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THE FORK IN THE ROAD

RELIGIOUS SEPARATISM VERSUS AFRICAN NATIONALISM IN THE CAPE COLONY, 1890-1910

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The relationship between religious separatism and African nationalism has long been an important topic of examination and theorizing among Africanists. Usually, it has been contended that religious separatism was a precursor of and contributor to African nationalism. This contention is, as far as South Africa is concerned, quite erroneous. At a superficial level, it is possible to see both sets of phenomena as 'resistance' to white domination and control. Nevertheless, it is clear that at a deeper, ideological level, the two manifestations represent antipodal reactions.

By the end of the nineteenth century, Protestantism in the English-speaking world was sharply divided between premillenarianism and postmillenarianism; [1] the point at issue was whether the second coming or second advent of Christ would occur before or after the millennium (the thousand years of peace foretold in Revelation 20). The issue had more than academic interest because the choice had profound implications for one's perceptions of the world and the trend of contemporary events.

Postmillenarianism was posited on the belief that men and society could and indeed eventually would be reformed into a condition of perfection. This involved a very potent optimism and belief in 'progress', "through the spread of Christianity the world itself was gradually working toward a state of perfection." Of course, the pre-

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1 See William G. McLoughlin, Jr., ***Modern Revivalism***. New York: Ronald Press, 1959. The growth of premillenarianism is traced in Ernest R. Sandeen, ***The Roots 0f Fundamentalism. British and American Millenarianism 1800-1930***. Chicago & London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1970.

The division was not a new one. At the end of the eighteenth century and during the early part of the nineteenth century, postmillenarianism seemed to be dominant, at least in Britain and North America. However, during the nineteenth century, premillenarianism made a strong comeback; by the end of the century the two traditions were in strong and sometimes acrimonious dispute.

requisite in this progress was reform of the individual by conversion to Christianity. However, most adherents to this theology and eschatology did not limit their activities to evangelization only. Many felt that society must also be reformed, that it was a Christian obligation to work for political and social reform as well; as a result they "engaged in the manifold reform movements of the day with the dedicated, and often self-righteous, zeal of persons assured that they were serving the Lord."[2] Specific evils (drink, prostitution, gambling, etc.) which made people less moral would have to be eliminated. Politics should also be reformed by promoting the election of good, moral men and by pressing for better laws.

Earlier in the nineteenth century, in the United States particularly, postmillennialists were inordinately optimistic about the imminent achievement of the millennium.[3] As the century wore on, it became clear that the perfecting of society and of people was not proceeding at the pace expected. While some became pessimistic and abandoned postmillenarianism entirely, others persevered. It is from this tradition that the social gospel and Christian socialism (at least in Protestantism) originated in the twentieth century.

Premillenarianism, on the other hand, was founded upon a profound pessimism about this world and the direction it was headed. One of its basic tenets was "the belief that the gospel was not intended nor was it going to accomplish the salvation of the world, but that, instead, the world was growing increasingly corrupt and rushing toward imminent judgment."[4] In this context, reform of this world was futile and one's efforts should be directed toward preparation for the next world.

The second coming itself could came at any moment; gazing at the world with jaundiced eye, the premillenarians felt that the cup of evil was almost full and the second coming was likely to happen sooner rather than later. The duty of the Christian was to save himself by becoming converted and by maintaining a constant state of readiness because only those who were converted and 'ready' at the precise moment of the second coming or death would be saved from damnation. Having assured his own salvation, the other duty of the Christian was to rescue as many other people as possible by timeous warnings and persuasion to be converted. This life was viewed primarily as a preparation for the next, and in as much as one's fate was determined by

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2 McLoughlin, ***Modern Revivalism,*** 100-107.

