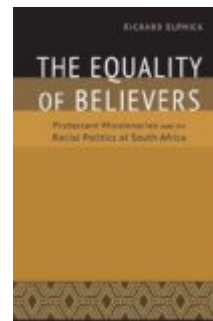


Richard Elphick. *The Equality of Believers: Protestant Missionaries and the Racial Politics of South Africa.* Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2012. vii + 437 pp. \$40.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8139-3273-6.



Reviewed by Lindsey Maxwell

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Few would deny the significance of race in shaping South African history and historiography. So far, much of the historiography has focused on the origins and development of racial inequality. Richard Elphick breaks with that tradition. His work *The Equality of Believers* instead traces racial egalitarianism throughout the history of South Africa.

In this impressive study, Elphick examines the role of European missionaries in the struggle between the two competing ideologies of racial inequality and racial egalitarianism. Elphick perceives the struggle over racial equality as central to the understanding of South African history. His thesis is that the origins of South African egalitarianism can be located in the original theology of the early European missionaries: namely the belief that Christ died for all people, and consequently all who accepted Christ were equal in the eyes of God (p. 2). Elphick's book not only emphasizes the critical role of religion in shaping South African history but also offers a new interpretation of the racial struggle. It therefore constitutes

a valuable addition to a historiography that abounds with scholarship that traces the origins and intellectual development of apartheid, yet has paid less attention to the parallel struggle for equality.

This study investigates how equality factored as an ideology in the making of the South African nation. The work fills several lacunae that have persisted in the historiography over the past few decades. First, it revises the history of racial domination and social oppression by recounting the parallel history of the "counter-ideology of equality" (p. 2). Elphick credits European missionaries for introducing this ideology while simultaneously arguing that their actions undermined the implementation of racial equality. Second, the book emphasizes the crucial significance of religion for South African history. Few English-language historians have placed religious theology and institutions so front and center in their analyses of race relations in South Africa. Elphick's study approaches both apartheid ideology and the ideology of equality as fundamentally religious in ori-

gin. Lastly, while the literature on nineteenth-century missionaries is extensive, relatively few texts extend this focus to twentieth-century South Africa. *The Equality of Believers* constitutes an intellectual bedrock for future research in this developing field.

Elphick's research covers the entire period from the arrival of the first German Moravian missionary in 1737 to the establishment of South Africa as a republic outside of the Commonwealth in 1961. In order to cover this vast chronological scope in one volume, Elphick's discussion remains close to the religious ideologies at all times. As a result, readers who are not intimately familiar with South African history may find this text difficult to access: Elphick rarely expands his view outside of the mission institutions and their connections with the state and refers to major historical events without providing much context.

The book consists of three parts, which follow the development of the ideology of racial egalitarianism in chronological fashion. The first covers the colonial period and underscores the significant historical implications of the theology and practices of the European missionaries, with a focus on conversion and missions. Here, Elphick demonstrates that the early European missionaries and black converts placed great value on the concept of *gelykstelling* (equalization) of the races. However, he notes that "the white missionaries' relationship to the doctrine they had introduced was immensely complex" (p. 2). Consequentially, missionary theology was oftentimes at odds with actual practices. His analysis of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) exemplifies this argument. Elphick illustrates how the DRC went through a period of revivals in the early nineteenth century to become "one of the most evangelical, mission-minded churches in the country" (p. 39). Paradoxically, the DRC sought to evangelize people of color while maintaining white supremacy. Elphick locates the origins of racial segregation in the ecclesiastical segregation of the

DRC (p. 45). The DRC was committed to both the uplift of poor whites and the conversion and uplift of Africans and coloured residents of the Cape—yet within a system of separate spheres. Elphick points to schisms emerging in the DRC between the 1850s and 1860s as impulses for its evolution into a *volkskerk* (people's church) that supported Afrikaner nationalist movements in the next century.

