

**Black critics of Lutheran Mission in Zululand and Natal
in the 1950s, with particular emphasis
on socio-political issues**

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Abstract

A survey in 1957 initiated by the Lutheran Missionary, Helge Fosseus, confirmed that Africans were highly critical of the missionaries, describing them as betrayers supporting the politics of the white oppressors. However, the missionaries perceived themselves as friends of the Africans; they condemned apartheid in internal conferences and contexts during the 1950s, although not in public. As a result, their condemnation of apartheid never reached the Africans. The sharp criticism of the missionaries regarding their lack of political involvement for the betterment of the Africans did not have any immediate effect on their practice as the first Lutheran public protest against apartheid took place as many as five years later, in 1962.

Introduction

The most common form of criticism offered against missionaries is that they do not practice Christianity themselves; therefore, what they teach is a fake, invented in order to help the whites when they exploit the Africans ... Christianity is either a fake or if not so, it is not meant for Africans at all. How can these people [missionaries] speak so nobly and behave so shamefully?

One of Philippe Denis' research interests are questions related to black clergy under colonialism and apartheid. The interest for this subject has materialised in several publications.¹ The topic of this article is related to this

¹ Cf. for example Philippe Denis (ed.), *The Making of an Indigenous Clergy in Southern Africa*. Proceedings of the International Conference held at the University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, 23-25 October 1995 (Pietermaritzburg, Cluster Publications, 1995); *idem* with Thulani Mlotshwa and George Mukuka, *The Casspir and the Cross. Voices of Black Clergy in the Natal Midlands* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 1999); *idem* (ed.), *Orality, Memory and the Past. Listening to the Voices of Black Clergy under Colonialism and Apartheid* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2000).

particular area of Denis' research interest as it explores black critics of the Lutheran Mission in Zululand and Natal in the 1950s.

The quotation above is taken from a document authored by SA Mbatha, a Zulu pastor in the Lutheran Church, in 1957.² The document was a reply to a question posed by a Swedish missionary, pastor Helge Fosseus. According to the missionary, it had recently become obvious that the attitude toward the church and mission among people in general had changed from a positive and sympathetic position toward a more hostile and critical one. According to Fosseus, in order for the church and mission to respond adequately to the situation, more accurate knowledge about common peoples' opinions and attitudes toward Christianity was needed. Mbatha's reply is relatively extensive – eight closely written pages, in which he, according to its self-presentation, gives an account of common Africans' major obstacles to adopting Christianity and mission.

This document indeed constitutes a unique source to the history of the Lutheran Mission in Zululand and Natal. A recurring challenge in studies of the history of mission has been – and remains – the very limited access to written sources produced by those who were objects of the mission work. Therefore, if attempting to reconstruct the “other's” voice, perspective and views, one has to rely largely on the missionaries' representations and try to read between the lines. As such, Mbatha's report is a valuable source because it provides first-hand information and a voice regarding how the objects of the Lutheran Mission perceived the missionaries and the churches they had established.

The purpose of this article is threefold. First, it will explore the main point in people's criticism of the missionaries and the churches they established. Second, it will discuss possible reasons why the criticism occurred. Finally, at the end of the article, it will address the question regarding to what extent the voices of Africans had any impact on the attitude and practice of the missionaries.

With a view to readers who are not familiar with the history of the Lutheran Mission in South Africa in general, and the Scandinavian mission in particular, a brief historical survey will be provided. When discussing the political stand of the Lutheran missionaries and their response to apartheid, primarily the Norwegians are used as an example.

² I came across the document in a box that was not catalogued in the archives of The Evangelical Lutheran Church in South Africa, Umpumulo.

Brief history of Lutheran Mission in South Africa and the emergence of a Lutheran Church

The first Lutheran congregations in Southern Africa were established by German settlers in the eighteenth century.³ These were followed by congregations established by Scandinavian emigrants in the subsequent century, such as St Olav, the settler church in Durban. Starting in the mid-nineteenth century, a number of European and American Lutheran missionaries established work in the country, mainly in Natal and the Transvaal. The major missions that worked in the region were the Norwegian Mission Society, the Schreuder Mission (taken over by the Americans in 1927), the Berlin Missionary Society, the Hermannsburg Mission Society, and the Church of Swedish Mission. The different mission societies operated relatively independently from both the established white settler churches and each other in the initial period of mission work. As a result, when black Africans converted to Christianity, particular “national” mission churches emerged. Over the years, a patchwork of “Norwegian”, “Swedish”, “Germantown”, and “American” black congregations sprang up across South Africa, particularly in Natal/Zululand, which had the densest concentration of Lutheran missionaries in the country. In other words, separate mission churches were established that did not become a part of the existing white settler churches.