3 Ibid.

4 Sandeen, ***The Roots of Fundamentalism***, 39.

one's status (converted or damned) at the termination of this life, there was a strong emphasis on personal pietism. Not only did pietism and the obligation to evangelize leave little time for reforming the world, there was also a strong bias in favour of withdrawal; in such a wicked world, prudence commended as little involvement as possible if one wished to remain uncontaminated and in a state of grace. It is from this tradition that modern fundamentalism is derived.

Both millennial traditions emphasize evangelization; revivalism in the two traditions is often identical in its outward manifestations. Thus, the revivalism of a Charles Finney or a William Taylor may seem identical to that of a Billy Graham or an Oral Roberts. However, the postmillennialism of the former produced a 'this worldly' orientation while the premillenarianism of the latter produce an 'other worldly' orientation.

As I have pointed out in a previous paper,[5] the Christianity which Africans of the Cape Colony began to adopt in vastly accelerated numbers from the late 1860s had a definite postmillennial orientation; quite naturally the primary focus was upon the condition and status of Africans. Some of their activity was (as elsewhere) directed towards the removal and elimination of specific 'evils', especially alcoholic beverages; thus, a strong temperance movement developed among Africans from the 1860s.[6] However, Africans hoped for and expected to achieve much more. They hoped for a more equitable society, one in which colour and race would not be determining factors of one's status and opportunity. The Cape 'liberal' policy of non-racialism gave the promise (or illusion) of a Society in which individual talents and ability would be the primary criteria. The first step was for Africans to attain 'civilized standards' by an aggressive acquisition of Christianity and education. Then, the discrimination, inequality and prejudice of whites had to be reduced and eliminated. Since these baneful aspects were usually attributed to ignorance and fear on the part of the whites, they were amenable to change, especially when confronted by the example of educated, Christian Africans. However, at the same time, Africans must be actively involved in politics and work for the elimination of

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5 "The Taylor Revival of 1866 and the Roots of African Nationalism in the Cape Colony," ***J. of Religion in Africa***, 8(2), 1976, 105-122.

6 For a detailed description of the temperance movement among Africans in the Cape Colony to 1896, see my ***The Role of African Clergy in the Reorientation of Xhosa Society to the Plural Society in the Cape Colony, I850-I9I5***. University of California, Los Angeles, Ph. D. dissertation 1975, 151-171. Temperance movements are a chief characteristic of postmillennial revivalism.

laws and practices which perpetuated inequality and subordination an the basis of race and colour.

So great was the belief in 'progress' and in the inevitable and perhaps imminent achievement of their utopia that most graduates from the mission schools in the 1870s and 1880s were almost unbelievably optimistic. This was not because they were blind to the real situation in their own day; they almost daily suffered indignities, insults and injustice at the hands of policemen, minor government officials and whites generally. They were aware of annual attempts (some of them successful) to enact more unjust and discriminatory legislation. Their optimism grew from their belief that 'progress', 'history' and even 'the divine Plan' were on their side and that the result was inevitable. However, by 1890 and increasingly during the next two decades, the optimism began to wear thin. It was clear that there was no progress and in fact, there was regression in a number of areas. Everywhere in western industrialized societies 1890-1910 was a period of unprecedented racism and brutality, especially in the scramble for Africa and empire. In the Cape Colony also, prejudice seemed to grow rather than weaken. The signs were unmistakable: restrictions on access to the franchise in 1887 and 1892, the Glen Grey Act with its compulsory labour clause in 1894, the annexation of Pondoland, and the brutal (and illegal) treatment of Sigcau. In the press, white politicians, editors and readers were increasingly extolling the virtues of the 'northern' racial policies of the Boer republics and criticizing the 'softminded', 'negrophilist' policies of the Cape. Even in the churches, subordination and discrimination continued.

