

MISSIONARIES CAUGHT BETWEEN COUNTRIES AND CONTINENTS

Embroiled: Swiss Churches, South Africa and Apartheid.

By Caroline Jeannerat, Eric Morier-Genoud, and Didier Péclard.

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Key Words: South Africa, Switzerland, Christianity, international relations, missions.

This fine study could be read too narrowly as the history of a particular mission society in relation to the challenges and paradoxes of apartheid, for it focuses primarily on the case of the Swiss Mission in South Africa (SMSA) and its local partner church there, the Tsonga Presbyterian Church (TPC), itself an expression of the historical mission. This rich and nuanced reading of the ambiguous and often contradictory dynamics that shaped the SMSA and the TPC, the Protestant church in Switzerland itself, and Swiss polity and financial interests broaches many questions that affected – and still affect – international religious and secular organisations, among others.

Originally undertaken as part of a Swiss national research programme to investigate the relationship between Switzerland and South Africa during apartheid (in part, prompted by legal challenges elsewhere directed at corporations that supported apartheid, a sensitive issue for Swiss banks), it is the only study in that programme to focus on the quite substantial role of religious communities. Such communities themselves, the SMSA not least, represent something of the transnational links between local bodies and international groupings without which neither South African history nor the nature of support for or resistance to apartheid can be read.

As with religious organisations in South Africa itself, this history is spiked with tension and conflict. Even if the bankrupt moral status of apartheid was something upon which most could agree in the post-Second World War era, significant divisions existed within the Protestant churches in Switzerland regarding the apartheid state. Because the particular case of the SMSA – and, in Switzerland, of the more ‘radical’ *Département Missionnaire des Églises de la Suisse Romande* (DM) – is consciously treated by the authors as an exemplar of a much wider range of phenomena, the book turns out to be of value not just for mission or religion scholars, nor just for understanding the diverse bilateral relationships that existed between Switzerland and South Africa, but because it illuminates many of the dynamics that affected countries and religious communities in them (including international expressions such as the Ecumenical Movement and the World Council of Churches).

Through this story, unsurprisingly filled with minor victories, many frustrations, some failures, and profound ambiguities, one gains considerable insight into what Patrick Harries, in his preface, describes as the ‘turbulent’ nature of a missionary society that is ‘at once political intermediary, spiritual guide and non-government organization’, simultaneously ‘[c]aught between different communities and discrete continents’. It touches on the ambiguity of missions in general; the tensions that missionaries face between meeting local realities and aspirations and fulfilling the institutional and organizational demands of the sending mission societies; European constructions of ‘the African’ person, society

and nature; and, the reverberations of these dynamics back into the host society altering it in unanticipated ways.

The first part of the book provides the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century background to the SMSA and comments on its educational, agricultural, and health programmes and facilities, up to the official inauguration of apartheid under the Nationalist Party in 1948. Then follows the story of the disruption of established mission activity and institutions by the apartheid state's nationalisation of mission schools and hospitals and through the impact on agriculture of farm excisions and removals with the implementation of Bantustan policy.

We then read of the impact of this earlier history on Swiss church or mission responses to apartheid. First, we learn of the intimate relationship between the mission, the TPC, and the emerging Bantustan elite in what was to become the 'homeland' of Gazankulu. The ideology of 'protective segregation' that lay behind apartheid finds its odd mirror here in the establishment of the local 'indigenous' church. We then return back to Switzerland, where the tensions inherent in these relationships begin to spill over into its internal politics, which can be described as a low-intensity conflict, occasionally becoming vehement, between those who challenged latent and overt Swiss support for the apartheid regime and those who defended Swiss 'neutrality' and 'dialogue'. The major points of contestation here become the initiation by the WCC of its Programme to Combat Racism and the anti-apartheid divestment campaign – once again a mirror of the South African reality.

The authors provide us with much detail, including numerous tables, maps, and figures and a useful set of seven appendices, including a detailed timeline. The whole is a worthy addition to scholarship on apartheid and the kinds of ambiguities, compromises, and challenges that mark our time too.

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INTERPRETING A MOVEMENT IN EXILE

External Mission: The ANC in Exile, 1960–1990.

By Stephen Ellis.

London: Hurst & Co., 2013. Pp. xii+384. £20, hardback (ISBN 9780849042628).

Songs and Secrets: South Africa from Liberation to Governance.

By Barry Gilder.

London: Hurst & Co., 2013. Pp. xxxi+359. £20, hardback (ISBN 9781849042376).

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Key Words: Southern Africa, communism, liberation movements, politics.

The armed struggle of the South African national liberation movement played out over the thirty years when the African National Congress (ANC) was illegal and based largely in exile. The development of an army, Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), made the ANC and South African Communist Party (SACP) close comrades in arms, a relationship that has