A Missiological Reflection

And

Brief History

Of

Thafamasi Congregational Church, UCCSA

Focusing on the Reverends Samuel Marsh and Benjamin Hawes

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The largest theological controversy of its existence rocked the American Board mission during the 1880s. The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (American Board) was the oldest mission society in North America, established in 1810, and had during its first hundred years a physical and financial presence throughout the globe that rivaled most governments. “The Great Debate”, as it was known, featured on the front pages of the United States’ leading newspapers. The bitter dispute devastated the mission society; requiring more than twenty years to fully, if ever, recover. 1886 proved to be the year of the ‘perfect storm’ among Congregationalists in America (Putney and Burlin/Taylor, 13).

Eminent preachers, divinity school professors, seminary students, local church parishioners and members of the American Board’s primary decision making body (Prudential Committee) gathered to watch the “The Battle of the Giants” as Boston’s Daily Advertiser headlined the contestation, in Des Moines, Iowa for the 77th annual meeting of the American Board. At issue was the speculative doctrine of “Future Probation” which held that people who did not have an opportunity to hear the gospel in their lifetime would have an opportunity after death to hear the Gospel message from the lips of Jesus himself. Therefore, after death an opportunity would be given for any person to accept or reject an offer of salvation (Putney and Burlin/Taylor, 12).

This speculative doctrine advocated by a second-generation missionary from India, the Reverend Robert Hume, threatened to overturn hundreds of years of Christian orthodoxy by questioning the means by which to achieve salvation. Future Probation threatened the missiological motivation for the church’s foreign presence throughout the world and thus questioned the need for vast amounts of lives and money to be sacrificed for the sake of evangelising the world. Because the Prudential Committee thought the doctrine of Future Probation a threat to the basis of its existence and coffers, it screened future missionaries for compatible beliefs contrary to the heresy before ordaining them, thereby approving them for service overseas. That screening threatened the fundamental ethos and polity of Congregationalism: that specific creeds not be enforced and that local churches call and thus ordain ministers. Because Hume intimated that a belief in Future Probation was not heretical and even plausible, he was not approved to continue his eleven-year ministry in India. Hume had many supporters, in India, at his alma mater (Andover Theological Seminary), in his local church and with liberal thinkers throughout the country. The battle lines were drawn between the progressives and the conservatives.
Context is crucial. First, in India, Hume confronted a country with millions of people and just a smattering of Christians. All of them could not be reached so as to ‘hear’ the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Second, in India, there existed many faith traditions that were hundreds if not thousands of years old. Culture, religion and language were imbricated and Indians could not be expected to forfeit generations of ancient spiritual wisdom. For Hume, herein lies the dilemma. If God is a God of love, how could God condemn to eternal damnation millions of people throughout the world who did not accept Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Saviour through no fault of their own? The God of love that Hume proclaimed contradicted Christian orthodoxy’s understanding of salvation (heaven and hell). Hume proposed, though he did not state he knew exactly how, that a loving, merciful and forgiving God offered salvation to those who had little or no means by which to accept it and therefore did not cause them to burn in the fires of hell for eternity.

In 1836, American Board missionaries arrived in southern Africa to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ. They preached that those who were not Christian were doomed to hell – unredeemed Africans were called ‘heathens’. Of course, therefore, virtually all Africans at the time were hell-bound and their ancestors were presumably already there.
I propose in this reflection that such an orthodox theology seemed ludicrous to indigenous Africans. I propose that Africans comprehended and reacted negatively to the contradiction that a loving Creator would condemn to hell those who, through no fault of their own, had not had a viable opportunity to accept salvation. American Board missionaries struggled to gain even one convert until 1846; it was ten years before there was a single African Christian: Mbulasi Makhanya of Amanzimtoti. Not until 1870 (35 years after the missionaries arrived) did the American Zulu Mission ordain its first African into the ministry of the Word and Sacrament. Due to many deaths and too few ordinations, by 1878 (42 years after missionaries arrived) there was only one ordained African minister in the field (Christofersen, 57). How could this be?

