Scottish and Evangelical Elements in the 1915 Nyasaland Uprising (Part Two)

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MISSION AND MILLENNIALISM

In a classic treatment of millennial movements in the Christian Middle Ages, Norman Cohn concluded that outbreaks of revolutionary millenarianism occur in remarkably uniform situations, where familiar biblical themes of God's judgement on evil, Christ's return, and a coming age of peace and plenty receive new hearing in volatile situations of economic uncertainty, rapid population growth or decline, and disruption to the traditional social fabric. A group of people emerge who feel uprooted and vulnerable: they cannot look back for guidance because old traditions are rapidly crumbling; stuck on the periphery of power in their context, they look to the future with hope—which for many means anticipating Christ's return to throw down the oppressors and raise up the downtrodden.[1]

A previous article showed how the conditions noted by Cohn were very much present in some form or another in colonial Malawi.[2] Specifically, the liberal education promoted by the Scottish Presbyterian missionaries at their important mission station at Blantyre (as well as Livingstonia in the north) contributed to the creation of a group of African Christians whose religious conversion and modern education had distanced them from their African past, but who remained on the margins of the colonial landscape of the present despite their education, acquired skills, and ability. These so-called 'new men' in colonial Malawi, who included John Chilembwe and several other leaders in the violent 1915 uprising against the colonial administration, were frustrated by the inherent injustice of colonial society as well as the paternalism of mission Christianity, and found in a radical strain of eschatology that was being propagated by some evangelical missionaries and indigenous evangelists in the region

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1 N. Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages* (London: Granada, 1970), pp. 53-60, 314-15.

2 T. Statham, 'Scottish and Evangelical Elements in the 1915 Nyasaland Uprising (Part One)', *SBET* 33.1 (2015), 39-57.

in the first decade of the twentieth century a catalyst for a fundamentally new vision of Malawi's future.

What remains to be seen in this article is how millennialism was introduced into Nyasaland by evangelical missionaries, and how it was appropriated by its African hearers so as to become an important ingredient in the revolt that occurred in late January 1915 (what is often referred to as the Nyasaland Uprising or—after its main inspiration—the Chilembwe Rising). Two objections need to be briefly addressed before proceeding. First, some scholars have argued against a direct connection between the Chilembwe Rising and millennialism. Most influentially, in his classic account of the 1915 Uprising *Independent African*, George Shepperson argued that Chilembwe's political radicalism grew out of biblical social teaching rather than eschatology:

> Chilembwe…often taught his politics straight from the Bible like many a good Covenanter ancestor of the Scots who had tutored Nyasaland; and, as has been noted, the slogans which inspired his men came from such radical scriptures as James's Epistles.[3]

Noting that as late as 1910-1911 Chilembwe remained a model of respectability, grudgingly praised by the Blantyre Mission as 'above the ordinary type of mission native' (although Hetherwick did add 'that his work is sadly suffering from want of European control and superintendence'), and apparently unruffled by the apocalyptic current coursing through other parts of the country at the time, Shepperson dubbed him 'a simple Baptist to the end of his life'.[4] Apart from the fact that being a 'simple Baptist' at the turn of the century might have also committed one to premillennialism, it would be a mistake to assume that because there appears to be little contact on this issue between Chilembwe and Nyasaland's end time prophets like Eliot Kamwana, Charles Domingo, and his old mentor Booth (see below), then there was no relationship between Chilembwe and millenarianism. When the copious court testimonies of PIM adherents recorded *after* the Uprising (testimonies which Shepperson was not allowed to access in 1958) are taken into account, an eschatological agitation behind the revolt is conspicuous. 'I was told the kingdom of God

[3] G. Shepperson and T. Price, *Independent African: John Chilembwe and the Origins, Setting and Significance of the Nyasaland Native Rising of 1915* (1958; reprint, Blantyre: CLAIM: 2000), p. 263.

