The race question remains at the heart of daily life in South Africa. Before the change of government in 1994, the Population Registration Act fixed every South African in a racial category based on biological differences. Despite the abolition of this law, the concept of race remains a primary social category, and means of identification, in South Africa. In a political climate concerned with the dismantling of the racial basis of the economy, state institutions, and even those in the private sector, have to « reflect the demographic structure of the country ». This in turn requires that, in an attempt to ensure greater freedom of opportunity, « the playing fields be levelled ». In this context, blacks have become the « formerly disadvantaged » who benefit from a form of positive discrimination called « affirmative action »¹. The political and economic transformation of South Africa requires that racial categories remain as clear today as they were during the period of apartheid.

¹ This term relates to a very different process of accumulation from that indicated by the same name in the United States.
The importance of racial ideas and practices in South Africa is normally explained in historical terms by the influence of slavery, the conflict produced on the advancing frontier of white settlement, and especially in terms of the competition between blacks and whites generated by the process of industrialisation. More recently, Saul Dubow has underlined the importance of racial ideas imported from Europe and redefined locally.

In this paper I want to concentrate on the ways in which Swiss missionaries from the cantons of Vaud and Neuchâtel contributed to the concept of race as a category of identification and explanation in South Africa. The Vaudois Mission, which became the Swiss Mission in 1883, served as a bridge between intellectual centres in Europe and the field of experience in Africa. Several missionaries came from the ranks of the evangelical élite in Switzerland. Almost all arrived in Africa with a university degree, as well as with the confidence needed to make sense of the world to which they had been sent by their vocation. Missionaries brought whites, in South Africa and elsewhere in the world, into contact with the black population, especially blacks living in the rural areas. In the following pages, I want to show how they situated the notion of race at the centre of this contact.

1. Notions of Race in Switzerland

The expansion of the missionary movement to Africa coincided with an era when many European intellectuals employed a concept of race to explain their world. In the Swiss Confédération, anthropometric and craniological studies showed that the Swiss, a people severely divided by differences of language, religion and level of development, shared a common racial foundation. On this Celtic basis, Switzerland had experienced a series of Gallic, Roman and German invasions. This racial mixture gave French-speaking Switzerland, the Suisse Romande, its special character and, at the same time, furnished it with a historical mission: to serve as the bridge between France and Germany. In neighbouring France, parallel studies sought either to find a Celtic or Nordic origin for the nation, situated its historical dynamics in the ancient interaction between native dolichocephals and immigrant brachycephals or, more recently, in the struggle between Frankish and Gallic races. In Geneva, Adolphe Pictet even developed, on the basis of comparative linguistics, a theory of Celtic racial superiority. But in extending his studies in « linguistic

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