MISSIONARIES FROM WITHIN: THE CONTRIBUTION OF INDIGENOUS CLERGY TO EVANGELISATION IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

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Abstract

This paper reviews the works devoted to the four-century-long history of indigenous clergy in Southern Africa during the past twenty-five years. The author proposes a periodisation which refers to the political history of the region as well as to the qualitative and quantitative transformation of the indigenous clergy. The first period in the history of the indigenous clergy in Southern Africa coincides with that of the first evangelisation in South-East Africa, from the middle of the 16th century to the beginning of the 19th century, under the Portuguese padroão. During the second period, which covers the 19th century, the European missionaries systematically recruited and trained catechists and lay ministers. The bulk of missionary work lay on their shoulders. The third period, which covers the first half of the 20th century, is that of the growth and spread of indigenous clergy. It is characterised by the multiplication of seminaries. The fourth period, which may be described as that of power sharing, is still in force. In the minority for a long time, the indigenous clergy has become a major force in Christianity in the region.

1 INTRODUCTION

For a long time the history of indigenous clergy has been neglected in missionary historiography. The reasons for this lack of interest are easy to understand. The authors of early works dealing with mission history were nearly all missionaries. Convinced of the superiority of their way of life and of their belief systems they were imbued with an exaggerated view of the civilising influence they were supposed to have on indigenous populations. They usually acknowledged their debt towards the pastoral
agents and catechists who ministered to chapels, schools and mission health centres. The more enlightened amongst them realised that indigenous priests, because of their knowledge of local languages and cultures, were in a better position than they were to convert the masses. Nevertheless, as far as they were concerned, the position they occupied at the very heart of the missionary system was unquestionable. Without missionaries, they believed, the mission would never have existed and if they were to leave, it would immediately disintegrate.

Another reason, stemming from the first, explains the unbalanced outlook of missionary historiography. It was essentially based on the reports which western missionaries sent to the heads of their religious congregations or to the missionary societies funding their work. The chronicles and accounts of journeys which missionaries sent to their religious orders provide another important source of information. Written by Europeans for Europeans, these documents were inevitably biased. Their main aim was to describe the work done by the missionaries and to justify the provision of supplementary funding. Reference to local pastoral helpers was infrequent and almost always anonymous.¹ For those to whom the reports were addressed, the main object was appraisal of the deeds of the men and women who had been sent to the ends of the earth to spread the gospel.

The aim of this article is to review the publications devoted to the history of indigenous clergy in Southern Africa during the past twenty-five years. Important changes have marked the ecclesiastical and cultural context in the so-called Third World. As a result of the secularisation movement affecting western societies, the flow of missionaries towards the countries of the South has gradually dried up. In 1949 the (Roman Catholic) apostolic delegation of Southern Africa (which then included South West Africa, Basutoland and Bechuanaland) consisted of 775 priests, 546 brothers and 4 076 nuns of foreign origin. The Catholic Church, which at the time was pursuing a vigorous expansion campaign, had a working staff of 5 397 expatriates.² In 1997 only 695 foreign priests or brothers and 1 676 sisters remained.³ Most of them were old and their numbers have continued to decrease since that time. In the Protestant churches, which are less dependent on western Christians than the Catholic Church, the contribution of missionaries is even slighter. For example, the London Missionary Society stopped sending missionaries to South Africa at the end of the Second World War. A second factor, this time positive, is the increasingly heard voice of indigenous priests and pastors.
Decolonisation and, in South Africa, the demise of apartheid, facilitated the access of indigenous priests and ministers to higher education. African clergy would henceforth have the opportunity not only to speak for themselves but also to write for themselves. African theology, which demonstrates greater respect for traditional culture, is at present being taught in the majority of theology faculties throughout the continent. Important developments equally affect religious historiography. Many more publications have been devoted to the history of those whom, in this article, we propose calling “the missionaries from within”.

In this article, the term “clergy” is used in its widest sense, designating all the ministers of the churches, be they ordained or not. Catechists, elders and lay preachers are also included. By “indigenous” clergy I mean all pastoral officials born on the African continent, including descendants of white or Indian immigrants. It is a fact that this inclusion is contested. In Southern Africa, questions of identity and belonging are contentious and will probably remain so for a long time. For some opinion makers, only a black person, whose ancestors have always inhabited the African continent, has the right to be described as indigenous. From the point of view of this article, it is important to show how the formation of a clergy of local origin has contributed to the development of African Christianity.