First, orthodox Christianity was as offensive to Africans as it was to Hume. Given their rich traditional African spirituality, they were loath to forfeit that which made a great deal of sense and provided comfort for a message that was contradictory and harsh beyond all rational comprehension. I argue that traditional African spirituality which emphasised and venerated (not worshipped, per se) the ancestors initially precluded Africans from accepting orthodox Christianity because the faith not only sought to separate amaKholwa (Believers) from their fellow Africans, it also by implication separated them (even physically, as did the ‘great chasm fixed’ between Lazarus and Abraham from John 16:26) from their ancestors. To be separated in heaven from one’s ancestors in hell was a doctrine too hostile to the African socio-spiritual psyche.
There has long been a valid argument that those who are not Christians, whether they have heard the Gospel or not, are not condemned by God to eternal torment. The Anglican Bishop William Colenso (b.1814-d.1883) of Bishopstowe near Pietermaritzburg argued such a perspective based on I Corinthians 15:22 (“For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive” RSV). Colenso viewed Christ as the head of humanity (not exclusively Christians), encapsulating and restoring humanity in his own person on the cross. The logic follows that if all are condemned by Adam’s sin that all are saved by Christ’s action. Therefore,

*Christ’s work was effective in gathering up the whole of humankind since creation and up to the final resurrection into one in himself and restoring it to what God all along intended it to be. So people were no longer accursed creatures but children, whether or not they came to conscious Christian faith (Draper, 121).*

Second, the American Zulu Mission misunderstood and judged pejoratively Zulu social values thus fostering a spiritual and cultural aversion to the new faith. Therefore, I also argue that traditional African spirituality is not necessarily incompatible with Christianity and perhaps there is even biblical evidence for a more flexible, tolerant and accommodating perspective within ‘orthodox’ Christianity. For example, the dedication stone at the Groutville Congregational Church, UCCSA that was unveiled in 2003 following its restoration is paraphrased from Hebrews 12:1 that reads:

*Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us...(RSV)*

Who composes these ‘clouds of witnesses’? Many times I have done home visitations in the rural areas and seen the smoke rising in the homesteads. Most are shy to tell the umfundisi (ordained minister) that they are honouring, even communicating with, their ancestors. Why be ashamed? How much different is it from when our Anglican brothers and sisters waft incense during services? How much different is it from when our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters acknowledge, honour and even pray to the saints?

Missionaries during the 19th century often, and perhaps unnecessarily, condemned various indigenous practices. For example, the missionaries imposition of the 1879 Umsunduze Rules caused irrevocable damage to Christian relations and served as a catalyst to many break away churches such as the African Congregational Church and the Zulu Congregational Church towards the turn of the 20th century (Christofersen, 108). The Umsunduze Rules were draconian laws that strictly prohibited polygamy, ukulobolisa (bride price), brewing or drinking of beer and intsangu (smoking). Though perhaps forgotten, there are spiritual and ecclesiastical wounds that still have not been healed. The rules were oppressive. For example, a man who wished to be a Christian had to abandon all but one of his wives and presumably therefore also their children. Debates raged between more conservative American Board missionaries and Colenso regarding many of these onerous rules (Draper/Maclean, 265-92). The Umsunduze Rules violated Congregational polity emphasising democratic discernment with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, disobeyed the American Board in the metropole (Boston) that advocated indigenous independence from the American Board and the local Zulu Mission. Had more liberal and therefore moderate missionaries, such as
Lindley and Grout, remained, then perhaps a more accommodating faith would have grafted to African spirituality and therefore a more genuine and prolific Christianity would have emerged from southern Africa.

