

Colenso, John William

(1814–1883)

- Peter Hinchliff
- <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/5875>
- Published in print: 23 September 2004
- Published online: 23 September 2004
- This version: 25 May 2006



John William Colenso (1814–1883)

by Samuel Sidley, 1866

Colenso, John William (1814–1883), bishop of Natal, was born at St Austell, Cornwall, on 24 January 1814, the eldest child of John William Colenso, mineral agent for part of the duchy of Cornwall. Originally dissenters, his parents and their four children became members of the Church of England in his adolescence. For four years he attended the mathematical and classical school in St Austell. His mother, whose maiden name was Blackmore, died when he was fifteen and at about the same time a tin mine in which his father had an interest was flooded by the sea. This appears to have ended his formal schooling for he was obliged, in order to help the family finances, to accept employment as an usher at a Dartmouth school. He seems already to have made up his mind that he wished to be ordained and he was also showing a marked talent for mathematics. He was able, after private preparation, to enter St John's College, Cambridge, as a sizar on 22 May 1832, at the age of eighteen. Supporting himself by private teaching and what he could earn in the way of prizes and exhibitions, and with some small financial assistance from his mother's family, his life at Cambridge was hard and lonely but academically successful. He was second wrangler and Smith's prizeman in 1836, and was elected to a fellowship in the college in March 1837.

Early career and South Africa

Colenso was appointed mathematics tutor at Harrow School in 1838 and was ordained in 1839. In material terms this, too, was a period of hardship and financial stringency. The school was in a less than buoyant state and, though Colenso ran a boarding-house, usually a source of additional income for an assistant master, his house was destroyed by fire and he was soon several thousand pounds in debt, which hung over him for years. He returned to St John's College from 1842 to 1846 and from Cambridge published two textbooks, one on algebra in 1841 and one on arithmetic in 1843. Colenso's *Arithmetic*, in particular, was a considerable success and earned him substantial royalties. He married on 8 January 1846 (Sarah) Frances (1816–1893), daughter of Robert Bunyon of Highgate, head of the London office of the Norwich Union insurance company. Marriage necessitated resigning his fellowship, but his wife's family obtained for him the living of Fornsett St Mary in Norfolk in the same year. The conscientious performance of his parochial duties in this quite small parish still left him time to coach pupils in mathematics and to edit the journal of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel.

Colenso had been brought up an earnest evangelical, but had begun to question some of the doctrines usually associated with that tradition. Before his marriage, his future wife had introduced him to Frederick Denison Maurice, whose ideas were to influence him profoundly. A belief in the universal fatherhood of God and the unity of all humanity, together with doubts about 'the endlessness of future punishment', began to characterize his preaching. He does not appear, however, at this stage in his life, to have regarded the Bible as other than literally true. In 1853, just as he was planning the publication of a volume of sermons to be dedicated to Maurice (which was to earn the sharp disapproval of the evangelical *Record*), his interest in missions brought him to the notice of Bishop Robert Gray of Cape Town, whose diocese was being divided and who was looking for potential bishops for two new sees. In April 1853 Colenso accepted the offer of the bishopric of Natal. Having been issued with royal letters patent, he was consecrated on 30 November, St Andrew's day, of that year and sailed for Natal almost immediately. His plan was to acquire as much information as possible so that he could return to England to raise money and recruit workers. On his return he published *Ten Weeks in Natal* (1855), setting out his impressions and his plans for the future, and also dealing with certain fundamental missionary principles on which he began to earn a reputation for unorthodoxy. He argued, for instance, that polygamy (which he disliked) was not incompatible with Christian morality.

In May 1855 Colenso arrived in Natal with his wife and children and a number of workers for the new diocese. His first task was to establish his headquarters at Bishopstowe, 6 miles east of Pietermaritzburg. Unfailingly energetic, by 1857 he had completed the cathedral in Pietermaritzburg and churches in Durban and Richmond, and within seven years of his arrival he had opened four mission stations in Natal and one in Zululand. And he had soon learned enough of the Zulu language to be able to teach and confirm.

