

Discussion

BISHOP COLENZO: PIETERMARITZBURG'S FIRST HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVIST?

by Christopher Merrett

JOHN William Colenso (1814–1883), the first Anglican Bishop of Natal, lived at the Ekukhanyeni mission at Bishopstowe just outside Pietermaritzburg for thirty years. It is remarkable that the city, consistently the butt of jokes about ‘sleepy hollow’, has significant links with a number of towering intellectual figures such as Colenso and Alan Paton and, more remotely, with Mohandas Gandhi.

Colenso’s life and work is of direct relevance to the modern world. He was, naturally, a product of his age; that of imperialism. He supported it and chose to explain its deficiencies and crimes as the result of human failings and distorted methods rather than the system itself. But, nevertheless, he may be considered a forefather of South Africa’s

post-liberation constitution and a distant patron of the civil rights groups that played such a key role in South Africa after the Soweto Uprising.

Influenced by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Colenso’s worldview accepted that new truths could be accepted without loss of faith; and that faith is intuitive and a matter of personal conviction, not obedience to dogmatic authority. The bishop’s belief in worthiness and godliness revealed in all humanity not a select few, based on the writing of F.D. Maurice, one of the founders of Christian socialism, was not reflected in the South African body politic until the 1990s when the post-apartheid constitution was enacted and universal suffrage achieved. Peter Hinchliff describes Colenso as a believer

in the 'innate goodness of man and in the value of human reason.'¹ He was convinced of the 'presence of God in all things' and the 'essential brotherhood of the great human family' with its capacity for reason and exercise of conscience.² For this reason he rejected increasingly fashionable scientific racism. His high liberal values were critical as were the 'honesty and perception' characteristic of the Colenso family.³

His Victorian opponents, with their sour view of humankind and their belief in religious and racial superiority, reflected a frame of mind that led straight down a path to the tragedy of apartheid. Colenso stood firmly against this dehumanisation.⁴ The exploited and dispossessed were conquered, heathen and black. He preached mercy, humility and justice and his belief, and actions based on it, was a warning to (and about) those who regard themselves as specially chosen. History is replete with outrages based on exclusivity, othering, blame and the zealotry it encourages. Colenso's riposte was humanism and universalism.⁵ Edgar Brookes and Colin Webb describe Colenso as a 'great tribune of African freedom.'⁶

His view of the world, a degree of pragmatism and adaptability, and opposition to dogma were a fundamental challenge to the power structures and social order of the day. The reaction of the Church authorities was to try him for heresy, a foretaste of political trials to come in South Africa. As a mathematician and theologian living in an age of significant scientific discovery, especially geological, he had married logic with courage and pointed out that some of what appears in the Old Testament could not possibly be literal truth. What is more, his conclusion arose out of the questioning of African converts;

such as William Ngidi's famous puzzlement over Noah's Ark.⁷ For this he was deprived of his bishopric and excommunicated in a rigged trial arranged by his opponents, who wielded threat and bluster, a travesty of justice from 'start to finish'.⁸ Others treated the incident as a joke and composed limericks.⁹ This was another foretaste of our own post-truth age. Conversely, Colenso 'had a profound belief in the saving power of truth', God's gift whose pursuit should be unfettered.¹⁰

The logical consequence of his religious belief and personal experiences was to involve himself in colonial politics. In 1874 he protested against the treatment of Chief Langa libalele and the Hlubi – 'disgraceful proceedings' – drawing attention to the importance of the rule of law and principles of justice, qualities starkly lacking in the grubby little Colony of Natal heavily populated by the second rate with their extreme prejudice and shallowness that easily erupted into violence.¹¹ For his pains he earned the enmity of the colonists and the abuse of the authorities in an attempt to discredit him. In this, the press of the day played a dishonourable part.

Colenso used his position and his intellectual gifts, plus his ability to communicate with the indigenous population, to expose the deception and distortion of the colonial administration, especially the duplicity and expedience of Theophilus Shepstone, secretary for native affairs. He was able to show that British justice had been flagrantly flouted; to be replaced by dishonesty and brutality.¹² He well understood the behaviour of a police state and achieved some counter success – censure of the Natal government and the recall of Lieutenant-Governor Benjamin Pine – but in the long run he failed to prevent

the dismemberment of the Zulu kingdom.

