

De Kaapsche Kerk, the British Empire, slavery, and the discourses of good and evil

Retief Müller

VID Specialized University, Norway
Stellenbosch University
Retief.Muller@vid.no

Abstract

It is a well-known history that the Dutch church in South Africa's Cape colony up until the early 19th century had readily accommodated the institution of slavery as commonly practiced within Cape Dutch society. Slavery was not seen as “good” but generally accepted as an unfortunate reality of life. Some groups of people, particularly those of non-European heritage, were seen within this colonist society as naturally predisposed for slavery. Biblical arguments regarding examples of the non-denunciation of slavery in both Old and New Testament scriptures could easily be mustered in defence of the institution against the rare voices protesting the practice. In that sense the Cape Church was not any different from most other Christian churches in colonial societies worldwide.

Yet the Cape church also had some strong antislavery statements and advocates from within its ranks since at least the first half of the nineteenth century. As seen for example in Dreyer's collection of documents under the title, “Die Kaapse Kerk en die Groot Trek”, several high placed church leaders opposed the migration of Dutch farmers from the Cape colony in the 1830s on the basis that the migration occurred in disobedience to British colonial legislation that were effectively seen as seeking to stamp out slavery and associated practices. The Dutch farmers tended to see the British Empire as an evil empire. The Cape Church leadership, to the contrary, which by then included a number of abolitionist Scottish pastors in its ranks viewed their emigrating members, at least initially, as being in rebellion not only against the civil rulers but also against the church, and they, albeit for the most part unsuccessfully, sought to dissuade the emigrants from abandoning their chosen paths. In the subsequent decades a number of Cape Church pastors sought contact with the migrants with the intent of bringing them back into the fold. This article presents the case of a noteworthy equalisation campaigner in this regard, Rev. D.P.M. Huet.

Another episode occurred later in the 19th century in the mission fields associated with the Cape Church in central Africa, Nyasaland as it was known at the time. Again, it is a well-known story that some of the early Christian missionaries in these areas, most

notably David Livingstone, confronted slave traders and agitated against the practice which was still rife throughout the region during much of the 19th century. Yet, as far as the Cape Church and Afrikaners more generally were concerned, historical accounts often suggest that particularly the northern Boers were more often themselves involved in the slave trade rather than acting against it. Yet, as this article will indicate the early missionary enterprise of the Cape Church in central Africa actively engaged in anti-slavery activities with a central character in this being missionary, William Hoppe Murray who served as leader of the mission in Nyasaland for a substantial period.

The article finally discusses the case of *De Kaapsche Kerk* (the Dutch Reformed Church in the Cape Colony) in relation to slavery and empire with reference to notions of good and evil.

Keywords

British Empire; Dutch Reformed Church; migration; mission; slavery

Introduction

If one were to ask for historical examples of unambiguous contrasts between good and evil in human history, the case of modern slavery and its abolition is usually a good place to start. No moral person would these days countenance defending slavery. It is rightly seen as steeped in discourses of dehumanization, which especially in its modern formation typically coincided with racialised discourses in which black Africans and South-East Asians were, to put it macabrely, free game for enslavement by Europeans, often in colonial contexts such as the Americas and not least the Cape colony of southern Africa.

Perhaps in part due to the economic and ideological power of the United States during the 20th century and beyond, even an unsavoury topic like slavery has often been globally discussed primarily in reference to that country's history and politics. The well-known slavery narrative concerns the transatlantic slave-trade that occurred between the west-coast of Africa and the Americas, including the Caribbean. Furthermore, much of the literature and even more popularized film on the topic, such as the 1997 Steven Spielberg's award-winning *Amistad*, relates mainly to the trade and practice of slavery involving the USA. A related subject is the influence of this theme in the outbreak of the American Civil War and the subsequent

history of interracial tension. Interesting and important though these narratives are an exclusive focus on the North American case in terms of slavery obscures the fact of the much larger numbers of slaves that went from West Africa to Brazil, the Caribbean and so (Marques 2016). Furthermore, a globally perhaps lesser told story is the case of the Indian and Pacific Ocean slave trade, which was more limited than the trans-Atlantic one but still globally significant (Chakraborty and van Rossum 2020). This story also contains the apparently historically anomalous case of slaves brought to the west coast of Africa from elsewhere. This occurred at the Cape of Good Hope, a place which name must have conveyed a terrible irony to the chained individuals brought there via VOC ships from various regions on the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