Opportunity also withered. The relative economic position of Africans declined rather markedly as most of the benefits of gold mining development were retained by whites as their living standards rose. Few good job opportunities opened, and prejudice reduced some of the existing ones. Throughout the 1890s, *Imvo* chronicled this trend. In Kimberley, efforts were made to replace first the court interpreter[7] and then the letter-carriers [8] with whites. In 1891, some magistrates consistently excluded Africans from even temporary employment as census-takers.[9] In 1895, Alan K. Soga's career was deliberately diverted to prevent his appointment as the first African Resident

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7 *Imvo*, 22 May 1890.

8 *Imvo*, 9 June 1892.

9 *Imvo*, 16 and 30 April 1891.

Magistrate. [10] In 1897, another African, Benjamin Sakuba, was replaced as court interpreter at King Williams Town by a white man. [11]

Then beginning in 1896, the relative decline in the economic status of Africans was aggravated by real declines in living standards. The rinderpest epidemic of 1896 wiped out a large portion of African cattle wealth. While the war (1899-1902) brought high wages in the ports, it also brought high prices, and the war was followed by a severe depression. Then, there followed the worst drought in the Cape Colony in almost a century. The result was poverty and destitution. [12]

In summary, the period 1890 to 1910 was one of intense pressure and difficulty. With their experiences so seriously at variance with expectations, Africans became bitter and needed to reconsider their position and prospects, and even their analysis of the world. One of the manifestations of this stress was the recrudescence of internecine hostilities among the Xhosa-speaking peoples of the Cape. Increasingly during this period, Xhosa-Mfengu and Mfengu-Thembu hostilities emerged in bitter feuding. The feuding affected religious, political and .social af fairs. The Presbyterian and Congregational churches (which allowed Africans a much larger Voice in church affairs than other denominations) were especially affected. In a plethora of splits, secessions and disputes during the period, these hostilities were almost always one of the factors and, in some cases, the mast important one. [13]

The hostilities intruded seriously into African political activities as well. Africans were clearly split by 1898 with the founding of *Izwi Labantu*. as the rival of *Imvo* and the emergence of two groups; one, under the leadership of Walter Rubusana supporting the Progressive

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10 Alan K. Soga, the youngest son of the Rev. Tiyo Soga and his Scots wife, was educated in Scotland. He was appointed clerk and assistant resident magistrate at St. Marks in the Transkei (*lmvo* - 10 Jan. 1894). He had passed the required law examination and was well on the career track leading to appointment as resident magistrate. Then in 1895, he was summarily transferred to the Labour Office which was both a demotion and a dead-end street (*lmvo* - 25 July 1895).

11 *Imvo*, 6 May 1897.

12 Rinderpest is a disease of cattle and horses. It began in Central Africa in 1889 and moved slowly south, reaching the Cape Colony in 1896. All efforts to find cures failed and animal mortality was high. Up to ninety percent of the cattle in Transkei may have died. See Monica Wilson and Leonard Thompson (eds.) *The Oxford History of South Africa,* II (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1971) 116. In regard to the effects of the drought which lasted in parts of the Cape Colony until 1910, it was said that "the whole... country. . . lived on American mealies for several months." Cited in *ibid*., 58.

13 These 'intra-African' hostilities in the churches are discussed in detail in my dissertation, *The Role of African Clergy*, 245-288.

Party, was strongly Xhosa and Thembu and the other, under John Tengo Jabavu supporting the coalition with the Afrikaner Bond, tended to be strongly Mfengu. Clearly, the division was not watertight nor solely the result of intra-African factionalism, but the latter was certainly involved. [14] Rubusana and John Knox Bokwe also founded the Ntsikana Day celebration sometime in the first decade of the twentieth century. It was clearly a reaction to the Fingo Day celebrations which commemorated the 'emancipation' of the Mfengu from 'slavery' to the Xhosa; it was also strongly anti-Mfengu. I do not wish to exaggerate the significance of this factionalism although it did have baneful effects.[15] Africans were able to cooperate on critical issues (e.g., opposition to the South Africa Act and the 1913 Native Land Act). Its main significance is its indication of a very sharp increase in the level of stress as a result of a deterioration in living standards and prospects. [16]

