‘Africa is an education; here you come to school again.’¹ So was David Clement Scott known to advise European newcomers in the late nineteenth century when he led the Blantyre Mission in present-day Malawi. Many of the newcomers misunderstood him. It was not an education to prepare the European to rule over the African, or even to convert the African to Christianity. Scott’s vision was of status reversals in which the newcomer, however powerful or wealthy, learned from those they had come to teach.

In another of his demands on the incoming European powers, Scott stated that ‘Africa is an altar of sacrifice, and on this altar the powers have laid their vows’.² Here his impetus came from the international slave trade that had disrupted life in the region long before the arrival of his mission. British opposition to slavery had also been long-standing, from the early abolitionists to David Livingstone’s description of the slave trade, inscribed in his tombstone at Westminster Abbey, as the ‘open sore of the world’. By invoking sacrifice, Scott contested a discourse that had started to lose its radical tenor. The British were not the redeemers, for so heavy were their own burdens that they could atone for them only through sacrifice. Scott came to see Christ in the figures of the slave and Africa.

But in order to put down the slave trade you must have a proper doctrine of humanity, a true appreciation of the slave. Just as Christ took upon Him the form of a slave long ago, so He takes upon Him the form of Africa today. Africa bears the sins of the world’s rulers. How long are we as a nation going to lay our selfishness, our meanness, our falsehood, our lusts, yea, and the whole burden of our sins upon this Lamb of God?³

² *Life and Work in British Central Africa (LWBCA)*, June 1889.
³ LWBCA, August–December 1897.
Scott saw in Africa what the Archbishop of Canterbury, some one hundred years later, came to interpret as the disciples’ predicament: ‘Jesus condemns the inadequacy of their earlier understanding: he is not what they have thought him to be, and thus they must “learn” him afresh, as from the beginning.’\(^4\) The unrecognizability of the risen Christ profoundly unsettles the disciples’ certainties; it subverts any reduction of Christ to a particular identity.

Africa as the risen Christ in Scott’s thought likewise assaulted the prejudices that had long acquired the status of certainties in European ideas of Africa. For Scott, Africa may have been unrecognized, but it was not unknowable. It was not the Dark Continent, let alone a continent outside history as in Hegel’s oft-cited fallacy.\(^5\) Africa confronted Scott with the otherness of the risen Christ, an otherness that exposed the limits of the newcomer’s learning.

The redemptive urge in Scott’s thought outlines a different sense of sacrifice than the one missionaries have used to describe their vocation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Inspired by the figure of Christ on the Cross rather than by the risen Saviour, they have seen self-sacrifice as a matter of forsaking the comforts of their homes in far-flung places.\(^6\) While Scott had more than his share of personal misery in Malawi, the sacrifice he sought was of a different order. Already by his time, redemptive politics had assumed a pattern by which the redeemer would not pursue transformation in their own outlook.\(^7\) ‘The attack on slavery’, an historian remarked in the mid-twentieth century, ‘represented hatred of a concept rather than love of its victims’.\(^8\) By the late nineteenth century, the anti-slavery campaign had become a mark of distinction that ‘automatically placed


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the British, as judges and deliverers, in the vanguard of the moral progress of the world’.  

Scott’s sacrifice was as much epistemic as it was personal. By adopting the position of a learner, Europeans in Africa would come to revise and even reject some of their cherished ideas. After all, it was ideas, whether in the Christian idiom or not, that justified the colonial conquest. As Marlow’s account in Heart of Darkness of the atrocities committed by European conquerors put it, ‘What redeems [the atrocities] is the idea only…something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to.’  

For Scott, the idea that had brought him and other missionaries to Africa came to bear disquieting resemblance to a prejudice. When confronted with the powers of African languages to express spiritual, moral, and political ideas, the missionary was the one who had to question the sources and nature of civilization. At no point would Scott question Christianity itself. What made his sense of sacrifice particularly challenging was precisely the realization that the Christian civilization could be enriched by Africans who had barely been touched by missionary teachings. One of Scott’s most startling maxims put it thus: ‘The native may be saved without us, but we doubt if we here can be saved without the native.’

