JAMES CAMPBELL, *SONGS OF ZION: THE AFRICAN METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH IN THE UNITED STATES AND SOUTH AFRICA*

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James Campbell's *Songs of Zion* contributes to a new impulse in comparative history (one also found in Rob Nixon's *Homelands, Harlem, and Hollywood*) uncovering the many connections that exist between societies which help shape our comparisons.[1] As I argued in my paper for the Commonwealth Fund Conference on American Exceptionalism in 1995,[2] this is a significant new direction for comparative history. For Campbell, such connections are important because the conduit between two societies acts as a "looking glass in which Africans and African Americans examined one another, and, in the process, re-examined themselves." (xii) By not revealing connections and showing how, for example, categories of race and nation in one place have been defined in reference to their meanings and applications in another, comparative historians until recently have tended to conform to "nationalist teleologies" already firmly in place. And in the case of the comparison we have been making during this conference between the United States and South Africa, these nationalist teleologies have been particularly problematic. Firstly, they have left in place both American exceptionalism, the idea that the United States has deviated from practices pertaining elsewhere, and South African exceptionalism, which, as exposed and confronted by Mahmood Mamdani in his very recent work, *Citizen and Subject*, is the idea that South Africa's post-colonial experiences (particularly the instituting of apartheid) were different from those of the rest of Africa.[3] Secondly, as Fredrickson points out in the epilogue of *Black Liberation*, recent transformations in both South Africa and the United States - the end of apartheid in the former, and increased racial tensions and inequalities in the latter - have shown that assumptions about the immutable South African racial code and the liberal American one were not well-founded.[4] Campbell's and Nixon's studies start us down a new road that can help give us answers about why current developments have happened, as well as provide us with a new set of questions revealing new possibilities for comparative history.

Before considering at length Campbell's analysis of the African Methodist social movement in South Africa, I want to outline some of the other strengths of this prize-winning work. Campbell's focus is the connection between the AME Church in the United States and the Ethiopian Church in South Africa. Aware that historians have "paid insufficient attention to Africa's pervasiveness in African American intellectual and imaginative life", Campbell undertakes "a study of transplantation, showing how a creed devised by and for African Americans was appropriated and transformed in a variety of South African contexts." In the process, Campbell reveals a narrative range that has seldom been matched in comparative history. Partly, I suppose, this derives from the fact that *Songs of Zion* is based upon his dissertation, so he has not come at the study of South Africa as an addition to an already-mastered field. Also, in bringing together intellectual and social history he has needed to undertake research in archives on both sides of the Atlantic, rather than rely on secondary literature that may be unbalanced in favor of one country or the other.[5] (This is no small feat. I myself found the idea of undertaking a comparative dissertation too daunting for this and other reasons; Robin D. G. Kelley also seems to have retreated from a study of communists in the United States and South Africa to one focused only on Alabama.[6]) The work, thus, represents a new generation of scholarship in comparative history, one made possible by and building on that of the earlier generation, but able to depart from it because of the new vantage point attained. Campbell's achievement would deserve the kinds of praise showered on the book even if the work didn't reach the standards of excellence that it does.

The work is divided into three parts. The first covers the establishment and spread of African Methodism in the United States, the growth of interest among African Methodists in the missionary enterprise both in the American South and abroad, and their increasing

preoccupation with Africa as a site for emigration, colonization and missionary work. Campbell shows that while "African" in the denomination's title did not mean that its members identified with African forms of worship, and that these northern free men and women often conformed to the belief that slavery was a divine vehicle bringing "benighted Africans" into the light of Christian civilization, they nonetheless retained a strong interest in Africa, which in times of increasing racial oppression could quickly become the focus of colonization schemes. Particularly strong in this section, I felt (and I was disappointed that it rather fell by the wayside in later parts of the book), was Campbell's analysis of women in the AME Church. Campbell shows that at the very beginning of the church's history the issues of the rights and privileges of women, and what these might signify for a people attempting to establish their collective "manhood" at a time when people seemed particularly preoccupied with issues of masculinity, were at the forefront of the denomination's political debates. While Campbell suggests that an analogy can be drawn between the treatment of women in these early years, and the response to African co-religionists at the end of the century, this is never fully developed. Given the increasing preoccupation with the intersection between gender and imperialism, this may be something that he or others will wish to expand upon.

