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**Christianity and African nationalism in South
Africa in the first half of the 20th century**

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Christianity and African Nationalism in South Africa in the First Half of the 20th Century

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The origin of African political consciousness in southern Africa can be traced back to the first half of the 19th century, to the impact of the Christian missions and to the development of a non-racial constitution at the Cape ... The expectation of progressive involvement in a modern state was bolstered by several additional factors. The most important of these stemmed from Christian missionary education, an education which provided moral principles for individual righteousness. Given the questioning and often the partial rejection of tribal ethics and organisation, these principles were then extended to social and political activity, so providing the motivation, not for political assertion, but for moral appeals to justice even if these appeals were not backed up by effective political organisation.¹ Peter Walshe, *The Rise of African Nationalism in South Africa*, 1970

The strengthening of mission stations and their growing educational institutions, particularly in the Ciskei and Transkei, set in motion a powerful process whereby a significant number of Africans were Christianized and given a western education. They were thus set apart from traditional African society and equipped to take up the promise of common citizenship in the Cape Colony as "civilized British subjects". It was the emergence of this small but visible new social group that brought to the fore new contentious questions about the implementation of the liberal ideal of a non-racial society.² Sheridan Johns, *Protest and Hope 1882-1934*, 1972

The political awareness of this new class was shaped by three main factors: the influence of Christian missions ... Of these factors the missionary stimulus was undoubtedly the strongest ... The members of the new educated class of Africans which emerged in consequence of these developments soon became aware of the overall discrepancy between Christian doctrine and western political ideals on one

¹ P. Walshe, *The Rise of African Nationalism in South Africa: The African National Congress 1912-1952* (London: C.Hurst and Company, 1970) pp.1,7.

² S. Johns, ed., *Protest and Hope 1882-1934*, vol. One, *From Protest to Challenge: A Documentary History of African Politics in South Africa 1882-1964* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1972) p.3.

hand and the realities of white conquest on the other. Andre Odendaal, *Vukani Bantu: The Beginnings of Black Political Protest in South Africa to 1912*.³ 1984

In South African history, a fairly standard, if polygamous union, between nationalism, modernity and Christianity characterises a fair portion of the historical literature on the rise of an anti-colonial nationalism.⁴ It can be summarised as follows. Towards the end of the 19th century some African men converted to Christianity and became educated in mission schools. These men, a new, black elite, embraced not only modern political thinking but also modern behaviour and practices (and they practiced proper Christianity). They became South Africa's first generation of African (not ethnic) nationalists, advocating cross-ethnic alliances in the fashioning of an anti-state politics. Perhaps the epitome of this trend was Don Davidson Tengo Jabavu, a Xhosa-speaking Mfengu, journalist, Methodist, lay preacher and political activist educated in the United Kingdom and United States of America.⁵ His equals would have included John Langalibalele Dube of Natal and first president of the South African Natives National Congress (later ANC), a product of the American Board Mission, as well as Modiri Molema, of whom Jane Starfield has recently written. These were men who drew upon their mission experiences and religious training in support of a protest politics, characterised in the first few decades after Union by the activities of the ANC. Albeit an elite initially in support of an elite politics, their legacy is omnipresent if evanescent in the contemporary politics and remembering of the ANC.

The Christianity equals nationalism narrative, however begs several questions. The first and most important, for me, concerns the relationship between Christianity and African nationalism. This touches, though, on broader considerations of black nationalism in South Africa in the first half of the 20th century. What were the links between Christianity and this early nationalism?

A second question concerns the nature of African nationalism present in this anti-colonial politics, which leads to a third: what kind of 'national' was the character of African nationalism? There are some other analytic categories and modes of thinking which help to inform deconstructions of the narrative, to do with modernity, faith and questions of status versus class, as well as the Eurocentric logos of much of it (though I don't propose to answer these following today). How elite was the early nationalist movement, and were only

³ A. Odendaal, *Vukani Bantu: The Beginnings of Black Protest Politics in South Africa to 1912* (Cape Town: 1984) pp.3-4.

