MISSIONARY ENDEAVOR AND THE POLITICS OF IDENTITY IN SWITZERLAND

Patrick Harries
(Historian, University of Cape Town)

As Switzerland celebrates the 150th anniversary of its first liberal constitution, the country is experiencing a crisis of identity. The Confederation established in 1848, bridging deep divisions of language, religion, region and class, is under threat. Part of the problem lies with the fall of the Berlin Wall, which terminated the reason for Switzerland’s long history of political neutrality. With the removal of this common bond the country has become divided over whether to submerge itself in a European union dominated by neighbours against whom the Swiss have long defined themselves. At the same time, neoliberal experts in profitability and efficiency call for the consolidation of communes and even cantons; and demand cuts in funding to social programmes and institutions upon which rests the identity of the Swiss as a moral and humane people. Revelations about Nazi gold and holocaust victims’ bank accounts have already dented this image. As Switzerland cannot fall back on an identity provided by a common linguistic tradition, there are fears the country will experience a balkanisation.

As Switzerland trembles on the edge of European Unity, it is worth recalling that an understanding of the process of nation-making requires a familiarity with the wider geographical context in which identities are formulated. Switzerland was a nation without colonies, but its very sense of nationhood emerged just as Swiss evangelists, traders, scientists and soldiers spread into the peripheries of their world. These adventurers were propelled by the search for profit and souls, but equally by an indefatigable curiosity

1 A fear reflected in newspaper articles and in topical works such as P. Hazan, Le mal Suisse (Paris, 1998).
and an organizing gaze. Through a wide range of lectures, sermons, exhibitions and popular writings, stretching from the spiritual to the scientific, these men brought an exotic world into the cultural heartland of Switzerland; and in so doing they created a mirror in which their compatriots could see themselves in new and dynamic ways.

In this essay I focus on one element in the construction of Swiss national identity: the nineteenth-century evangelical movement and its mission in Africa. In part one I examine the way in which the Christian Revival and its missionary wing became a focus for identity politics in the canton of Vaud. In part two I stress the importance of evangelical institutions to the Vaudois cultural tradition; and hope in this way to introduce new themes into recent studies of literature in the Suisse Romande. The missionary movement brought members of the intellectual elite of Vaud and Neuchâtel into an unfamiliar but exciting world in West and Southern Africa. Part three is concerned with the ways in which this world was portrayed to readers, listeners and viewers; and simultaneously absorbed into the Vaudois culture. Africa was a central trope in the web of evangelical signs that captured the imagination of many Swiss in the nineteenth-century. They found in the imagery of Africa tools with which to criticize their own society; but more importantly, they found in this imagery a means of self-definition. Evangelical views of Africa played an important role in creating the cultural conditions of imperialism. But in the process, I want to suggest, the same views helped shape and create aspects of the imperialists' quotidian culture at home. The disparate Swiss saw themselves reflected as a group in opposition to what they saw in Africa; and they found a unity of purpose in the Dark Continent that would bind them at home and abroad.

2 For important works on the literary tradition of the elite, see D. Maggetti, L'Invention de la littérature romande 1830-1910 (Lausanne, 1995); R. Francillon (éd.), Histoire de la littérature en Suisse Romande, vol. II "De Toepffer à Ramuz" (Lausanne, 1997); Y. Bridel et Francillon (éd.), La "Bibliothèque universelle" (1815-1924) : Miroir de la sensibilité romande au XIXe siècle (Lausanne, 1998).


4 The cultural construction of Europe through interaction with colonial peoples is a growing field. I have found particularly useful C. Hall, "Missionary Stories : gender and ethnicity in England in the 1830s and 1840s" in her White, Male and Middle Class : explorations in Feminism and History (Cambridge, 1992) and S. Thorne, "The Conversion of Englishmen and the conversion of the world inseparable : missionary imperialism and the language of class in early industrial Britain" in A. Stoler and F. Cooper eds, Tensions of Empire : Colonial cultures in a bourgeois world (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 1997). P. Wolfe charts this new direction in "History and Imperialism : A Century of Theory, from Marx to Postcolonialism", American History Review, 102, 2, 1997.