Colenso from the first regarded the indigenous people, who called him Sobantu ('father of the people'), as his chief responsibility. He chose to live outside the capital of the colony so that his home at Bishopstowe could also be his chief mission station, Ekukanyeni. With white colonists he was less patient and less popular. Because he tried to do away with pew rents and to insist on strict observance of the provisions of the Book of Common Prayer, he was attacked as a ritualist and his effigy was burnt in the market square in Durban. The leading clergyman in Natal before the bishop's arrival was James Green, dean of Pietermaritzburg, who was an advanced Tractarian and, from the first, bitterly critical of Colenso's broad-church opinions.

The bishop was able, as early as 1855, to publish an elementary Zulu grammar and, four years later, an abridgement entitled *First Steps in Zulu*. His linguistic ability was also put to work in translating the whole of the New Testament, several books of the Old Testament, and much of the Book of Common Prayer, while his *Three Native Accounts of a Visit of the Bishop of Natal* (1860) made available Zulu texts, with grammatical notes and an English translation. His *Zulu–English Dictionary* (1861) was a substantial volume with more than 10,000 entries. Most of these works were printed, under his direction, on his own press at Ekukanyeni.

Old Testament scholarship

In presenting Christianity to the indigenous people Colenso was not prepared to deny or ignore the findings of natural scientists. When questioned by Zulu converts, he admitted that much of the Old Testament was not factually true. Even more important, he came increasingly to feel that he could not present Old Testament accounts of massacres as if these were in accordance with the will of God, while telling his African hearers that battle and murder were immoral. He began to believe that the supposed acts of God as presented by some Old Testament texts were little better than the savageries committed during the Indian mutiny of 1857–8. It was this moral difficulty that first kindled his interest in

biblical criticism. Because the questions of his converts played some part in the process, too, his opponents joked that, having gone to convert the heathen, the bishop had in fact been converted by them. However, ‘conversion’, as understood by most missionaries, played a small part in Colenso's vocation. He desired to Christianize Zulu culture rather than to remove individuals from their traditional ‘heathen’ way of life. He maintained his attitude on polygamy, agreeing with Theophilus Shepstone (1817–1893), secretary for native affairs in the colonial administration, that to insist on monogamy for Christian converts would, by putting aside other wives and calling the status of their children in question, entail the worse evil of destabilizing traditional society.

Colenso published a commentary on Romans in 1861 which stressed God's love for all mankind and insisted that his purpose was to destroy sin rather than punish it. This tendency to universalism was thought to contradict the Thirty-Nine Articles, and its implications for his sacramental theology were particularly unacceptable to the Tractarian clergy. The first volume of the bishop's *Pentateuch and the Book of Joshua Critically Examined* was published in 1862. It was typical of his immense and disciplined energy that he produced it, after reading all the works of German biblical scholarship on which he could lay his hands, in a matter of a few months. Kurtz and Hengstenberg seemed to him dishonest; Ewald's erudition impressed him; but Bleek and De Wette he thought nearest the truth. The technique he employed in applying critical methods to the first six books of the Bible was one which he would later use to great effect in attacking colonial government publications: if one could demonstrate that allegedly factual statements were untrue, one need not be bound by any principles said to be founded on them. If, for example, one could show that the Israelites could not possibly have camped in one place in the desert, as described in Exodus, without being buried under a mound of dung produced by their flocks and herds, then the text (since it was mistaken) could not be the product of divine direction and therefore one need not believe that God had commended some cruel atrocity. Unfortunately the first volume was chiefly concerned with the negative and destructive part of this programme. In comparison with some of the German critics, Colenso was moderate. He made no great contribution to the advance of scholarship, though it is possible that he influenced Abraham Kuenen (1828–1891) in his identification of P as the latest of the Pentateuchal sources and played some part in the growing consensus that Deuteronomy was Josiah's law book. Modern scholars inevitably regard Colenso's work as outdated and, while some some historians have treated him as little more than a figure of fun, others regard his critical writings as not insignificant. At the time this work gave great offence, alienating even F. D. Maurice and E. H. Browne, who had both previously been his friends. (The later volumes were a constructive reassessment of the Hexateuch in the light of developing scholarship, but were largely unread and unremembered. The seventh and final volume did not appear until 1879.)

