RESENSIES/REVIEWS

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THE PORTABLE BUNYAN: A TRANSNATIONAL HISTORY OF THE PILGRIM'S PROGRESS

2004. Wits University Press / Princeton University Press, 314pp.
ISBN 0-691-11656-3

As I was about to receive *The portable Bunyan* for review purposes, I was looking forward to some collected or condensed work by the great Puritan Baptist. Likewise the reader may be surprised to find out that "portable" refers to Bunyan's bestseller *Pilgrim's Progress* being transported, as the book and its ideas travelled over the world and were received into different contexts. Long after its author died, Bunyan's book continued to attract a popular interest that lasted for many centuries. Few of his contemporaries, let alone the author himself, would have imagined that many nations would read his work, from the shores of India to the heartland of the Dark Continent.

Not only was *Pilgrim's Progress* widely appreciated by that part of British Christianity that stressed conversion and walking the narrow road, but it also found its way abroad through translations into other European languages. The efforts of the 19th century missionary societies made Bunyan next best only to the Bible, exporting thousands of copies as evangelical tracts. Missionaries with an evangelical Protestant background took great endeavours to produce translations in African languages between the 1840s and 1960s, as *Pilgrim's Progress* was considered nearly as good as the gospel itself. It was a practical outline of evangelical beliefs by means of a dramatised story of a Christian on his pilgrimage to heaven, encountering enemies, curves and byways after he started following the narrow road when Jesus released him from his burden of sin. The book gives one the refreshing feeling that Christianity is about the Lordship of Jesus who should have a real impact on life, not just for one hour on Sunday.

In literary circles Bunyan has been appreciated as the father of the English novel. The *Pilgrim's Progress* received a place next to the works of Milton and Shakespeare, rather as part of the national heritage and not as a religious book. In other words, the book was initially immensely popular for religious reasons and conquered the world. Later, with the rise of literary criticism it received a new popularity because of its Englishness. In other countries, such as the African continent,

the book was received despite its Englishness for religious and sometimes other reasons. In her book *The portable Bunyan* Isabel Hofmeyer seeks our attention for this "transnational" side, which is essentially religious in character. Because of its Christian teachings, the book spread all over the world. Of course, in details the story was adapted to make it intelligible to different cultures, illustrations sometimes changed to include a black pilgrim and a less sleepy or visionary author. The contents, however, remained essentially the same: a religious pilgrimage on earth towards a celestial city, after one has received forgiveness of sin from God, through receiving his Son Jesus Christ as Lord of one's life.

Bunyan's claims to the novel status have been supported by the book's geographical realism, Englishmen of course reading the map of Bedfordshire into the whole affair and closing the book very proudly when finished. Hofmeyer, on the other hand, argues that the interpretations of other tongues and nations are not less valid, as *Pilgrim's Progress* is essentially a symbolic religious book. There is no indication whatsoever, that Bunyan had any intention of putting Bedford on the map by writing. On the contrary, he told a religious parable. The likelihood that some of his familiar environment was on his mind while producing imagery for the story, does not change this. John Bunyan was not writing literature, but preaching his religious beliefs. Because they shared this same faith, likeminded black missionaries of later centuries, like Tiyo Soga, translated *Pilgrim's Progress* into Xhosa and other languages. (Cf. F. Lion Cachet, *De eerste Kaffer-zendeling, eene bladzijde uit de geschiedenis der zending in Kafferland*, Amsterdam Höveker 1888).

In post-colonial Africa the situation has changed. Some influence of Bunyan remains, but in resemblance in terminology only. Among Afro-Marxist and feminist writers over the last decades, burdens are no longer defined in terms of personal guilt and offence to God, but usually somebody else's fault. Life is about choosing the road of the worker against burdensome oppression or embracing the broad way of the capitalist. Of course one cannot really speak about interpretations of *Pilgrim's Progress* in these writers anymore, especially as concepts of pilgrimage and the narrow road have been universal Christian images since the days of the New Testament. In post-colonial Africa, at best some of the potent imagery inherited from earlier generations survives. *Pilgrim's Progress* as an entity no longer features and for this reason it seems only possible to attach the label "transnational Bunyan" in a much derived sense. Loose quotes and similarity in terminology

do not necessarily constitute a conscious interpretation of an author. Churchill learned a list of Latin quotes by heart because he considered this useful in politics; however, speaking about "transitional Cicero" in Sir Winston would hardly do justice to Cicero or the great Prime Minister. Perhaps Prof. Hofmeyr should have reached the conclusion that the "transnational Bunyan" ceases where the essential religious symbolism is no longer shared or appreciated by the new context.

Prof. Hofmeyr should be congratulated for emphasising the wider influence of *Pilgrim's Progress* and for putting John Bunyan on the map again as a persuasive writer of Christian literature.

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