However, these difficult decades also saw the emergence of two other manifestations which were to be of much more long-term interest and importance—religious separatism and African nationalism. It is with the ideological orientations and the relationship between the two that this paper is primarily concerned. There has been a very long tradition of linking religious separatism and African nationalism. Hostile white contemporaries immediately branded 'ethiopianism' (religious separatism) as a political movement masquerading as religion. More recent scholarly writing has tended to see religious separatism as the first manifestation of 'secondary resist-

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14 Stanley Trapido, in "African divisional politics in the Cape Colony, 1884 to 1910," *J. of African History*, 9 (1), 1968, 80-82, admits that the two groups tended to be factional, but he attempts to argue that that was largely accidental; generation conflicts, economic and social class distinctions, and the conflict between the educated and the traditionalists tended to coincide with the ethnic factions, he argues. These assertions are at best only partly true and some are demonstrably untrue.

15 The 1914 Tembuland election is perhaps the most notable. Jabavu ran against the incumbent, Rubusana, the only African ever to be elected in the Cape (1911). The African vote was split and a white candidate elected. That debacle was at least partly the result of over 15 years of personal and factional hostilities; the usual interpretations (i.e., Jabavu as 'Uncle Tom' to Merriman and other white politicians) suffer from ignoring that background. See *The Role of African Clergy*, 277-8.

16 However, this internecine conflict does tend to contradict some theories of revolution which argue that revolution comes when misery reaches an intolerable level. In fact, the reverse may be true. The re-emergence of determined and violent protest in South Africa recently follows several years of small improvements in standards of living.

ance'; [17] subsequently, this resistance becomes secularized and evolves into political and nationalist organizations. This interpretation has not been based upon demonstrated direct links because, as Saunders admits, "direct connections between the independent church movement and participation, either in the nationalist movement or Cape African politics, are not easy to find" and "those ministers most active in politics remained in the orthodox churches." [18] Instead, there has been the implication that the link was generic (both are examples of revolt and rejection of white domination) and that "the contribution of religious independency to nationalism was in large part ideological" [19]

It is true that both are examples of rejection of white domination, but they are antithetical, not linked, responses. That this is so emerges quite clearly when the ideological foundations of each is examined. The fact that the ideological foundations of both are in Christianity has complicated the issue. [20] However, the problem is soon solved if it is recognized that the advent of religious separatism in South Africa marked the arrival of Christian premillenarianism.

As indicated earlier, the mass conversion of Africans beginning in the 1860s was in the postmillennial tradition. By the 1890s, the failure of their expectations was forcing Africans (as it was forcing Protestants elsewhere in the world) to reconsider their eschatological beliefs. Some Africans definitely chose premillenarianism. Every description of separatist churches of which I am aware, indicates that separatists have, almost without exception, beliefs and practices which are compatible only with a premillennialist eschatology. [21] Sundkler's entire 'Zionist' category clearly falls within the fundamentalist Pentecostal tradition. [22] Even where the separatist churches are not characterized

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17 For example, Chris C. Saunders, "The new African elite in the Eastern Cape and some late nineteenth century origins of African nationalism," in *Collected Seminar Papers on the Societies of Southern Africa in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, I, Univ. of London, Institute of Commonwealth Studies, 1969-1970, 54, fn. 48 argues, "religious independency was conveniently a way of asserting African equality which avoided confrontation."

18 *Ibid*., 55, fn. 54. 19 *Ibid*., 49.

20 Saunders obviously found it an enigma; A. P. Walsh, The origins of African political consciousness in South Africa, *J. of Modern African Studies*, 7 (4), 1969, 592—notes the dichotomy in Christian influence but provides no explanation.

21 The most comprehensive book on the subject is still Bengt Sundkler, *Bantu Prophets in South Africa*, 2nd ed. London: Oxford University Press 1961.