The history of the indigenous clergy in Southern Africa spans four centuries. To fully appreciate this, I propose a periodisation which refers to the political history of the region as well as to the qualitative and quantitative transformation of the indigenous clergy. In retracing this history, I will highlight important events which punctuate the history of the indigenous clergy such as the ordination of the first priests or pastors, the opening of the first novitiates or seminaries, the election or nomination of the first African ecclesiastical leaders and the departure of the last foreign missionaries.

2 THE ORIGINS OF THE INDIGENOUS CLERGY UNDER THE PORTUGUESE PADROÃDO (17TH AND 18TH CENTURIES)

The first period in the history of the indigenous clergy in Southern Africa coincides with that of the first evangelisation in South-East Africa, from the middle of the 16th century to the beginning of the 19th century, under the Portuguese padroado. From the perspective of missionary penetration, this period is marked by failure. Subsequent generations of missionaries hastened to forget the work of their Portuguese
predecessors. But it would be wrong to ignore this period. The first black priests and pastors play an important role in the imagination of their distant descendants of the twenty-first century. The fact that an ordained clergyman could have lived in sub-Saharan Africa so long ago gives credence to the theory that Christianity, far from being a product imported from Europe, is an authentic African religion.

The Jesuits were the first to arrive in the kingdom of Monomotapa, in present-day Zimbabwe, in 1561, but their stay was of short duration. They returned half a century later but did not managed to establish an indigenous clergy. Longer lasting and extending over a far greater area, from the shores of the Indian Ocean to the Zambezi, was the Dominican presence. The names of half a dozen African brothers are known, most of them of princely descent. Trained in Goa in India, the political and ecclesiastical capital of the Portuguese territories in the East, their influence on their country of origin was minor. The best known of these early black Dominican brothers, Miguel de Apresentação, was the son of a deposed king of Monomotapa. He obtained a master's degree in theology in Goa in 1670 and devoted himself to teaching. At least once, he was the head of a priory, Santa Barbara in Goa. During the 18\textsuperscript{th} century, at least a dozen diocesan priests of Indian or coloured origin were active in South-East Africa. Poorly trained and insufficiently motivated, they drew criticism from the Portuguese administration. Several reformers attempted to establish a diocesan seminary but their efforts came to naught.7

3 AMBIGUITIES AND FRUSTRATIONS DURING THE COLONIAL PERIOD (19\textsuperscript{th} CENTURY)

It was only in 1799 that representatives of the London Missionary Society arrived in the Cape to begin the real work of evangelisation in Southern Africa. Apart from the Portuguese missionaries, about who there is some doubt, and a group of Moravian brothers who created a mission amongst the Khoikhoi in Genadendal in 1737, none of the Europeans in the region had taken the trouble to convert the indigenous people to Christianity. At most, they were content with baptising the slaves. The situation changed in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century. With several bitter contests concerning their influence, the Congregational, Methodist, Lutheran, Baptist, Anglican and Catholic missionary societies slowly established missions and schools in the entire area of the present-day Republic of South Africa. The influence of traditional chiefs over the indigenous population was so great that most
first converts were only runaways and outcasts. Initially, the missionaries were relatively independent regarding the colonial power. Later, realising the ineffectiveness of this policy, they called upon the colonial army to defend their mission stations from outside attacks, thereby protecting the material base of their development. Until the end of the first quarter of the 20th century, a tacit agreement of mutual support linked the churches and white power.

During this period, the European missionaries recruited and trained many catechists and lay ministers. The bulk of missionary work lay on their shoulders. It appears that the first African pastoral representative was Jacob Links, the descendant of a tribal chief from Namaqualand, chosen by the missionary Barnabas Shaw as his interpreter before being proposed as a missionary helper at the Methodist conference in 1818. He was martyred in 1825 after having led a single-handed evangelisation campaign amongst the Khoikhoi.8

What we know about Jacob Links comes only from Methodist sources. We have better information on Tiyo Soga, the first black pastor ordained in South Africa, for he left several writings in English and Xhosa. Raised by a Christian mother, he was not circumcised but, on the contrary, was sent by his Presbyterian mentors to Glasgow to receive a Christian education and to be baptised. Several years later, he returned to Glasgow to be ordained and there he married a white woman. Until his death he was intensely involved in pastoral activity. An independent and cultured man, he knew how to keep his distance from the colonial system. In a letter written to his children, he advised them to honour the memory of their mother and to “take [their] place in the world as coloured, not as white men, as Kaffirs, not as Englishmen”. In his eyes, the “height of ingratitude and impiety for any person” was “to be discontented with the complexion which God has given him”.9 Tiyo Soga’s heritage is contested. His colleague and mentor, John Aitken Chalmers, presented him as the perfect product of missionary education. On the contrary, a century later, militants for the Black Consciousness Movement saw him as a prophet in the fight for the freedom of black people.10