The practices of the mission society in this area was confusingly similar to the practices of the white DRC (Nederduitse Geformeerde Kerk), which did not incorporate black converts into the mother church, but instead established a “daughter church” for each race.⁴ The result was a fragmented Lutheran church landscape split into a number of black mission churches and white – mostly German – settler churches. The missionaries worked among and were members of the black churches, and close connections emerged between the missionaries and their descendants and the white settler churches. The missionaries often served as pastors in the settler churches, whether this service was funded by the respective settler churches or was a part of the cooperation between the mission societies and the settler

³ For introductions to the history of Lutheran Mission in South Africa, see Berit Hagen Agøy, *Den tvetydige protesten. Norske misjonærer, kirker og apartheid i Sør-Afrika, 1948-ca 1970* (Master thesis, University of Oslo, 1987), 46-87; *idem*, “Norske misjonærer, lutherske kirker og apartheid i Sør-Afrika, 1948-63,” *Historisk Tidsskrift* 72 (1993): 145-80; Georg Scriba and Gunnar Lislerud, “Lutheran Missions and Churches in South Africa,” in *Christianity in South Africa: A Political, Social and Cultural History*, eds. Richard Elphick and Rodney Davenport (Cape Town: David Philip, 1997) 173-94; Gunnar Lislerud, “Luthersk kirkedannelse i Sør-Afrika” *Norsk Tidsskrift for Misjon* 52 (1998): 81-96; Helge Fosseus, *Mission blir kyrka. Luthersk kyrkobilgning i södra Afrika 1957-1961* (Stocholm: Verbum, 1974).

⁴ Agøy (1993): 149.

churches.⁵ Missionaries and retired missionaries, who in many cases settled in South Africa, and their descendants constituted important elements within the network of white settlers. If this was true for the Scandinavian missionaries, it was even more so for the Germans. Extensive and close connections existed between the Germans and the German settler churches and the networks associated with them. Thus, the missionaries had a double social belonging, being both members of the black churches and parts of white settler networks.⁶

As segregation increased in the 1930s and the National Party came to power in 1948, and as social interaction decreased between blacks and whites in general, fewer social interactions occurred between the missionaries and the black Africans. An important consequence of this was that the missionaries became increasingly influenced by the white discourse on race and how the “race problem” should be solved.

The aim of the missionaries was to build indigenous and independent churches. As a part of the process of realising this goal, the various missionary organisations established their respective synods or Zulu churches. BM established a synod in 1911, while the CSM and Norwegian Mission Society (NMS) established their synods in 1926 and 1929, respectively.⁷ However, it is important to emphasise that these synods or churches were not autonomous. Admittedly, the number of black clergy, catechists, and evangelists were increasing, and church meetings were established in which the blacks could discuss issues that concerned them. Yet it was the missionaries who held the leading positions and had the power to define what should be regarded as correct perceptions in everything from theological and moral questions to the redeployment of personnel and financial transactions.

The main reasons the missionaries did not believe that it was advisable for the Zulus to take over leadership of the churches was that they were not spiritually mature and were not financially self-supporting. The missionaries had a distinctly paternalistic management style in which they perceived themselves as teachers and the Zulus as pupils.⁸ In the 1920s several black pastors and other church members were of the opinion that the process of independence was too slow, and they would no longer accept the submissive position they had in relation to the missionaries. They then broke with the white leadership of the mission churches and started or joined existing African churches. Dissatisfaction with white leadership and guardianship was

⁵ Scriba and Lislerud (1997) 177-8; Agøy (1987) 52-5.

⁶ Agøy (1987): 54-5; Hanna Mellemsether, *Misjonærer, settlersamfunn og afrikansk opposisjon: Striden om selvstendiggjøring i den norske Zulukirken, Sør-Afrika ca. 1920-1930* (Norges teknisk-naturvitenskapelig universitet, Trondheim, 2001) 89-116.

⁷ Mellemsether (2001): 308.

⁸ Agøy (1993): 163; 172.

one of the leading forces in the so-called Ethiopian movement.⁹ As we shall see, the question about the missionaries' attitudes and practices in relation to black ministers and churches was one of the central themes in Lamula's criticism of the Norwegian mission in the 1920s.

The process of independence of the mission churches continued slowly. Partly as a result of pressure from black co-workers and partly as a result of changing attitudes, especially among a new generation of missionaries who arrived in the country after World War II, the Norwegian Zulu church became independent in 1954, becoming the first of the mission churches that became formally independent. Later in the 1950s, the other missionary churches gained their independence. It is worth noting that HM, which was the largest Lutheran Mission in Zululand and Natal, had not established a synod at all before the synod that was established in 1958 and which in fact never became independent in relation to the mission.¹⁰

The other mission churches also experienced a gradual transition to genuine autonomy. For example, although the Norwegian Zulu Church became independent in 1954, the missionaries still held great influence and power. Since they continued as parish pastors, they could hold key positions at both local and central levels of the church. The constitution stated that NMS should take part in the leadership of the church as long as the organisation contributed financially: "As long as the Norwegian Mission Society [NMS] labours in this country, the Superintendent of the Mission continues to have a right to full supervision and the supreme leadership also of the Zulu Church."¹¹ The missionary influence was not least brought on when the synod elected superintendent Follesø as president. The missionaries wanted a black leader, but the Zulus themselves believed that they were not yet mature enough to hold the top leadership in the church. Agøy explains this attitude by arguing that "no 'mental decolonisation' had taken place".¹² The missionaries had to a limited extent encouraged the Zulus to make their own decisions while the Zulus had been taught to rely more on the white missionaries than on themselves. As late as 1963, the missionary Frøyse described the Zulus in the following way: "They have looked up to us. They count us as superior to them – which we know better than them – they want to learn from us. They look at us missionaries as their spiritual parents, and

⁹ Bent Sundkler, *Bantu Prophets in South Africa* (Forlag: London, 1961); Mellemsether (2001): 49-53. Whether it was the political or religious motives that were the driving forces in the Ethiopian movement is still being questioned. See, e.g., Jean and John Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution. The Dialectics of Modernity on a South African Frontier* (Vol. 2, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997) 102-104; Shula Marks, *Reluctant Rebellion. The 1906-8 Disturbances in Natal* (Oxford: Clarendonpress, 1970) 60.