22 Walter J. Hollenweger—*The Pentecostals*, trans. R. A. Wilson. London: SCM Press, 1972—discusses the history of Pentecostalism in South Africa at some length (111-175).'The first Pentecostal missionary (from the American 'Christian Catholic Church in Zion') baptized twenty-seven Africans in Johannes-

by radical departures in theology or worship practices, there is clearly a giving up on this world, a retreat from efforts to change the political and social structures of this world into an inward-looking pietism and an 'other-worldly' attitude.

P. J. Mzimba, the leader of the 1898 secession from the Presbyterian Free Church of Scotland mission, [23] illustrates the process of disillusion and withdrawal. Mzimba was ordained in 1875 and was for many years pastor of the Lovedale Native Congregation. He was the contemporary of Elijah Makiwane, John Knox Bokwe, Walter Rubusana and John Tengo Jabavu; all had attended Lovedale. Like the others, he had participated in political activities in the Cape Colony: canvassed in elections, circulated petitions to Parliament, appeared before parliamentary commissions, campaigned for restriction or withdrawal of liquor licences for canteens in African areas, etc. However, in an address to the Lovedale Literary Society in 1886 (the address was reprinted in *Imvo*), he stunned and outraged many Africans when he declared, "*Let the white man rule, and the South African people be out of politics.*" [24] He went on to say,

> we shall get nothing at present from Politics. If we go into politics, we shall sooner or later be forced out, whether we like it or not.

He quoted at length from a black-authored *History of the Negro Race in America* which declared that politics had been a disaster for blacks in the U.S. South and what a blessing it was that they were no longer involved. Asserting that the remarks applied to South Africa as well, Mzimba declared,

> Let the experience of Africans in American [sic] give warning in time to the Africans in Africa to let politics alone at present. Let us be content to be ruled by the colonist. Let us only have to do with politics in order to encourage those white men who desire to give us schools and books. Could we prevent the colonists from depriving the native of the franchise? No. .... The ignorant, poor, and superstitious native cannot rule the intelligent, experienced, wealthy Colonists, however few in number.

The remarks created a sensation and were widely quoted and discussed in both English and Dutch newspapers. Africans too responded strongly (letters were still being printed on the subject in *Imvo* four months later in April, 1887). Makiwane tried to defend his friend

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burg in 1904 (120). Hollenweger points out that white Pentecostals (especially Afrikaners) object to the Zionist churches being classified as Pentecostal, but his argument is decisive (see 149-175).

23 Mzimba founded the Presbyterian Church of Africa (P.C.A.) which has maintained a continuous existence to the present.

24 *Imvo*, 30 Dec. 1886. Italics in the original as a heading.

(Mzimba was absent, probably supplying at a mission station in the Transkei). Makiwane claimed that Mzimba was misunderstood, that all Mzimba had meant was that Africans should not consider electing an African to Parliament—a proposition Makiwane supported. However, he concluded, "if he meant what is supposed to have been his meaning then I for one cannot agree with him." [25]

Mzimba probably did not make the complete transition. The remarks on politics were made within the context of a Booker Washington-type speech in which he urged Africans to attend first to education and economic matters. Even after the secession, he participated actively in the campaign to establish a South African Native College (finally achieved in Fort Hare). Thus, he had not given up entirely on this world, but he was clearly disenchanted with political action. Yet Mzimba is one of the few separatists who participated in public or political activities at all. [26]

Saunders notes that a separatist minister made the opening prayer at the first meeting of the South African Native National Congress (later renamed the African National Congress—A.N.C.) in 1912.[27] In 1959 at the founding conference of the Pan Africanist Congress (P.A.C.), "the principal clergyman invited to speak was the Rev. Walter M. Dimba, leader of what was then the country's largest federation of African independent churches." [28] However, these were unusual, atypical events. Sundkler found that most separatist leaders agreed with the sentiments expressed by one, "I tell my people, don't take any interest in this colour bar. Forget about it, forget about politics." There are a few exceptions, but Sundkler states that one does not usually find "radical or even the politically conscious" in the separatist churches.