⁴ This view follows through most of the chapters in Richard Elphick and Rodney Davenport's edited collection, *Christianity in South Africa: A Political, Social and Cultural History* (David Philip, Cape Town, 1997).

⁵ C. Higgs, *The Ghost of Equality: The Public Lives of D. D. T. Jabavu of South Africa 1885-1959* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1997).

Christians part of the elite? Was nationalism a political response of only the elite? Were only Christians nationalists? Were there non-nationalist Christians? In what follows I attempt to answer some of these questions, as well as my meta-question: why is it important to answer them. This is a tricky task, because a paper like this inevitably sets up some oppositions. Part of the paper then becomes an attempt to counter these oppositions, while still putting forth its own coherent narrative (I anticipate two principle critiques in respect of this paper, but I don't want to pre-empt by outlining them at this point).

Deconstructing the Mission-Education Narrative

The jizz of the mission package, outlined above, is fundamentally correct. The quality of scholarship, which is a characteristic of its proponents, goes much of the way to explaining why, in most secondary texts which do refer to it, Walshe, Johns and Odendaal appear as principle sources. The problem, though, is not so much with some of the constituent elements of the package, but the package itself. This is clearly indicated in James Campbell's work on the influence of Ethiopianism - in this case the African Methodist Episcopal Church – on African nationalism: 'Nationalist historians elaborated the interpretation in the 1950s and 1960s, firmly locating the AME Church in a teleology which reached its fulfilment in the formation of the South African Native National Congress in 1912'. However, "the equation of Ethiopianism and African nationalism conceals as much as it reveals".⁶ Although Campbell's intent is not to explain the origins of African nationalism, but rather the origins, appeal and nature of African Methodism, the breadth of attention he gives to his subjects shows up the poverty of work which considers Christianity only in as much as it was a source of African nationalism.

Following Campbell, I am very wary of such a neat teleology, where Christianity becomes the handmaiden of nationalist agitation, rather than – as Campbell shows – a phenomenon in its own right. In the teleological view of the relationship between the Christian faith and African nationalism, Christianity's sole purpose is to provide a crucible for the emergence of African nationalism: a teleology implies a design with a specific end in mind.⁷

⁶ J. Campbell, "'Like Locusts in Pharaoh's Palace': The Origins and Politics of African Methodism in the Orange Free State, 1895-1914," *African Studies* 53, no. 1 (1994). 41-42 To begin with, the official name of the organisation was the South African Natives National Congress. J. Campbell, *Songs of Zion: The African Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States and South Africa* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1995)., p.xi and chapter five. Also Birgit Meyer, "Christianity in Africa: From African Independent to Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33, no. 1 (2004), Terence Ranger, "Religious Movements and Politics in Sub-Saharan Africa," *African Studies Review* 29, no. 2 (1986).

⁷ A teleological explanation either explains a process by the end-state towards which it is directed; or explains the existence of something by the function it fulfils. In sociology, the former tends to be confined to theories of purposive human action, whereas the latter is a feature of functionalism. It is

This teleology is present in a range of works dealing with black protest in South Africa, firstly within the liberal historiographical tradition and later much of the revisionist history of the 1970s and '80s. It is present usually as a reference to the mission origins of the first generation of African nationalists. It crops up especially in syntheses of South African history:

The roots of African political organization have often been traced to the foundation of the African National Congress in 1912. However, as Odendaal (1984) has shown, black protest politics had a long tradition before then. The earliest examples of black political organizations were found in the eastern Cape in the late 19th century where the franchise involved the propertied in politics, led by a mission-educated elite.⁸

While more recent works on, for instance, South African resistance politics of the period may eschew the narrative as a totality, elements of it still remain as unexamined assumptions. This is a discourse which has also moved over into popular knowledge, for instance in popular writing about the ANC's history as well as in ANC discourse itself. A very recent example of this is Jeff Radebe's speech on this year's Easter Weekend, to the St John's Apostolic Church of Prophecy in North-West Province:

After all, the history of the ANC is synonymous with particularly the Christian faith, such that even the founding President of the African National Congress was the Reverend John Langalibalele Dube.⁹

What of it? Apart from the fact that such comments are interesting in light of South Africa's putative secular status, much is in fact concealed by an overlap of Christianity and African nationalism – to do both with African nationalism and with Christianity. This is where it becomes important to examine the contents of this package more closely.

widely argued that teleological explanations are admissible only with reference to individuals and groups since they alone have explicitly formulated purposes or goals. Societies, by contrast, set themselves no such objectives. Evolutionary and systems theories, as well as theories which imply a historical logic or inevitability (such as historical materialism), are often criticized as being unacceptably teleological—although there have been controversial attempts to argue that even these explanations can be translated into conventional causal accounts. A Dictionary of Sociology. John Scott and Gordon Marshall. Oxford University Press 2009. Oxford Reference Online. Oxford University Press. JohannesburgUniversity. 7 May 2009.

<<http://0www.oxfordreference.com.ujlink.uj.ac.za:80/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t88.e2341>>

⁸ N. Worden, *The Making of Modern South Africa*, ed. M. Chamberlain, H. T. Dickinson, and Joe Smith, Second ed., *Historical Association Studies* (Oxford and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1995) p.80.

⁹ J. Radebe, 'Easter Weekend Speech', <http://www.anc.org.za/show.php?doc=./ancdocs/speeches/2009/sp0412b.html>. Visited 3 May 2009.

Back to the 19th century, then, and the spread of Christian missions in South Africa. The key elements of the mission-education narrative – the ones that are most often spoken about – are the impact of mission Christianity on black South Africans; the relationship of Christianity to nationalism and, much less explicitly, the modernising influence of Christianity (where nationalism is fundamentally a political response of the modern era).

The coherency of the narrative, though, including the way in which it establishes its credibility arise from its implicit assertions of causality. These include a causal relationship between white evangelical teachings, African patterns of conversion, access to education, the abandonment of traditional belief, and an espousal of a nationally-based anti-colonial politics.¹⁰ The causal sequences include the following reasoning:

- i) white mission teachings caused Africans to convert to Christianity
- ii) their faith caused newly-converted African men to seek education of a western standard in mission schools
- iii) at the same time they learnt that traditional practices and beliefs were bad, and that to be Christians meant to act as a Christian i.e. as a European
- iv) Christianity also taught them that all men are equal in the eyes of the Christian God
- v) also at school they gained access to modern and liberal political theory (which was the meta-curriculum of the teaching)
- vi) the adoption of modern political theory provided the tools for the foundation of a nationalist-inspired politics of resistance.

The stability of some of the cause-and-effect processes needs some jarring. The first one rests on the relationship between white mission effort and black conversion. More recently, some of these causal assumptions have been shown to be rather more casual.¹¹ Whatever else the debate around the impact of John and Jean Comaroffs' work has revealed, it has shown at least the lack of any straight-forward relationship between missionary teaching and African conversion. Much more forcefully than the Comaroffs, Elizabeth Elbourne's work on the London Missionary Society in the early-19th century had demonstrated the tremendous impact that indigenous evangelists had on the spread of Christianity amongst the remnants of the Khoikhoi.¹² My own work has traced later-19th century patterns of

¹⁰ Though there are very real links between tradition and the cultural nationalism of some of this anti-colonial politics, the former are not always very well brought out in the straight-forward political nationalism narrative.

¹¹ Note I am not here trying to deny the possibility of casual relationships between historical phenomena. This would represent an act of extreme disciplinary abnegation. Instead I would call for a better understanding of the nature of causality in history. In this I am very much influenced by William Sewall Jr's recent book. Sewall, W. H. *Logics of History*. (University of Chicago Press Chicago, 2005).