¹⁰ Fosseus (1974): 47.

¹¹ Constitution of The Lutheran Zulu Church established by the Norwegian Mission Society, Mission Archives (MA), Stavanger, SA-A 183-4.

¹² Agøy (1993): 152. My translation.

call us Baba and Mama”.¹³ It seems that, by and large, the relationship between the missionaries and the Zulus continued as before in the first few years after the Norwegian Zulu church gained its formal independence.

Although several mission synods had become formally independent at the time Fosseus took the initiative to find out more about the causes of the increasing criticism of the church and mission, the missionaries still had great influence and power in the church, through both formal structures and regulations, and not least through their informal position as masters, thereby possessing the power of definition.

Reverend Mbatha’s reply to Fosseus

Mbatha’s reply was written in 1957 in a response to a questionnaire the Swedish pastor Fosseus had sent to his black colleagues. Fosseus encouraged respondents to ask common Africans, including those who were not members of the mission churches, about their objections and criticism of mission and Christianity. It was a matter of fact, according to Fosseus, that Africans had become more critical and negative toward Christianity, the church, and the missions in the past ten to fifteen years. In the letter to his African colleagues, he noted some features that might explain this development. Among other things, he points out that the church had failed to provide “any clear guidance towards a sound Christian patriotism,” that the church had not developed a theology that sufficiently related to the African social and political conditions, and that the church did not represent an alternative to the segregated society in general as even in the churches there was little interaction across races.

Despite the fact that he had his assumptions about the causes of the growing opposition to Christianity, Fosseus obviously understood that it was necessary to get a broader picture. His investigation aimed to expand knowledge and understanding of how Africans perceived the mission, the church, and Christianity, then apply this information to point out “how the task to christianise Africa should be carried out”. His questionnaire consisted of ten questions and was accompanied by a letter to his colleagues in which he emphasised that the intention was not for them to ask people exactly these questions, but to use them as examples of current issues and questions.

We do not know how many people responded to Fosseus’ initiative. In a summary of the survey that was probably intended for the missionaries, he explained that he wanted to “forward you some of the answers”. The fact that he here only quoted from Mbatha’s response, suggests that the response was rather limited. Perhaps no one other than Mbatha responded. There could be several reasons why other co-workers in the mission did not answer. One

¹³ Missionary Conference (MC) (1963): 34-5, MA, Stavanger. My translation.

may be that the black employees, out of respect for the missionaries, dared not express criticism of them. It is certainly striking that the only reply found – and the one upon which Fosseus relies in his presentation of the survey – came from Mbatha, who was in fact characterised by both a former missionary and retired Zulu pastors as an outspoken and radical priest who stood close to the people.¹⁴

Although Mbatha's reply was detailed, how representative were the points of view he expressed in terms of African peoples' attitudes to the mission, the church and Christianity? It is not possible to give a definitive answer to this question, yet several indications suggest that what he wrote was largely representative. First, the overall profile of Mbatha's reply went, as we soon shall see, in the same direction as those features that Fosseus mentioned in his brief analysis of the situation in the letter he sent to his co-workers. Second, Mbatha was a pastor who had good knowledge of the mission and, as previously mentioned, lived close to the people. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that he was aware of the prevailing currents of the people. Third, Fosseus, who knew Mbatha well, did not question or discuss the issue of representativeness. On the contrary, he rendered his and no other reply in the summary of the survey.

African criticism of the missionaries

A prevalent element in Mbatha's reply is that the missionaries had not done anything to improve the African people's socioeconomic conditions. On the contrary, he criticised them for being in alliance with the white rulers and oppressors. The missionaries were perceived as an extended arm of the colonists. "The Missionary came first. Then followed the traders to buy and sell. Last but not least came soldiers with machine guns to kill, conquer, divide, and rule." One might discuss how accurate this understanding of history is, but in this context it is not necessary to address this question. What matters is that missionaries were associated with colonial actors who had exploited and plundered the country for riches. One gets the impression that people thought that the missionaries' arrival in the country was part of a strategy of the whites in power to subjugate the country. According to Mbatha, people said straight away that "missionaries and Christianity are means by which whites lulled Africans and made them submissive while they deprive them of their country and their riches."