[4] Shepperson, *Independent African*, pp. 163-4, 176, 263.

was at hand,' said one suspect. 'I heard these words John Chilembwe said *Tembenukani mitima* [the kingdom is coming] in January'.[5]

Second, it is widely thought that premillennialism, unlike postmillennialism, is inherently apolitical and socially disengaged. The German theologian Thomas Schirrmacher argues in reference to mission that premilliennialism is

> indifferent or even opposed to social action. Long-term investments in human well-being were said to divert missionary efforts from the high priority: preaching the gospel so that souls might be saved… This means that for evangelical Christians with a premillennial orientation their negative worldview inclines them to a low engagement with social, political and cultural affairs.[6]

This is a theological inference that is not sustainable as a historical generalization. As the Latin American scholar Julio de Santa Ana argues, throughout the history of the church, something like premillennial eschatology has often expressed both deep dissatisfaction with the present political, social and economic circumstances and fervent hope in radical future change. '"The day of the Lord is at hand: do not waver in your faith". This was expressed in an eschatological hope, bringing with it hope in the justice of God which was about to come'.[7] Indeed, in the 1915 Nyasaland Uprising, as at other times in Christian history, the imminent return of the King to establish *his* rule of righteousness and peace was believed to have direct political and social consequences for the rulers of the land.

'RECKLESS' BAPTISM

In correspondence with family in Scotland c. 1911, Napier of the Blantyre Mission remarked on two related items of interest. He criticized 'the reckless baptisers up-country' who 'baptise in a hurry without much

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5 Statements at the Commission of Inquiry, Malawi National Archives Files S/10/1/3. The landmark reinterpretation is J. Linden and I. Linden, 'John Chilembwe and the New Jerusalem', *Journal of African History* 12 (1971), 629-51.

6 T. Schirrmacher, 'Millennial Thought', in *Dictionary of Mission Theology: Evangelical Foundations*, ed. by J. Currie (Nottingham: IVP Academic, 2008), pp. 106-10. An excellent article by B. Stanley, 'The Future in the Past: Eschatological Vision in British and American Protestant Missionary History', *Tyndale Bulletin* 51 (2000), 101-20, offers a more historically informed view.

7 J. de Santa Ana, *Good News to the Poor: The Challenge of the Poor in the History of the Church* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1977), p. 87.

instruction,' concluding: 'This is a cause of trouble…'. He mentioned, second, that in his capacity as instructor to those Malawians studying for Presbyterian ministry—'a professor to a college of two'—he needed to study up on the 'Millennial Dawn teaching' which was rapidly growing in popularity, and for which his respectable Glasgow University education had not prepared him in the least.[8] In the decade prior to the 1915 Uprising, the long established Presbyterian and Anglican missions faced a new challenge from a slew of faith missions from America and Britain, all of which were credobaptist, and most of which were premillennialist. While premillennialism had been growing in popularity among evangelicals throughout the nineteenth century, its impulse to missionary activity became particularly strong toward the century's end, especially through the faith missions movement.[9]

Of course, the Scottish Presbyterian missions also typically practiced believers' baptism at this time, but they situated baptism at the end of a very long and strenuous probation which allowed them to carefully monitor and ultimately determine who would be part of the new community. Several of the evangelical faith missions, on the other hand, were, as Napier complained, 'reckless', baptizing people immediately upon profession of faith—an urgency underscored by their eschatology. The theological legitimacy of premillennialism and the propriety of 'rapid' baptism are moot points here. What is important is to appreciate in the context of colonial Africa the social significance of 'rapid' baptism in combination with this variant of eschatology. As noted above, despite its reputation, premillennialism *can* encapsulate a critique of the status quo simply by its anticipation of the coming of the One who will overturn it. Under specific circumstances, believers' baptism can express similar social discontent. In early colonial Malawi, Christian baptism was widely understood by missionaries, new Christians, and non-Christians alike as a rite of passage into a fundamentally new order of existence, namely, the modern order of Christianity and western civilization. As such the sacrament of baptism had a symbolic significance not unlike the wearing of a European hat: it marked one's entrance and status in a new secular and religious

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8 *Robert Hellier Napier in Nyasaland; Being His Letters to His Home Circle*, ed. by A. Hetherwick (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1925), pp. 15, 37, 55, 70-71.