This Indian and Pacific Oceans networks of slavery and their consequences in the Cape Colony is the first most noteworthy aspect of the practice to bear in mind when it comes to the Cape Church as discussed in this article. Secondly references will be made to the practice of informal slavery within the frontier expanses of southern Africa, where formerly slaveholding communities who migrated from the Cape colony again took up the practice, but now with “slaves” originating from local communities. Third, the central-east African trade in slavery, which in turn was connected to the Arab slave trade, forms part of the background context for the discussion in this article.

Background of slavery and Christianity as practiced within the VOC/DEIC controlled Cape colony

In this context *De Kaapsche Kerk* (the Cape Church) hardly had an exemplary track record. To a large extent it served the purposes of the Dutch East India Company (DEIC). Its ministers since the colony’s foundation and throughout the next century and beyond showed hardly any opposition to the practice. In fact, slavery was seen as a sure way of exposing “heathen” slaves to Christianity, which helped in its moral justification (see *Slavernij in Kaapstad*).

South African historian, Karel Schoeman tells several interesting narratives involving slaves and slaveholders in his book “Cape Lives of the

Eighteenth Century”. Noteworthy among these are some references also to clergymen and spiritual workers within the context of the DEIC controlled Reformed Church. Although the narratives themselves are often based on scanty evidence which does not allow the historian to delve very deeply into the details of such slave-master relations, there is enough on record to indicate that prominent church leaders and spiritual leaders (*zieke-troosters*) were among the slave holders. Economically this is not surprising given that such individuals were company employees, and therefore among the financially better off class of colonists in the Cape in that era. Yet, so prevalent was slavery during this period in the Cape that Schoeman could write the following: “While not everyone at the Cape owned slaves, most whites and many free Coloureds in the Table Valley and the more settled inland areas did ...” (Schoeman 2011:72).

An intriguing question for the purpose of this article would be what if any theological justification might have been proffered for the keeping of slaves in Christian households, as indeed such justification had been attempted elsewhere in the protestant Atlantic world (Gerbner 2018). However, lacking any direct comments from the specific spiritual leaders in question, one is left with speculation. It seems plausible that they simply acceded to the abovementioned notion that slavery in Christian households was one way in which Christianity could be imbibed. Perhaps they might also argue that it was far better for a slave to be enslaved in a charitable Christian home than in a different kind of household. However, making these sorts of arguments on behalf of the Christian slaveholders and in retrospect might not be the best approach. Quite likely they themselves would have felt no need to justify their ownership of slaves in any way whatsoever. Dutch laws were perhaps not always meticulously followed in the colonies of the DEIC. Yet, it is also a matter of historical record that Dutch ministers at the Cape were aware of the 1618-1619 Synod of Dordt’s implication that slaves should be freed upon their Christianisation. There is even a case in 1706 when a minister in Drakenstein wrote to the Classis of Amsterdam “to denounce the selling of baptized slaves” (van den Belt, de Jong, van Vlastuin 2022: 31).

Whether this meant that Christians would thenceforth purposefully keep slaves in ignorance of the gospel, out of economic concerns above and beyond Christian considerations of salvation and damnation, in other

words irrespective of objective yet abstract notions of good and evil, is indeed a question. The answer would probably not be surprising. When one looks at the historical evidence regarding recorded aspects of the slaveholding context, as for example presented by Schoeman, it readily becomes apparent that slaveholders who were also in Christian leadership positions were not always of the most charitable kind. Sometimes the contrary was truer as the case of Rev. P.J. van der Spuij is perhaps an example. Van der Spuij served as minister at Drakenstein for 28 years under acrimonious circumstances until his resignation in 1781. Schoeman suggests that ministers in the Cape Church often suffered difficulties with their congregations during this period for various reasons (Schoeman 2011:60). Lest one should imagine that opposition to slavery was among these reasons that was perhaps not the case since, as indicated above, many of them, including van der Spuij, were slaveholders. Instead, differences in social class between the rough and rustic congregants and their highly educated ministers appears to be one reason for the strife. However, Schoeman argues that: “the underlying cause was most likely the fact that the formal style and legalistic approach of the Dutch Church and its ministers no longer satisfied many of the faithful” (Schoeman 2011:60–61).