Given that missionaries were linked so closely to the colonial powers, it is not strange that people perceived African pastors and evangelists as betrayers who were "paid for selling their brethren." According to Mbatha,

¹⁴ Both the retired Zulu pastor, R. E. Nxele and the retired missionary A.I. Berglund emphasized this fact in interviews with the author respectively in Durban (November 2008) and in Uppsala (October 2010).

people constantly asked “What have ministers and Christianity done to improve our social condition? What are they saying to fight the colour bar?” The notion that pastors and churches in general were not concerned with people’s social conditions and that they were passive in the race question seemed to be intended as a confirmation that the church and mission silently accepted the increasing repression and discrimination against the black Africans. In other words, the criticism of the church and the mission was very harsh at this point.

We should note that Mbatha seems to share this view. He further commented that not only “outsiders” (i.e., those who are not members of the churches and observe from a distance), but also “insiders” regarded the church as passive in social and political issues. It is obvious, he says, that “the Christian Church has not felt that Christianity is concerned with the whole of life”. The work of the Church focused exclusively on people’s spiritual needs, “whereas souls in this world live in bodies which must cared for socially, politically and economically”. Such factors, according to Mbatha, led to a very tense attitude toward the church and Christianity. “The hatred with which the people hate it now is alarming.”

The idea that Africans’ strongest criticism of the church and the missionaries related to the lack of interest in their social and political conditions was confirmed when Mbatha answered the question in Fosseus’ questionnaire about what was the most common criticism of the missionaries. He stated that the missionaries themselves did not live by the Christianity they preached. Thus, Africans drew the conclusion that “what they teach is fake, invented in order to help the whites when they exploit the Africans”. In other words, Africans accused the missionaries of preaching a fake word that they have constructed to function as an instrument for the white oppressors. The main cause for this criticism was that their beliefs and practices did not contribute to the fight to improve Africans’ social and political conditions. Rather, the Christianity of the missionaries was an instrument for maintaining the discrimination and exploitation of blacks.

Another factor affirming this understanding is the fact that the missionaries turned down politically conscious and active pastors. Mbatha noted that he himself did not know many politically conscious and active members of the mission churches. The few he knew had been instructed by the missionaries to stop such a worldly activity. If they did not follow this instruction, they were expelled from the church or had to leave their position as a pastor. Mbatha referred to one specific case, in which BG Mpanza was removed from his position as teacher at the training seminar for pastors at Umpumulo. As a result, according to Mbatha, the school lost one of its best teachers. However, he did not mention the most famous example from the field of the Norwegian mission: Petrus Lamula (more on the Lamula case below). It is not difficult to imagine that, seen from an African perspective,

the reprisals and obliterating of politically conscious pastors who worked to improve the blacks' social and political conditions were regarded as actions in which the missionaries demonstrated their desire to maintain the political status quo.

Another reason why Africans criticised the missionaries related to the same issue: The latter had very little social interaction with the former. According to Mbatha, the "pagans" said that "you go to church together, pray together and glorify God together, but as soon as you leave the church house you are strangers and foreigners to one another". Missionaries' limited social interaction with Africans led the latter to draw the conclusion that Christianity "is either a fake or, if not so, it is not meant for Africans at all". However, people from outside the Christian ranks were not the only ones to criticise the missionaries on their limited social interaction with blacks. The same criticism also emerged among Christians. One man observed a change of attitude toward Africans among the missionaries. A few decades earlier, missionaries had visited the huts, ate, sat and slept on the floor mats, and acted as "loving fathers". He drew a picture of missionaries who sought out the Africans in their homes and spent time with them. This was apparently interpreted as recognition and appreciation of Africans as human beings. However, according to this man, this approach changed radically: "Now they hardly shake hands with me" and spend all their time with "our oppressor." He claimed that missionaries only remembered Africans on Sundays, when they come to collect money. The rest of the time they spent in their network of other whites: "From Monday to Saturday our so-called fellow Christians discuss us and call us the Kaffir problem", without wanting to divulge the contents of the discussions. On Sundays the missionaries attend, together with other whites, churches that black Africans may not enter (ie, white Lutheran settler churches). Thus, missionaries were criticised for identifying with the white "oppressors". The anonymous man Mbatha quoted concluded that "we must either do away with the whites in our churches or do away with Christianity itself". To further strengthen this conclusion, he referred to the fact that descendants of missionaries held prominent positions in the Native Affairs Department and served as the "greatest advisors of oppressors". In an interview with the author of this article, Bishop Emeritus SP Zulu touched on this issue.¹⁵ He said that it was a tremendous stumbling block to the black Christians that the descendants of German missionaries had key positions in the apartheid administration. The main point of criticism on this point is that the missionaries identified with the values and attitudes of the white population in general regarding the issue of colour bar and the politics of apartheid.

¹⁵ Interview in his home in Zululand, November 2008.