9 On the origins and growth of premillennialism in the nineteenth century see D. Bebbington, *The Dominance of Evangelicalism: The Age of Spurgeon and Moody* (Leicester: IVP Academic, 2005), pp. 173-88. K. Fiedler, *The Story of Faith Missions* (Oxford: Regnum, 1994), especially pp. 272-91, examines the relationship between premillennialism and faith missions.

order.[10] Baptizing immediately upon profession of faith, then, could be seen as a implicit rejection of European paternalism: it rejected the stringent missionary criteria and control of the process, as well inserting—instantly and completely—the Malawian convert onto the new religious and political landscape created by colonialism.

Accordingly, the expectation of Christ's return in vindicate or rescue his troubled flock could easily become socially and politically radicalized when these new Christians realized that they remained very much on the pale of the colonial landscape they had joined in theory through their baptism.

The taproot of Christian radicalism in Nyasaland is generally considered to be Joseph Booth (1851-1932). Booth was an Australian-British faith missionary of fiercely independent mind and radically evangelical conviction. He was enormously influential in turn of the century Nyasaland as a church planter, proponent of African rights and tireless critic of British colonialism. In the mid 1890s Booth began his ministry in the shadow of Blantyre Mission and immediately began to irritate the Presbyterians. Harry Matecheta avidly remembered the uproar among new Christians when Booth made his first appearance at the Blantyre Mission church:

> When the Preacher was praying he [Booth] was behind the church but we often heard him saying 'Hallelujah, Amen'. When we got out of the church most Africans surrounded him such that he started preaching – 'Rise up and be blessed. Point to Morocco, save your country! The whites have taken everything leaving you only grass and water; in the past they bought you, now they want your land.[11]

In the next few years Booth established several industrial missions as (potentially) self-sufficiently stations for Christian community and African empowerment, offering Malawians much higher wages then what the Presbyterian and other missions offered, which triggered strikes and labour deflections. Along with baptizing former hearers, catechists, and students of the Presbyterian mission who had become attracted to his cause and message, Booth mocked the 'elegantly robed' Scottish missionaries, 'preaching a gospel of self-denial to men and women slaves' while they benefited from the colonial annexation of African territory.[12]

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10 Statham, 'Scottish and Evangelical Elements', p. 53.

11 H. K. Matecheta, *Blantyre Mission: Nkhani za Ciyambi Cace* (Blantyre: Hetherwick Press, 1951), p. 23.

12 Cited in H. Langworthy, *Africa for the African: A life of Joseph Booth* (Blantyre: CLAIM, 1996), p. 54.

> It seems to me that the greatest hindrance to the progress of God's work in Africa is the painful fact that as the Negro gets to know us Europeans and our little ways he calmly concludes that we are a nation of robbers, nothing less. He could tolerate the robbing better if we did not preach up honest so persistently.[13]

Throughout his two-decade career in Nyasaland—often interrupted by travels and deportation—Booth repeatedly called for the crown to dedicate all tax revenue from Africans to their own education, to grant Malawians self-government without delay, and to promise not to conscript Malawians into the British army, thereby making them shed the blood of other Africans. Booth tried as well (usually unsuccessfully) to organize various capital schemes for African entrepreneurs to help them become independent of European control and capital. The Blantyre Mission, in turn, used all available means to have the land grants for Booth's mission revoked; it criticized Booth for 'robbing our established mission' and decried the 'sectarian advantage' that permitted the faith missions like his to baptize upon profession of faith, i.e. without the lengthy catechesis mandated by the Presbyterians, as well as the exorbitant wages he offered to lure young people to his mission.[14] As a young boy Chilembwe left the Blantyre Mission to become Booth's 'houseboy', although the relationship they developed was genuinely affectionate and almost filial in nature.[15] Booth trained Chilembwe as his ministry apprentice and mentored him until they parted ways in America, and much of what Chilembwe took from Booth regarding African capability and white Christian duplicity would be reinforced by his American experience of African-American dynamism and rampant white racism.