¹² Elizabeth Elbourne, *Blood Ground: Colonialism, Missions, and the Contest for Christianity in the Cape Colony and Britain, 1799-1853*, ed. Don Harmon Akenson, *McGill-Queen's Studies in the History of Religion* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002).

conversion, where it becomes apparent that mission agency is only one of the catalysts for conversion. Instead, the encounter between first-generation black converts to Christianity, and white missionaries becomes one in which the agency of the converts is emphasised. Indeed, there is a substantial literature now on the fractured and fraught nature of conversion itself. Together, this work deconstructs any straight-forward causal link between white mission imposition and black Christian conversion.

Another debate touching on mission history concerns the role that Christian educational institutions played, and in the nationalist sequence the issue becomes that of the role played by mission education in the creation of a black intelligentsia. The problem with this question is the answer most commonly given: that a black intelligentsia was the product of mission education, which misses out on some of the nuances of the sequence.

Initially, the development of mission-initiated institutions like Healdtown (Methodist), St Matthews (Anglican) and Lovedale (Presbyterian) may have had their impetus in evangelization strategy: English (or later isiXhosa) was necessary in order to read the Bible. Their development and continued support by Africans, though, was in response to a need for the resources with which to negotiate in colonial society. These included literacy and numeracy in English, as well as the cultural capital (another term I use loosely) for interacting with white South Africans. Education, in this sense, was a route to potential economic independence from, by the late-19th century, structures like migrant labour. Even then, education was no insurance against being sucked into a downward economic spiral ending in migrant labour. Many of the young men, and to a certain extent young women, attending Lovedale in the later-19th century were not doing so because they perceived a facility in Latin and Greek as an inevitable consequence of conversion, but because it represented access to a new mode of existence. While mission societies, therefore, gave access to educational possibility, the vision African converts (and non-converts) had of those possibilities differed.

Further, to suggest that mission education and the tools – intellectual and otherwise – it provided were responsible for the abandonment of tradition, because of the inevitable association of western education with modernity, is also missing out on some of the story. Of the black men, committed Christians, who graduated Lovedale having learnt Latin and Greek¹³, an insignificant minority countenanced completely the abandonment of the practices and customs many of the missionaries viewed as retrogressive – polygamy, lobola, circumcision, and the like. This did not mean they did not consider themselves to be modern. Enlightenment philosophy was not discontinuous with veneration of the ancestors.

¹³ Not as many as some of the Lovedale blurb would have us believe.

Perhaps the most disingenuous part of this narrative lies in the way mission education leads almost inevitably into nationalist politics, as if nationalism were something the black elite caught at school. There seems to be an equation something like the following at work in this part of the narrative:

mission education + oppression by the white state = protest politics.

Some of the issue here lies with a collapsing of temporality, a confusion of a repeated process with the first instance of that process. Probably nearly every significant leader of the ANC did attend a mission school (or a school run by a church) in the first half of the 20th century. Amongst the several reasons for this, the most obvious is that, until the mid-1950s, the mission schools were the only source of higher-level education. However, there is a great difference between someone like DDT Jabavu attending school before 1900, and Nelson Mandela attending school in the 1920s. Mission institutions were not static enterprises, and the memories that prominent black protest figures have of their schooling are quite different depending on when they were at school. At some point in the 1920s it is likely that students at mission schools not only experienced those schools as sources of education (and much else), but also as memories of a schooling system now several decades old. The mission education trope has had continual reinvention throughout the 20th century.

At this point I feel like I am really splitting hairs, so let me put my thinking here differently. I would rather an equation which read:

x (where x is unknown) + oppression = protest politics OR

mission education/ Christianity + oppression = x (where x is unknown).

If the perceived relationship between Christianity and protest is broken open, what different questions and issues are revealed, about both the profession of Christianity and the practice of nationalism?

