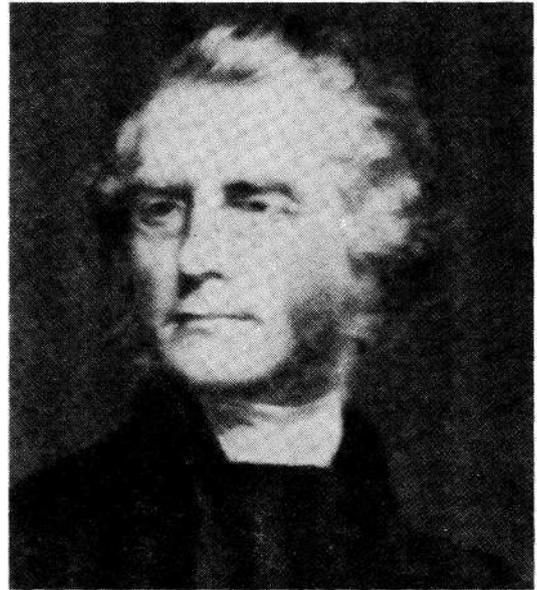


COLENZO: SUCCESS OR FAILURE?



An extract from the conclusion of *The Heretic: A Study of the Life of John William Colenso, 1814-1883*, about to be published by the University of Natal Press and Ravan Press.

by Jeff Guy.

What assessment can be made of John Colenso's life after one hundred years? In terms of what he himself set out to achieve the answer must be that he failed. The plans to spread light through Natal by means of missionary enterprise were abandoned many years before his death. The project to reform his church from within and thereby enable it to incorporate in its teaching the historical and scientific findings of the age ended with Colenso's name being associated, not with a New Reformation, but with pedantry and fruitless, debilitating controversy. The following stanza from *Hymns Ancient and Modern* is said to refer to Colenso's writings and the repercussions they had in the Church of England:

Though with a scornful wonder
Men see her sore opprest,
By schisms rent asunder,
By heresies distrest,
Yet Saints their watch are keeping,
Their cry goes up, 'How long?'
And soon the night of weeping
Shall be the morn of song.¹

Matthew Arnold described the Bishop of Natal as "that favourite pontiff of the Philistines"² and Browning wrote these dismissive lines:

The candid incline to surmise of late
That the Christian faith may be false, I find;
For our Essays-and-Reviews' debate
Begins to tell on the public mind,
And Colenso's words have weight:³

Colenso was banished from the religious world which meant so much to him. His victories in the courts, which he believed established his rights within the Church of England, had little practical effect: legal decisions could do nothing in the face of doctrinal antagonism, and when the missionary societies withdrew their financial support it became impossible for Colenso to minister effectively. Most hurtful of all was the fact that his biblical criticism — his contribution to religious scholarship upon which he worked to the end of his life with scrupulous attention and which he saw as his intellectual legacy — was first attacked, then dismissed as tasteless and slight, and finally ignored. Mrs. Colenso's hope that her husband "should live to see some appreciation of his labors" was never fulfilled. When she read in the 1870s that the English

bishops were moving towards a more liberal position on the question of scriptural inspiration Mrs. Colenso wrote,

Yet they don't come forwards as they ought, and say — you were right and we were wrong and we retract all our hard words against you! Oh no — we always knew that — only you expressed it so coarsely, we were shocked at you! Just think of the violent abuse which has been poured out upon him for making it plain to the common people that Moses did not write the P.(entateuch) and that the various and many un-divine things, diabolical rather — or rather things belonging to a savage age — which the P. contains, did not come down from the Supreme, from a supernatural and supernal sphere. And now not a word of just or generous apology, or confession, but they go on talking of Colensoism as if it were the equivalent of Atheism, or of the lowest materialism.⁴

And in the last decade of his life Colenso was forced to watch distaste overtake the Africans whose cause he had adopted as his own, and suffer the charge that he was directly responsible for the bloodshed.