'THE YEAR OF THE LORD'S FAVOUR, THE DAY OF VENGEANCE OF OUR GOD'

Booth bequeathed Chilembwe a socially conscious critique of European colonialism, including (but not always fairly, it should be added) the com-

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[13] J. Booth, *Africa for the Africans*, ed. by L. Perry, (Blantyre: CLAIM, 1996), p. 84.

[14] Blantyre Mission Council Minutes (January 1897), National Archives of Malawi File 50/BMC/1/1. See Langworthy, *Africa for the African*, pp. 35, 40, 53-61. Also useful is Langworthy, 'Joseph Booth, Prophet of Radical Change in Central and South Africa, 1891-1915', *Journal of Religion in Africa* 16 (1986), 22-43.

[15] So recalled Booth's daughter, E. Langworthy in *This Africa Was Mine* (London: Stirling Tract Enterprises, 1950), pp. 47, 143.

plicity of missionaries and imperialism. Booth had written in his 1897 tour de force *Africa for the African*:

> To the unprejudiced observer and to the educated African, she [Christian Europe] is a marvel of inconsistency, if not criminality, since by her national religion, she gratuitously and systematically asserts her belief in the commands:
> Thou shalt not covet;
> Thou shalt not steal;
> Thou shalt not kill;
> yet, most effectively, deliberately and continuously she does all three of these in pursuit of her African annexation policy. Her various Christian churches send forth into Africa in good faith, their messengers of 'peace on earth and good will toward men'; yet these often prove to be the forerunner of another set of men, sent to appropriate, to kill, to tax and subjugate. Our words are of peace, but our acts are of war.[16]

Yet when Booth committed himself in 1906 to radical premillennialism, Chilembwe was very much his own man and did not follow suit, nor had he in 1900 when Booth had become a sabbatarian. Booth adopted the imminent, apocalyptic eschatology of the Watchtower movement emanating from the United States in the early 1900s, which he probably encountered while on a fundraising trip to Scotland. Upon his return to southern Africa he formed a cell group of Africans in Capetown devoted to the study of eschatology which became a conduit throughout southern and central Africa for Watchtower teaching on the end times and imminent return of Christ. Booth's advocacy of Watchtower eschatology, which expected the return of Christ on a sinful generation in 1914 and the establishment of an earthly kingdom of peace and righteousness for the saints, attracted the attention of several Malawian Christian leaders, among the most important of whom were the northerners Charles Domingo (1875-?) and Eliot Kawmana (1872-1956), both of whom had abandoned the Livingstonia mission for independent ministry.[17]

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16 Booth, *Africa for the Africans*, pp. 11-12.

17 See especially J. Chakanza, *Voices of Preachers of Protest: The Ministry of Two Malawian Prophets: Eliot Kamwana and Wilfred Gudu* (Blantrye: CLAIM, 1998); K. Lohrentz, 'Joseph Booth, Charles Domingo, and the Seventh Day Baptists in Northern Nyasaland, 1910-1912,' *Journal of African History* 3 (1971), 461-80. Also useful are their respective entries in the *Dictionary of African Christian Biography*. I did not have access to Karen Fields, *Revival and Rebellion in Colonial Central Africa* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

