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ESSAY REVIEW

THE SHIFTING THRESHOLD IN
INDEPENDENT CHURCHES

WHILE LATELY THERE has been a notable shift in research approaches by scholars of Independent Churches, from an overly critical if not disparaging assessment to a positive and constructive appraisal,¹ there have not been enough case studies highlighting the Independent Churches' response to changing religio-cultural, socio-political, and economic situations. More studies of such a nature, bringing out the changing theological, ecclesiological and church-state perspectives, could go a long way in the establishment of a fair and objective historiographical legacy to counterbalance the predominantly subjective legacy that has often thrived on generalizing isolated cases.

Daneel, in *Quest for Belonging* and *Fambidzano*,² his latest contributions to the study of Independency, sets out to examine some changes in theological and ecclesiological perspectives that Independent Churches have undergone during the forty years since Sundkler's seminal study in 1948.³ *Quest for Belonging* is an introductory study that grapples with both typological and missiological issues that have been examined by scholars such as Turner, Sundkler, and others.⁴ *Fambidzano* provides a sequel to *Quest for Belonging* and gives a descriptive account of the launching and development of the Shona Independent Churches Ecumenical Conference (Fambidzano). This study aims at motivating dialogue and debate on the theological implications of ecumenism at the levels of both vocational training and education and socio-economic development. *Fambidzano* is a case study that reinforces the theological perspective that Daneel adopts in *Quest for Belonging*.

While *Quest for Belonging* is based on research results from the fieldwork Daneel conducted during the late 1960s, *Fambidzano* is based on his own experiences and observations and the annual reports of Fambidzano since 1972. It is noteworthy that he draws upon first-hand material he acquired between 1972 and 1980, when he was the Director for this ecumenical organization. To this material he added data from ecumenical services and a variety of religious ceremonies taking place in the member churches of Fambidzano. Daneel also added data gathered from casual sample surveys and in-depth interviews with 45 former Theological Education by Extension students. The appendices included in *Fambidzano* reflect the astuteness and thoroughness that have always characterized Daneel's research. It is no wonder that he has been referred to as 'a born fieldworker of rare quality'.⁵

¹ B. G. Sundkler, *Zulu Zion and Some Swazi Zionists* (Lund, Gleerup, 1976); M. L. Martin *Kimbangu: An African Prophet and His Church* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1975).

² M. L. Daneel, *Quest for Belonging* (Gweru, Mambo Press, 1987), 310 pp., Z\$22.10; *Fambidzano* (Gweru, Mambo Press, 1989), 645 pp., illus., Z\$54.50.

³ B. G. Sundkler, *Bantu Prophets in South Africa* (London, Lutterworth, 1948).

⁴ H. W. Turner, *Religious Innovation in Africa* (London, Oxford Univ. Press, 1979); Sundkler, *Bantu Prophets in South Africa*.

⁵ See 'Foreword' in Daneel, *Quest for Belonging*, 8.

The basic assumption underlying both books is that Independent Churches represent a genuine and viable stream of African Christianity that should be viewed in equal light with historical (mission) churches. These two streams of African Christianity are of equal importance and should embark on a course of ecumenical co-operation that may result in their gradual convergence. Daneel arrives at this conclusion as a result of his recognition that Independent Churches — in particular the Shona Churches that he studies but also including many others in Africa — have undergone many changes necessitated by both internal and external dynamics.

Daneel argues that the Independent churches, like historical (mission) churches, are characterized by the incompleteness and frailty of human nature to be peripheral but always strive towards the centre in recognition of the Lordship of Christ. Such striving to the centre is shown in the embracing of theological education and development-oriented projects that Fambidzano member churches have embarked on for about two decades. It is within this ecumenical framework that Daneel examines the changes in christology, eschatology, pneumatology and related soteriological issues. These issues are crucial since they could influence the overall ecclesiological and theological outlook of the churches under review.

The question of christology features prominently in both *Quest for Belonging* and *Fambidzano*. Contending with critics like Oosthuizen, Beyerhaus and others who labelled Independent Churches as sycretistic, messianic and post-Christian,⁶ Daneel conceded that, according to Western theological categories, no 'properly' worked out christology exists. He argues strongly, however, that a 'presupposed christology' exists that in no way denies Christ or his cross.⁷

With respect to leadership in Zionist Churches, Daneel's analyses of sermons lead him to reject the often stressed view of the founding leader as the 'Black Messiah'. Rather, Daneel talks of the leadership as 'iconic', that is, the leader is seen as an image or reflection of Christ and not as subverting Christ's role.⁸ Contrary to the theological stance adopted by some Western theologians who are bent on deprecating practices associated with African traditional religions, Daneel approves of the 'name-giving' ceremonies and the role given to deceased members of the churches. He argues that these practices cohere with the African religious mentality which thrives upon the concern for continuing meaningful ties between the dead and the living members. *Fambidzano* goes a long way towards showing that these age-long practices in African traditional religion have been transformed and perfected by the Christian Gospel, albeit in ways that manifest the original cultural context. This is one of the many areas in which Independent Churches are making a lasting contribution to African theology. It is from these theological developments within Independent churches that historical churches can find ready resources as they strive towards developing a theology of inculturation.

Daneel demonstrates that since the founding of Fambidzano and the launching

⁶ G. C. Oosthuizen, *Post-Christianity in Africa* (London, Hurst, 1968); P. Beyerhaus, 'An approach to the African independent church movement', *Ministry* (1969), IX, 74-9.