CONSOLATION

Just before he died Colenso did receive one small consolation, in the form of a public tribute made, in the teeth of abuse, by Arthur Stanley, Dean of Westminster, at a meeting of the SPG:

Speaking to you as a Society for the Propagation of the Gospel I am ashamed that these questions should occupy your attention, relating as they do to one who, as a propagator of the Gospel, will be remembered long after you are all dead and buried. I know everything I say will be received with ridicule and contumely. Nevertheless, I say that, long after we are dead and buried, his memory will be treasured as that of the one missionary Bishop in South Africa who translated the Scriptures into the language of the tribes to which he was sent to minister; the one Bishop who, by his researches and by his long and patient investigations, however much you may disapprove of them, has left a permanent mark upon English theology, — yes, though you may ridicule, I say the one Bishop who, assailed by scurrilous and unscrupulous invective unexampled in the controversy of this country, and almost in the history, miserable as it is, of religious controversy itself, continued his researches in a manner in which he stood quite alone, and never returned one

word of harshness to his accusers; the one Bishop who was revered by the natives who asked him to intercede for them with the Government, and that without reference to any other Bishop in South Africa; the one Bishop to whom the natives came long distances to place themselves under his protection, or even to have the pleasure of looking upon his countenance. I say there will be one Bishop who, by his bold theology – (interruption) – there will be one Bishop who, when his own interests were on one side and the interests of a poor savage chief on the other, did not hesitate to sacrifice his own; and with a manly generosity, for which this Society has not a word of sympathy, did his best to protect the suppliant, did not hesitate to come over from Africa to England to plead the cause of the poor and unfriended savage, and when he had secured the support of the Colonial Office, (unlike other colonial Bishops) immediately went back to his diocese. For all these things the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel appears to have no sympathy; but, you may depend upon it, in the world at large, wherever Natal is mentioned, they will win admiration, and posterity will say that, among the propagators of the Gospel in the nineteenth century, the Bishop of Natal was not the least efficient.⁵

While there has been recognition in the hundred years since Colenso's death it has usually been qualified, and nothing like that which Stanley predicted on this occasion. Once time had softened the reality of Colenso's presence, colonial Natal was able to incorporate the Bishop into its gallery of quaint Victorians who, gaitered, waistcoated or bonnetted, trip through the pages of the colony's histories or, when the circumstances demand it, defend civilisation with grit and determination. Colenso's reputation amongst Africans remained high for many years. In the 1890s some Zulu ministers were reported to have said "there was no white man living who was a safe guide for native African people'. Bishop Colenso . . . 'was the last of the race of true white man friends, and . . . no living white man, whether carrying guns or not, would in the end, when war came, be friends of black men.'" ⁶ In 1900 John Kumalo, who had been educated at Ekukhanyeni, stated that he believed that the school had closed because it had worked in the interest of Africans: "These things displeas the European and the school afterwards ceased to exist. Nothing which espouses our cause ever seems to prosper. Colenso himself did not prosper". Kumalo continued,

Colenso left no message except the earnestness he threw into his work The original missionaries opposed Colenso, and used their influence against him. In these circumstances he gave no message but he left us an energetic example. His deeds on behalf of the natives, his questionings, discussions, the briefs he held, were themselves of the nature of light; they tended to produce light; they tended to glow. The circumstances in which he laboured may pass and vanish from view, but his example is a beacon of light.⁷

RESPECT

Tributes in the twentieth century to Harriette Colenso often depicted her as continuing the work begun by her father. Thus Sol. Plaatje dedicated his classic **Native Life in South Africa** "To Miss Harriette Colenso", "in recognition of her unswerving loyalty to the policy of her late distinguished father". Today Colenso is still remembered with respect – although there are those who reject him as one of the many whites who protested at, but still participated in, African subjugation and were unable to break with the process of racial oppression in South Africa.