Scott was not impervious to the vocabulary of his times, but ‘native’ – the only n-word he would use – appeared along with ‘African’ in his writings. Rather than becoming distracted by the nineteenth-century lexicon, the twenty-first-century reader may more profitably discern in Scott’s vision a new kind of society in which Black and White would live together, ‘not side by side but as one’. Racial equality would not deracialize all differences, but it would be the principle by which justice would be sought and delivered in the new society. Scott’s struggle for justice took place in a variety of domains, from language use to land tenure. Although not carried out in the name of gender equality, his promotion of girls and women was for some of his contemporaries almost as unsettling as his desire to learn from Africans. Not only did Scott include girls and women in the earliest cohorts of school children and so-called African deacons. He also oversaw new income-generating industries among both men and

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9 Ibid.
11 LWBCA, December 1891.
12 Ibid.
women. Particularly controversial was his decision to send unmarried White women to work with an African man at a newly-established mission station.

Scott’s vision was not curtailed by blind egalitarianism. He found in African chiefly authority food for thought, just as the missionary’s efforts to learn from Africans never denied his capacity to teach them. Hierarchies would persist, but they revealed common humanity, not innate racial or cultural difference. It was common humanity as seen from a particular vantage point. Scott remarked on the campaign against slavery: ‘The basis is wider than Protestantism, it is humanity, it is the Church of Christ.’ Far from being a view from nowhere, let alone the politically expendable ‘bare life’ that critics would theorize after twentieth-century atrocities, common humanity was for Scott Christian humanity, inspired by the risen Christ. Its challenge to prevailing White prejudices lay in its reversals, in the possibility that the scope of Christian civilization could include those whom Europeans had relegated to the status of non-Christians, perhaps even to the condition of being less-than-human.

Whatever else it would have entailed in nineteenth-century central Africa, racial equality required the end of White domination in defining acceptable knowledge in racialized encounters. Epistemic justice was, in other words, the sine qua non of Scott’s struggle for justice in various other domains. As understood by contemporary moral philosophers, epistemic justice corrects the wrongs committed when people are disregarded as knowers because of blanket presumptions about their sex, race, nationality, class, and so forth. In their search for ethically and epistemologically robust responses to prejudice, some philosophers doubt whether epistemic justice demands a particular virtue, a stable disposition of character which, much like honesty, would serve as a bulwark against prejudice. Few dispute, however, the contention that ‘eradicating [epistemic] injustices would ultimately

13 Ibid., August–December 1897.
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take not just more virtuous hearers, but collective social political change’. Historical and anthropological study can take the contention forward by attending to epistemic justice as a struggle in specific political, racialized circumstances.

How David Clement Scott, the son of a middle-class Edinburgh family with no Christian calling until relatively late in life, came to pursue epistemic justice in central Africa deserves a study of the multiple historical currents that ran through these turbulent times. He was invited to re-establish the Church of Scotland’s mission in 1881 after the first attempt had ended in violence and scandal. With his Scottish and African associates, Scott approached the task with such energy that his departure in 1898 would seem to have brought to a close a period of unmitigated success. Although the departure was ostensibly caused by ill health, Scott left the Blantyre Mission as a broken man, criticized, if not vilified, by influential figures in the Church of Scotland, the colonial administration, and the White settler class.

This book draws on the biographical method to illuminate the intricacies of Scott’s struggle. Against ‘Great Man’ history, in which a White man single-handedly shapes the course of history, the biographical method, not least when deployed to explore Africa’s missionary and colonial past, can reveal the subject’s transformation through time. It can uncover complexity and connection obscured by the reduction of persons to categories, such as ‘missionary’. The sources of Scott’s struggle for justice were multiple and not reducible to his individual disposition as a ‘virtuous hearer’. This book puts an emphasis on the influence of vernacular African thought and practice on his struggle. At the same time, despite its intermittent successes, the struggle was ultimately doomed as forces more powerful than his vision began to consolidate central Africa’s colonial and capitalist capture. Yet in its very failure the twenty-first-century reader may find

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17 Fricker, Epistemic Injustice, 8.
an opportunity to evaluate the ideas by which the horizons of racial equality are now envisaged.