Regarding the slavery context, Schoeman describes situations in which slaves belonging to both van der Spuij and his predecessor at Drakenstein, Reverend van Echten, absconded, and were punished by scourging and branding upon their recapture. In the case of van der Spuij’s five escaped slaves an even more serious situation developed in that they became involved in the murder of a fellow slave and were put to death in 1754 in some of the variously extreme ways by which such sentenced slaves were executed. Schoeman comments on the financial loss this would have entailed for van der Spuij and then notes: “In this regard it is perhaps significant that his mother, a wealthy Cape widow, had already attracted unfavourable attention and official comment because of her treatment of her slaves, and with this precedent, he may himself well have been a severe master” (Schoeman 2011:73).

The Great Trek and *De Kaapsche Kerk* leadership regarding slavery

By the time the “Great Trek” – to use the term for the 1830s migration of Dutch farmers that became enshrined in the 20th century popular imagination of the Afrikaner people – had commenced, the DEIC had long ceded control of the colony, which was firmly under British rule since the early 19th century. The farmers themselves cited various reasons for migrating away from the Cape colony. Some of these arguments are cited by Cape Church minister, and future moderator of the church, William Robertson, in a letter written to the well-known Cape-Town based journalist, John Fairbairn and preserved in a collection of documents put together by the early 20th century archivist of the Dutch Reformed Church in the Cape Province, Andries Dreyer (1929). More regarding this letter will follow below. Notably, both Fairbairn and Robertson were Scots with sympathies aligned with the more socially enlightened, and abolitionist component of the local society (See Müller 2022:31–32). Robertson formed at some level part of a wider group of Scottish recruits who found their way into leadership positions in the Cape Church since the 1820s. He was closely connected to fellow Scot, Andrew Murray who was a long-standing and respected minister at Graaff-Reinet (Müller 2022:23–36). Murray’s second son, Andrew Jr. would become an internationally acclaimed evangelistic writer and church leader, but he was also married to Emma Rutherford, the daughter of a leading Cape-based abolitionist. Her father, Howson Edward Rutherford, was treasurer of the “Cape of Good Hope Society for aiding deserving Slaves and Slave-children to purchase their freedom”, founded in 1828 (see Müller 2022:47). Even more conspicuously Andrew was introduced to this family “through the services” of John Philip of the London Missionary Society (Du Plessis 1919, 168), who was a well-known, or rather notorious campaigner, in many Cape Dutch eyes, for anti-slavery and equalisation policies.

Robertson, the Murrays, and several other Scots who were appointed to positions in the vicinity of the Eastern borders of the Cape Colony became involved in correspondences involving the migrating farmers. In some cases, the contacts were extended after migration had become a reality. Ministers Taylor, and Reid, for example, wrote to their church leadership

to request permission to visit the migrating communities (Müller 2022:25). Andrew Murray Jr. would at one point occupy the most northerly post under the Cape Church's jurisdiction when he was appointed as minister in Bloemfontein in 1849. From there he would embark on several evangelistic tours to the Transvaal (Müller 2022:41ff). The church leadership in the aftermath of the 1830s wave of migration would also directly involve themselves in such visitation, for example Abraham Faure who visited the migrants in Natal (Gerdener 1934:33–34). Unquestionably, the church leadership of the Cape Church looked upon their migrating flock with a certain amount of concern and abhorrence over their choices. As stated by Anna Steenkamp, sister of one of the migrant leaders, Piet Retief, their actions occurred to a large extent out of protest to the regulations undertaken by the imperial authorities in the aftermath of abolition. Yet, even more pertinently Steenkamp described the legal equalization of slaves and "Christians" as contrary to the laws of God (Gerdener 1934:5).

Beyond such moral indignation, if one could call it that, there were strong economic concerns. From the migrants' point of view, reimbursement for the loss of property which the freeing of slaves entailed was not properly and fairly carried out. These and other constraints enforced by what they saw as an increasingly draconian British administration all contributed to leaving them with no choice but to effectively vote with their feet and vacate the colony. Such was the tenor of Steenkamp's agitation, anyway, and over time in the aftermath of the migration an ever-encroaching British Empire would more and more be cast in the role of evil empire in the developing Boer/ Afrikaner imagination. This development might be said to culminate in the turn of the century South African War, but that story is beyond the scope of this present article.