Studies of the different aspects of Colenso's life are often sympathetic. Nonetheless theologians, while they find it easy to accept the principles upon which Colenso's biblical criticism was based, are still disturbed by his universalism. Colenso's intervention in African affairs is considered, at least by the liberal scholars who have dealt with it, as wholly admirable: by supporting the Hlubi and the Zulu royal house Colenso is seen to have made amends for his extreme religious views and to have situated himself within the tradition of Christian protest in South Africa. As a book, co-authored by a prominent liberal scholar who was to be ordained as an Anglican priest, has it:

Colenso was a great tribune of African freedom. There were others who preceded him such as John Philip in the Cape, but in his day and generation he fought a good fight and in this respect at any rate he kept the faith (He) set a tradition which has never died out since, though it has never been more than a voice of a minority in South Africa. Bishop Reeves and Father Huddleston may have little in common with Colenso, the theologian, but they are in the direct apostolic succession of Colenso, the tribune.⁸

However this view is dangerously misleading. It fragments Colenso's life in order to have the political activist without the controversial theologian: it conflates South African history by approaching all protest against racial injustice as if it had the same roots. It is a judgement which can only be made by someone unaware that religious belief is a multi-faceted social phenomenon and not only a personal conviction, and it ignores the fact that devout religious views can also be an expression of social forces in the continuing struggle for power and domination.

IMPERIALISM

The context within which Colenso's life has to be placed before an adequate assessment can be made is that of imperialism. His youth and early manhood were contemporaneous with the great material achievements in England in the first half of the nineteenth century. He was part of the tremendous movement of people, ideas and capital from Europe to the non-European world, which led to the domination of the lives of the people whose land was invaded. Far from being a tribune of African freedom Colenso assumed the superiority of his religion, his church, his culture, his political and economic system, and saw it as his God-given duty to subordinate the lives of Africans to the demands made by his perception of the world.

At the same time Colenso was able to escape many of the accepted crudities and brutal assumptions implicit in conventional imperialist attitudes. He was a humane and intelligent man, with the confidence that is needed to resist accepted ideas and practices. He believed that, in spite of differences, there existed in all human societies an awareness of the truth and a knowledge of the good. Progress and enlightenment should come to Africa through a process of building, not one of destruction. It was the task of the teacher to make contact with the God in all men and allow the light to shine with greater intensity. It was this approach, together with a real sympathy and the insights gained through his ability to communicate in the Zulu language, which allowed Colenso to develop a view of African society which was radically different from that of the ordinary colonist and official. He was able to appreciate the predicament of those Africans who found biblical stories simply preposterous. He was able to see how the

missionaries used fear to drive the heathen towards Christianity. The same impulse and insights which led Colenso to reject the psychological terrorism of hell-fire preaching in the 1850s led him, in the 1870s, to protest vigorously against physical terrorism. Nonetheless, while critical of certain features of colonialism, Colenso was not able to move from the conviction that the imposition of English rule, in its political, economic and ideological aspects, was a great and glorious step in the history of Africa.

THE TRUTH

Underlying this conviction was Colenso's belief that the essence of his role was that he was a witness to "the Truth". The quotation with which he prefaced his works on the Pentateuch read:

Not to exceed, and not to fall short of, facts, — not to add, and not to take away, — to state the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, — are the grand, the vital, maxims of Inductive Science, of English Law, and, let us add, the Christian Faith.

His missionary writings, his preaching, and his political work, were all made in the belief that the indisputable facts which his work revealed would touch the good in the "English People" and turn them towards "their old principles of truth and justice".

