INTRODUCTION

APPROACHING THE PROBLEM

During the last decades leaders have appeared in various parts of Africa, calling to life new religious organizations, formed partly by secessions from White Mission churches, and partly by spontaneous growth. The prophet movement on the lower Congo; the role of the Watch-Tower movement instigating disturbances in Northern Rhodesia, Nyasaland and Belgian Congo; the emergence of Independent Schools in Kenya; Separatist Church movements in an embryonic stage in Tanganyika and Uganda; a fairly rich flora of African sects on the West coast of Africa; and, above all, the hypertrophy of African churches in the Union of South Africa: the whole of this development presents the Protestant missionary undertaking in Africa with one of its most baffling practical problems, and we are hitherto very poorly informed as to the very nature of the movement. The present study is an attempt to analyse the sociological and religious problems within the "Separatist Church" movement in South Africa, on the assumption that the development of the movement in South Africa may have its bearing upon and be relevant to similar movements among other Bantu further north.

There was a time in South Africa when the "Ethiopian Problem" was discussed with interest and almost with anxiety, not only by missionaries, but also by politicians, scholars and others interested in the welfare of the country. This occurred in the years after the Boer War (1899–1902) and in the days of the Zulu Rebellion, 1906. It was then feared that the Ethiopian movement was an African political underground movement aiming at ousting the White man from South Africa, or, at least, that it might establish a pan-African National Church which would cause harm by hampering the evangelization of the Bantu peoples.

If the problem now—after forty years—seems to have lost its primary interest, as far as the general public in South Africa is concerned, this is not due to any decline of the Bantu Independent church movement as such. The movement is now numerically very much stronger than a generation ago. Further, the history of this African movement in recent years, full of

dramatic points and vicissitudes, elucidates more clearly than anything else an important phase in the ascendancy of the Bantu peoples. The fact that all this has remained, and still remains, very much a hidden world to those who otherwise have the cause of the Africans at heart, is significant of the general development in the Union at the present time; the gulf separating the races is much wider now than at the beginning of the century.

This study pertains almost exclusively to conditions within one South African tribe, the Zulus. This limitation has been made for definite methodological reasons. With my experience from ten years of investigation into this subject I would now claim that the research area could advantageously be limited still further. One could have concentrated on one particular Independent Zulu church, or on an area geographically more circumscribed than that of a whole tribe stretching—as the Zulu language area does—from the Natal coast line to Johannesburg.

In planning the study on lines such as those drawn in this book, one is in a position of being able to define clearly the tribal, cultural and religious background of the problem, and to relate the phenomena of Bantu church life to definite social conditions in different communities (reserve, farm and urban areas).

The material on which my conclusions are based consists of my own direct observations in the field, together with local observations over a certain period (1941–45) made by Zulu assistants. I have been privileged in having had full access to rich and instructive material in the official archives in South Africa. My knowledge of the Independent Zulu churches was gained in the course of my missionary activity in South Africa, 1937–42, and during six months of special study of the problem on the Witwatersrand in 1945. As a missionary in Central Natal (farm and coal-mining districts) and in Northern Zululand (a tribal reserve), I had daily opportunities of coming into contact with the leaders and common people of these Independent Zulu churches, meeting them, as I did, wherever I went. In 1942 I went for three years to Tanganyika, and this *trek* to the north helped me, I believe, in letting me see the South African situation more in perspective than would otherwise have been the case.

From time to time I arranged meetings where Independent Church leaders met with pastors, evangelists, and ordinary lay

members of Mission Churches. We had very stimulating talks, sometimes friendly, sometimes arguing rather heatedly, in the end agreeing to differ on fundamental theological and religious questions, such as the interpretation of the Bible, the role of baptism and purification rites, the Black Christ and the Whites' Christ, and scores of other problems. Sometimes our Lutheran Church at Ceza, Northern Zululand, was filled with hundreds of "Zionists" in their colourful vestments. I attended preaching and purification services and other meetings of the Independent Churches whenever my own regular mission work allowed me to do so.

I was greatly helped by the competent and keen co-operation of some ten Zulu assistants. Teaching theology for a short while at a Lutheran college in Natal, I attempted to interest the students in a thorough study of this subject, of which they already had considerable practical knowledge. After some initial training in the art of observation and note-making, they were in two consecutive years, 1940 and 1941, posted in different areas of Natal and Zululand, for a period of some weeks at each place. Detailed life stories of local leaders and ordinary church members were recorded, Church services, dreams and visions related. All their notes were, as in the case of my own fieldwork, written in Zulu. In certain cases, these observations revealed new issues and tasks of field research to which we would turn our concerted action. Three of my helpers—now pastors in Lutheran Mission Churches—proved to be exceptionally good and reliable observers, and I owe them a very real debt of gratitude. For reasons which they have pointed out to me, their names are not published here.

Prior to undertaking this study, I had certain forebodings that in my capacity as a missionary of one particular church I should be handicapped in establishing friendly contacts with Independent church leaders—contacts without which they would not give information about themselves, their work, ambitions and aspirations. But my fear on this point was unnecessary. In an overwhelming number of cases I found that the very fact that I was known as a missionary, genuinely interested in their church life as well as in their personal life-histories and activities was a help when trying to elicit the information I wanted. Almost without exception, my African assistants and I were received as honoured guests at their church services. I was invited to preach in their churches, an

invitation which I hardly ever refused. I count some of these Zulu leaders as good friends. Experience of related problems in the work of one's own mission church opened up new avenues of inquiry and research.