It might be stretching the limits of credulity to suggest that the Cape Church leadership in the 1830s and beyond was so devoutly anti-slavery that it was especially this aspect in the motivations of their rebelling flock, their implicit refusal to distance themselves from the practice of slavery, that entreated the leadership to view the migrants as not only geographically out of bounds but also spiritually astray. At some level it seems that the migrants' disobedience to the laws and regulations of the Empire, whatever those might have been, was the real sin, rather than a very specific humanitarian concern regarding slavery that some in the

leadership might have held. In short, it might seem that disloyalty to the Empire was a primary concern. The synodical meeting of 1837, among other things expressed sadness over the fact that so many of its members left their altars, without a Moses or an Aaron into the wilderness to search without promise or direction for a Canaan (Gerdener 1934:12). On the other hand, there were specific references to the prospective migrants protesting the freeing of slaves, such as that by Steenkamp, mentioned above. The abovementioned William Robertson also mentioned this theme as well as his attempt to dissuade the migrants from the perceived folly of their plans when he wrote to Fairbairn on 13 March 1836, having just returned from a distant part of his parish called Groote Zwarte Berg. There he found many of the people set on the “idea of going to Port Natal, I made particular enquiry about their reasons, and spoke much in public and private to dissuade them from their intentions ...” (Dreyer 1929:6). Robertson goes on to list several reasons, and although this is not the space to analyse this list in detail it will suffice to state that some of the reasons might remind present-day readers of contemporary conspiracy theories. Yet, most importantly: “The chief reason, however, for those who are the principal movers in the matter, is – “the final abolition of Slavery – the pecuniary loss which they have sustained by the “Compensation” – and the fear of not being able to procure servants” (Dreyer 1929:7).

Robertson then proceeded to describe his refutation of the various reasons given by the prospective migrants. Mostly this was easily done, he suggests. Regarding the main reason, the issue of slavery, it is illuminating to note that part of his argument rests on seeking to inspire a sense of guilt or shame in the rebellious migrants over the fact that, according to Robertson’s argument, the vast sum for compensation was collected through taxation to which the people of England “willingly” submitted themselves, “although they had never enjoyed any benefit from the slaves and that therefore the people of England were actually more losers than the slave owners” (Dreyer 1929:8). Irrespective of the imperially sympathetic tone of this argumentation, it is notable that Robertson also gave the following unambiguous denunciation: “... I reminded that Slavery was founded in Injustice – and contrary to the Law to do onto others as we would wish them to do onto us ...” (Dreyer 1929:7).

Robertson, in addition to this letter regarding the reasons for the migration and his own opposition against the idea, has an interesting segment in a letter he wrote subsequently when traveling together with P.E. Faure through the Orange River Sovereignty early in 1849 in visitation of the emigrants. In a seemingly unrelated comment, he admits his own illiberal sentiment to the effect that the African “tribes” are utterly incapable of self-rule:

It may appear an illiberal wish and would, I know, be cried down by many if openly expressed, but I could not help, while travelling among the tribes, from expressing the wish that they might not only be included in the Sovereignty, but at the same time, be placed under British Law, – which must I think, ultimately be the case. Such men as Sikonyella and Molitsani ... are in my opinion, utterly incapable of ruling thousands of their fellow creatures, and the greatest boon, in my opinion, that could be conferred upon them, would be to put them under just and equitable laws and to exercise over all the control which a civilized Government alone is able to impose (Dreyer 1929:144).

This sentiment is a curious twist if one were hoping to have unblemished character portrayals of church leaders who had at one point written against slavery. Although Robertson’s abovementioned writing against slavery is perhaps more pragmatically infused and less morally outraged than it could have been, it still made it clear that he had a negative view on the subject. Yet, at this point one must acknowledge that even if his subsequently expressed illiberal opinion on black self-rulership and his designation of Africans as “creatures” might have been temporary lapses based on negative individual encounters, we are likely dealing here with a more general imperially aligned arrogance. This was a perspective which presented no doubt about civilizational hierarchies and the ways in which they were stratified in the world. The underlying view was that the white European Christian civilization had the duty to oversee African affairs for the benefit of Africans who did not know any better themselves. This is the implied point.

