

BOOK REVIEWS

A History of Christian Missions in Zimbabwe, 1890–1939 By *Chengesai J. M. Zvobgo*. Gweru, Mambo Press, 1996, 412pp.

Doctor Zvobgo's studies of the history of Christian missions in Zimbabwe are very valuable. In this book he studies the systematic evangelisation of Zimbabwe from 1890 to 1939, the beginning of the Second World War. Dr Zvobgo introduces his subject with a summary of the first attempts in the field of Christian evangelisation of the Ndebele and the Shona peoples from 1859 to 1890.

Lobengula, the king of Matabeleland, did not allow missionaries to teach religion, nor reading or writing. Nevertheless, he skillfully supported their presence. Missionaries were convinced that under Lobengula's rule it would be impossible to evangelise, and consequently they welcomed the fall of Lobengula. With the 'Pioneer Column', Jesuit Catholic missionaries and the Anglican Canon Belfour entered Lobengula's territory. The Anglo-Ndebele war of 1893 put an end to Ndebele power. Missionaries approved and urged the dismantling of the Ndebele kingdom. They were happy that the people (Ndebele or Shona) could no longer use the political power of Lobengula as an excuse not to convert to Christianity.

With all the facilities offered by Cecil Rhodes, missions increased. So the question must be put: would it be necessary to destroy the Ndebele social and political system to evangelise them? This is not the object of Dr Zvobgo's discussion. He accepts the fact, and analyses the history that follows. However, the problems remain beneath the surface, and Dr Zvobgo does analyse them very well when he writes about the Ndebele and Shona uprisings of 1896–1897. These two disturbances, and the Shona rising in particular, took the whole White population by surprise. The Chishawasha missionaries thought that a 'Shona rebellion was the last thing the "cowardly" Shona would dream of attempting' (p. 47). The author chiefly uses missionary sources, but not exclusively. Missionaries played a role in suppressing the two uprisings because they were, in the words of Fr. Boos, S. J., a 'war of heathenism against Christianity' (p. 55).

They were completely mistaken in their appreciation of Shona people, because they did not know the history of their brave past as conquerors. Also superficial was their appreciation of the religion of the people. Some missionaries were convinced that these two rebellions destroyed all the religious work they had done until that time. Others, with a positive point of view, believed in a spring time for the Mashonaland mission with 'its joyous promises of good things to come' (p. 56). In reality, we deduce that Christianity was not so deep-rooted. There was a real spring and a very

flourishing time for Christianity in Zimbabwe, but at the same time, there were many difficulties. After the suppression of the Ndebele and Shona risings, Catholics and the various Christian denominations established missions everywhere.

Was it a desire to make Christ known or expansionist dynamism that drove missionaries to face all kinds of sacrifices? Dr Zvobgo considers the question from two points of view: from the missionaries's point of view, and from that of the Africans.

Missionaries found Africans very difficult to convert. Sometimes they felt that Africans didn't believe in their voluntary work, and instead believed that missionaries merely wanted to separate people from their customs and traditions.

'But the greatest hindrance to Christianity in Mashonaland as in Matabeleland, from the missionaries' point of view, was the institution of polygamy and its concomitant *roora/lobola* system' (p. 104). Generally the missionaries' opinion about African adults was very negative. 'We are too old to change our ways' (p. 104) was the answer used by some Africans. Dr Zvobgo analyses very well this problem of the *roora/lobola* system. The great majority of the missionaries from abroad had an uncompromising position on this matter. About polygamy missionary opinion was more or less unanimous, but failed to get the colonial government to forbid it. The issue of *roora/lobola* was more debated, and Dr Zvobgo reports studies made by different churches, and their final positions. However, the opinion widespread among Africans was that missionaries did not understand the system. 'We may therefore, reasonably conclude', writes Dr Zvobgo, 'that missionary efforts to limit lobola through legislation during this period (1924-1939) were unsuccessful' (p. 334).

In spite of the initial opposition to Christianity from the old generation, the Christian community increased considerably. This was due to the translation of scriptures, allowing people to read the word of God in their own languages, the establishment of Christian villages (an unrealistic programme in the long term, p. 166), and Western education (the most potent agency in the evangelisation of the Africans of Zimbabwe, p. 149). Initially missionary education was religiously oriented, but soon included academic, industrial and teacher training. Parents were initially reluctant to allow their children to attend school. Later they were completely convinced of the benefit of education for boys and girls. The governing British South Africa Company was interested in industrial schools to qualify Africans for different occupations, and helped the missions to open this kind of school. But it was literary education that appealed most strongly to African pupils.

The role of the government and missions in African education is well analysed by the author. Professional teacher training schools fulfilled an

important role in African education. Dr Zvobgo considers this matter in all its aspects: government subsidies, organisation, reforms, etc.

The ministry of healing was also a means of carrying into Africa the total salvation of body and soul, as Christ had done. It was a very convincing way to evangelise. So missionaries opened hospitals, dispensaries and clinics. Initially Africans had no confidence in White doctors. Later on the missionaries gained the confidence of Africans by gentleness supported by spectacular cures, and missionaries took advantage of this confidence by ministering to their spiritual needs at the same time.

In the last chapter, the author presents some statistics, which show the growth and expansion of Christianity in Zimbabwe. Of interest is that ordained ministries among the Africans, in spite of the stringent rules, began to appear in almost all the denominations from 1924 on: in the Catholic church, however, the first two priests were ordained only in 1947.

Dr Zvobgo offers us a very useful book on how to know and understand the Christian history of Zimbabwe, which will be an essential basis for further investigation. It is a precious contribution to the history of Africa, and in particular to that of Zimbabwe, which cannot ignore the role played by the churches and their missionaries. Churches have always brought to Africa the equilibrium for harmonious development. The author shows skill and balance in his presentation. Sometimes we would like to see more interpretation, and criticism of the events.

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FRANCISCO A. CORREIA, S. J.

Politics of Repression and Resistance: Face to Face with Combat Theology
By Canaan Sodindo Banana. Gweru, Mambo Press, 1996, 335pp., ISBN 0-86922-650-9.

Racism among Whites is used to justify what Banana calls a 'combat theology'. He writes,

... missionary motives were often at variance with the economic interests of their Governments, but this in no way detracts from the fact that European Churches often shared the same attitude of superiority towards the beliefs, values, customs and traditions of the peoples of lands being colonised.

Banana provides a detailed account of the responses of the Church to the challenge to remove White supremacist policies. He articulates well the complex relationship between Church and State in politics, against the background of a war of liberation in which Banana himself took part as both Church leader and politician.