The prevailing content of the criticism of the missionaries and the churches they had established was that they stood on the white oppressors' side in racial politics. Another feature in the criticism of the missionaries, and which ought to be read to a certain degree in light of the same issues, was that black ministers were discriminated against in relation to their white counterparts in terms of salary, cars, houses, and other working conditions. According to Mbatha, people said, "they give you a small salary and you may have to cycle up and down steep hills, whereas your predecessors owned beautiful cars. Why don't they give you a better salary and a car or at least a motor cycle?" Mbatha asserted that this differential treatment of black pastors and missionaries is the issue that most often gives rise to tension between local churches and missionaries. In the current context of racial segregation and apartheid, it is not difficult to imagine that different working conditions and salaries could be regarded as the missionaries practicing a form of apartheid in the churches. Approximately ten years later, the Norwegian missionary Reverend Peter Kørner shared this understanding.¹⁶ Yet Mbatha said he rebuked such criticism and defended the missionaries. He asserted that, instead of complaining, they should be grateful that people far away, in Sweden and Norway, offer so much money for salaries and other things the Zulus themselves should have done. However, it does not seem that Mbatha gained support for his argument. Indeed, he quoted one man, who replied "you always defend them".

Another factor that caused tensions between African Christians and missionaries was the paternalistic attitude. Mbatha pointed out that, under many white missionaries, no ecclesiastical democracy had developed: "The White *umfundisi* (missionary pastor and leader of the congregation) has been the dictator and law of the parish and congregation." Black pastors were treated as servant boys for the missionaries. The church council had no real influence, and any open criticism of the missionaries was ignored. Those who opposed the paternalism of the missionaries repeatedly asked, according to Mbatha, "Are we going to remain the white men's boys for the rest of our lives?" Several members lost their patience, left the mission churches, and joined independent African churches. Mbatha pointed out that most leaders of these churches were men who had left the mission churches in protest of what they perceived as undemocratic and paternalistic leadership.

To summarise, Mbatha's reply reflects that Africans in the 1950s were very critical of the Lutheran Mission. The pivotal point of the criticism was that, despite their noble words, the practice of the missionaries suggested that they accepted discrimination and the politics of apartheid. They had not done anything to improve blacks' social and political conditions; what was perceived as silence about race policy was interpreted as support of a political

¹⁶ *Norsk Misjonstidene* 30 (1971): 14; MC (1971): 36.

status quo. The fact that they spent much of their time together with other whites combined with their paternalistic attitude was taken as evidence that they did not detract from the position of other whites in the race issue.

What caused the harsh criticism of the missionaries?

The core of the criticism against the missionaries was that they did not side with the blacks in the race issue and did not engage in or provide support to social or political activity that aimed to improve the blacks' civil rights. The question that naturally arises is what is the root of the criticism? Of course, the missionaries perceived themselves not as enemies of Africans, but as friends and benefactors.¹⁷ Despite everything, they ran a lot of schools and several hospitals that benefited Africans. The Norwegian missionaries were of the opinion that, by breaking apartheid laws that intended to limit social interaction between blacks and whites, they carried out a silent protest against apartheid and demonstrated thus treated blacks with respect and dignity. Without a doubt, their self-understanding was that they took sides with the blacks and worked for their interests.

Notwithstanding this self-understanding, a highly critical attitude toward the missionaries in Zululand evolved in the 1950s. What was the origin and source of this criticism? The answer to this question is complex, and there were many factors that come into play. We have already touched on some of them – namely, the missionaries' paternalistic attitude and the fact that they spent much of their time in their white network. As apartheid caused society to become increasingly segregated, increasing the polarisation between whites and blacks, the latter got the impression that the missionaries identified with the white oppressors. The missionaries themselves felt that, when tensions arose between them and the black Christians, Africans tended "to see the white man in him [the missionary]".¹⁸ The pivotal point in the criticism of the missionaries was, as already mentioned, their lack of social and political commitment to fight segregation and improve the African peoples' living conditions. Although factors came into play and were mutually related to each other, we must focus primarily on the missionaries' attitudes and practices in this matter. Space permits no detailed examination of this complex subject; on the contrary, only the main lines can be drawn.

One can trace differences among the Lutheran missionary organisations in terms of their political affiliation. As a rule, the Scandinavian missionaries identified themselves with the so-called liberal whites and with the English-speaking churches. The Lutheran settlers and the German missionaries were closer to the Boers and the Nationalist Party.¹⁹ Despite these

¹⁷ MC (1949), Report for Imfulwe, MA, Stavanger, SA-A 99-16. See also Agøy (1987): 257-61.

¹⁸ Jan Egils Ofstad, *Vi besøker Sør-Afrika* (Stavanger: Misjonsselskapets forlag, 1959) 45.

¹⁹ Agøy (1993): 151.

differences, from the beginning of the twentieth century and until the period in focus here (ie, 1950s), they all advocated the political ethos that one should not mix church and policy. An expression of this ethos is that the missionaries prohibited black ministers from being involved in politics. The political ethos of the missionaries, which had a significant impact on the theological thinking of the churches, was grounded in the Lutheran teaching of the “two kingdoms”: the idea that God rules the world through two governments, one heavenly and one earthly. This teaching asserts that the church, including missions, should as a rule not be mixed up in political activities. God established the secular authorities to take care of worldly politics, and Christians should obey them. However, when authorities instruct their citizens to sin and practice politics that clearly contradict fundamental Christian principles, it is the duty of the Church to speak out and criticise the secular authorities. By and large, until the end of the 1960s, the Lutheran missionaries in South Africa were in favour of a conservative interpretation of the teaching of the two kingdoms in which they underscored the apolitical role of the Church.²⁰