The purpose of the above reflection is not to denigrate the American missionaries, but rather to celebrate their ministries in truth and honesty. We must remember the missionaries forfeited almost every worldly thing they knew and loved to set sail for Africa, often for the rest of their lives (Mary Kelly Edwards of Inanda Seminary). They suffered culture shock and extreme psycho-social isolation on what was to them a very forbidding continent. They sacrificed their lives, even their children’s lives, for what they believed in. Though their theology may have been harsh, they were products of their times and culture (as we all are), and they were primarily motivated by a loving imperative that desired to save those who were thought to be ‘lost’.

At the Thafamasi church, we celebrate the lives of two faithful men. One white American, one black African: Samuel Marsh and Benjamin Hawes. Everything in the world divided them, yet they were colleagues in Christ Jesus. They were servants to their faith communities. At Thafamasi, we celebrate the partnership between North Americans and southern Africans who worship together today.

It is my prayer that in restoring the stones of the Reverends Marsh and Hawes, we honour our ancestors in faith. It is my prayer that as we remember their lives, we will be inspired to emulate them. It is my prayer that each local church will write its history and tell the stories of its saints (Couper, Albert Luthuli: Bound by Faith). It is my prayer that every graveyard will be one that dignifies and respects that great ‘cloud of witnesses’. Here in kwaZulu-Natal, American faith history and African faith history are the same. It was since 1836 and it remains so today. To God be the glory!
A Brief History of Thafamasi Congregational Church, UCCSA
Focusing on the Reverends Samuel Marsh and Benjamin Hawes

The Reverend Samuel Marsh (b.1817-d.1853) set sail from the United States of America for southern Africa on 28 October 1847. Marsh and his wife Mary, together with the Reverend David and Alvira Rood, arrived in southern Africa on 20 January 1848 (Christofersen, 32; Tyler, 245 and Briggs, 85). They served as missionaries of the ecumenical, but Congregational by default, American Board. The American Board established the American Zulu Mission on the east coast of what is now the Republic of South Africa.

Marsh began his ministry at Table Mountain and departed ill in 1850 to serve at Thafamasi where he founded a mission station (Christofersen, 34ff cites Ireland, 31-2). Marsh departed Table Mountain leaving one member (Christofersen, 34). The Reverend Daniel Lindley of the Inanda mission station once said of Marsh:

*During all the time he was in health, and in sickness, he never said, or did, or left undone a single thing which tended even in the least degree to weaken the conviction deep in the minds of all who knew him that he was eminently a man of God. In his family he ever appeared as a beautiful model of a husband and father...He was true and faithful and loving and generous in all the relations and duties of life. It was with an emphasis that we called him ‘brother’, so much was he loved by us all (Tyler, 239-40).*

The Reverend Daniel Lindley, n.d.
Like the Reverends James Bryant at Imfume (b.1812-d.1850 at 38 years) and Dr Newton Adams at Umlazi and Amanzimtoti (b.1804-d.1851 at 47 years), Marsh died young at the age of 36 (Reuling, 40 and Briggs, 86).

Tyler reported in detail Marsh’s last moments in a hagiographic prose:

*Though his sufferings were intense, he never lost his faith in God or uttered a word of complaint. After a paroxysm of pain, he once asked: “Why do I linger here?” And when told to him it seemed to be God’s will that he should glorify him by suffering, he remarked, “Oh, yes, it is all right. Heavenly Father, thy will be done”. Allusion having been made to his wife and child, he said, “I have no concern for them; the Lord can take better care of them than I can”. Once, I remember, he clasped his hands and prayed most earnestly that God would make him grateful for the kind friends who were caring for him in his sickness and that he might be patient and submissive under all his sufferings. He delighted to have me read him a book on “Consolation”, by Dr JW Alexander. As he approached the dark valley his faith grew stronger and stronger. Then I asked him what was his trust, and he immediately responded, “The finished work of Christ”. His end was calm and peaceful. Without a struggle his soul passed into the arms of his Saviour (Tyler, 238-39).*

Marsh died leaving four members at Thafamasi (Christofersen, 36). Many of the early American missionaries lived and died in southern Africa and their remains are buried with those whom they served.