The Malawian appropriation of Watchtower teaching was not a commitment to comprehensive Jehovah Witness doctrine but rather the appropriation of this movement's eschatology. In Britain's colonies in southern Africa, Watchtower became a threat to the *pax Britannica* as it was funnelled into the region through preachers and pulp literature, finding receptive ears among the exploited mine workers and urban slum dwellers in the Rand and the Rhodesian Copperbelt, as well as the cotton and coffee plantations in Nyasaland. Isaiah 61:1-2 was a favourite passage of this movement, with its proclamation of good news for the poor and oppressed and vengeance on God's enemies. The millennial hope of this movement challenged the moral justification of colonialism—if Christ's return in judgement was imminent did Africans really need to endure a European 'trusteeship'?—even as it criticized what Kamwana called 'the satanic alliance' between mission church and colonial administration that kept Malawians and other African peoples marginal citizens of their own countries.[18] 'From 6 A.M. to 5 or 6 P.M there is too much breakage of God's pure law as seen in James Epistle, v. 4,' warned Domingo—and even on mission compounds.[19] Significantly, as Kamwana began his ministry of preaching, healing, and anti-witchcraft measures, he also demanded free education for all Malawians, baptizing ten thousand people in Lake Malawi in preparation of Armageddon, which would take place in 1914. When Christ returned, it was widely expected by those Malawians touched by the Watchtower eschatology that he would abolish the hut tax, expel Europeans from their country, and give the land back to the Africans.

It is also important to note how this current of radical apocalyptic chiliasm converged with the religious-political movement of 'Ethiopianism' that was widespread across colonial Africa.[20] The nomenclature is from Psalm 68:31, 'Ethiopia will stretch out her hands to God', a verse long cherished in the African diaspora as signifying God's love and value for their lost homeland, and infused with new political and social meaning for Africans suffering in discriminatory colonial contexts. Ethiopianism asserted African equality in the face of white discrimination and European paternalism, and expressed the belief that—like the free nation of Ethiopia and its ancient church—Africans were fully capable

[18] Cited by R. Edgar, 'New Religious Movements,' in *Missions and Empire*, ed. by N. Etherington (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 231.

[19] Cited by Shepperson, *Independent African*, p. 163.

[20] See O. Kalu, 'Ethiopianism in African Christianity', in *African Christianity: An African Story*, ed. by O. Kalu (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2007), pp. 227-44; for the Malawian context see J. Chakanza, 'The Independency Alternative: An Historical Survey', *Religion in Malawi* 4 (1994), 32-42.

of ruling themselves and running their own churches. In the later nineteenth century and into the early twentieth century Ethiopianism provided an impulse to the creation of African-led church denominations as well as anti-colonial political activism. It was not necessarily eschatological: many African church denominations were founded in this time that rejected missionary control of the church but maintained the ethos, doctrines, and liturgies inherited from western missionaries.[21]

In the first decade after his return from America, Chilembwe exemplified this type of Ethiopianism, aiming to establish PIM as the centre of a pan-African church—'from the African [Atlantic] to the Indian ocean' claimed a contemporary.[22] While critical of colonial society and the missionary-controlled churches, Chilembwe's PIM remained both resolutely orthodox Baptist and committed to 'civilizing' Africans for the modern world. Like the leading Malawian Presbyterians, Chilembwe was counselling patience regarding the slow pace of African progress in colonial society, taking his cue from the famous African-American intellectual, Booker T. Washington, 'that if the opportunities afforded the African were fully utilized by him, they offered prospects for individual and collective advancement that would otherwise have been utterly impossible'.[23] His approach, taking form in his indigenous-run church mission and criticism of colonialism, was classically 'Ethiopian' but not apocalyptic.

As such, Chilembwe was not a cause of serious worry for Nyasaland's government in the years prior to the Uprising, while Booth, Domingo, and Kamwana were labelled dangerous men and, not surprisingly, often kept under police surveillance, imprisoned, or even exiled from Malawi either before or after the 1915 Uprising. Booth, especially, was singled out by the *Report of the Commission* as the ultimate cause of the rebellion through his racial teaching and millennialism: 'his correspondence with Chilembwe directly influenced the latter and others in rebelling against

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21 A. Anderson, 'African Initiated Churches', in *Global Dictionary of Theology*, ed. by W. Dyrness and V.-M. Kärkkäinen (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2008), pp. 5-7.