And yet, I am fully conscious that my account does not reach the heart of the matter. I doubt whether any outsider can achieve that. However sympathetic an attitude the White observer may take, he remains—an outsider. The Bantu churches of South Africa have not yet got—as the Negroes of the United States have—their own Richard Wright to record the rhythm of black voices and to feel the heart-beat of the Black Man's longings and aspirations.

I was at a disadvantage sometimes with the Zulu Christians of my own mission church (Church of Sweden Mission, Lutheran), who of course found my intense and sympathetic interest in the ways of "Ethiopian" archbishops and "Zionist" prophets somewhat out of place, although generally speaking, they were forbearing towards this peculiarity of mine.

The reader should be fore-warned that in an investigation of this kind there obviously enters *the problem of bias*. A subjective emphasis is bound to affect any student of these phenomena. This can be gauged by putting the question, what would have been the outcome of this investigation if the observer had been, let us say, a Pentecostal soul-winner, or an African nationalist, or a sociologist who would not necessarily have to be a professing Christian. Obviously the writer's valuations and ideals enter into the investigation—from the collecting of the material itself, which is the fundamental stage, to the final presentation with its balancing of one viewpoint against another. I readily accept the engaging frankness and honesty with which the eminent Swedish sociologist Gunnar Myrdal in his book on the Negro problem declares that "a disinterested social science is pure nonsense. It never existed, and it never will exist."[1] Value premises do enter into our arguments. So they should not be hidden, as tacit assumptions, but explicitly stated. A subjective emphasis is bound to affect the valuations of any missionary dealing with a problem of this nature, implying a definite criticism of his own ideals and life-work. No doubt, I am myself, both as a Protestant missionary and as an investigator, a part of the problem, and I affect its future development by my missionary activity or inactivity.

The value premises on which—as far as I am aware—the argument of this book is based are the following two:

1. As a motto of the book I have chosen a statement by Bishop Gore at the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh, 1910: "What I mean is that we have got to put into all bodies of Christians the consciousness that continuous life depends upon continuous principles." The significance of that statement is seen by Dr. Gore's grave warning expressed on the same occasion: "On almost all sides I notice in respect of what might be called in the broadest sense, the religion of Protestant Christianity, a tendency to drift. Men are conscious that what they used forcibly to assert was essential to Christianity they no longer are willing to assert."

Hardly anywhere is there, of course, such a cruel example of this tendency to drift as in the Bantu Independent Churches, and I shall attempt to show in this book to what this tendency seems to lead. The material of this investigation is therefore also organized as a contribution to the discussion of the central problem and main dilemma of the Protestant missionary cause: the founding of an "independent", self-supporting, self-governing, self-propagating Church. My contention is that there has been altogether too much stress on the *"self"* and much too little emphasis on what the *Church* is. Without those "continuous principles" which have been delivered to the Church, "continuous life" is not to be expected.

2. This investigation is also a study of the impact of racial discrimination upon the life of the Christian Church. In South Africa, there have been two Protestant traditions in this respect: First, the S. African Calvinist "golden rule" claiming *"geen gelijkstelling"* (no equality) between White and Black in Church and State. And secondly, a liberal interpretation of the Bible proclaiming equal opportunity for all men, regardless of race and colour. Neither of these policies, if left unhampered by any conflicting views, would seem to lead to secession. The problem arises when the more repressive view tacitly or openly becomes dominating in churches which, in principle, are equalitarian and liberal, but which by "practical necessity"—consideration for the race-conscious White membership of a particular church—have to conform to a general segregation policy within the church.

The very reason why I first undertook this study was *practical*: my interest in it was based on the assumption that, in these churches, one could be able to see what the African Christian, *when left to himself*, regarded as important and relevant in Christian faith and in the Christian church. By such

a study I hoped to be able to discern tendencies that could be utilized in the practical task of building Christ's Church in Africa.

Instead of the official name, "Native Separatist Churches", which is obviously not a very happy term, I speak of "Bantu Independent Churches". The word "Native" is not liked by the Africans, and to apply the term "Separatist" only to Bantu secessionists as if White secessionists were not "Separatists" in much the same degree, does not seem fair. Although conscious of the fact that "*Independent*" in English usage often stands as a synonym for "Congregational", I shall here use the word "*Bantu Independent*" in a wider sense, as referring to such religious organizations as, in their desire for independence from the Whites, have seceded from mission churches. I also notice that D. Westermann, in his *Africa and Christianity*, refers to these churches as "Independent".

One difficulty which is encountered when describing the activities of certain Bantu church leaders is the necessity of *anonymity*, so as not to offend contemporary individuals and also to avoid legal actions which might otherwise follow. Some North American sociologists have encountered the same problem when publishing their Indian or Negro material (cf. M. Mead, *The Antlers*, and Dollard, *Caste and Class in a Southern-town*). On the other hand, in the case of the Zulu prophet and Church leader, Isaiah Shembe, for instance, such precautions are not necessary to the same degree, because his ideology is expressed in the official hymn-book of his church. I believe I can honestly say that I have tried to show all appropriate personal consideration—without jeopardizing the analysis of the actual problems.