A Protestant Verdict on the Jesuit Missionary Approach in Africa: David Livingstone and Memories of the Early Jesuit Presence in South Central Africa

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David Livingstone (1813–73) is a larger-than-life figure in the history of Christian missions in Africa. However, reaching Africa for the first time in 1841, he is far from being the continent’s first missionary. His first contact with Africa was mediated by Robert Moffat (1795–1883), a Scottish Congregationalist missionary, who had already settled at Kuruman in today’s South Africa in 1817, and who would later become Livingstone’s father-in-law. More importantly, Livingstone himself noticed the marks left behind by Jesuit missionaries who had evangelized in the lands he was visiting before departing from the region close to a century before his own arrival. In his writings, Livingstone made mostly anecdotal references to these Jesuits, yet he believed he had observed enough of their legacy in southern Africa to enable him to comment on their missionary methods and achievements. While he praised the way the Jesuits financed their missions and the success they had in their educational work among native Africans, he was scathing about their failure to impart durable faith in their African converts, a failure he attributed to the Jesuits’ Catholic background and their associations with the slave-dealing Portuguese authorities.

Livingstone’s assessment of Jesuit success and failure in south central Africa calls for a deeper analysis. His verdict is best understood within the context of his own mission to Africa, more specifically as a Protestant evangelizer, an anti-slavery campaigner, and a pioneer of a commercial empire. Moreover, his experience as a medical doctor, a British consul, and an explorer also contributed to determining what he admired or criticized the Jesuits for. Protestant–Catholic competition, often marked by less than civilized language, is an essential element of the nineteenth-century Christian evangelization of the

African interior. This so-called third-wave of evangelization was taking place at a time when notions of ecumenism and a desire for unity among different Christian denominations were still in their infancy. Statements by someone like Livingstone, who had such a towering influence across denominational boundaries, help us understand not only his own opinion at the time but also the ways in which African Christianity can be viewed today.

Protestants and Catholics in Nineteenth-Century Africa

During the first half of the nineteenth century, most of the African interior was an open missionary field. Between 1818 and 1850, the Catholic presence was limited to fourteen locations, most of which were situated along the coast (Algeria, Egypt, Gabon, Natal, and Cape Colony) or on the islands (Madagascar, Mauritius, the Comoros, and the Réunion). There were only two Catholic initiatives in the interior during this time: in Ethiopia (established in 1836 and 1846) and Sudan (established in 1846). In the early part of the nineteenth century, the French journal *Annales de l’Association de la propagation de la foi* had sections containing extensive reports from Catholic missions in Asia and the Americas, but it reported literally nothing from Africa. A Catholic desire to penetrate the interior of Africa was itself aroused at least in part by increased Protestant missionary activity.2

In the period under consideration, Protestant churches and individuals took the lead in preaching the Gospel to native Africans in the interior. Dr. Johannes Theodorus van der Kemp (1747–1811), commonly referred to as Doctor Vanderkemp,3 was one of the first three pioneers of the London Missionary Society (LMS) in southern Africa. He reached the Khoikhoi and the Xhosa in that region and even learned their languages. Moffat, who was a close follower of Vanderkemp, worked mainly among the Tswana people, translating the New Testament into their language. These Protestant missionaries had a free field without Catholic competition, and they thus made little or no reference to the Catholics. In the dedication of his book to His Royal Highness Francis Albert Augustus Charles Emmanuel, duke of Saxe (1819–61), Moffat praised the house of Saxony for standing by Martin Luther (1483–1546), whom he acknowledged as “the great Reformer,” and for offering him protection “against the power of

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