This view of the relationship between religion and politics is reflected in the so-called missionary instruction that all NMS missionaries were obliged to keep. The revised edition from 1924, which remained in effect until 1963, stated: “The missionaries must not engage in politics and other controversies of the actual country.” The primary task of the missionaries was to “establish, build up and spread the kingdom of God by preaching the Word, the administration of the sacraments, and by education and charity work”.²¹ Another condition of the instruction about mission and politics was the fact that the missionaries were foreigners and guests; as guests, they should be reluctant to engage in internal political matters. The missionaries evaluated political regimes primarily on the grounds of whether they accepted the Christian mission or not. If they allowed it, they were positively evaluated. The premise for such an assessment was that, for the mission, the overall perspective was that the gospel should be preached to all nations; to realise this vision, the government had to accept mission work in the country.²²

In the 1920s, the Zulu Pastor Petrus Lamula challenged the missionaries’ understanding of the relationship between politics and religion.²³ Lamula was regarded as the most promising of the black pastors in the field

²⁰ See the discussion in Agøy (1987): 37-9.

²¹ Agøy (1993): 157-8.

²² Agøy (1993): 158.

²³ Til konflikten mellom NMS og Petrus Lamula, se Paul La Hausse de Lalouvière, *Restless Identities. Signatures of Nationalism, Zulu Ethnicity and History in the Lives of Petros Lamula and Lymon Maling* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 2000) 124-154; Mellemsether (2001): 81-247; *idem*, “Race and Religion in the Norwegian Mission Discourse in South Africa in the 1920s,” *Swedish Missiological Themes* 91 (2003): 33-64.

of NMS and was praised by the missionaries for his good work and character. In Durban, he came under the influence of nationalistic and political movements, becoming an agent in these currents. He became a sharp critic of the white man's treatment of the blacks, including the missionaries' attitude toward and treatment of the black churches. Lamula was not the only pastor in the Norwegian Zulu church who directed this kind of criticism, but was the sharpest and the most outspoken one. When he served as a pastor in Durban in the 1920s, he became engaged in various forms of political activity. Among other things, he publicly criticised the missionaries for not being concerned with the Zulu's material conditions and for their silence about the injustice to which the blacks were subjected:

... because they will lose their positions and plots of land next to the 'mission reserves'. Pilate was also afraid of losing his job and he said to the Jews, 'crucify Him'. Therefore, what are the white church minister saying about our plight? Most of them are not bold enough to comment about this situation ... you know that I am a member of this white church, which is more afraid of the government than of God.²⁴

Lamula challenged the missionaries for their failure to practice what they teach. Here we clearly see a line to the criticism of the missionaries in the 1950s. They were also accused of not practicing Christianity. "If people read [the Lord's book] correctly they will see differently in years to come ... it is surprising that a race as well educated as the white is the one that oversteps the limits of the Bible."²⁵ Hanna Mellemsether aptly concluded that:

Clearly Lamula had learnt the gospel of freedom and equality from the missionaries, but unlike them he wanted equality also in the material world. He agitated for equal pay for blacks and whites; and for economic and material betterment of Africans. And he accused the missionaries of betraying their religion when they put themselves outside the social reality of the black communities they worked in.²⁶

Lamula became involved in various political organisations and activities that the missionaries decided conflicted with his position as a minister. They sought to handle him like they had handled difficult co-workers in the mission: The missionary conference made a decision to move him to another area. However, Lamula refused to be moved to another place. Instead, he

²⁴ Lamula in *Ilanga Lase Natal* 04/30/1926, according to Mellemsether (2003): 40.

²⁵ Lamula, *UzulukaMalandela*, 136-7, according to la Hausse (1992): 144.

²⁶ Mellemsether (2003): 40.

engaged in a sharp confrontation with the missionaries, broke with the NMS, and established a new African church that, in certain areas, was perceived as a challenging competitor to the mission work. For the missionaries, Lamula was seen as “a sign of warning”.²⁷ It did not make matters better for them that the Home Board accused them of not having the right attitude toward their black colleagues and members of the congregations. The Lamula case and the criticism from Norway caused the missionaries to discuss and reflect on their own role in an increasingly segregated society at the annual missionary conferences in the subsequent few years. However, no change in their attitude emerged regarding becoming involved in social and political issues.

Apparently, the missionaries were not receptive to learning from the “warning signs” of the Lamula case. This fact may be one of the explanations as to why they were not well prepared to cope with the situation they faced when the National Party came to power in 1948. They had no clear idea of apartheid, and their reactions to the new political signals were characterised by a wait-and-see attitude. Prime Minister DF Malan eventually asserted that he was a devoted Christian; missionaries were then keen to preserve the hitherto good relations with the government in order to continue carrying out their mission work. Yet the relationship between the mission and politics was further discussed at the annual missionary conference in 1949, when they confirmed the principle of political neutrality, which had been an important principal of Lutheran mission work from the very beginning. At the same time, they argued that this principle was not absolute. In situations where the authorities violated fundamental human rights, it was legitimate to criticise them.