Marsh became the third missionary to die in the field. To the indigenes, Christianity was quite novel, strange and claimed great things. Therefore, the missionaries’ funerals were opportunities to demonstrate the efficacy of the new faith. Anguish over a dear friend, colleague and husband had to be stifled so as to not dissuade potential converts to the faith.

*The Africans attending his funeral were amazed at the absence of wailing and the sense of triumph through all the proceedings (Briggs, 87).*

The Reverend Josiah Tyler of Esidumbini recalled that Marsh’s remains lie at the station he founded, and on the hill where he loved to call together the Africans and tell the story of redeeming love (Tyler, 239). After Marsh’s sudden death, Thafamasi struggled. Various missionaries from surrounding sites kept the work going for almost two decades.

In 1872, the Reverend Benjamin Hawes (b.1829-d.1897) accepted the pastorate at Thafamasi Congregational Church. Only one new member (5 total) had been gained since Marsh died (Christofersen, 36). Benjamin was the younger brother of Thomas Hawes (b.1827-d.1921), both sons of Joel (b.1806-d.1896) and Keziah Hawes (b.unknown-d.1896). Joel was a convert of Lindley who founded the uMzinyathi (1847) and Inanda mission stations (1858). Joel was one of nine founding members of the Inanda Congregational Church that was established on 21 January 1849 (Briggs, 84 and Smith, 283). Joel’s name was originally Mbambela Goba (Andile Hawes, unpublished).
When he converted to Christianity, he and his family took the name of a western clergyman, as was the custom at the time (Mguzana Mngadi/Rufus Anderson, first indigenous ordained minister at Umzumbe; Nembula Makhanya/Ira Adams of Amanzimtoti, second indigenous person to be baptised after his mother Mbulasi Makhanya and sixth indigenous minister to be ordained in August 1872; Isaka kaSeme/Pixley of Inanda, founder of the African National Congress; Patayi Mhlongo/George Champion of Inanda, father to the trade unionist AWG Champion; Ngatsiyane Dube/James Dube, son of Dalida, who was a convert of Lindley and father of the Rev Dr John Dube, the first President of the African National Congress).

In Joel’s case, he and his family took the name of a distinguished minister of the First Church of Christ in Hartford, Connecticut who married Lindley and his wife, Lucy (Missionary Herald, Vol. 70, 1874, 217 and Smith, 55). At least for some time after 1849, Joel’s relationship with his two sons was strained because he temporarily took a second wife before returning to a monogamous marriage (Hughes, 11).
Thomas’ original name was originally SiGoba (Stuart Archives, vol. 5). Benjamin’s original name still requires research to discover. If Joel converted in 1849, SiGoba would have been about 22 years old when he changed his name to ‘Thomas’ and his younger brother would have changed his name to ‘Benjamin’ when he was about 20 years old. Thomas and Benjamin, like James Dube, were dependable and stalwart assistants to the Lindleys (Smith, 281 and 401). Thomas also was ordained into the ministry in 1872 and placed at Esidumbini when the Tylers went on furlough (Briggs, 89 and Smith, 401). Esidumbini is where the mission press was based for a time and published the first complete Zulu New Testament, numerous Sunday school books and one of three monthly newspapers, *Ikwezi (The Morning Star)* from April 1861 to December 1868. Thomas pastored the Esidumbini church until 1889 and thereafter moved to Noodsberg (Andile Hawes, unpublished). Lindley said Thomas was...

...a little the best preacher we have. He has more unction than any of the rest and is not far behind the best of them in giving instruction (Smith, 401).
On behalf of the Inanda church membership and the American Zulu Mission, Thomas expressed sentiments of love for the Lindleys upon their retirement and repatriation to the United States (Smith, 418-9 and Hughes, 26).