22 Kundecha testimony in K. Ross, *Christianity in Malawi: A Source Book* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1996), p. 152.

23 Cited in Shepperson, *Independent African*, p. 163. A famous Malawian expression of a non-prophetic and non-apocalyptic Ethiopianism is Yesaya Mwase [Mwasi], who broke away from the Livingstonia Synod to found the Blackman's Presbyterian Church, and explained his reasons in *My Essential and Paramount Reasons for Working Independently* (1933; reprint, Blantyre: CLAIM, 1999).

the Government'.[24] A direct connection is difficult to sustain, however. Booth was not even in southern Africa at the time of the Uprising, having been deported to Britain as an outspoken pacifist at the outbreak of the War, and his correspondence with Chilembwe in the years immediate to the Uprising was sparse.[25]

TOWARD REBELLION

While people at PIM certainly would have been unaware of the 'millennial dawn' agitating other parts of the country, Chilembwe did not have much direct contact with either Domingo or Kamwana. When they were at the peak of their influence, c. 1910, he was still strongly committed to the more mainstream 'Ethiopian' position and, as mentioned before, had earned a reputation even among the Scottish missionaries as a thoroughly respectable pastor.[26] A sure sign of his propriety was the fact that he served as a respondent to the questionnaire solicited by Commission II for the great World Missionary Conference that would be held in Edinburgh in 1910. Whether he held to evangelical premillennial doctrine as a 'simple Baptist' is unknown.

Yet in the few years before 1915 he appears to have gradually begun to accept certain tenets of the apocalyptic and millennialist eschatology that was pulsing through the colony, although it is impossible to determine precisely when and how. His turn to the radical Watchtower eschatology taught elsewhere in Nyasaland coincided with exasperation at the futility of the patient approach as problems deepened around him: there were intermittent famines between 1911 and 1913 that left many in the Shire highlands struggling to survive, especially the impoverished Lomwe immigrants from Portuguese East Africa who were swelling his congregation; the hated hut tax was raised yet again in 1912; animosity between Magomero Estates management like Livingstone and workers was waxing; Chilembwe himself had mounting debts in the wake of his ambitious attempts to expand PIM's infrastructure and ministry.[27] Finally, there was a 'tremendous upsurge of millennial expectation

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[24] *Report of the Commission Appointed by His Excellency the Governor to Inquire into Various Matters and Questions Concerned with the Native Rising in the Nyasaland Protectorate* (Zomba: Government of Nyasaland, 1916), pp. 11, 13. Finding a European mastermind to the Uprising, as the Report does, betrays racist assumptions typical of the day.

[25] For Booth's career at this time see Langworthy, *Africa for the African*, pp. 441-83.

[26] *The Church in the Mission Field* (New York: Fleming Revell, 1910), p. xvii.

[27] See Shepperson, *Independent African*, pp. 189-201.

caused by the World War', not only because Kamwana had prophesied the spiritual final battle to take place in 1914, but also because the imperial war machine aggravated many of the long standing grievances African leaders like Chilembwe held against the colonial administration by forcibly conscripting soldiers and porters into the army and devouring local resources for the war effort.[28]

Significantly, in the months immediately prior to January 1915 Chilembwe broke with the passive stance of both evangelical and Watchtower premillennialism: the 'New Jerusalem' would have to be initiated through force.[29] It is difficult to precisely date this fateful turn of mind, but we have a hint from the post-rebellion testimonies that it had happened at least 'a few months' prior, according to the testimony of a George Masango, who recalled debating the meaning of Isaiah 52 with David Kaduya, whom had been sent to Masango by Chilembwe to try to enlist him.