In 1865, the American Board of Missions started a school for theological training at Adams, near Durban. The first students, Mguzana Mngadi, Msingaphansi Nyuswa and James Dube were ordained as pastors in 1870. For its part, the Methodist Church established a training centre for teachers and candidates for the ministry in Healdtown near Fort Beaufort
in the Western Cape. The first three black ministers in the colony, Charles Pamla, William Shaw Kama and James Lwana, were ordained in 1871. In the same year, Paul Masiza was ordained deacon in the Anglican Church. He died two years later but his brother, Peter Masiza, followed in his footsteps, becoming the first black Anglican priest in South Africa. At this time, few African pastors were ordained. It was only in the 1880s that this increased. The first two pastors of the Berlin Missionary Society, Martinus Sewuschane and Timotheus Sello, were ordained in 1885. In 1892, it was the turn of the Evangelical Missionary Society of Paris in Basutoland (present-day Lesotho) to ordain two pastors, Carlisle Motebang and Job Moteane.11

The Catholic missionaries were the last to consider ordaining Africans. The first black priest in South Africa, Edward Mnganga, a pupil at the Mariannhill mission close to Durban, was ordained in Rome in 1898. Shortly afterwards, three other young Zulus, Aloys Mncadi, Julius Mbhele and Andreas Ngidi were ordained. However, no other black priest was ordained before 1936.12 Yet from 1845 Pope Gregory XVI had expressed the wish that an indigenous clergy be trained, and pioneers such as Mgr Alois Kobès from Senegal and Cardinal Lavigerie from Central Africa had, for a long time, demonstrated this need. But, according to the majority of Catholic missionaries, Africans lacked the “moral fibre” necessary for the priesthood as had been demonstrated by an inspector of education in Basutoland in 1906.13 In their opinion, it was too soon to place trust in Africans.

This paternalistic, not to say racist, attitude was not the monopoly of the Catholic missionaries. In Protestant missions, the black pastors quickly learnt that their ordination did not give them access to the same working and housing conditions as those granted to European or American missionaries. Their salaries were decidedly lower and their children did not receive the same education opportunities. Even more serious was the fact that they were forbidden to manage all funds. Some of the new recruits persevered and, gradually, received better recognition from their white colleagues. Others threw in the towel and started independent African churches. So it was that, in 1884, Nehemiah Tile left the Methodist Church to found the Thembu Church. In 1890, five years after being ordained, Martinus Sewuschane founded the Bapedi Lutheran Church. In 1892, Mangena Maake Mokone withdrew from the Methodist Church to start the Ethiopian Mission. Some of these new religious movements disappeared rapidly. Others, like the Ethiopian Mission, enjoyed
considerable growth, in spite of mission societies and colonial authorities. The European missionaries’ apparent desire to eradicate traditional African customs, which were seen as immoral and pagan, placed the African priest and pastors in a difficult position. Ancestral practices such as polygamy, the bridewealth (lobola) and circumcision were condemned by mission authorities, sometimes vehemently. Some of the early black pastors supported the churches’ standpoint. Peter Masiza, for example, vigorously condemned the lobola, even going as far as calling on the colonial government to make it illegal. Early in the century, the African clergy of the Anglican diocese of Grahamstown rejected circumcision and indigenous customs. Other black pastors adopted a more ambiguous position. In 1881, James Lwana and Abraham Mabula were reprimanded by the Methodist Church for having accepted a lobola for their daughters. They defended themselves in the eyes of their colleagues by stating that this was a gift and not a payment. Occasionally, the black pastors counter-attacked by defending African customs. At the turn of the century, Isaac Wauchope, a Congregational pastor went as far as to publish a series of articles in the Xhosa language journal Imvo in which he attempted to demonstrate the morality of circumcision and lobola.