The second section focuses on Ethiopianism in South Africa, the forging of a relationship with the AME Church after 1896, and the development of a "populist" social movement around the congregations which "sprouted" from Cape Town to Barotseland. Campbell provides a richly detailed social history of this movement, and makes a bold effort to move beyond the generalizations about the Ethiopian movement evident in the historical literature that it was merely an urban movement, appealing to the "educated" and "de-tribalised."(141) Revealing an unusual ability for a comparativist to comprehend the diversity of social systems and people present in Southern Africa, Campbell shows that the social movement reached into the reserves of the eastern Cape and Transkei, and that there was a "lively traffic between the AME Church and revanchist African chiefs, several of whom adopted the church as a kind of state religion."(142) In the process, Campbell rescues the Ethiopian movement from the common dismissal of being "proto-nationalist", as merely being a precursor to the South African Native National Congress, and therefore not really worthy of consideration as a social movement in its own right. Here, most clearly, Campbell tries to move beyond one aspect of the nationalist teleology.

The final section describes the building of a religious institution in the early years of the twentieth century, the redirection away from the social movement toward the establishment of the same bureaucratic structures on which the American church depended. This development is described in terms of a transformation from "sect" to "church", one that the African Methodists had gone through earlier in their history first with the establishment of their denomination and then with consolidation of the church in the South during and after Reconstruction. Campbell's description of the work undertaken by the various Bishops appointed to South Africa to rein in the Ethiopians is finely detailed, reading like a description of Colonial administrators throughout the British Empire attempting to bring the benefits of "civilization" to the unruly. Less clear, however, are the thoughts and actions of the Ethiopian churchgoers themselves. In his analysis of the transformation from sect to church, Campbell may be rescuing the Ethiopians from a "nationalist teleology" only to subject them to an institutional one provided by the African Methodists. The theological equivalent of the dichotomy between proto-nationalist and nationalist might be the sect/church dichotomy Campbell employs. By providing a narrative which suggests that Africans were responding to the African Methodists' appearance rather than building on traditions of their own, and that an African Methodist social movement existed in time before the attempt to formalize and institutionalize the church, Campbell may be taking agency away from the Africans in the Ethiopian movement. He may also be privileging an African Methodist narrative of institutional development as opposed to others, Holiness, Baptist, Spiritualist, for example, that the Ethiopians seem to have decided very quickly were more satisfying.

In order to discuss Campbell's description of the African Methodist social movement further, I feel I need a text to refer to. This is a discussion of religion after all, and my sermon needs a text. I won't use the biblical texts like Psalm 68:31 or Isaiah 35: 1-6, that are relevant to Campbell's work. Rather, I want to give you a brief description of a visit to my seminar by Reverend Joseph Patterson, pastor of Hickman Temple AME Church in

West Philadelphia and President of the Preacher's Association of Philadelphia and its Vicinity. What Reverend Patterson had to say surprised me greatly and highlighted, I think, some of the difficulties in studying churches.

Reverend Patterson was speaking to my students about "The Church and the Urban Challenge". His church has become renowned in West Philadelphia for its attempts to deal with some of the issues that arise from current urban conditions - poverty, the homeless, drugs, childcare, literacy, etc. Just about every difficulty faced by inner-city dwellers has been taken on by Patterson's congregation as a challenge to be met. He has worked with Mayor Ed Rendell establishing an Empowerment Zone in the area around the church. He has established cheap daycare, housing initiatives, a drug rehabilitation center, an AIDS hospice, and so on.

In the middle of his presentation he began to talk about his own calling. In particular, he asserted that the above-mentioned work was a product of his being called to direct it, and that those of us who would study the subject should be aware when focusing on African American churches that there is "no grass roots movement in the black church". What followed was a description of the black church that was straight out of Tanner, Coppin, Smith, and some of the other ministers and bishops described in Campbell's book and my own.[7] There was a complete denial of a movement that was separate from his own top-down intervention, and he evidenced a clear desire to maintain authority over and to be identified personally with anything that was occurring in his church. Submerged beneath his understanding of "the calling", no doubt, were years of struggle within his denomination over the rights of members and especially those who made up more than fifty percent of the denominations, namely women. Patterson himself, I should note, grew up in the section of West Philadelphia known among African Americans as "the bottom", and so in all likelihood, his own rise in the church would have been met with some resistance from more elite, status-conscious members of the church. On the way up through the church, Patterson may have seemed more like a Henry McNeil Turner; now at "the top" (both in West Philadelphia and in the church), he sounds more like a Tanner.

The other interesting part of his comment, for me, was that Reverend Patterson clearly believed the category of a "black church" to be meaningful and applicable one. What my book had attempted to do was show how the AME Church had held the kind of position Patterson defined (as head of the black church) back at the turn of the century, but that changes resulting from ghettoization and the emergence of a plethora of new denominations and religions had led to the church's relative decline in the community. Consequently, I had argued, the concept of the "black church" was by the end of the 1930s no longer as useful as it had once been. The community was too divided between elite and lower-class churches, between sects and churches if you will, to be brought together under the umbrella of such a monolithic category.