A *Kaapsche kerk* minister as anti-slavery advocate among the migratory Boers in Natal and Transvaal

D. P. M. Huet was a Dutch poet and eventually a pastor who arrived in South Africa as a journalist but then felt himself called to a missionary career. In the event he became no conventional missionary but a minister in a far-flung eastern outpost of the Cape Church, that is in Pietermaritzburg. In this role he participated in the fateful 1857 synod which controversially declared that racially segregated worship, although wrong and unscriptural, could be allowed under the conditions of human weakness. As an opponent to this regulation, Huet subsequently wrote the oft-referenced *Eene Kudde en Een Herder* (1860) in which he forcefully argued that contrary to the synodical decision, converted “heathens” should in all cases be brought into the same congregation and worship with the existing Christians.

While the abovementioned text firmly established Huet as an equalisation proponent, the more directly relevant work for this article is Huet’s 1869 publication, *Het Lot der Zwarten in Transvaal: Mededeelingen omtrent de Slavernij en Wreedheden in de Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek*. This is translatable as “the Fate of the Blacks in Transvaal: information about slavery and cruelty in the South African Republic.” Huet wrote this work, apparently, in response to several news articles and publications doing the rounds accusing the migrated Boers of perpetuating slavery in the frontier situations where they found themselves. Although Huet disputed some of the allegations, he confirmed that the situation in the Transvaal was particularly dire. Based on his own experiences of a tour undertaken in 1857 to the Zoutpansberg region of the Transvaal where he spent a couple of months as a delegate of the Cape Church in the hope of bringing the Boers in that region back into the fold of their mother church, he penned down experiences of the journey and context that make for alarming reading. The conditions experienced there, dissuaded Rev. Huet against celebrating Holy Communion in the local church, something which Andrew Murray Jr. apparently also refused to do during his earlier visit to the region in 1852 (Hough 1962:80). Documenting various ways in which Boers in that region engaged in slavery practices, the book describes among other things how wars between Boers and Africans and between different African groups resulted in children taken prisoner and then “booked in” in a system akin

to slavery by any other name, as practiced by the Transvaal Boers. This in-book system was usually defended by the practitioners as a temporary measure enacted for the protection of orphan children, but according to Huet such children were often kept deep into adulthood. Since those booked in usually had no knowledge regarding the laws subject to the condition they found themselves in, they did not know anything about when they were to be released and so they were entirely at the mercy of those who had them in their power (Huet 1869:27–28).

Among other interesting themes in this text, Huet discussed the “treklust der Afrikaners” and the fact that this passion for migration was used to open the wilderness of southern and soon central Africa for civilization. However, this passion was neither exclusively nor mainly driven by the need to get away from injustices at the hands of the English. No, the main cause, as the Afrikaners themselves said, was equalisation between white and black in church and law. They could not tolerate that there were laws that protected their workers against repression and maltreatment. Yet, rightfully, or unrightfully, Africa was being opened, and civilisation, legal authority, gospel proclamation follow (Huet 1869:35–36). Thus argued Huet in a way that would appear to indicate the hidden hand of God at work even through the deplorable actions of these migratory Afrikaners. And the instrument through which justice might prevail was no secret as Huet effectively offers a plea that the Transvaal should be brought under British imperial control to relieve the suffering of the Africans at the hands of the Boers (Huet 1869:32). This kind of argument could not have endeared him to many within the church he had served in southern Africa, although by the time of the publication of this work he was back in Holland.

However, it is also clear that his sentiments were well-known and often expressed during his time in South Africa. The unnamed author of a memorial published in an issue of *De Vereeniging* of 1905 mentioned that Huet’s concern for the black population had made him very unpopular among the Afrikaners. Yet, intriguingly, this same memorial also claims that Huet later in life retracted many of those opinions (de Vereeniging 15 Juni, 1905, p. 10), although this supposedly did not affect the already tarnished perception, he had among the Afrikaners at large. Although this author did not provide details regarding Huet’s changed perspective there are other well-documented instances where he changed course during

his lifetime. His conversion to orthodox Christianity early in his career in South Africa marks one such occasion (Hough 1962:20). Secondly, he controversially converted to Spiritism after his return to the Netherlands, only to revert back to a more orthodox Reformed position later on (Hough 1962:116–117). Given this level of theological repositioning over the course of a lifetime one might perhaps not be surprised that a position change regarding the Afrikaners' racial attitudes might also not be implausible when it comes to such a complex character.