> He said do you read these things George? I said 'I can'. He said do you know what these words mean? I said 'what kind of words?' He replied 'Where the words of God says 'Awake! Awake' [52:1]. I told him 'I know what it means because I am a Christian'…I told him that these words mean to say we Christians must not be ignorant of the temptation of Satan…He said to me 'Oh, dear George you are still stumbling and know not what you are doing or what sort of Christian you are…But these words awake! Awake! mean to say that the people must fight for their own nation!'[30]

Further testimonies underscore and elaborate upon the pervasive millennial ferment at work in Chilembwe's congregation before and during the Uprising, even though it is difficult to piece them together into a coherent eschatological perspective. The 'beast from the sea' from the book of Revelation was being compared to the white settlers, missionaries, and colonial administration. The hated Livingstone was being referred to as an 'anti-Christ', and some scholars have suggested that the gruesome decapitation of the Estate manager and his impaled head in the church sanctu-

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28 Linden and Linden, 'John Chilembwe and the New Jerusalem', pp. 645-6.

29 Linden and Linden, 'John Chilembwe and the New Jerusalem', p. 640. The colonial administration received but ignored reports of seditious activity at PIM in the months before the Uprising, expecting that if trouble came, it would be from among the historically troublesome tribes like the Tonga or the Ngoni.

30 Malawi National Archives File S/10/1/2. (The irregular capitalization is in the original transcript). The testimonies below are derived from Statements at the Commission of Inquiry, Malawi National Archives Files S/10/1/2-5.

ary might have been a symbol of the defeat of evil by the forces of God.[31] Chilembwe and his elders were preaching just before the Uprising that Christ would return and 'all people except John Chilembwe's Christians would be killed. I believed it.' PIM was being likened to Noah's Ark, where Christ's people would wait out the deluge of God's judgement on a sinful world, and await the new earth. Other testimonies assert that Christ's return would bring the end of the old world, and a new kingdom would come with Africans in control of their own land and people; that would any person who fell in battle against evil would receive a martyr's crown and share in the new kingdom. Even as late as the morning of Sunday 24 January, Chilembwe declared the Kingdom of God was hand with highly apocalyptic imagery—'you will hear the bugles sounding', he preached to his congregation. Finally, after the Uprising the government was able to apprehend and prosecute rebels after recovering from Chilembwe's main church in Mtombwe a so-called "War Book", seemingly a list of church members who had pledged themselves to Chilembwe's cause, which itself suggests a similarity with the 'Book of Life' (e.g. Rev. 13:8). Accordingly, one woman who had surrendered herself to the authorities (receiving a lighter sentence of eighteen months hard labour and ten lashes), explained her name in this book to the prosecution with the language of perseverance typical of biblical apocalyptic literature: 'If my name appears in the War Roll Book I suppose it is because John Chilembwe wrote the names of all his Christians to fight for him and he thought I was strong'.

Clearly evangelical premillennialism had been transformed in the fulcrum of colonial African experience, and like the Scottish Presbyterian missionary emphasis on education, was now being directed toward radical ends. The traditional premillennial teaching on the return of Christ to gather his church from the growing darkness, then to initiate the millennial kingdom, had been radicalized by Watchtower emphasis on the *parousia* as God's judgement on the world, and indeed already been given a date (1914); within the peculiar African context, the negative pole of this doctrine was given explicitly an anti-colonial form, while the positive pole neatly aligned with emerging 'Ethiopianism' that looked for religious and national independency for Africans. Finally, against the backdrop of the War and waxing grievances among both the poor labourers and frustrated African 'bourgeoisie', this eschatology took a last step in its morphology: from passive to active resistance to inaugurate the millennial kingdom.

[31] P. Makondesa, *The Church History of Providence Industrial Mission* (Zomba: Kachere, 2006), p. 136.

A CHURCH OF THE DISINHERITED

Writing in 1929, H. Richard Niebuhr claimed the Methodist revival as 'the last great religious revolution of the disinherited in Christendom'.[32] It was not, although Niebuhr can be forgiven for not being aware of what was then happening on the African continent—few in the Christian West were. In the first three decades of the twentieth century colonial African Christianity was rippling with revivals, prophetic movements and church divisions. 'Ethiopian' churches were sprouting from the stock of mission churches, especially in South Africa and west Africa.