Like many prominent amaKholwa daughters (Laurana Champion, Louisa Nembula, Helen Klasi, Martha Hawes, Martha Mali, Nomagugu Dube), one of Thomas and Leah’s daughters (and therefore Benjamin’s niece), Talitha (b.1862 – d.1927) attended school at Inanda Seminary as the youngest student (6 ½ years old!) on its opening day (01 March 1869).

_Her father...had begged that she might be taken, in spite of her being very young, as she had the use of only one leg and, having crutches for walking, she found it hard to attend school at her home (Wood, 18)._
Talitha remained as a student helper until 1875. She returned from 1877 to 1885 as an assistant to Mary Kelly Edwards, the first Principal of Inanda Seminary. Talitha achieved the extraordinary by saving sufficient funds to travel to the United States to further her education, a dream she did not realise. She became a very competent translator for various publications. Like her father Thomas and her uncle Benjamin, Talitha was ‘Exempted’ [from Native law] as from 25 February 1889. Talitha taught school on Thomas’ farm, Ellersmere (Umzinto), where she died unmarried on 12 February 1928 (Wood, 173 and Andile Hawes, unpublished).

Theological education for indigenous Christians began in 1854 with the Reverend David Rood at Amanzimtoti. After two or three years the school moved to Umtwalume under the instruction of the Rev Hyman Wilder. In 1858, theological education moved to Esidumbini where Msingaphansi Nyuswa, James Dube and Benjamin Hawes received training (Christofersen, 52). Thereafter, education reverted back to Umtwalume and Esidumbini, each for a second time. Education ceased in 1859 until the Reverend William Ireland became principal at Amanzimtoti in 1865. Ireland was succeeded by the Reverends Stephen Pixley (1870), Seth Stone (1873) and Elijah Robbins (1875 when named Adams Theological College).

Benjamin originally taught for some years, at least from 1860, at the Umvoti mission station (Groutville) with the Reverend Aldin Grout earning £3 per month (Christofersen, 39). It should be noted that Umvoti came to financially support Benjamin without the assistance of the wider church.

Benjamin at the age of 35 and Mbiyana Ngidi were licensed to preach at a conference in Inanda in August 1864 (Smith, 389-90 and Briggs, 95). The Mission allocated £72 per year for their support (Briggs, 95). On 09 August 1873, Ngidi was the seventh indigenous ordained minister and went on to establish the Noodsberg station, otherwise known as Inhlimbiti (Briggs, 95 and Christofersen, 67). At one time he and Thomas disputed over this church to the point where the contestation was adjudicated in court (Andile Hawes, unpublished). Ngidi defected, called himself a bishop and split the church (de Gruchy/Booth, 86 and Christofersen, 57).

From at least 1864 until 1872, Benjamin served the Thafamasi church as an evangelist (catechist) for the Home Missionary Society (Christofersen, 50), an indigenous mission organisation. Thereafter, Benjamin trained at the theological school in Amanzimtoti from 1870-1872 together with his former school mates at Esidumbini, Nyuswa, the second indigenous ordained minister on 14 June 1870 at Ifume, and Dube, the third indigenous ordained minister on 11 December 1870 at Inanda (Andile Hawes, unpublished and Smith, 401).

On 17 January 1872, Benjamin became the fourth indigenous minister to be ordained. Lindley and seven other missionaries were present (de Gruchy/Booth, 85 and Smith, 401). Simultaneously, he was installed at the Thafamasi church by the American Zulu Mission, thus constituting the church with two men and three women (Christofersen, 50).
Benjamin ministered at Thafamasi until 1895. He died on 19 March 1897 at the age of 68. Following Benjamin Hawes’ death, the American Zulu Mission intentionally concerted a great deal of effort to train African ministers. Missionaries stationed in rural areas declined. Missionaries operated more as educationalists than pastors. A great expansion of the church required additional African ministers. On 23 June 1901, Joseph Gobhozi, Cetwayo Goba and William Makhanya were ordained at the Thafamasi church (Christofersen, 94).