To a certain extent, the first of these issues has already been broken open. Of all the Africans who went through mission schooling in the late 19th and early 20th century, not all became part of what the literature refers to as the black elite. Many were Christians, though, and not all Christian black Africans become members or supporters of the African National Congress. Campbell's eminently-readable work has helped to disrupt the assumed relationship between African nationalist politics and Christianity, while Paul la Hausse de Lalouviere's work on Zulu Christians in the early 20th century has begun to disrupt the relationship assumed to exist between modernity and Christianity. These and other similar works display a certain homogeneity of purpose with respect to the history of African Christianity, in that they seek to understand Christianity as part of lived experience, as part of daily life but simultaneously as part of a religious mentalité shaped in the particular South African crucible. Apart from the Comaroffs, though, whom many cite but seem not to have read, as a corpus this work does not have much attention beyond its own backyard and so its historiographically-disruptive work is not always taken up in the mainstream. Their work

opens the way for more in similar vein. Black Christian lives, and the way they understood their relationship to the forces of colonialism, occurred not only within the narrow realm of political nationalism, but across a range of spaces in which the mission toolkit was variously appropriated and used, and used differently at different I now wish to return to the relationship between Christianity and nationalism.

Reflecting on Religion

Religion is both something of a ballpark concept and a no-go area for many academics. Certainly, it is the Bermuda triangle of Marxist humanism (or humanist Marxism?). By this I mean that religion is too scary for many academics to examine closely, but that it is simultaneously an all enveloping-space with a wide variety of scarcely-understood phenomena consigned to its care.

In South Africa, studies of Christianity form the bulk of research on religion. Christianity constitutes a normalizing field against which studies of other religions are conducted (religion and Christianity are often used synonymously). In this understanding, Christianity is variously understood as a set of practices and rituals, as a denominational superstructure and, less frequently, lived faith. Seldom are these variables considered together, the last being most difficult for many rationalists to deal with. These different conceptions of religion also map onto different disciplinary approaches to religion, where – if I can caricature these approaches – departments of religious studies consider religion as lived faith, anthropologists prefer to theorise it, and historians consider religion as institutional burden in historical context.¹⁴ Or, of course, it constitutes false consciousness. This is a pity, since some cross-disciplinary contact would prove fertile grounds for the well-established literature on protest politics and African nationalism in South Africa.

However, I am not yet quite finished with Christianity in South Africa. Within the three dominant strands which consider Christianity (history, anthropology/sociology and religious studies) the terms ‘mainstream’ and ‘AIC’ appear frequently in much writing. While the use of these terms is a common heuristic device in writing about them, the terms themselves are seldom unpacked. In the first place, framing much writing on Christianity is an implicit understanding that Christian faith is always linked to a church, where the church may not represent a literal structure, but rather a congregation sharing similar beliefs and practices. According to this implicit logic, churches are then either mainstream or independent (the term that seems to have greatest currency in South African writing, though the ‘i’ can also represent ‘initiated’ or ‘instigated’). Lurking behind this division is a further one: from the

¹⁴ This is partly because most regionally-focused historians are generally suspicious of religion, viewing it often in the light of false consciousness. In the South African academy, there are very few professionally-employed historians who have Christianity as an historical phenomenon as a priority research concern. The majority of these are historians of mission.

1930s or so onwards until the last decade and a half or so, a further binary entered the field so that mainstream became equated with modernity and AICs with tradition.¹⁵ Extrapolating further, the mainstream churches and their affiliates/ offshoots become the source of nationalism, while the AICs are seen as separate from nationalist currents. This comes through very clearly in work on the AICs which characterises them as apolitical and colluding in apartheid. More recent scholarly work – not generally within history – would now include Pentecostal Charismatic Churches (Pentecostals) alongside the AICs.

I'm not trying to digress from a discussion of nationalism now. One of the reasons that little work dealing explicitly with connections between nationalism and Christianity has been done, is that the AICs – which are seen sometimes as colluding with apartheid – dominate the field in terms of research on Christianity. Most writing on black Christianity in South Africa has concentrated and continues to concentrate on its African independent (or initiated or indigenous variety)¹⁶. Despite the limitations of this typology, which reifies difference over similarity, in general this category includes the Ethiopians and Zionist churches, and more recently the Pentecostal Churches. If the first two churches represent early reactions to mission Christianity, the PCCs represent a more recent and global approach to the practice of faith. This particular research focus has been much the case since the publication of Bent Sunder's seminal work, *Bantu Prophets in South Africa* (1948), and is apparent across a range of religious, anthropological, sociological, and historical writing.