After the Anglo-Zulu War he acted as spokesperson for King Cetshwayo; his meticulous collecting and reading of documents being a key factor in establishing the truth and countering government propaganda. Bishopstowe became an effective news agency where Colenso compared the despatches of emissaries from the Usutu to the north with the information put out by government; and wrote up accounts that challenged colonial conspiracy and London would otherwise have missed. As

Guy puts it, 'The Colensos analyzed newspaper articles, official documents, tested them against evidence collected from Zulu informants and the mission printer, Magama Fuze, printed their conclusions for circulation'.¹³ Guy describes his 'Extracts from the Blue Books' as a major historiographic resource.¹⁴ This was a 'mammoth task' that showed up 'an unjust war, unjustly waged.'¹⁵

History cautions us from seeing Colenso, the ascetic nineteenth-century clergyman and imperialist, as one of Pietermaritzburg's first human rights campaigners. He presents a conundrum as an establishment figure at odds with his own Establishment. Nor can we judge him by the standards of our time as he was a man of his own. But we may compare his role then with modern events. What he would have made, say, of the culture of the liberation move-



Caricature of John William Colenso (from Vanity Fair)

ment in the Emergency years of the 1980s is an intriguing question and impossible to answer. But possibly he would have enjoyed a spell as an involuntary guest of the security branch.

This eminent Victorian was a thoroughly modern man, unafraid to confront the powerful with uncomfortable truth. Like many quick thinkers, he attracted criticism as tactless and insensitive, but preferred the courage of his deeply held convictions.¹⁶ The consequences, and an ongoing campaign of vilification from all quarters, amounted to

systematic censorship. His response was research and documentation and the establishment of an effective channel of communication with the world outside Natal. That this was promoted against a background of what Colenso regarded as the high moral purpose of British imperialism, 'a sacred trust', does not detract from his courage or effectiveness.¹⁷

Colenso was a prophetic figure in the historical sense. There is little doubt that he acted as a role model for confrontation with abusive power and tyranny whether from dogma, arbitrary colonial power or the imperial military.¹⁸ Yet his only secular memorial in Pietermaritzburg is a suburb named Sobantu and he barely warrants a mention when the famous historical figures of the city are discussed. Essentially, he was a voice crying in the wilderness who won

battles but few campaigns. Critically he focused on human failings rather than systemic iniquities: 'The Colensos supported the lofty aims but protested at the lowly means, when in fact both were part of the same process.'¹⁹ But as Jeff Guy pointed out in referring to the work of Marxist historian E.P. Thompson, each person lives within the context and limitations of a particular time: what is historically important are enduring values.²⁰

Judged by that yardstick, Colenso has significance for both recent and present times. First, he was a universalist who believed that every individual deserved respect, the basis of human rights. Second, he emphasised the rule of law. Third, he was a seeker after truth and courageous in using it to confront abusive power. Fourth, he based that truth on the collection and analysis of evidence and its publication. For this he paid a considerable personal price; but it was one that made him an enduring historical figure particularly because his three daughters, Harriette, Frances Ellen (who died in 1887) and Agnes, carried forward his legacy into the early twentieth century.

NOTES

- 1 Peter Hinchliff, *John William Colenso* (London: Thomas Nelson, 1964), p. 52.
- 2 Jeff Guy, *The Heretic: A Study of the Life of John William Colenso, 1814–1883* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press and Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1983), p. 113; Ruth Edgecombe, 'Introduction' in John William Colenso, *Bringing Forth Light: Five Tracts on Bishop Colenso's Zulu Mission* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press and Durban: Killie Campbell Africana Library, 1982), p. xiii.
- 3 Jeff Guy, 'The Colenso daughters: three women confront imperialism' in *The Eye of the Storm: Bishop John William Colenso and the Crisis of Biblical Inspiration* edited by Jonathan A. Draper (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2003), p. 347.
- 4 Guy, *The Heretic*, p. 358.
- 5 *ibid.*, p. 42.
- 6 Edgar H. Brookes and Colin de B. Webb, *A History of Natal* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1965), p. 105.
- 7 Guy, *The Heretic*, p. 90.
- 8 Wyn Rees, *Colenso Letters from Natal* (Pietermaritzburg: Shuter & Shooter, 1958), p. 327.
- 9 Guy, *The Heretic*, p. 133.
- 10 Rees, *Colenso Letters from Natal*, p. 81; Edgecombe, 'Introduction', p. xxxv.
- 11 Guy, *The Heretic*, p. 80; Rees, *Colenso Letters from Natal*, p. 263.
- 12 Guy, *The Heretic*, pp. 212, 286, 288, 291, 292, 354; Edgecombe, 'Introduction', p. xxxvii.
- 13 Guy, 'The Colenso daughters', p. 348.
- 14 Guy, *The Heretic*, pp. 274–5.
- 15 Edgecombe, 'Introduction', p. xxxviii.
- 16 Guy, *The Heretic*, p. 50.
- 17 *ibid.*, p. 243; Rees, *Colenso Letters from Natal*, p. 310.
- 18 *ibid.*, p. 330.
- 19 Guy, 'The Colenso daughters', p. 352.
- 20 Guy, *The Heretic*, p. 355.