Yet Colenso's lived experience — as a missionary, biblical critic, and as a critic of colonial and imperial policy — demonstrated time and again that the presentation of the facts, the exposure of false doctrine, and the publication of detailed accounts of cruelty and oppression, were not sufficient to bring about reform and remedy injustice. The depth and solidity of Colenso's convictions enabled him to act with great strength and courage but at the same time created rigidity and inflexibility in his character. The man who was so aware of the need to consider religious beliefs and scriptural writings in a historical perspective was unable to view his own present as history. He never began to realise that the highest ideals and the most rarified spiritual beliefs can be instruments in the exercise of power and have to be confronted as such if they are to be changed. While Colenso's faith gave him the confidence and courage to act, it also restricted his view: his liberal convictions, his faith in the English commitment to justice and the transforming power of the Truth were out of place in the context in which he lived and worked.

Unable to identify the social and historical forces which created the issues so offensive to his humanitarian conscience Colenso always had to explain the defeat of his projects as the consequence of the failure of individuals to do their duty and stand by the truth as Christians and Englishmen. Colenso's history was marked by painful ruptures with those who had been his closest friends: these breaks were indications of the distance that he was progressing: but he never travelled far enough to be able to look back and see the wider context in which these quarrels had taken place. The continued acceptance of what was demonstrably false as religious truth was for Colenso the result of the cowardice of the English bishops, and the personal animosity of Gray and Wilberforce. The horrors of the 1870s and 1880s in Natal and Zululand were the result of Shepstone's obsession with personal prestige, Frere's duplicity, and the weakness of Carnarvon and Kimberley. Violence was an aberration, not an intrinsic feature of the system. Untruth and injustice prospered not because of the structural de-

mands of a particular political and social situation, but as a consequence of the moral frailty of those who held power.

VALUES

However it has been the intention of this book to show that Colenso was more than a brave man caught up in his time and unable to distance himself in a significant way from his social and political environment: that he can in fact be considered as one of those Victorians whose "victories (were) many times more noble than their defeats."⁹ On the question of passing judgement upon historical figures E.P. Thompson has written:

Such judgement must itself be under historical controls. The judgement must be appropriate to the materials. It is pointless to complain that the bourgeoisie have not been communitarians, or that the Levellers did not introduce an anarcho-syndicalist society. What we may do, rather, is identify with certain values which past actors upheld, and reject others. We may give our vote for Winstanley and for Swift; we may vote against Walpole and Sir Edwin Chadwick.

Our vote will change nothing. And yet in another sense, it may change everything. For we are saying that these values, and not those other values, are the ones which we intend to enlarge and sustain in our own present. If we succeed, then we reach back into history and endow it with our own meanings: we shake Swift by the hand. We endorse in our present the values of Winstanley, and ensure that the low and ruthless kind of opportunism which distinguished the politics of Walpole is abhorred.¹⁰

John Colenso, I have tried to suggest, was a man to whom we can reach out in this manner, endorsing in our present his fight for scientific achievement against theological obscurantism, and his struggle against the duplicity, the brutality and the violence of racial oppression.

RELIGIOUS ASPECT

It is easier for me to do this in connection with the political aspect of Colenso's life than it is with the religious one. As far as the latter is concerned I can only speak as an outsider. However, even a casual acquaintance with contemporary religious debate shows the relevance of Colenso's thinking to issues of great concern to many Christians today. Colenso can be situated firmly within the traditions of modern religious humanism. His assertion that the scriptures must be considered as historical documents is widely accepted. His belief that the God in all men is revealed through their lives forced Colenso first into social and then into political action, as it has done and is doing to so many of the courageous and committed men and women in the struggle against tyranny. Colenso also adopted a wider ecumenism which even today would be considered advanced.

Some of the links between Colenso and contemporary religious thought appear to be fairly direct. Mervyn Stockwood in his analysis of the significance of the controversies in which Colenso played a major role describes Colenso's worst fears:

A century ago the Church made a tragic mistake. Faced with the advance of scientific knowledge, the Church, without making a serious attempt to understand what was happening, went into opposition. The attacks by leading Christians on Darwinism and biblical criticism were not only laughable but tragic. The result was a pitiful war between Religion and Science — a war which need never have taken place, but which, because it did take place, has done untold damage and is

responsible for much of the irreligion in the country today."