Mainstream Protestant Christianity (a most normative term) continues to have a very wide following amongst black and white South African. However, because the Protestant churches are viewed widely as having colluded with the apartheid state, the church's role under apartheid tends to be the defining feature of research into this area. James Cochrane's book, *Servants of Power*, probably set the terms of this engagement, and the church establishment's own introspection in the 1960s and 1970s, in the form of the Study

¹⁵ The debate on Christianity in the western world takes on a very different shape to the kind of anthropology of religion approach often found in African work. One of the ways in which this difference is apparent, itself a matter for further consideration, is the degree to which in the west modernity is associated with secularisation in histories of Christianity. Here I am thinking of Callum Brown's volume, *The Death of Christian Britain* (Routledge, London, 2001), in which Brown takes on the notion that industrialisation and the growth of capitalism encouraged the growth of a secular Britain. In this literature, Christianity is not really a part of modernity.

¹⁶ This point has also been made by Terence Ranger and Birgit Meyer (see above) and I am very indebted to their thinking in what follows. Meyer picks up on the debate around naming (initiated versus independent versus indigenous) on pp.447-8, 454.

Project on Christianity in an Apartheid Society (Spruces) did nothing to dispel this view.¹⁷ Paradoxically-speaking then, the mainstream churches constitute a research underdog, and black membership of these even more so.¹⁸

As studies of AICs have proliferated, the nature of the attention given them has come under scrutiny, in some very astute observations of the theoretical underpinnings of studies of African Christianity. In one of the more recent, Birgit Meyer has written about the need to “highlight not only the shift from AICs to PCCs as new foci of empirical study but also the conceptual transformation to which it gave rise”, including the way in which studies of PCCs have brought about shifts in the understandings of AICs.¹⁹ Meyer’s own work then lays out what she refers to as a set of three discursive contexts behind the framing of research into AICs: “(a) the relationship between Christianity and “traditional religion” and the question of Africanization; (b) the relationship between Africa and the ‘wider world’ and the question of globalization; and (c) the relationship between religion and politics ”.²⁰ Cutting across these contexts is a concern to unravel a complex set of understandings about what is authentically African, the degree to which tradition is anti-modern, and the degree to which independent and mainstream churches represented completely different expressions of Christianity, the one (Meyer paraphrasing Ranger) worthy of study and the other a colonial collaborator.²¹ Meyer importantly, then, brings the study of Christianity back to the relationship between religion and politics.

Nationalism and Christianity

One of the difficulties behind an extended consideration of the role of Christianity in African nationalism lies in how we understand nationalism, or at least African nationalism in the early-20th century. There is no dearth of scholarship on nationalism as a category, nor any lack of scholarship on African nationalism.²² Nationalism, however, means different things to different people (more especially to different theorists). I’m not trying to make a critique here – about the proliferation of understandings – but rather to restate what is so self-

¹⁷ J. Cochrane, *Servants of Power: The Role of the English Speaking Churches in South Africa, 1903-1930* (Johannesburg: 1987).

¹⁸ Although I refer to the mainstream churches henceforth, I am referring to the protestant mainstream churches.

¹⁹ Meyer, "Christianity in Africa: From African Independent to Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches", p.448.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid, pp.454-56, 450.