Around the time of the outbreak of the Great War, prophets William Wade Harris and Garrick Braide converted and baptized hundreds of thousands of people in west Africa. In 1921 Simon Kimbangu shook the Belgian colonial government to its core with his dramatic ministry of healing and prophecy in the Congo, at roughly the same time that Tomo Nyirenda in Northern Rhodesia [Zambia] and John Maranke in Southern Rhodesia [Zimbabwe] were attracting notoriety from the colonial administrations for their ministries of exorcism, witch-hunting and healing, as well as their resolutely anti-colonial rhetoric. Revival was sweeping through Rwanda, Uganda and Kenya in the 1920s, which, like the concurrent Aladura movement in Nigeria, was making the Christian gospel relevant to Africans in way unimaginable to missionary Christianity. These were very much movements of the disinherited, taking place at the points of friction in colonial society as well in the wake of the world wide turmoil wrought by the Great War. Inspired by the Christian gospel brought by the missionaries, these spiritual movements worked outside the channels of missionary Christianity, featuring independent African agency and emphasising the relevance of the Christian gospel to traditional African spiritual cosmologies and Africa's current colonial injustices. As a doyen of the study of African initiated Christian movements, David Barrett, noted, missionaries typically responded to these 'disturbing deviations from mission Christianity' by dismissing them or trivializing them as isolated events of fleeting duration:

> It is not surprising that the note of alarm should thus be sounded, for in most cases observers were reporting each on a single moment or regime and were under the impression that it was an isolated outbreak arising out of some local

[32] H. R. Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (1929; reprint, New York: Meridan, 1957), p. 60.

> misunderstanding of the Christian faith. Very few…realized that they were witnessing the local manifestations of a continent-wide phenomenon.[33]

The 1915 Nyasaland Uprising, which was dismissed then by both colonial and missionary authorities as local and limited, should be seen in this continent-wide phenomenon of African Christian initiative and independency, and was most certainly a 'religious revolution of the disinherited'. Niebuhr intended the phrase to refer specifically to the poor and oppressed who turned in desperation to an apocalyptic worldview or millennial expectation because their plight went unrecognized in magisterial Christian traditions (or was even theologically justified by them). 'The failure of the Reformation to meet the religious needs of peasants and other disenfranchised groups is a chapter writ large in history', he concluded.34 This assessment is likely true.

But the 1915 Nyasaland Uprising suggests not only the failure the Reformation but also its success: historians have rightly noted that Protestant Christianity in Nyasaland in the early twentieth century was a religion of a book, the Bible, and because of the efforts of Scottish Presbyterian missionaries, Malawian Protestants could read that book for themselves.[35] In that book they could read of the promise of a coming world more just and fair than their colonial world, and so develop a social and political critique of the unjust established order, including those Christian churches that tacitly supported it or benefited by it. Such were two substantial Christian currents that flowed into the 1915 Nyasaland Uprising, an event that was not only a landmark in Malawian history and in the development of nationalism in central Africa, but also a significant chapter in the respective histories of Scottish and evangelical missions, as well as yet another reminder from the story of world Christianity that the missionary transmission of the Christian faith bears unpredictable results—even violently challenging the agents of transmission in the very name of the message they had brought with them.

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33 D. Barrett, *Schism and Renewal in Africa: An Analysis of Six Thousand Contemporary Religious Movements* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 89-90.

34 Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*, p. 34.

35 Linden and Linden, 'John Chilembwe and the New Jerusalem', pp. 630, 647. The authors point out that the Roman Catholic Church in Nyasaland at this time did not authorize the use of the Bible for indigenous Christians, but provided them rather with a book of selections from Scripture, which did not include the book of Revelation!