Prosecution for heresy: the ‘Colenso case’

Bishop Gray, who had been created metropolitan by royal letters patent when his diocese was divided, was in the process of developing a synodical structure for the Anglican church in South Africa, including ecclesiastical courts for the new province. In this process Colenso had played a full part, but he was now delated for heresy before the metropolitan's court for teaching contained in his commentary on Romans and in *Pentateuch and ... Joshua*. Gray sat, with two other bishops as assessors, found Colenso guilty, and deposed him from office on 16 December 1863. Colenso appeared by proxy, but only to protest against the court's jurisdiction. When he ignored its sentence, he was formally excommunicated. Gray had already been involved in an attempt to exercise ecclesiastical discipline over a clergyman in his diocese, and it rapidly became clear that his letters patent conferred on him no coercive jurisdiction. On Colenso's seeking redress from the civil courts by means of a petition to the crown, the sentence was set aside in 1865 by the judicial committee of the privy council, which held that the letters patent of both bishops were void since the Cape and Natal each possessed its own legislature. Nor did Colenso's oath of canonical obedience give the metropolitan any authority to depose him, since the letters patent were held, despite their invalidity, to have created ecclesiastical persons who could not be unmade except by the crown. In addition, because the letters patent could not confer jurisdiction, Colenso ought not to have taken an oath of obedience to a metropolitan who had no legal authority to demand it.

Gray and his supporters believed passionately that the church must be free from interference by the civil courts and achieved the passage of a constitution for the ‘Church of the Province of South Africa’ which enshrined this. In Natal it was regarded by many as an attempt to create a church different from the Church of England. However a new bishop, W. K. Macrorie, was appointed under this constitution and consecrated in Cape Town, without royal mandate, as ‘bishop of Maritzburg’ on 25 January 1869. Schism in Natal was inevitable and was to continue until after Colenso's death. A majority of the English bishops agreed to inhibit Colenso from officiating in their dioceses, but more liberal opinion supported him, and Dean Stanley was to invite him to preach in Westminster Abbey. In Pietermaritzburg, Green and his supporters used every device possible to exclude Colenso from the churches, but the bishop's preaching—and his notoriety—drew crowds to his services and the courts supported his right to use the buildings.

The master of the rolls, Lord Romilly, in a judgment of November 1866, pronounced Colenso to be entitled to all the property of the see. The case is cited as *Bishop of Natal v. Gladstone and others*, W. E. Gladstone being the treasurer of the Colonial Bishopricks Fund which was threatening to withhold from Colenso the income from the endowment of the diocese. In the eyes of the law he was bishop of Natal, and some two-thirds of the laity forgot their earlier suspicions of his ‘popery’ and supported him. The supreme court of the colony confirmed him in the possession of all land and buildings granted, donated, or bought for ‘the Church of England’, including all save one mission station. Macrorie and his adherents were obliged to build a new cathedral and churches, but had the support of almost all the original clergy and of the English missionary societies. Colenso's greatest difficulty lay in finding suitable clergymen: most of those who went to join him turned out to be misfits, indolent, or undesirable.

Colenso's position was weakened by hostility arising from his active championship of the Hlubi chief Langalibalele, and subsequently of the Zulu king Cetewayo. The bishop had always taken more than a passing interest in, and through his friendship with Shepstone had involved himself with, the colony's policies regarding the indigenous people. Langalibalele's offence was that in 1873 he ignored a summons to account for the failure of many of his Hlubi tribesmen to register firearms procured at the diamond fields. He had subsequently withdrawn to Basutoland, after a skirmish in which half a dozen colonial auxiliaries were killed. He was handed over to the authorities and tried, in accordance with the principles of indirect rule, under what purported to be ‘native custom’, in a court presided over by Lieutenant-Governor Pine as ‘supreme chief’. Colenso was appalled by the procedures of this court, under which the tribal assessors gave their verdict on the first day, evidence was heard on the second, and the accused was permitted counsel on the third. The sentence was transportation to the Cape. Not only the rebel Hlubi but the neighbouring Ngwe (Putili) people suffered confiscation of land and cattle or were compelled to work on colonists' farms. Colenso at once denounced the injustice of these harshly punitive measures, offending Shepstone (who claimed to be ‘the humane ruler of these natives’; Uys, 104), and campaigned in England for the imperial government to intervene. The breach with Shepstone was further widened by accusations of earlier treachery against a tribal chief made by the bishop against Shepstone's brother. In London, Lord Carnarvon, the new colonial secretary, heard the bishop, recalled Pine, and insisted on mitigation of the sentences. Many colonists in Natal turned against Colenso once more, and he became the target for much abuse.