The chapters that follow chronicle the developments from Scott’s initial experiences of friendship and well-spoken deliberations among Africans to his immersion in the vernacular language, from his dismay at the newly-established administration’s resort to warfare against defiant chiefs to his early criticisms of Cecil Rhodes’s imperial designs. Several characters, African and European, appear along the way, not least Scott’s successor Alexander Hetherwick and the leader of Malawi’s first anti-colonial uprising, John Chilembwe. Between them, Hetherwick and Chilembwe embodied the directions race relations would take after Scott’s vision for racial equality had been extinguished. White liberal paternalism and Black militant nationalism appeared as the only alternatives to White supremacy, both incompatible with Scott’s visionary practice. It was visionary precisely because its work towards an interracial future found few parallels in the available approaches to race relations.

Missionary Positions

Despite being the subject of an extensive scholarly literature, Christian missions continue to attract spurious generalizations even among professional historians. To quote one of the most prominent, Eric Hobsbawm had in his magisterial history of colonial empires little time for them except to comment that Christian missions were ‘something done by whites for natives, and paid for by whites’.20 As the case of the Blantyre Mission shows, he also seemed to get the chronology wrong by asserting that ‘colonial conquest opened the way for effective missionary action’. More mindful of the chronology in missionary and colonial enterprises in east and central Africa, another historian could nevertheless regurgitate some of Hobsbawm’s attitude in the twenty-first century. For Roy Bridges, missionaries in the nineteenth century were ‘unofficial imperialists’, who ‘did believe that it was their task to reorder African religion, politics, society, and economy in ways decided by them and for a good as defined by them’.21

Although the call for including missionaries in anthropological studies goes as far back as 1928, it was not until the 1980s that they became the subjects of major African ethnographies. The early overlap between anthropological and missionary enterprises may have accounted for this late recognition of missionaries as worthy subjects of study along with local people. The long gestation of the anthropological interest did not, however, ensure subtlety about the variety of positions missionaries may have taken. Trends in social theory could take precedence over such subtlety, resulting in myopia about how missionaries had been represented in popular and academic thought previously. A specialist on missionary history, for example, came to describe the influential work by Jean and John Comaroff as breathing ‘new life into the almost lifeless corpse of the missionary-as-imperialist’.

Building on the rediscovery of Antonio Gramsci’s concept of hegemony in social theory to highlight both symbolic and material domination, they asserted that ‘the southern Tswana had no alternative but to be inducted, unwittingly and often unwillingly, into the forms of European discourse’. Both power and resistance to it came, in this perspective, to be locked in an embrace that was as tight as it seemed inexorable – the southern Tswana ‘could not avoid internalizing the terms through which they were being challenged’.

By the early 2000s, other conceptual preoccupations had taken hold in anthropology. Among them was Bruno Latour’s concept of purification, which Webb Keane put to use in his study of Calvinist...
missionaries in Indonesia.\textsuperscript{26} For Keane, the missionaries ‘had to know the false religion in order to combat it effectively, and the culture in order to convert people in accordance with, and thus with the support of, their particular way of living’.\textsuperscript{27} Purification as a quintessentially ‘modern’ protocol to distil true from false marked little conceptual advance over hegemony, because in neither case would the anthropologists claim that the processes had been entirely successful from the missionary point of view. The question is, rather, whether concepts such as hegemony or purification – or epistemic justice, for that matter – get deployed to drive an intellectual agenda that is less concerned to explore the variety of missionary positions than to insert the study into an academic trend. The call for more subtlety about missionary positions by no means suggests modesty about the scope of issues to be raised. In David Clement Scott’s thought, race relations and common humanity appeared in ways that demand a fresh look in the twenty-first century.