> Broadly speaking, the politically awake and active, if subscribing still to "Christianity" at all, are found in other Churches, and not among "the Native Separatists". The Separatists go out of their way to state that they take no part in politics. [29]

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25 *Imvo*, 2 Feb. 1887. When the secession occurred, Makiwane, who was also Mfengu, remained in the Free Church of Scotland in spite of the fact that the secessionists were all Mfengu and he was subjected to harassment.

26 Saunders feels Mzimba "may perhaps have retained some interest in participatory politics" (The new African elite, 55, fn. 54). Trapido cites a letter from the Merriman Papers indicating that Mzimba was actively involved in the 1903 election (Divisional politics, 88, 91).

27 Saunders, The new African elite, 55, fn. 54.

28 Thomas Karis, et al. (eds.) *From protest to challenge. A documentary history of African politics in South Africa I882-I964,* v. 3. Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1977, 314.

29 *Bantu Prophets*, 304-5.

Thus, under the stress of the disappointment and difficulties of the 1890-1910 period, some Africans rejected the earlier postmillennial tradition and retreated into a pietist, other-worldly, premillennialism; many of these left the regular, white-led churches to form or join independent churches. However, others reacted very differently to the crisis. Certainly the period disabused them of the illusion that the millennium would be achieved easily or automatically. It became clear that 'progress' and change would have to be worked for and struggled for. The development of political and nationalist organizations were a natural outcome of that recognition. That African nationalism was founded in and remained largely dominated by this Christian tradition up to its suppression in the early 1960s is demonstrated unmistakably by the documents of *From Protest to Challenge*. [30] Though Marxist and Communist influence did emerge in the period after the first world war and did become a consistent element of African nationalism, [31] it probably never became the dominant element, not even in the final days when Africans, in the early 1960s, in desperation turned to violence and sabotage. [32]

Much of the leadership showed this strong Christian influence. Clergymen (and their children) played an important role in the political and nationalist organizations from John Dube (Congregational) and Walter Rubusana (Congregational) to Zaccheus Mahabane (Methodist) and James Calata (Anglican). A great many others were devout, active laymen from John Tengo Jabavu (Methodist) to Albert Lutuli (Anglican). This Christian influence is not in dispute, but what needs to be emphasized is that it came almost entirely from those Africans who remained in the regular white churches.

It was not timidity or an Uncle Tom servility that differentiated Africans who remained in the regular churches from those who rebelled and went into religious separation. In fact, neither willingly acquiesced in continued subordination. The major difference between the two groups was whether or not they retained any faith in the prospect of

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30 In all, there are three volumes of documents and a fourth volume of biographies published 1972-1977. Tracing that optimism. faith and expectation through those eighty years of disappointment and deterioration is a sad, painful experience—much like reading Anne Frank's diaries.

31 That Communists and Christians with postmillennial convictions could frequently work together is not surprising; their respective eschatologies are very similar. The Marxist vision of the 'socialist society' and this Christian view of the 'millennial society' are almost identical.

32 This is the conclusion reached by Karis also; see *From protest to challenge*, v. 3, 680-1.

attaining greater equity or justice in this life. One group, many of whom became religious separatists, [33] gave up on this life and hence forward centered all their hopes on the next life. The other group which remained in the regular churches, retained a belief and a determination to change and improve this life; they went on to form organizations to accomplish this. Thus, while the two manifestations were reactions to the same conditions and crisis, they were antithetical, not linked.

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33 It is by no means certain that all who became premillennialists seceded or joined the religious separatists. Certainly in North America, many did remain in the traditional churches. In South Africa, many African clergymen and laymen in the regular churches took no active part in politics and were apparently concerned only with 'religious' or spiritual matters.