I didn't find Reverend Patterson's language disquieting, however. I knew that this revival of the AME Church had occurred and that the notion of a "black church" (stripped of its liberationist quality associated with James Cone's "black theology"[8]) had been given renewed currency. A number of reasons exist for this development not the least important of which is the fact that fears resulting from the Black Power movement in the 1970s led to a great deal of concern among liberals that they should establish institutions within black communities with which they could work and through which they could help alleviate some of the worst conditions in the inner cities. The AME Church was seen as an ideal church to receive funding from foundations like the Lilly Endowment and the Ford Foundation. (Perhaps its episcopal structure and more centralized nature meant that a gift to the denomination might have a greater impact on the community than a grant to a single church. Further, it may have been reasoned, the bureaucratic characteristics of the AME church might make it a strong base on which to build a larger ecumenical organization). In 1979, the Congress of National Black Churches emerged out of this nexus of foundation and church, with the AME Church established as a leading force. While this has led to many important improvements in conditions for people in particular "empowerment zones", and in a large number of foundation-funded projects, there has also been a privileging in the concept of the black church of certain kinds of churches that advocate certain notions of respectability that date back to imperial discourses of civilization and uplift.[9] Those who remain outside this funding loop fit neatly within

categories of "unworthy poor" and "underclass", and they continue to be viewed harshly, their churches not funded (as, for example, when Reverend Patterson, during my seminar, described in the harshest terms those linked to MOVE or other cult-like movements in Philadelphia).

It also has led to some very conservative politics on the part of representatives of the black church (one example of this was the support for the nomination of Clarence Thomas to the Supreme Court, though there has also been a fairly strong identification with the Presidency of Bill Clinton). Reverend Patterson described in great detail how Frank Rizzo had come to his help a few years ago when he was getting no joy in getting his boiler repaired on a very cold winter day. Rizzo had made a couple of calls for him (even though he was no longer in office) and within twenty minutes repairmen were at Reverend Patterson's door (the bill for the work was also taken care of by someone other than Reverend Patterson). Instead of wondering at the corruption of a system that could make this scenario a possibility, the Reverend indicated to us that this act had led to a rapprochement between black church leaders and Rizzo, and that prior to the former Mayor's heart attack when running against Rendell, the church leaders were ready to declare their support for the man they had considered their enemy in the 1970s.

I am describing this, in part, because this story of the AME Church in the United States sounds very similar to Campbell's description of the conservatism of AME Church leaders in South Africa. But there is more. The idea that "the black church has no grass-roots movement" raises questions, albeit not unanswerable ones, about the connection between African Methodists and the Ethiopian social movement. There may well be connections between the AME church and grass-roots movements, but if they exist they do so beyond the vision of church leaders. But if this is the case to what extent do they deserve the title "African Methodist social movement" and how are they connected to the development of the Church as an institutional unit? Another question raised by Patterson's description of his work, is about institutional narratives and about the difficulties of escaping from their biases. Clearly, by focusing on the grass-roots, Campbell has slipped through the net, but in other ways, particularly with regard to the dichotomy of sect and church, he may be caught in it still.

Returning now to Campbell's analysis of the intersection of African Methodist and Ethiopian churches, the author maintains that the coming together of the two churches "began one of the most remarkable episodes in the intertwined history of Africa and black America". Between 1896 and 1910, "African Methodism exploded across the subcontinent". Such claims justify recounting the early history of the AME Church in the early part of the work, as if African Methodism provided the necessary seed or spark for the African social movement. The evidence from the book, however, suggests that Campbell perhaps overestimates African Methodist influence. The vital middle section, in which the author maintains that "close to forty thousand Africans - urban workers, peasants, clerks, teachers, even disaffected chiefs - had joined the AME Church, [while] tens of thousands of others had been touched by its message", may blur African Methodism and Ethiopianism. For, within three years of joining the AME Church, leading members of the Ethiopian Church had defected (followed by other defections in 1904, 1906 and 1908), taking many of the forty thousand Africans, the core of the "social movement", with them. From 1900, African Methodists like Bishop Levi J. Coppin realized that they faced a membership crisis, and yet still tried to separate themselves from any taint of Ethiopianism. While Campbell describes such developments in his last section, they surely have profound implications for the "social movement" he describes in the second. Here, I think Campbell's omission from the book of Coppin's appearance in 1903 before the South African Native Affairs Commission is important. During this appearance, the Bishop claimed that there had been no connection between the AME and Ethiopian churches since the defection of Bishop James Dwane in 1898.[10] If, as Campbell asserts, "For a brief historical moment, this venerable African American institution stood at the center of one of the most dynamic popular movements in Africa", this seems to have been something that its American leaders learned of after the fact and which they laboured to rectify. Whether or not the Ethiopian Church could have spread as rapidly as it did without the AME Connection, my sense from the book was that it was Ethiopian "populism" and not an "appropriation" of Richard Allen's vision of uplift and respectability that seems to have spawned this social movement.