One reason why Scott’s thought compels consideration – and why the variety of missionary positions must be recognized – is precisely the range of liberal, progressive and even Afrocentric standpoints that missionaries have taken in Africa in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Scott’s is only one of those standpoints, easily overlooked if subtle (and not so subtle) differences are not acknowledged. His appreciation of vernacular thought and practice might seem primitivism to some, the position some missionaries took both to marvel at African culture and to bemoan aspects of it as obstacles to conversion.\textsuperscript{28} Primitivism’s more radical form was Afrocentrism that could lead to ostracism from the mission movement itself, such as when Johannes Winter from Germany began to live with his Sotho family in a straw house, or when Joseph Booth became a nineteenth-century advocate of African political independence.\textsuperscript{29} For others, such as the Irish lay evangelist Charles Stokes who married the daughter of an African chief and was promptly dismissed by his missionary society,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 99.
\item \textsuperscript{28} Harries, ‘Anthropology’, 246.
\item \textsuperscript{29} Richard Elphick, \textit{The Equality of Believers: Protestant Missionaries and the Racial Politics of South Africa}, Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2012, 64.
\end{itemize}
‘Afrocentric’ would be too refined an attribute. An altogether more scholarly variety was the well-known case of John William Colenso, the Anglican bishop of Natal, who had by the mid-nineteenth century developed doubts about certain fundamentals of Christian doctrine. That none of these standpoints describes Scott’s vision calls for a closer look at the variety in missionary approaches to race relations.

In 1945, some half-a-century after Scott’s departure from Blantyre, a pioneering missionary study of African thought was published. While anthropologists, notably E. E. Evans-Pritchard, had by then discredited European ideas about Africans’ deficient reasoning, Bantu Philosophy by Placide Tempels presented a missionary’s respectful account of practical wisdom and what he called ontological ideas. For the Catholic missionary in Congo, this ontology offered a window into ‘the soul of the Bantu people’. It is not so much the content of those ideas, as understood by Tempels, as the purpose of his study that is relevant to the question of epistemic justice. For the missionary’s purpose was to know in order to civilize. The ontology identified by Tempels would ‘serve as the starting point of a higher civilization’, but if it was not properly understood by the missionary or colonist, ‘one [ran] the risk, while believing that one [was] “civilizing” the individual, of in fact corrupting him’. Tempels was motivated here by the common European concern about the emergence of uprooted Africans, or déracinés, outnumbering ‘fully civilized persons, or true évolués’. The majority, however, remained ‘under a light coating of white imitation’, immersed in the ontology identified by Tempels. The missionary’s knowledge was needed, because Africans had no method of presenting their ontology as a philosophy. ‘It is we’, Tempels asserted, ‘who will be able to tell them, in precise terms, what their inmost concept of being is’.

The respectful attitude that Tempels adopted betrayed him as the owner of superior knowledge. The respect he accorded to Africans

recognized their ways of knowing as specific to them, so much so that any ‘higher civilization’ that they might achieve would always be ‘their own Bantu civilization, a stable and noble one of their own’. Here, too, he subscribed to common twentieth-century, ostensibly liberal European views on how best to develop Africa. Segregation along racial lines was the logical conclusion of those views, although it came to define settler colonies more than Congo where Tempels worked. The South African-born Methodist missionary and one-time president of the Royal Anthropological Institute Edwin Smith had become aware of Tempels’s study long before it was translated into English and pursued related ideas with regard to countries where White settlers were gaining prominence. Already in the 1920s, he insisted on respect rather than pity as the attitude Europeans should adopt towards Africans. Such an attitude would stimulate the African ‘to develop his culture according to his own genius’. Tempels’s premonition about uprooted Africans was anticipated by Smith’s sense of confusion. ‘The danger is’, Smith wrote, ‘that in the process of social revolution [the African] should lose his old moral restraints and gain no others’. If ‘thorough, out-and-out assimilation’ was not possible because of White prejudices, segregation in a ‘limited sense’ had to be considered, with a view to allowing Africans ‘to develop their own civilization on their own land’.

The doctrine of separate development, as enshrined by the apartheid policies in South Africa after the 1948 elections, was one extreme to which segregation could be taken. It clearly was not what Tempels and Smith advocated, but their writings indicate the extent to which related ideas were in the air in the early twentieth century. Smith saw in ‘tribalism’ a source of admiration, if not envy, for Europeans, ‘a solidarity that civilized communities find it hard to attain’. Where it still existed, ‘tribalism’ had to be ‘jealously safeguarded in the moral interests of the Natives’. Those African Christians who had grown

39 Ibid., 113.