Benjamin had nine children, three boys and six girls, together with his wife (Andile Hawes, unpublished). One son, the Reverend Samuel Marsh Hawes, was the only child that became ordained. He pastored a church at Dumisa on the south coast near the village of Ekubusisweni where he was buried. Both the Reverends Samuel Marsh and Benjamin Hawes are buried at Thafamasi on the church glebe.

During the 1970s, the Reverend Josiah Dlamuka (b.1889–d.1974) served the Thafamasi faith community. Thereafter, the Reverends Gideon Shandu and Cleopas Mkhize served the church as Acting ministers. On 16 February 2004, the Reverend Zodwa Mzoneli of Groutville was ordained into the ministry at Thafamasi as she served until June 2008. Following her, the Reverend Nzuko Magwaza of Umsunduze served as Acting Minister.
Since the days of Marsh, the United States presence at Thafamasi and Inanda continued over the decades. In July 1958, the Reverend Allen Myrick of the United Church Board for World Missions was ordained at the church. From 2000 to present, the UCCSA appointed the Reverend Susan Valiquette of Global Ministries to serve the Inanda Seminary as Chaplain. The KZN Region of the UCCSA appointed the Reverend Dr Scott Couper of Global Ministries to serve as Acting Minister of Thafamasi in April 2011 following pastorates at Groutville, Umzumbe and Sydenham (Bethel).
The Marsh and Hawes Tombstones

The original tombstones for the Reverends Samuel Marsh and Benjamin Hawes found at Thafamasi were recovered in very poor condition. In fact, both stones were in pieces and severely stained due to exposure over the years.

The Marsh stone was found in so many pieces that only two composing the top half of the stone could be salvaged for use. The bottom half, on which the scripture in English and isiZulu are inscribed, is new stone. The two old and one new stone pieces were grafted together using metal rods and epoxy. The Hawes stone was found in two half pieces, top and bottom. The two pieces were fused together using metal rods and epoxy.

Both stones had the original texts reinscribed as exact to the originals as possible. The task was made difficult as the spoken and written isiZulu then (Lala) and now differ and both stones had texts on major breaks. Fonts could not be exactly matched, especially on the Hawes stone, because the fonts used in the 1800s no longer exist as they were hand crafted originals and today’s fonts are standardised by computer. The closest to the original fonts were used. The Hawes stone had a unique antiquated font, wherein holes were drilled for each letter, a stencil was placed over the stone, the letters were carved and lead (rather than ink) filled the inscriptions. Of course, this method is obsolete (drilling and stencils) and lead can no longer be used to fill the inscriptions. All the work was carried out by Swiss Stone (Umgeni/R102/Northcoast Road).
Marsh Stone

SAMUEL D. MARSH
Missionary to the Zulus
died Dec. 11. 1853,

Note: The original stone read “1843”. This was an error. It should have read ‘1853’. It is corrected on the restored stone.

aged 36 yrs.
I know that he shall rise again
Gi ya u ya ku vuka futhi

Note: There is no “N” is the original ‘Ngí’. The scripture derives from John 11:24.

Hawes Stone

LELI LITYE LA MISWA
EKUKUNJULWENI KA
REV. BENJAMIN HAWES
UMALUSI WEBANDHLA ETAFAMASI IMINYAKA 33

Note: There is a “H” after the “D” in “WEBANDHLA”. Thafamasi is spelled with an “E” and without an “H”.

WA FA NEMINYAKA KU NGATI 68
BABUSISWE ABAFILEYO ABA FELE E NKOSINI

Note: This sentence was difficult to discern because more than half of it is was upon a break line and thus unintelligible. It is thought that the text represents the antiquated written and spoken ‘Lala’ dialect.

G.T. Taylor
Note: Name of the original engraver/manufacturer.
Bibliography


See Jonathan Draper’s “Colenso’s Commentary on Romans: An Exegetical Assessment”, pp. 104-25.


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