⁷ Daneel, *Fambidzano*, 193.

⁸ Daneel, *Quest for Belonging*, 191.

of Theological Education by Extension in 1972 a strong incarnational christology has developed in the Fambidzano member churches.⁹ It is significant that a better understanding of the incarnated Christ correspondingly leads to a more balanced pneumatology, 'which offsets the "monopoly" of prophets on spirit manifestations and allows more readily for a much wider conception of individual spirit inspiration in all aspects of life'.¹⁰

Hitherto, many Independent Churches have been criticized for placing too much emphasis on the here and now at the expense of the future. The over-accentuated role of healing and exorcism in Spirit-type (Zionist) churches reflected such a 'salvation now' outlook. Daneel shows how a balanced eschatology has emerged through the ecumenical ventures represented by Fambidzano and the theological education embraced by both leaders and the rank and file. Within Fambidzano's ecumenical endeavours members appropriate Jesus' prayer for ecclesial unity (John 17:21). Such ecclesial unity, Daneel argues, brings a future-oriented eschatology into the churches. Characterized by mutual support and witness among groups and churches Fambidzano's ecumenical experiment has generated a sense of security and makes the Church truly 'a place to feel at home'.

Theological Education by Extension courses have not only substantially bettered the formation of Christian Independent Churches but also helped them to move away from fragmented interpretation of the Bible to a more systematized approach.¹¹ The courses have also imparted sound historical perspectives to the members. Daneel's presentation and analyses of sermons clearly show that this educational innovation has substantially liberated participants from 'incapsulation' in a doctrinaire system which in some respects almost verged on religious bigotry.¹² It has not only undermined 'self-satisfied ecclesiastical exclusivism'¹³ but also helped member churches to go beyond parochial tendencies that Sundkler called 'ecclesiastical tribes'.¹⁴

On church-state relations Daneel is consistent in his conclusion that the element of political protest in Shona Independent Churches is much less evident than was earlier expected. Daneel, like Murphree¹⁵ and Thomas,¹⁶ argues that only in rare cases have the churches been drawn to active subversion. Daneel contends that during the war of liberation in Zimbabwe Independent Churches did not overtly join the guerrillas nor always support them. In fact he argues that Mutendi's Zion Christian Church and Johannes Maranke's Vapostori maintained a certain aloofness. The approach of various Independent church leaders towards the war was ambivalent. Therefore, whatever level of involvement there may have been, one cannot speak of a total mobilization of the Independent Churches in the freedom struggle. In this respect, then, it would be appropriate to describe Fambidzano member churches as 'acquiescent' because it was the policy of

⁹ Daneel, *Fambidzano*, 167, 344.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 393.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 340.

¹² *Ibid.*, 386.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 169.

¹⁴ Sundkler, *Bantu Prophets in South Africa*, 310-23.

¹⁵ M. W. Murphree, *Christianity and the Shona* (London, Athlone Press, 1969).

¹⁶ N. Thomas 'Christianity, Politics and the Manyika' (Boston, Univ. of Boston, Ph.D. thesis, 1968).

most of these churches 'to avoid political activism of a critical nature'.¹⁷ However, after Independence, Daneel shows how Fambidzano became enthusiastically interested and involved in development projects based on a development plan that fits neatly into the massive Five-Year National Development Plan instituted by the government.

In spite of all the good that has come from Fambidzano for nearly two decades, there are two major problems that may ultimately undermine the very character and identity of the member churches. Firstly, the propensity for greater institutionalization, reflected in the building of schools and headquarters, does not augur well for the movement. It is sad to learn that Independent Churches are moving towards institutionalization while historical churches are realizing the difficulties inherent in the system and are moving towards de-institutionalization.

Secondly, the level of dependency on foreign aid for Fambidzano's Theological Education by Extension programmes and for development projects and institutions is alarming. This apparent mimicry of outmoded models that characterized historical (mission) churches is a bad sign for the Independent Churches. It is a sign of a growing neo-colonial mentality making inroads in churches that have always been associated with self-reliance and the development of ecclesiological structures and organization that were sustained by local, if limited, resources.

Receiving aid and not liberation is Fambidzano's Achilles' heel. 'There is a risk today that creating and engaging in works of charity may placate the church's conscience by closing its eyes and ears to alienating social conflicts.'¹⁸ Fambidzano has done little to equip itself with tools to analyse the present situation so that it can study what it is doing in the light of the Gospel. Apparently Fambidzano churches are seeking to emerge from poverty by means of programmes of assistance that will unquestionably only further enslave them. 'The church must promote a Christianity that will help the African masses get out of the deadlock that has followed Independence, and a Christianity that will become a force resisting injustice and exploitation.'¹⁹

In spite of the shortcomings in Fambidzano's development policy it is heartening that Daneel transcends the subjective and critically raises questions that matter for Fambidzano's livelihood. I recommend Daneel's studies to churchmen, academics and students and anyone interested in African ecumenical trends, African theology and the growth of Independentism.

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¹⁷ M. Schoffeleers, 'African Independent Churches and the Medicalization of Christianity in Southern Africa' (Uppsala, paper presented at a conference hosted by the Swedish Institute for African Studies and Dept. of Theology and Missiology, Univ. of Uppsala, on 'Religion and Politics in Southern Africa', 1989), 3.

¹⁸ J-M. Ela, *My Faith as an African* (New York, Orbis Books, 1989), 154.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 176.