According to the author’s acknowledgments this book originated in a wide-ranging research project commenced during fellowships at Rhodes University in the 1980s and Princeton in 1991. Having set out to make a comprehensive survey of the political involvement of South African Protestant missions, Elphick gradually scaled back his ambitions to concentrate on the period from 1900 to 1960. Within this timeframe he devotes most attention to the relationship between theology and politics. At the heart of his investigation is the early twentieth-century response of Calvinist theologians and the various branches of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) to the challenge posed by some nineteenth-century Protestant missionaries who insisted that the equality of believers proclaimed by scripture implied equal treatment before the law. He decisively demonstrates that theology mattered in debates over racial legislation during the long march of the South African state toward implementation of the apartheid regime.

The first third of the volume reviews the record of the missions from the arrival of the first Moravian in 1737 to the turn of the twentieth century, by which time foreign evangelists in South Africa constituted nearly forty percent of the entire Protestant missionary force in Africa. The broad outlines of this part of the story are fairly well known. Dutch settlers strongly resisted any egalitarian tendencies in either church or state. Thanks to a few outspoken individuals such as the London Missionary Society’s agents Johannes van der Kemp, James Read, John Philip and David Livingstone, missions acquired an outsized reputation as troublemakers. This belies the fact that few missionaries lived by the egalitarian precepts they preached. On the contrary, they frankly avowed their intention to abolish long-established customs and placed obstacles in the way of Africans who aspired to leadership positions in the church. Elphick’s main contribution in this section of the book is to show the profound theological thinking that underpinned John Philip’s critique of colonial policy. He also rightly points out that missionary denunciations of injustice can be found right through the nineteenth century, including Anglican Bishop J.W. Colenso of Natal and Johannes Winter of the Berlin Missionary Society, whose devotion to the cause of the BaPedi extended to the point of offering his daughter in marriage to the Pedi chief Kgolokoe and supporting the secession of the breakaway Bapedi Lutheran Church in 1890.

By the dawn of the twentieth century missionaries had learned from expe-
rience that steering clear of political involvement would not raise their popularity among settlers. Insofar as their preaching and teaching raised African expectations of a better life, they were viewed as agents of sedition. That many white missionaries came from overseas and answered to foreign-based boards of governance only served to increase suspicions. However, two developments raised hopes for a better understanding after the Anglo-Boer War. One was a growing enthusiasm for missions in the Dutch Reformed congregations, born of a feeling that the work of evangelism would not have required foreign missionaries if they had done their duty. Another was associated with growing acceptance of racial segregation in American churches and of racially tainted imperialism in Europe. The so-called Social Gospel privileged charitable, medical, agricultural and general welfare work above conversion, transformation of traditional mores and promotion of egalitarian individualism. For a time it seemed – as Elphick puts it, borrowing an American concept of that era – that missions of different complexions might join hands in a Benevolent Empire.

From this point the book tacks off in a new direction, taking us deep into the evolution of twentieth-century Calvinist thought in Europe and in South Africa. This will be for many readers the most valuable section. Most of the ins and outs of those discussions within the Dutch Reformed tradition have been only cursorily treated in previous studies. Elphick proves to be an exceptionally surefooted guide on this rugged terrain of intellectual history. At times the discussion veers so far toward the theology of politics as to lose touch with missions altogether. However, some understanding of these developments is essential for understanding how DRC mission thinking related to the development of apartheid as an ideological program. He concludes with a series of case studies showing how at critical junctures missionaries from other Protestant traditions were outflanked and eventually run down by the opposing forces of DRC Calvinism and the white supremacist state. The first was the battle over education, where ‘adaptationist’ doctrines recommending ‘culturally appropriate’ training for Africans defeated the advocates of equal opportunities for all – culminating in the disastrous Bantu Education system. The second was the battle for retention of a colour-blind franchise, beginning with the compromises reached in the Act of Union and ending with the enshrinement of a whites-only electoral roll. The third was the transfer of almost all missions schools to state ownership and control.

Winding up the story with the Sharpeville killings and the banning of the ANC gives Elphick’s book a sepia-coloured, almost elegiac tone. The once promising missionary challenge to white supremacy suffers defeat after defeat, thanks in no small part to division and vacillation within its own ranks. “In the coming decades”, he concludes, “the inter-racial network would be revived and