4 GROWTH AND SPREAD OF THE INDIGENOUS CLERGY (FIRST HALF OF THE 20TH CENTURY)

The third period, which covers the first half of the 20th century, is that of the growth and spread of the indigenous clergy. Research carried out amongst forty-eight missionary societies showed that in 1928, 80% of the ministers and almost all of the lay ministers were indigenous. Subsequently, this trend continued to grow. Today, almost all those in positions of responsibility in the indigenous churches are South African. One of the most outstanding features of this period is the increase in the number of centres for theological training. Several had been established in the 19th century but their numbers grew dramatically in the 20th century. Founded by the missionaries of the Missionary Society of Glasgow in 1844 for the training of teachers and catechists, Lovedale accepted candidates for the ministry from 1872. Later, the Presbyterians established training centres at Elim in the Transvaal and at Morija in Basutoland. As has been seen, the Congregationalists established a theological school at Adams close to Durban in 1865. In 1881, this institution had eight students. Another centre opened its doors at Tiger
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Kloof in the Northern Cape in 1908. For their part, the Methodists depended upon the institute at Healdtown where a centre for the training of indigenous ministers was created in 1867. This centre was incorporated into the institute for tertiary education, which was established nearby, and which was to become the University of Fort Hare. As for the Anglicans, they founded three theological colleges at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century: St Peter's at Rosettenville close to Johannesburg, St Paul's at Grahamstown and St Bede's at Umtata. The first two were intended for white pastors and the third for black pastors.

The Anglican Church was not the only one to practise segregation in the training of pastors. This tendency was in general use. At the time it seemed inconceivable that whites and blacks could be trained in the same place. In all the churches, whites destined for the ministry were trained either in Europe or the United States or in South Africa in theology faculties which were de facto reserved for whites. With a few exceptions, the segregation of theological training was maintained up until 1980.

To complete this overview of the theological centres for the training of Protestants, mention must be made of the Lutheran college at Rorke's Drift at Dundee in Natal which moved to Mapumulo in 1962. The independent African churches which experienced considerable growth in the 20th century did not, generally speaking, have the means to provide any real theological training for their pastors.

From a Catholic standpoint, there was a comparable phenomenon but this changed in time. In 1950, more than 80% of priests were foreigners. The training of indigenous clergy began only in 1922, under the auspices of the sole Apostolic curacy at Mariannhill, with the establishment of the Daughters of Saint Francis of Assisi, a female African congregation, and the following year with that of the Franciscan brothers, its male equivalent. In 1925, the missionaries at Mariannhill opened a diocesan seminary at Mariathal near Ixopo which slowly accepted candidates from other dioceses. All were black. For white candidates who were not trained abroad, a similar institution was opened at Aliwal North in the Eastern Cape. It was only in 1947 that a true major seminary, the St John Vianney Seminary, opened its doors in Pretoria at the express request of the Apostolic delegate. Meanwhile, St Peter's Seminary, the seminary for
blacks, had grown and had moved to Hammanskraal, north of Pretoria, in 1960.19

Another important characteristic of the third period in the history of the indigenous clergy in Southern Africa is the involvement of the African priests and pastors in political life. In a context which was strongly marked by racial prejudice, the majority of Africans were forbidden access to education. The missionary schools, particularly at Lovedale and Healdtown were the only ones to offer training to a black elite. The ministers of religion were those best placed to give voice to the aspirations and fears of the African population. In addition, they played an important role in the constitution of the South African Native National Congress (SANNC) – which would become the African National Congress (ANC) several years later – at the congress held in Bloemfontein in 1912. Significantly, the meeting opened with the singing of a hymn composed by Tiyo Soga, the first ordained black minister in South Africa: “Fulfil your promise, God of truth”. John Dube, a Congregational pastor, was elected president. Amongst the ministers of religion who held high posts in the movement were James Calata, the president of the ANC in the Cape, and Albert Luthuli, a deacon in the Congregational Church who was president of the ANC in the 1960s. In 1926, Petros Lamula, a minister in the Norwegian Lutheran Church, author of several books in Zulu and vice-president of the Natal African Congress was excommunicated from his church for political activities. He subsequently founded the United Native National Church of Christ.21

