

**"CHRISTIAN MISSIONS IN 19TH AND 20TH CENTURY
SOUTHERN AFRICA AND IN COMPARATIVE
PERSPECTIVE" CONFERENCE**

**RHODES UNIVERSITY
8 JULY 2007**

The conference organisers, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen, molweni, good evening

On behalf of Rhodes University, a warm welcome to you all to this conference of Rhodes University and the Berlin Society for Mission History on "*Christian Missions in 19th and 20th Century Southern Africa and in Comparative Perspective*". Welcome also to iRhini/Grahamstown, the Eastern Cape, and to our international colleagues to South Africa.

Given the history of this region over the past three and a half centuries it is appropriate that such a conference is occurring in the Eastern Cape.

In my view *Christian Missions in 19th and 20th Century Southern Africa* as objects of knowledge in their own right and in *Comparative Perspective* are to be welcomed for a number of reasons.

- First, permit me to observe that two of the performances that I was fortunate to view in the past week during the National Arts Festival made reference to missionaries. One was Peter Dirk Uys in his splendid one person comedy *Evita for President*. The other reference to missionaries was in the provocative drama *Inter-racial* written and directed by Paul Grootboom. In both performances reference was made to the same well-known Jomo Kenyatta phrase: "When the Missionaries arrived, the Africans had the Land and the Missionaries had the Bible. They taught how to pray with our eyes closed. When

we opened them, they had the land and we had the Bible."

It seems to me the role of missions and missionaries clearly remains an issue in public intellectual discourses and therefore it is important that the character, role, significance and consequences of missions, in general and in different social domains such as education, health and the like, continue to be subject of critical scholarly analysis.

- Second, in as much as Kenyatta's memorable phrase may capture the intended or unintended general historical outcome of the relationship of missions and missionaries and indigenous people under colonialism and apartheid, it is very likely that missions were not homogenous and that there were specificities in relationships across peoples, classes and geography, that possibly different kinds of dissolution-conservation relationships existed and that there were a diverse range of outcomes.

Further, since history is not seamless and there are significant changes in ideological, political, economic and social conditions over time, it is important to know whether and how these changing conditions affected relations between missions and different social classes and groups, political and social movements, and states, and also what were the determinants of whatever continuities and discontinuities in relations there may have been.

Your work is thus important in documenting and building understanding of the rich variety of social relations that are likely to have existed between missions and indigenous people, missions and different social classes among the colonised and colonists, and missions and political and social movements and states.

- Finally, we live in an age in which the value of intellectual work is increasingly being judged in relation

to its significance for economic growth, with the result that the humanities and social sciences are in danger of being crucified at the altar of an extremely narrow conception of 'relevance'. This obsession with knowledge serving narrow instrumental ends is something we must, of course, refute and reject.

Intellectual work of the kind that is being conducted by you has great value and significance and must also be promoted.

Increasingly, however, I am beginning to ask myself whether the humanities in particular are well-served by the argument that society and its institutions should support and fund the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. My question is: Is knowledge ever pursued for its own sake? Is it not always rather for certain ends – economic, social, political and/or cognitive? Our task, then, is to persuade that the end of enhancing human understanding and developing the cultural inheritance of future generations is worthwhile alongside the other ends and it is an impoverished society that sacrifices this end for the pursuit of others alone!

In closing, you are most welcome at Rhodes. I trust you will find us convivial hosts and I wish you all the best with your research and a stimulating and productive conference.

Thank you.