²² For instance in Craig Calhoun, "Nationalism and Ethnicity," *Annual Review of Sociology* 19 (1993), Philip Spencer and Howard Wollman, *Nationalism: A Critical Introduction* (London: Sage, 2002), Philip Spencer and Howard Wollman, *Nations and Nationalism: A Reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005).

evident that it is sometimes forgotten. In what follows I want to reflect upon two different ways of thinking about nationalism.²³

As the quotations at the opening of this paper will make clear, African nationalism is often understood in South Africa as a black anti-colonial politics, or a form of protest and resistance to the white state. In this paradigm, black nationalism arises out of a desire by Africans living in South Africa for a slice of national sovereignty, to have sovereignty alongside whites within the territorial boundaries of South Africa. This is a view of nationalism which sees it as being predominantly a political response to segregation and apartheid, and contested at the level of the political. In addition, it is linked to conceptions of citizenship and rights: equal rights for black and white South Africans. What characterises the nationalism of the ANC in the early 20th century then, is a sense that Africans need to unite to overcome white oppression of various sorts. The end goal of this nationalism is political, in the sense of shared power.²⁴ Nationalism understood in this way derives from relatively well-established theories of nationalism, which tend to locate its operation principally in the sphere of the public, and mediated through and in relation to the creation of a political community.

In the South African case, this mode of enquiry is evident in the sources I quoted at the start. Because they understand nationalism primarily as a political response to white supremacy, they locate their work in a protest and resistance paradigm. As a result, they focus their attention on African nationalism as exemplified by the ANC, because it was the movement which most explicitly articulated –using the language of nation – the need for African unity and sovereignty. Despite all its shortcomings – elitism, lack of mass support – which even its chroniclers have indicated – the ANC has, since the 1970s at least, been and still is seen as the epitome of nationalist movements (nothing of course to do with longevity, perish the thought). This is a view of nationalism which measures it according to its success.

Nationalism as nation, though, is only part of the story. The other part looks to considerations of nationalism as national identity, notions of shared nationhood or shared national culture. ²⁵ Bhikhu Parekh explains how national identity is comprised of three elements:

The first of these is the constitution or the constitutive principles of a political community ... The second dimension of national identity has to do with the way a political community imagines itself ... Since the political community spans past, present and future generations and involves unseen millions, it requires a remarkable act of

23 To a certain extent, but not in totality, these might approximate the distinction that theorists draw between primordialist and modernist conceptions of nationalism, see above. Also see Mortimer, E., and R. Fine. *People, nation and state: the meaning of ethnicity and nationalism*. IB Tauris, 1999.

24 The documents in the first volume of *From Protest to Challenge* make this abundantly clear. Johns, ed., *Protest and Hope 1882-1934*.

25 Benedict R. O'G Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991), Ernest Gellner, "Nationalism," *Theory and Society* 10, no. 6 (1981).

imagination, and is in that sense an imagined community... The third component of national identity has to do with the way one relates to one's [sic] community.²⁶ Parekh's explanation is useful, because he shows how the national imagining required is not always, nor necessarily an act of the intellect but is 'necessarily articulated in the language of evocative images ... images crystallise and offer highly condensed and idealised accounts of what the community takes to be its ideals, values and organising principles'.²⁷ While Parekh's formulation is highly-dependent on Benedict Anderson's work, Parekh is making the point that the imagination required of a national community may emerge in and through acts of literacy, but will spread through shared imagination, where imagination is different to the work of the intellect.

I am interested in what happens if we start to consider the operation of nationalism in this regard. Let me pose a question: what were the ideals, values and organising principles of African nationalism in the early-20th century? At this point most readers will think I've lost the plot since the answer, which is the answer every writer on the ANC has ever given, is so self-evident. On the other hand though, I want to push further how we understand the shared principles of early black nationalism in South Africa. Here I want to make an argument for shared faith, in a way which goes beyond the limits of the rational secular imagination. What would it mean to say that, apart from a shared anti-colonial sentiment, Christianity (or for the Marxists, a Christian humanism) served as the only common source of identity and organising principle within African nationalism.

Some of my thinking in this respect is influenced by Talal Asad.²⁸ According to Asad ideas about religion, and here he would include notions of secularism, are fundamental to the *raison d'être* of the 20th-century political subject.²⁹ This is reinforced in other work which establishes linkages between religion and nationalism.³⁰ Partha Chatterjee, in his work on Indian nationalism, is very explicit about the connections which exist between identities which have their source in the private, and which contribute to the formation of anti-

²⁶ Parekh, Bhikhu. "Defining national identity in a multicultural society." In *People, Nation and State*, London, IB Tauris, edited by Mortimer, Edward and Fine, Robert, 1999.