5 TOWARDS POWER SHARING (SECOND HALF OF THE 20th CENTURY)

The fourth period, which may be described as that of power sharing, is still in force. Before the Second World War, the only way in which a black priest or pastor could rise to a position of ecclesiastical power was to leave his church and found an independent African church. Since 1950, the possibility of obtaining independence for a large number of African states obliged many ecclesiastical leaders to consider the transfer of power within their institutions. In 1953, Emmanuel 'Mabathoana was consecrated bishop of Leribe in Basutoland. The following year, Bonaventure Dlamini became bishop of Umzimkulu, a diocese of limited territory and resources which the Apostolic delegate had encouraged the
South African bishops to create so as to justify the appointment of a black bishop. The experiment failed and Dlamini resigned in 1960. The process of appointing black bishops continued but even more slowly. Similar reluctance was to be found in the Anglican Church. A black suffragan bishop, Alpheus Zulu, was appointed in 1960 but it was not until 1976 that another black priest, Desmond Tutu, was ordained bishop, this time in Lesotho. He was elected bishop of Johannesburg in 1985 and archbishop of Cape Town the following year. In 1963 Leonard Nangolo Auala became the first black Lutheran bishop in South West Africa. The same year, Seth Mokitimi was elected president of the Methodist Conference of Southern Africa. This was merely a symbolic gesture as the position was an honorary one and was conferred for one year only. It was a decade later that another black acceded to the same position. Mention must also be made of the appointment of Mother Rocha Mushonga as head of the Little Children of the Virgin Mary in 1965. This was the first time that an African woman was appointed head of a religious congregation in Southern Africa.22

In a climate dominated by the fight against apartheid and the growth of the Black Consciousness Movement, the procrastinations of ecclesiastical leaders provoked bitter debates in the churches, the more so as parishes and seminaries continued to be separated on racial grounds. In several churches, the more militant priests and pastors formed pressure groups.23 “Despite the fact of being ordained”, said the signatories of the *Black priests manifesto* published in the press in 1970, “we are only choir boys wearing priests' habits”. In this context, the election of Desmond Tutu as head of the South African Council of Churches in 1978, and the appointment of Smangaliso Mkhatshwa, one of the signatories of the *Black priests manifesto* as secretary general of the Southern African Catholic Bishops’ Conference in 1980, represented a remarkable advance.

It was during this period that desegregation in the training of clergy took place. The movement began at the end of the 1950s when, one by one, the theological training centres which had been established during the colonial period – Adams College, Tiger Kloof, Rosettenville and Modderpoort – were obliged to close their doors as a result of the enforcement of the Group Areas Act. This situation forced the affected churches, the Anglican Church, the Methodist Church, the Presbyterian Church and the Congregational Church to unite. In 1963 they jointly opened, on a property belonging to the Presbyterian Church close to the
University of Fort Hare, the Federal Theological Seminary of Southern Africa, a multiracial seminary which would train generations of black, coloured and sometimes white students in an ecumenical and progressive spirit. It was there that future ecclesiastical leaders such as Desmond Tutu and Stanley Mogoba were offered the opportunity, for the first time, to teach. But for the government in Pretoria, this place of free speech, where teachers and black and white students rubbed shoulders without any barriers, was a thorn in the flesh. Under the pretext of needing to expand the neighbouring University of Fort Hare, the state expropriated the seminary in 1974. After having wandered from place to place, it reopened its doors at Imbali, near Pietermaritzburg in 1979. Competition with other institutions of tertiary learning, which were open to black students from that date, forced it to close down in 1993.²⁴

The Catholic Church only began to offer training to its diocesan priests at a unified institution, on a non-racial basis, in 1981: St Peter’s, the former seminary for blacks, was limited to the study of philosophy and St John Vianney, the former seminary for whites, offered only theological studies. The scholasticate of the Oblates of Mary the Immaculate at Cedara in Natal, which was opened to all races when it was founded in the 1940s, once again became multiracial in the 1970s.²⁵

6 CONCLUSION

We have followed the road taken since the ordination of the first black priest in Southern Africa in the early years of the 17th century. In the minority for a long time, the indigenous clergy has become a major force in Christianity in the region. Countless priests and pastors, black, coloured or Indian, at present occupy positions of responsibility in their churches. Another important development - whose history still needs to be written – is the ordination of women in Protestant churches. It has not been unusual in the past ten years to see women ministers chosen or elected to lead their churches. In Southern Africa, as elsewhere in the world, gender has become a major issue in the life of the churches.
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2. The Catholic Church and Southern Africa (Cape Town, Catholic Archdiocese of Cape Town, 1951), 103.


17. P Denis (ed.), The making of an indigenous clergy, 199.


P Denis (ed.), The making of an indigenous clergy, 198; Mandy Goedhals, “James Calata, the African Congress and the Anglican Church”, in Denis, P (ed.), Orality, memory and the past, 162-175.

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