Colenso wrote in 1863:

I respectfully protest against the language which the Archbishop of Canterbury has, apparently, applied to all those, who read my books with interest, by summing them up under three categories, as either 'ignorant,' or 'half-informed,' or else 'rejoicing in anything which can free them from the troublesome restraints of religion.' The object of my whole work is to bind the consciences of men more imperatively than ever by the law of true Religion, which is the law of life and happiness. But, inasmuch as multitudes have already broken loose from the restraints of that traditional religious teaching, which they know to be contradicted by some of the most familiar results of modern Science, now made the common heritage of every educated English child, I believe that I have only done my duty, as a Minister of the National Church, in endeavouring to reestablish a permanent union between the teachings of Religion and Science, and to heal effectively that breach between them, which otherwise will assuredly widen day by day, with infinite injury to the Church itself, and to the whole community.¹²

John Robinson cited an article on Colenso in the preface to his famous *Honest to God*, and he shares with Colenso the view that religious questions must be presented in terms which the age can understand notwithstanding the protests of the traditionalists. Their published sermons reveal a common concern over particular issues of religious controversy. And Colenso would share Robinson's admiration for Maurice, and endorse without qualification Robinson's statement that "theological freedom" and "social responsibility" are "the twin pillars of the Anglican ethos in which I most deeply believe."¹³

John Hick, a thinker "sensible to the living insights of non-Christian religions", in a recently published lecture, "Is there only one way to God", quotes a Sikh prayer

There is but one god. He is all that is.
He is the Creator of all things and He is all-pervasive.
He is without fear and without enmity.
He is timeless, unborn and self-existent.
He is the Englightener
And can be realized by grace of Himself alone.
He was in the beginning: He was in all ages.
The True One is, was, and shall forever be.

Hick continues, speaking of a Sikh doctor and friend,

Now, for me, to say to such a person as Kusdevah Singh, through whom the love of God is so powerfully at work: You are not on the way to God, because there is only one way, which is my way — to say or think this would not be spiritually realistic or responsible. It would require a deliberate blindness to the presence and activity of God in ways for which our traditional theology has not on the whole prepared us.¹⁴

John Colenso would agree wholeheartedly. He himself, one hundred and twenty years previously, ended the first part of his study of the Pentateuch with a very similar Sikh prayer in order to demonstrate the presence of the Living God in all religions.

HISTORICAL CONTENT

But of course we must be careful. We have always to be aware of the historical content of Colenso's religious tenets. For example when he spoke of the Fatherhood of God and

the Brotherhood of Man, as the fundamental principles of his religious faith we must remember what a father and brother were to Colenso as a member of the bourgeoisie in the mid-nineteenth century. For him the family was a stabilising and conservative influence in a world disrupted by revolutionary change: it was a hierarchical structure, the father demanding of his sons, not only love, but obedience and the unquestioned recognition of his authority. Colenso's universalism and the belief that God's love was present within all human beings implied the need for respect between individuals, but not equality. Communities, and the individuals within them, were ranked and it was the duty of some to lead and of others to follow. When Colenso spoke of the Brotherhood of Man this was an expression of selfless commitment to others, but it was not an egalitarian ideal.

The same risk of conflating history and ignoring the context of Colenso's life is present when we consider his political activities. Colenso's humanitarianism found expression within the traditions of nineteenth century English liberalism. Furthermore it is obvious that the situation at the time when capitalism was being established in South Africa was vastly different from the contemporary one. Nevertheless, at an important level, there is a continuity in South African history which, in spite of these differences, does give Colenso's life a contemporary significance. The continuing theme of racial brutality and violence, and the participation of the state in this, is striking. The reasons for this are complex, but include the fact that capitalism in South Africa was forced into being and towards maturity in a colonial situation by means of physical, fiscal and legislative coercion, together with the acquisition of state-power by a racial minority and the demands that this makes on those who exercise authority. As a result, in their outward aspect, many of the issues which bishop Colenso confronted continue to have meaning in the present, some of them as immediate as the reports in today's newspaper.