When the Anglo-Zulu War broke out in 1879 Colenso contended that it had been precipitated by Sir Bartle Frere, the high commissioner, and that Cetewayo's strategy, when the British troops had first entered Zululand, had been purely defensive. He published a series of pamphlets sharply critical of Frere's Zulu policy and after the conclusion of the war did everything he could to put the deposed and exiled Zulu king's case in Britain. It was partly through his intervention that Cetewayo was invited to London in 1882 and received by Queen Victoria. The bishop had been made a member of the Natal native affairs commission in the previous year but, because he encouraged the Zulu people to resist government pressure, he was suspected by the Colonial Office as well as local officials of fomenting rebellion and riot. He was vilified in the Natal newspapers and became a very lonely and isolated figure. He died at Bishopstowe on 20 July 1883 and was buried in his cathedral.

Perhaps because of their isolation, Colenso's family was a very united one. Of the bishop's five children, one son ([Frank Colenso](#)) and his three unmarried daughters ([Harriette Emily Colenso](#), Frances, and Agnes) were committed to continuing their father's struggle for the rights of the indigenous people. His wife, who died on 23 December 1893, was an intelligent and gifted woman and an accomplished amateur water-colourist. She seems to have chosen deliberately to avoid Natal society, preferring to worship in the mission church rather than in the cathedral. She was well educated and was a friend of F. D. Maurice even before her marriage to Colenso; she maintained a regular correspondence for more than a decade with Lady Lyell, the wife of the eminent geologist Sir Charles Lyell. She supported her husband unreservedly, though quietly and from behind the scenes, and was responsible for seeing that G. W. Cox, the bishop's biographer, received such material as would put Colenso in the best possible light.

Sources

- G. W. Cox, *The life of John William Colenso, Bishop of Natal*, 2 vols. (1888)
- P. B. Hinchliff, *John William Colenso* (1964)
- J. Guy, *The heretic: a study of the life of John William Colenso* (1983)
- J. Rogerson, *Old Testament criticism in the nineteenth century: England and Germany* (1984), 220–37
- W. Rees, *Colenso letters from Natal* (1958)
- P. B. Hinchliff, *The Anglican church in South Africa* (1963), 64–8, 82–105
- A. O. J. Cockshut, *Anglican attitudes: a study of Victorian controversies* (1959), 88–120
- C. Lewis and G. E. Edwards, *Historical records of the Church of the Province of South Africa* (1934), 159–74, 310–39
- O. Chadwick, *The Victorian church*, 1 (1966), 550–51 ; 2 (1970), 90–97
- DSAB*
- C. J. Uys, *In the era of Shepstone* (1933)
- Gladstone, *Diaries*

Archives

- Bodl. RH, family corresp.
 - Natal Provincial Archives, Pietermaritzburg
 - University of Natal, Durban, Campbell collections
-
- Co-operative Union, Holyoake House, Manchester, letters to G. S. Holyoake
 - Hunt. L., letters to Frances Cobbe
 - Leics. RO, letters to R. Blunt
 - LPL, corresp. with A. C. Tait
 - Natal Provincial Archives, Pietermaritzburg, Carl Faye collection
 - National Library of South Africa, Cape Town, letters to Sir George Grey
 - Suffolk RO, Bury St Edmunds, copy of corresp. with Sir Bartle Frere
 - University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, Cullen Library, Church of the Province of South Africa archives

Likenesses

- S. Sidley, oils, 1866, NPG [\[see illus.\]](#)
- Ape [C. Pellegrini], chromolithograph caricature, NPG; repro. in *VF* (28 Nov 1874)
- E. Edwards, photograph, NPG
- H. N. King, carte-de-visite, NPG
- London Stereoscopic Company, carte-de-visite, NPG
- Maull & Co., carte-de-visite, NPG
- T. C. Wageman, watercolour drawing, Trinity Cam.
- carte-de-visite, NPG
- portrait, St John Cam.

Wealth at Death

£5454 1s. 7d.: administration with will, 23 Oct 1883, *CGPLA Eng. & Wales*