Missionaries from the Cape and the Arab-connected slave trade in central Africa

It is noteworthy, although not surprising, that individuals within the purview of the Cape Church mentionable as opponents of slavery were also among those closely associated with missionary interests in that church. William Robertson, Andrew Murray Sr, and especially D. P. M. Huet are examples, but it is worth bearing in mind that one of the central complaints that the migrant Boers levelled against the British colonial administration was what they perceived as the meddling of missionaries in their affairs. The previously mentioned Dr John Philip was a significant equalisation campaigner in the British controlled Cape colony who of course accrued the ire of many of those among the slaveholding colonial society, and there were famous or notorious interactions involving David Livingstone and Boers precisely on the matter of slavery or at least what Livingstone perceived as such (Schapera 1960).

While many of the figures mentioned were immigrants to southern Africa from Holland and Scotland, homegrown Afrikaners also became part of the missionary enterprise as instituted within the context of the Cape Church. Several of them such as pioneer missionaries A.C. Murray and W.H. Murray to Nyasaland and A.A. Louw to Mashonaland were indeed descendants of Andrew Murray of Graaff Reinet, who was a Scottish immigrant. However, these people had Dutch-Afrikaner mothers and grandmothers. They were born in the Cape and steadily identified with broader Afrikanerdom along with many of their peers. It is therefore of interest to note that the question of slavery and efforts against it also crops up within an expanding British imperial context in the early narratives of the Cape Church's missionary enterprise to central Africa.

This concerns a context somewhat removed from the trans-Atlantic and Indian/ Pacific Ocean slave trades both in time and space. By the 1890s when Cape missionary to Nyasaland, W.H. Murray encounters slavery practices in that part of the world, these earlier forms had mostly ceased to exist with slavery already illegal for several decades in Europe and its colonial contexts. Yet, as Murray reported in personal letters to family members and also documented in his memoir, *Op Pad*, he was shocked to discover a thriving slave trade targeting the communities that were subject to the missionary efforts in these central African regions. This is similar and related to what Livingstone had earlier found along the shores of Lake Malawi. It appears that at least one of the ethno-linguistic groups in the region, according to Murray the Yao who were Muslim and connected to Arab traders, participated in the slave trading practice (e.g. Murray 1940:31–32; cf. Pauw 1980:6–8). Other non-Yao chiefs perhaps not infrequently conspired in the practices for their own benefit (Murray 1940:67; Thompson 1995:20ff.). The result was that Christian missionaries often felt themselves called upon to act against the practice and indeed styling themselves as anti-slavery agents could have only aided their own reputation among the Chewa people who were the main subjects of missionary engagement by protestant societies including the Afrikaner missionaries belonging to the Cape Church.

W.H. Murray describes a hair-raising encounter with slavers when he was called upon by the mother of a young girl who it turns out had just been captured by Yao slave traders. Murray and a couple of trusted local men from the mission then set off in armed pursuit, caught up with the slave party and during a tense exchange they managed to free the girl who is safely returned to her mother. This rescued child, by the name Maunkalulu, is reported to later become a grateful mission child who eventually ends up in the role of serving as nanny to the missionary's daughter, Pauline (Murray 1940:67–74).

Murray in the description of the slavery context in Nyasaland in a private letter to his father tells of various threats and worrying incidents. He also suggests that “this silly administration” flatters itself with the idea that the “slave trade is suppressed on the lake while we know that numbers of slaves are still sent over the lake and river under their very noses, and what makes it worse is that they don't seem anxious for information on the matter at all” (Murray 1895).

I previously discussed in an article (Müller 2017:265–271) how missionaries like W.H. Murray and his relative A.A. Louw who contemporaneously served as missionary in Mashonaland might have understood their roles as agents of protection of certain African groups who were subject to exploitation by other groups and wider forces, whether other Africans or elements within the British colonial society. In this way, these Afrikaner missionaries, perhaps ironically, might have styled themselves in roles similar to those of John Philip, David Livingstone, and others who tended to variously place the Dutch colonists and the Boers in the dock for participating in unjust activities including the slave trade. In this case the wider cast of characters were different of course.