²⁷ *Ibid*, p.67.

²⁸ Talal Asad, "Religion, Nation-State, Secularism," in *Nation and Religion: Perspectives on Europe and Asia*, ed. Peter van der Veer and Hartmut Lehmann (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999) p.178.

²⁹ I'm avoiding the word 'modern' here, because I don't want to digress at this point into a discussion about modernity and nationalism, and the equally necessary conversations about non-western modernity/ alternate modernities.

³⁰ John D. Rogers, "Post-Orientalism and the Interpretation of Premodern and Modern Political Identities: The Case of Sri Lanka," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 53, no. 1 (1994), Peter van der Veer, *Imperial Encounters: Religion and Modernity in India and Britain* (Princeton and London: Princeton University Press, 2001), Peter van der Veer and Hartmut Lehmann, "Introduction," in *Nation and Religion: Perspectives on Europe and Asia*, ed. Peter van der Veer and Hartmut Lehmann (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

colonial nationalisms. Work on gendered nationalisms would make the same point, that identities forged close to home resonate within the public.

Asad, then, provides a very different way into thinking about the relationship between Christianity and African nationalism. The question becomes, rather than the mission influence, or the influence of mission education on African nationalists, the role that faith plays in conceptualisations of national identity. I cannot stress how much this is a very different question. The first is instrumental, the second – excuse the phrase – requires the academic to take a leap of faith into the unknown, in attempting to account for the operation of belief.

Put differently, this requires that we begin to think about the importance of Christian belief and practice, both as emic and etic categories. Catherine Higgs and Paul la Hausse do this for the subjects of their work, so that they take seriously the way in which Christian belief interacted with other elements, including notions of tradition, to create a repertoire for political action.³¹ There has, though, been little systematic attempt (apart perhaps from Campbell) to account for the impact of faith as part of an ideology fuelling, not only a cultural or ethnic nationalism, but a nationalism that is geared towards the production of a nation-state potentially inclusive of all its subjects. Even considerations of the former – cultural and ethnic nationalism – tend not to see Christianity-as-faith relevant to the creation of identities.

Is there any evidence for this? Some of the difficulty in attempting to answer this question is that, by definition, if faith is an emic category there is no proof for its operation, apart from what individuals might tell us. James Calata, for instance, and DDT Javabu, for instance, do reflect on their faith to greater and lesser degrees, in some of their writing, and they also reflect on the importance of Christianity to themselves.³² Assertions of faith are, in fact, common currency for black political figures in the early- 20th century. Walshe refers to this as a 'Christian vision of non-racial justice'.³³

Conclusions

If one of the questions I posed at the start of this paper concerns the relationship between Christianity and African nationalism, I realise that I have yet to provide substance to this. While much has been written of the relationship, I would suggest that the content of this devolves into a consideration of the impact of mission education on African nationalism. This, though, is an insufficient account of the impact. Drawing on bodies of theory to do with nationalism – which is where I touch on the broader

³¹ Also M. Goedhals, "African Nationalism and Indigenous Christianity: A Study in the Life of James Calata (1895-1983)," *Journal of Religion in Africa* (2003).

³² Higgs, *The Ghost of Equality: The Public Lives of D. D. T. Jabavu of South Africa 1885-1959, Ja Calata*, (1974).

³³ Walshe, *The Rise of African Nationalism in South Africa: The African National Congress 1912-1952*, p.158.

considerations of black nationalism in South Africa in the first half of the 20th century – I suggest that faith is central to the making of modern national identities. Indeed, though I don't provide the evidence, Christianity formed a nexus of common thinking for the full spectrum of early-20th century nationalism. Rather than limit the impact of Christianity to the influence of mission education, I would call for Christianity to be accorded a more central role in considerations of African nationalism.

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