkei Zionism sees itself as genealogically descended from Dowie's Zion City. It emphasises the working of the Holy Spirit in sanctification and healing as central issues.

5 SYNTHESIS

The synthesis is that Le Roux's involvement with the Zionist movement amongst black people and the early Pentecostal movement was determinative for the origin of part of the AICs. "The historical dependence of the Zionist Churches upon the early Pentecostal mission activity, seems to be indisputable" (Pretorius 1985:9).

This is how a conglomeration of groups from both Zion and Pentecostal (or 'Apostolic') background originated. This can be demonstrated clearly in the combination of 'Zion' and 'Apostolic' in the nomenclature of the new groups and churches (Sundkler 1976:56).

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