JOSEPH BOOTH, PROPHET OF RADICAL CHANGE
IN CENTRAL AND SOUTH AFRICA, 1891-1915

BY

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There are many qualitative and quantitative ways of assessing the roles of missionaries in technical, institutional and ideological change. One could count the number of converts, guess at the degree of commitment to a new ideology, note the impact of health services, see the alteration of the material culture, including providing employment and a market economy, investigate the varying impacts of education, and assess the effectiveness of combatting traditional institutions and ideology. In general one could look at the degree of social, individual or institutional change along a yardstick of modernization, westernization, or enlargement of scale. Here I am not so much concerned with effect, although it is mentioned occasionally. I am more concerned with cause—Booth's frequently unsuccessful attempts to bring about change. Joseph Booth fits into a vital role in the religious phenomena—the prophetic tradition of calling on his own people to fulfil the commandments of God and reform society, not so much for their own salvation, but to meet the command of evangelism and to institute in Africa a society consistent with the Mosaic code and the Love ethic. However, Booth's prophetic call was not just a religious or moral one; it was for Africa for the Africans, with all the political implications involved.

It is time for a fresh look at Booth as a force in African history. Since Shepperson's and Price's seminal work in 1958 on John Chilembwe, in which Booth's role was considered at length, a fair amount of new material has been uncovered. It is my intent here to consider within a limited focus whether this new material leads to a radical reassessment of Booth or largely confirms Shepperson's findings. Boeder, based on limited access to some of the material, takes a revisionist view, measuring rhetoric against deed and ends
up agreeing with Booth's critics from the colonial and missionary establishment. This study, dealing mainly with Booth the advocate and not so much with his effect, avoids dealing explicitly with Boeder's arguments. Naturally this overview is indebted to Shepperson's work for much detail and interpretation; it seeks to fill in information for previously little known periods of Booth's life, provides augmentive detail for other periods, occasionally corrects or differs from relatively unimportant details and ends up confirming Shepperson's broad conclusions. In fact, to a remarkable degree, where Shepperson's evidence was scanty his inferences, extrapolations and assumptions have proved well founded. To a certain extent this is due to a consistency in Booth's career. In spite of the complexity of his character, the frequent shifts in institutional affiliation, apparent changes in religious beliefs, and great variety of proposals and plans, there is a unity to Booth's career, which can be shown by the calls he felt to be, in effect, a prophet of increasingly radical change.

Booth's fundamentalism was so absolute that it was radical. His outlook was one of complete racial equality (it is unclear how much of a conventional sexist he was; he certainly dominated his wife, but at least was sensitive to the need for women's education). He was unshakeably optimistic that the Lord would show him the way to fulfill his vision of the Lord's will. He literally followed the Ten Commandments to the point of becoming a pacifist, worshipping on the seventh day and feeling the need to protest at the colonial powers' coveting and stealing Africans' land, labour and freedom. His conscience and conviction in his mission led him to an active advocacy of religious, economic and political independency.

Before turning to what Booth did to try to bring about change we should mention aspects, which will not be dwelled upon, of Booth's impact on individuals and institutions. His well known association with John Chilembwe of Nyasaland is his most spectacular, and probably his most important, effect in history. Contrary to what the government believed, he played no direct part in the rising of 1915, and in fact did not know about it for a few years; but without the initial influence of his ideas on John Chilembwe there would have been no rising. His influence on other less well known central Africans, such as Elliott Kamwana, Charles Domingo, Peter Nyambo, Alex Makwinja, and others, is also to be noted, but its evaluation involves the complicated issue of Booth's relations with