It was a fundamental principle of the Norwegian Missionary Society and its missionaries in the Zulu Church that they do not meddle in the political controversies of the country ... To take apartheid (segregation of the races) as a specific example, at the presented time when the concept is not yet, as the father as we know, satisfactorily defined, we as a mission (church) find it difficult to declare ourselves in favour or against. But we reserve the right to appeal and if necessary also protest if the freedom of conscience and of religion, other fundamental human rights or clearly established legal norms should be violated by the enactment of an apartheid programme or other plans of vital importance for the future of the different ethnic groups which directly affect the position or the work of the Christian church.²⁸

²⁷ The missionary Kjelvei in Conference Report 1927, p. 54, MA, Stavanger.

²⁸ Report from NMS annual conference in South Africa 1949, MA, Stavanger. Annual Conference 1949, trans. Berit Hagne Agøy, “The Freedom Struggle in Southern Africa: The

As the consequences of the apartheid policy became more visible in the 1950s, the missionaries became increasingly critical of it, especially after it created problems for the mission work. The introduction of the Bantu Education Act of 1954 represented the largest source of conflict with the authorities.²⁹ The purpose of the Bantu Education Act was to secure government control over the content and teaching of the schools, and the government threatened to withdraw financial support from schools that broke with the principles of the apartheid ideology. Schools with classes in Christianity and training in the Lutheran catechism were an effective instrument for recruitment into the church as well as for education in the Lutheran faith. Although NMS, and other missions, wanted to run the schools, they could not afford to do so without economic support from the government. The missionaries were thus presented with the options of closing down the schools and suffering the negative consequences such an action would have for the students and the mission work, or compromising with the authorities. They chose the latter option and reached an agreement that allowed them to continue with classes in Lutheran catechism in the new state-run schools.³⁰

In the 1950s the political development in the country was the subject of discussion at many of the annual mission conferences. Both at the conferences and in other internal ecclesial contexts, the missionaries condemned the apartheid policy as unbiblical and unchristian.³¹ However, they hesitated to protest against it publicly because they feared that this would damage the work of the mission and the church. In addition, a public protest could come into conflict with the missionary instruction that said that the missionaries should not interfere in internal political matters.³² The fact that the missionaries did not criticise apartheid in public in the 1950s also had to do with the fact that they believed that the race problem was primarily of a spiritual and theological nature. Therefore, the solution to the race issue was not primarily of a political nature, but of a spiritual nature. What that required was a “change of the hearts” and for all people in South Africa to convert to Christianity and live according to God’s will. The missionaries believed that the race issue “primarily had a ‘Christian’ solution, not an economic, political or social change of the social conditions”.³³ Characteristic of this approach is a statement written by Follesøe in a mission magazine in 1957:

Role of the Norwegian Churches 1948-1994,” in *Norway and National Liberation in Southern Africa*, ed. Tor Linné Eiksen (Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2000) 277.

²⁹ Cf. Agøy (1987): 118-51; *idem* (1993) 166-8.

³⁰ Agøy (1993): 168.

³¹ Agøy (1987): 153-67.

³² MC 1957, p. 63, MA, Stavanger.

³³ Agøy (1993): 165-6.

The race problems in South Africa as in any other countries have become a political problem. But now we know for sure that politics is not able to change a man; only God's Word may do so. Therefore, we look at the Church of God with hope – because we know that he alone through the preaching might solve the problems.³⁴

The missionaries' apparent lack of interest in the blacks' organised resistance against apartheid must be considered in light of this approach to the race conflict. Furthermore, they were worried that the political liberation struggle would lead to anarchic situations with chaos and violence; they also feared that communism would increase its influence in society.³⁵

In the 1950s, the Norwegian missionaries were without a doubt against the politics of apartheid. The single fact that throughout the fifties they supported statements against apartheid published by the South African Council of Churches is further evidence.³⁶ Several times they took the initiative to suggest that Lutheran churches and missions should publish a joint statement against apartheid. However, these initiatives failed, mainly because of opposition from the white churches and from the German missions.³⁷

Thus, opposition to the apartheid policy was expressed solely in internal contexts. As a result, the Africans – both those who were members of the churches and those who were not part of the inner circle of church members – naturally never heard about the missionaries' critical attitudes. For them, it seemed very likely that the missionaries' silence in the 1950s indicated their indirect support of the politics of apartheid. When they further observed that the missionaries spent much of their time together with whites and became familiar with the missionaries' paternalistic attitudes and unfair treatment of black ministers in terms of salaries and working conditions, they concluded that – despite their noble words – the missionaries sympathised with the white oppressors. This explains to a large extent the critical attitudes toward the missionaries and the mission-dominated churches that were reflected in Mbatha's reply.

Did the criticism have any effect on the missionaries?

As previously noted, the purpose of Fosseus' survey was to gain better knowledge and understanding of Africans' attitudes toward the mission, the

³⁴ *Norsk Misjonstidene* vol. 23 (1957): 8. My translation.

³⁵ Agøy (1993): 163-5.