Interesting in this regard is a comment by Murray in which he acknowledges the advice of the Free Church of Scotland's Livingstonia mission leader, Robert Laws, in terms of building up good relations with the chiefs in the vicinity of the mission station. In Murray's case this was most importantly, Chiwere, at Mvera where the Cape Church missionaries had their first station. Although there did indeed consequently develop strong relations between chief Chiwere and the mission, Murray describes how Chiwere at first mistrusted the idea that Murray could be his friend while simultaneously being friends with the "white man who wants to take over his land and make him (Chiwere) his slave" (Murray 1940:81). Despite being self-evident in implication it is worth emphasising how this comment not only sheds light on the complex situation that colonial missionaries found themselves in between the British administration and the Africans, but moreover the way in which an African chief considered colonialism itself as tantamount to slavery.

Conclusion

This is a good note to proceed on for a discussion about how one might retrospectively consider the themes of slavery and anti-slavery in Christian history within discourses of good and evil. Granted that these case studies are limited to the development of the theme in a specific context, I would not presume to make generally wide claims in this regard. However, some cautious remarks might be in order that could also shed light on the ways in which other colonial context might be evaluated.

It would hardly be a controversial thing to claim that slavery, objectively speaking, is an evil institution. That would furthermore logically imply that anti-slavery efforts are objectively good. Yet, in order to account for the complexities of history it might be a question how useful such categories are for explaining the full range of human motivations and behaviours. On the one hand we as researchers and readers probably need binary constructs like good and evil to attach meaning to both the events of the past and the actions of those in the present, to make decisions about what is right and wrong, what to learn from as positive examples and what to eschew as abhorrent. To some extent one could argue that if we did not attach values like good and evil to institutions, events, and people, there would almost be no point in studying them. They would simply not be interesting.

Yet what is arguably even more interesting than the cut and dry cases are situations in which the actions of people within their contexts are neither unambiguously good nor evil when considered with the benefit of hindsight. This means situations that show complexity where people might think they are doing what is good when in fact their actions might betray elements of self-serving deliberation, in other words to use a biblical analogy, the typical pharisaic conundrum. There may be aspects of this going on in some elements of the anti-slavery activism, not to judge these individuals according to contemporary mores or to question the laudable consequences of their actions of course. Doing so might result in a different kind of historiographical evil. Yet, with the benefit of history we may understand their actions within their broader context to an extent that they themselves would not have been able to do.

It is clear that the earlier mentioned actors, such as Robertson, his fellow Scots, and also Huet understood slavery as an evil institution even if many of them, with the exception of Huet, might perhaps not have called it as such. At the same time all these individuals, at least until the end of the 19th century, considered the extension of the British Empire as a good prospect. It might seem that such an extension was considered a protective measure against slavery practices. In the case of the Dutchman, Huet this is specifically mentioned as motivation for such a wish. In the cases of the Scots clergy in South Africa, there might have been a more general idea of the British Empire as essentially benevolent. There is also underneath the surface, and occasionally above it, the sentiment privately expressed by

Robertson, that the extension of empire is necessary to save the Africans from themselves, and more specifically from their perceived incapacity to rule themselves. The implication, of course, is that freedom and self-determination are not unambiguously good, and in fact it might be better for subjected peoples to be so subjected as long as this occurs under capable and benevolent rulership. The question one might pose to that is whether such an implied understanding is not any other than the extrapolated form of the argument that would approve slavery if it occurred within a Christian context. Whatever one might think of that it is clear that the central Malawian chief, Chiwere, had ample reason in the late 19th century to be suspicious of friendship offers from colonial missionaries who were themselves so deeply intertwined in imperial designs.

Regarding the wider question of the Cape Church in connection to the issue of slavery in the British imperial era, it is clear that the leadership, or at least several of its leading actors such as discussed here, conducted efforts against the practice especially at the direct, micro-level. At the same time, they were oblivious to the wider systemic enslavement implied by an expanded British empire. One exception might be W.H. Murray, who as indicated above, was at least critical of the British administration's stance in this regard.