In the second part of the book, Elphick focuses on two critical elements of the twentieth-century missionary movement. The first is the "Benevolent Empire," which describes the vast institutional infrastructure of educational and medical institutions that British missionaries had built throughout the nineteenth century. This Benevolent Empire was indispensable to the state because of its extensive network of churches, schools, and hospitals. Elphick contends that it ensured that missionaries always had a place in South African's racial debates (p. 131). Calling them a "Christian coalition of paternal elites," Elphick makes a strong case that the black "petty bourgeoisie," white liberal paternalists, and international humanitarians remained well connected because of their common reliance on this extensive institutional network (pp. 116, 131). The other prominent theme in this second part is Elphick's discussion of the social gospel in South Africa. Influenced by several intellectual currents, such as socialist thought developing in industrial Britain and the gradualist ideals of racial uplift exemplified by Booker T. Washington, Elphick argues it came to constitute the theology behind the Benevolent Empire (p. 134). Using Dr. James Henderson, Fredrick Bridgman, and D. F. Malan as examples, Elphick demonstrates how social gospel ideology became a central component of both English- and Afrikaans-speaking missionaries.

The third section of the book examines the decline of the missionaries' social and political leadership. Elphick deftly navigates the complicated unraveling of the Benevolent Empire, arguing

that ultimately the adaptation of social gospel ideology proved the downfall of missionary influence. Calling it a “profoundly secularizing ideology,” Elphick contends that the missionaries allowed short-term gains to take priority over their agenda of interracial understanding (p. 325). For example, Elphick shows that missionaries and white elites failed to protect the Cape Franchise when they embraced an expanded gospel that no longer limited the task of missionaries to conversion, church-building, and education, but included “agriculture, criminology, education, recreation, motherhood, childcare, and medicine, as well as linguistic and anthropological study” (p. 211). Elphick argues that such an expanded conceptualization of the Christian gospel “required an alliance with congenial secular forces and ... reinforced the model of elite accommodation” (p. 212). Thus, by the 1950s “the political missionary impulse had moved into secular settings—above all, into SABRA [the South African Bureau of Racial Affairs], the Liberal Party, and the multiracialist wing of the ANC” (p. 318). By the 1960s all three organizations were on the defensive or disbanded. The final blow to missionary political relevance came with the overthrow of the mission schools by the Malan government through the enactment of the Bantu Education Act of 1953. Calling it a “graceful capitulation” by the missionaries, Elphick contends that the churches failed to unite against the act. Indeed, most of them “simply gave up” when confronted with the hard terms of the government, the perception that schools were no longer needed for evangelical purposes, and the lack of support from their sending countries (p. 296). In Elphick’s view, the missionaries sacrificed their idealistic vision of full racial equality for small practical advances in black welfare and, ultimately, lost both when they relinquished control of their institutions to the state.

The Equality of Believers is a well-structured and elegantly written account of the role of religion in South African racial struggles. By blending

intellectual history and institutional history in the South African context, Elphick constructs an inspiring approach to the study of race, religion, and nation-building in South Africa. The scholar himself characterizes his methodology as a “history of an idea in relationship with institutions and the people who ran them” (p. 8). Elphick draws from an impressive collection of sources, including mission archives, state records, newspapers, and church periodicals to support his conclusions. Some readers will no doubt take issue with Elphick’s suggestion that the struggle for equality originated in European missionaries’ gospel of Christianity. Radical historians in particular might dismiss this book as a frustrating reinterpretation of the nation’s history as the author places religion in the forefront of racial strife while neglecting the significance of class. While Elphick’s approach is appropriate for the production of a socio-intellectual history, it is not entirely flawless. Frequent criticisms directed at intellectual history in general may be applied to this book as well. Because of his focus on European missionaries and church institutions, Elphick’s analysis tends to overlook the voices of ordinary black South Africans, and it does not pay adequate attention to the perceptions of middle- and working-class blacks either. At times, these omissions suggest that ideological battles of great magnitude occurred in a societal vacuum. Despite these flaws, this book remains a valuable addition to the growing body of scholarship on the role of religion in South Africa. Overall, *The Equality of Believers* is highly successful in illuminating religious ideology as a major force in South Africa’s struggle for racial equality.

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