

RESENSIES/ REVIEWS

ELPHICK, Richard. 2012. *The Equality of Believers. Protestant Missionaries and the Racial Politics of South Africa*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2012. 437pp.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/actat.v33i2.16>

This book is a major contribution to the political and religious history of South Africa. Although its focus is on the years of Protestant missionary endeavours since the beginning of the 19th century up to about 1960, the subject of the book is inbedded in the whole colonial history since 1652 when the question of the relations between the races became an issue. It is the result of decades of intense, informed and fair scholarship (as its 30 pages Bibliography and 60 pages of Notes show). It gives not only a strong line of argument on the expressed theme, but also provides a wealth of (to me, at least) previous less known details about some of the main actors who played a significant role in the shaping of present and past ideologies in South Africa. In that sense it can also almost serve as an encyclopaedia, a Who's Who of the South African racial debate (for which the 21 page Index is of great value).

Elphick, who is teaching at Wesleyan University in the US, is no stranger to South African history as such, but more specifically the history of Christianity in South Africa. He also uses Afrikaans sources, and writes with insight and sympathy for all sides of the equation. What is unique about this book is the way in which the theme of "Christian brotherhood" – and its opposite of racial separation – is followed through the development of the Christian activities and discourse in the country. The main players, as stated in the title, are the Protestant missionaries, but they are never dealt with in isolation. Yes, the European missionaries initiated the process which led to the Christianisation of South Africa, but quite soon (actually from the very beginning) indigenous people were the ones who were leading the growth and spread of the gospel. Many of these people (and most of them remain unnamed, also in this book) were as important actors as the missionaries themselves, and often sharing the same views. Mission became church, so from the late 19th century the churches became the main arenas of opinion forming and debate, even though it is the range of powerful and eloquent leaders who are the ones who take centre stage also in this book. But the broader political history is never absent from Elphick's treatment. That is why politicians like Jan Smuts, DF Malan and Jan Hofmeyr are also prominent in the story he tells.

The book is organised into three parts. Part I he calls *The Missionaries, their Converts, and their Enemies*. In this the main theme is the establishment

of the churches (and Christianity) in the area which is covered by the book and which later became South Africa. The early missionaries were in their thinking on race in general on a quite different wavelength as the settler community, and tensions developed which would play an immense role even into the late twentieth century. This section of the book covers more or less the period up to the early 20th century. Part II, *The Benevolent Empire and the Social Gospel*, relates the development of missionary policies which expanded the primitive idea of mere evangelisation into a more wholistic and integral understanding of mission. The “mission” (and the churches) increasingly became involved also in education, health services, cultural upliftment, and also politics. The concept of “equality of believers” was never really in doubt among the missionary minded leaders of all groupings, although few missionaries and church leaders really thought that this also meant social equality. This period certainly overlaps with that covered in the first part, and its emphases continued into the late 20th century. The author relates the high points of missionary cooperation in Councils and conferences, but also the brewing conflicts which eventually led to *The Parting of the Ways*, his title for Part III. Especially enlightening in this early 20th century period is the author’s description of the extent to which “segregation” was originally the “liberal” option among sympathetic thinkers among those committed to the equality of believers. The moderates (White and Black) of the “Benevolent Empire” sought compromises in order to gain as much as possible for the Blacks, without forfeiting all support from the side of the Whites. The author shows convincingly that this approach unfortunately played into the hands of the ideologies on the other side. With the passing of time, however, the differences in ideology hardened to such an extent that, towards the middle of the 20th century, political and other pressures led to an almost total breakdown of relations between the Afrikaans churches with their support for a political policy of separation (apartheid) and the “English” churches and organisations who condemned this.

It is a delight, but also disturbing, to be introduced to the views and words of the prophets of the past centuries. Some of them were the outspoken rebels starting with John Philip in the early 19th century to Trevor Huddleston of the nineteen fifties, but there were also scores of other key thinkers among churchmen (very little in the book is written about the contribution of women!), anthropologists and politicians. It is unfortunate that the book had to end somewhere, because it would have been fascinating to see the author’s theme expanded into the nineteen nineties and on into the next decade. This story doesn’t really end.

There is hardly a chapter without its enlightening insights and often forgotten historical facts and intrigues. No one can spend time with this

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book without feeling overwhelmed by the scope and sheer breadth of information.

For myself I found very little, if any, to criticise. The history that is related is itself a formidable criticism of the good intentions of people. It shows that the good and the better, not to speak of the bad, are always there at the same time. And it is often only by looking back from the vantage point of the present that we can distinguish between them. The book is also a reminder and a challenge: what role do we, the present actors, play in this same struggle for equality?

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