Does this mean that Murray, who also had pro-Boer/Afrikaner sympathies by the turn of the century South African War (see Müller 2022:128), had greater discerning powers than the other mentioned individuals when it came to distinguishing systems of enslavement? Given the subsequent exploits of Afrikaner rulership in South Africa once the British Empire had retreated, one would have to say no, or at the very least decline to speculate. Freedom and enslavement, as is perhaps also true of good and evil more generally, have shown the ability to transform and occupy various guises over time.

Bibliography

- Chakraborty, Titas and van Rossum, Matthias. (2020). “Slave Trade and Slavery in Asia – New Perspectives,” *Journal of Social History*, Volume 54, Issue 1, Fall, Pages 1–14. [Online]. Available: <https://doi.org/10.1093/jsh/shaa004>
- de Vereeniging* (1905, 15 Juni) “Amptsbroeders naar den hemel verhuisd”.
- Dreyer, Andries 1929. *Die Kaapse Kerk En Die Groot Trek*. Kaapstad: Van de Sandt de Villiers.
- Gerbner, K. 2018. Epilogue: Proslavery Theology and Black Christianity. In *Christian Slavery: Conversion and Race in the Protestant Atlantic World*. University of Pennsylvania Press. [Online]. Available: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv16t6j9v.13> (pp. 189–196).
- Gerdener, G.B.A. 1934. *Ons Kerk in Die Transgariep : Geskiedenis van Die Ned. Geref. Kerke in Natal, Vrystaat En Transvaal*. Kaapstad: Verkrygbaar by die Suid-Afrikaanse Bybelvereniging.
- Hough, Jasper Anthonie (1962). “Ds. D.P.M. Huet : ’n Historiese Oorsig van sy Dienstyd in Suid-Afrika (1854-1867).” Dissertation, Pretoria: [Uitgever niet vastgesteld].
- Huet, P. 1860. *Eéne Kudde En ÉÉN Herder: Verhandeling over de Toebring van Heidenen Tot de Christelijke Kerkgameenschap*. Kaapstad: Marais. [Online]. Available: <https://archive.org/details/eenekuddeeneenhe00huet>.
- Huet, Pierre 1869. *Het Lot Der Zwarten in Transvaal Mededeelingen Omtrent de Slavernij En Wreedheden in de Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek*. Utrecht: J.H. van Peurse. [Online]. Available: <http://books.google.com/books?id=3f5UAAAAcAAJ>
- Marques, Leonardo (2016). *The United States and the Transatlantic Slave Trade to the Americas, 1776–1867*. New Haven: Yale University Press. [Online]. Available: <https://www.degruyter.com/isbn/9780300224733>.
- Müller, Retief 2022. *The Scots Afrikaners Identity Politics and Intertwined Religious Cultures*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

- Murray, W.H. 1940. *Op pad: vertellings uit die pioniersjare van 'n gewese Nyasasendeling*. Kaapstad: Suid-Afrikaanse Bybelvereniging.
- Murray, W.H. 1895, 9 March. "To Father – Mvera". DRC Archive, Stellenbosch, K-div 1144.
- Pauw, C.M. 1980. *Mission and Church in Malawi: The History of the Nkhoma Synod of the Church of Central Africa, Presbyterian 1889–1962*. Unpublished Th.D. thesis: University of Stellenbosch.
- Schapera, I. 1960. "Livingstone and the Boers." *African Affairs: The Journal of the Royal African Society*.
- Schoeman, Karel 2011. *Cape Lives of the Eighteenth Century*. 1st ed., 1st impression. Pretoria: Protea Book House.
- "Slavernij in Kaapstad: Hoe slavernij zijn intrede deed in Zuid-Afrika" [Online]. Available: https://kaapstadmagazine.nl/geschiedenis-zuid-afrika/slavernij-in-kaapstad/125_22_17840 [Accessed: 4 June 2024].
- Thompson, J. 1995. *Christianity in Northern Malawi: Donald Fraser's Missionary Methods and Ngoni Culture*. Leiden: Brill.
- Van den Belt, H., de Jong Klaas-Willem, and van Vlastuin W. (eds.) 2022. *A Landmark in Turbulent Times: The Meaning and Relevance of the Synod of Dordt (1618–1619)*. Göttingen: Vanderhoeck & Ruprecht.