BRUTALITY AND DEHUMANISING

For example, Colenso attempted to expose the brutality which took place behind the walls of the gaol. He tried to expose the manner in which servants of the state, when under attack, can protect themselves through the construction of self-supporting evidence. He was also smuggled the scrawled note about conditions in detention. Colenso suffered the attentions of the informer and the spy and the consequences when their highly irresponsible information is passed to the authorities. He refused to accept the findings of the show trial and the board of inquiry whose examination of the evidence is so scrupulous that responsibility for the act of glaring injustice cannot be fixed.

Most significant of all, because he was able to gain some insight into the colonial world as it was perceived by the colonised, Colenso lighted upon an essential feature of the exercise of political violence — the need to dehumanise those against whom inhuman action is to be taken. The enemy is no longer a celibate, man-slaying gladiator, dressed in skins and feathers and chanting some barbaric war-cry. He now tends to be depicted as a mindless puppet, manipulated by a foreign power which unscrupulously exploits ignorance for its own advantage. But the means by which this dehumanising process is continued is similar: the falsification of history, hints at some dark and secret

plot, the exploitation of fear and insecurity and the manipulation of public information. Colenso was able to identify and publicise the manner in which this was done one hundred years ago in the violence which prepared the ground for the founding of modern South Africa. The need to expose this process of falsification remains as urgent as ever. It is part of the long struggle for justice. We cannot of course use the principles upon which Colenso

based his actions: with hindsight we can see their limitations. But many of the issues which he confronted and attempted to rectify remain with us and have still to be eradicated. In this sense Colenso's mission was well begun, it has been taken up by others, and must be completed. Consequently the final assessment of Colenso's life can only be made in the future — the answer to the question whether his battle for justice was a success remains an open one. □

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POEMS BY LEONARD KOZA

THE WIND

A monstrous wind howls through grand
fig trees of centuries beyond.

Rocking enslaved seeds to liberation
from the stifled grown branches.

With scattered seeds underground,
old mother tree couldn't trace their
whereabouts until green infant
heads emerged out of the soil to bear
fruits of her own.

Cunningly old mother tree martially
cut the roots through which food
flowed to uplift the infant trees.

Armoured the old tree battles to
keep the monopoly of bearing export
fruit to herself while the isolated
infant tree develops along its own
legislated lines to bear small fruit
for domestic consumption only.

THE UNKNOWN

His clock wrestling in his throat with dumpy sound-throbs.
He lay soundless between the weeds,
waiting for the second to lift his machine-gun
direct at creeping
figures in Tropical jungle.

Just then a glib feeling arrested his precise
attention when a snake crossed his wrist,
slow-motionly disappearing in a hole not far away.

With his mind temporarily released from guerilla-warfare,
he was again nearly rattled to bits when the thunderous
roar of the wilderness King echoed along silenced banks
of Zambesi which has become
the new Blood River of Africa.

I, THE DUPLICATE

I am shadow of what I'm not allowed to be —
Living of what I should die, but die not.

Nightly my tummy is puffed with hunger
inherited by my black colour.

Even my mind can discharge no FREE thoughts,
neither can my tongue entertain, FREE speech.
My ears can hear only what is whispered in a faint
separated voice.

I breathe only to keep death alive.
I am free to live without freedom.

Even a peaceful march can be a death-march as the
"over-staffed" police force give real criminals a long leave
by dishing out bullets and teargas to the hungry marching
for bread.

At birth it was a separate ward baptized in a separate church
in a separate Township.

I had a separate education,
at work a separate uniform with separate time-table
and pay-packet.

After work it's homeward in a separate coach,
through a separate subway or over a separate bridge
in order to fight "inflation".

And when I die?

Just a separate grave.

My whole life is separate because according to the Law,
we're not real humans,
but a duplicate of it.