³⁶ For an introduction to The South African Council of Churches statements against apartheid until 1954, see *The Christian Council Quarterly* no. 38 (1954): 1-2. See further Agøy (1987): 135; 162-4; 166.

³⁷ MC (1960), MA, Stavanger.

church, and Christianity. He believed that such knowledge was a prerequisite for the church to “give guidance for Christian apologetics, equally fit to meet the situation”. The question that then arises is whether the missionaries were influenced by the criticism that was expressed in the survey. Did the missionaries learn from the criticism? Did they become more outspoken in their condemnation of apartheid? Fosseus summarised the survey under the heading “Reaction to mission in Africa of today.” He introduced the summary by stating: “It is of utmost importance that missionaries and mission societies working in Africa, now more than before, try to estimate the effect of their activities.” It seemed that Fosseus, at least, had the intention to learn from the survey regarding how the work of the missionaries was perceived by Africans.

Despite this intention, it is difficult to trace any immediate change in the missionaries’ practice regarding their involvement in political affairs. It took no less than three years for the first public condemnation of apartheid to take place. In 1960, a critical speech that the superintendent in NMS Løken gave at the annual missionary conference was published in the mission magazine, *Norsk Misjonstidene*. The outspoken Swedish missionary, Gunnar Helander, clearly made a number of critical comments of apartheid in Swedish newspapers and magazines during the 1950s.³⁸ However, the publication of Løken’s speech was the first time a Lutheran mission society as such criticised apartheid in public. Yet there is little reason to assume that there was any direct connection between Fosseus’ survey and the publication of Løken’s speech. If the contrary had been the case, one should expect that the criticism was expressed in South Africa in order for Africans critical to mission work to become familiar with it. Only in 1962 did it become publicly known in South Africa that Lutheran missionaries condemned apartheid. Follesø and Løken, took part in a protest organised by the Natal Christian Council against forced relocation, which caused considerable attention in newspapers that Lutherans were also openly protesting against apartheid. Furthermore, the Norwegian and Swedish missionaries became a driving force when a council of the ELCSA-South Eastern Region approved a statement that criticised apartheid in 1963.³⁹

In other words, the first public protest in South Africa against apartheid took place as many as five years after Fosseus’ survey, suggesting that the criticism expressed in the survey regarding the missionaries’ lack of social and political involvement had no immediate effect on the missionaries’ practice in this area. The mentality of the missionaries was obviously so

³⁸ Cf. Frederick Hale, “The Church of Sweden Mission and apartheid, 1948-1960,” *Missionalia* 29 (2001): 21-42. Several of “Helander’s colleagues expressed misgivings about his criticism” (34), and the missionaries in the field were hesitant to protest against apartheid, mainly for the same reason as the Norwegians.

³⁹ Agøy (1993): 176-7.

dominated by old patterns of thought regarding the relationship between mission and politics that the negative assessment of them and their work as reflected in Mbatha's reply did not cause any self-critical reflection on their own attitudes and practice. Of course, we cannot exclude the idea that the content of Mbatha's reply was entirely without influence on the missionaries in the longer term and that the survey thereby and therefore was one of several factors that, over time, influenced the Lutheran missionaries to take a public stand against apartheid in the early 1960s. However, ultimately this is no more than vague assumptions and speculations. According to identified sources, it is not possible to draw any other conclusion except that the criticism expressed in Mbatha's reply, at least in the short term, did not have the effect that the missionaries critically reassessed their attitude and practice regarding the relationship between mission and politics.

Conclusion

The Swedish Lutheran missionary, Pastor Helge Fosseus, initiated a survey in 1957 to examine Africans' attitude toward the mission, the church and Christianity. The survey was conducted in the heartland of the Lutheran Mission in South Africa – namely, in Zululand and Natal. Although only one reply was identified from the Zulu pastor, Mbatha, it is reasonable to assume that the views he expressed by and large were representative, confirming Fosseus' assumptions about a growing critical attitude toward the missionaries and churches for which they had laid the foundation. The missionaries were described as betrayers who stood on the white oppressors' side in their discrimination and exploitation of the blacks. Their practice was contradictory to their noble words. They were accused of not having spoken out against discrimination of the blacks and of having done nothing for the betterment of their social situation. The criticism of the missionaries' lack of political engagement and their racist attitude toward the blacks was very harsh.

Meanwhile, the missionaries perceived themselves as friends of the blacks and allies in the struggle against apartheid. In the 1950s, the missionaries condemned apartheid as unchristian and unbiblical, but due to the fact that it took place only in internal contexts, such condemnation never reached the Africans. The missionaries did not condemn apartheid in public for several reasons: (1) they feared the authorities; (2) they worried that they might be acting in contradiction to their instruction; and (3) they believed that the solution to racial conflict required a spiritual approach.

Despite Fosseus' intentions to learn from the survey, it had no immediate effect on the Lutheran missionaries' attitude of not getting involved in political issues. Only in 1962 did Lutheran missionaries publicly protest against apartheid in South Africa. In retrospect, we may wonder whether –

had they been better equipped to meet the challenges of apartheid – they would have learned from the kind of criticism that, among others, Petrus Lamula directed against the missionaries' lack of social and political engagement in the 1920s.

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