There are two last points that I want to raise quickly. The first is Levi J. Coppin's centrality to this story, which I felt could have been developed further. As the first Bishop appointed to South Africa, Coppin receives quite a bit of attention in the book. What might have been elaborated on further was the role he played in bringing about the change in attitude of African Methodists to the missionary enterprise in Africa. As editor of the *AME Church Review* Coppin wrote editorials on Africa and published debates on the issues surrounding emigrationism that helped forge the consensus between the more extreme positions of Turner and Tanner. As a Maryland-born African Methodist, Coppin also could mediate the church's internal conflict between the South Carolinian and Georgia Methodists led by Turner and the "Old Philadelphians" represented by the Tanners. Perhaps more important still was his marriage to Fanny Jackson, the former Principal of the Institute of Colored Youth. This marriage brought Coppin far greater prominence within the church than his formidable abilities alone could have enabled him to achieve. When Levi Coppin was elected Bishop in 1900 the widespread assumption was that by elevating him the church was honouring Fanny Coppin.[11] As Campbell mentions, Fanny Coppin was an advocate of black domesticity, so the appointment of the Coppins to the South African episcopal district perhaps represented a pointed comment about what it was about "civilization" that would be important to implant in South African soil.

As a Social Gospeler, Coppin had a profound influence also on the work of the two leading propagandists within the church during the Great Migration, Reverdy C. Ransom and Richard Robert Wright, Jr. (Campbell discusses this connection, but without noting the response of these three men to the migration). Here, I think, one part of the story may have been left from the book, namely the influence of South African events and people on the development of the church in the United States (and I made the same error in my own work). During the 1890s, the AME church was losing its exalted position in the United States. Even by the time Du Bois was writing *The Philadelphia Negro* in 1897, the AME Church was no longer the largest denomination in Philadelphia. What the church was confronting in South Africa, therefore, was the question of what its role should be in black communities more generally. The response to the Ethiopian movement and the assumptions that church leaders drew about rural people and their needs in urban society, would be repeated in their later response to the Great Migration. As Coppin had argued in Cape Town, African Methodists should reach out to the in-coming migrants and offer support to those in need, but the church itself should not attempt to change to appeal to the new arrivals. These people brought with them traditions that were not compatible with African Methodism. Far better that they should be churched by Baptists and Ethiopians, and that African Methodism be eclipsed by other denominations, than that African Methodists should radically alter their own traditions.

No work of history should be considered definitive, since if it is considered so it may pre - empt the possibility that others will pursue the questions raised by it. The many strengths of this work lie in its new approach to comparative history, its suggestive analysis of the "conduit" between South Africa and the United States, the delineating of a social movement developing in the 1890s (whether of an African Methodist or Ethiopian cast), and its detailed and perceptive account of the development of the AME Church. That *Songs of Zion* raises questions in so many other areas as well does not detract from, but rather adds to Campbell's great achievement.

NOTES

1 Nixon, *Homelands, Harlem and Hollywood: South African Culture and the World Beyond* (New York, 1994).

2 See Gregg, "Apropos Exceptionalism: Imperial Location and Comparative Histories of South Africa and the United States", in Rick Halpern and Jonathan Morris, (eds.), *American Exceptionalism? U.S. Working Class Formation in an International Context* (Basingstoke, 1997).

3 Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject* (Princeton, 1996).

4 Fredrickson, *Black Liberation: A Comparative History of Black Ideologies in the United States and South Africa* (New York, 1995) p 319.

5 See Shula Marks, "White Supremacy: A Review Article", *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 29:2, (1987), p 387.

6 Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama's Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill, 1990).

7 Robert Gregg,*Sparks from the Anvil of Oppression: Philadelphia's African Methodists and Southern Migrants, 1890-1940* (Philadelphia, 1993).

8 James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Philadelphia, 1970).

9 See Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church* (Cambridge, Mass., 1993).

10 John W. Cell, *The Highest Stage of White Supremacy: The Origins of Segregation in South Africa and the American South* (New York, 1982), pp 33-45.

11 Gregg, *Sparks*, p 120.