

FRIEDRICH FABRI AND THE GENESIS OF THE GERMAN COLONIAL MOVEMENT'

Missionaries and the 'new imperialism'

The inter-action between the surge of European missionary activity in the nineteenth century, mainly directed towards Africa and Polynesia, and the political acquisition of those areas by the European powers towards the end of that century is a complex one. The French were the most open about the connection between the two. Under the Third Republic anti-clericalism was not for export. The French government protected missions and expected reciprocity. Leon Gambetta notoriously said of Cardinal Lavigerie, the founder of the White Fathers, , 'His presence in Tunisia is worth an army to France.' Such feelings were reciprocated. The Superior of the Congregation of the Holy Ghost wrote to Jules Ferry in January 1884 that his Order was hastening, to establish mission stations in the Congo which were 'as important from a patriotic and French point of view as from a Catholic [one]'.² The relationship of British missionary societies, and associated bodies like the Anti-Slavery Society, to their government was a more complicated one. They were powerful pressure groups which could influence government policy. Missionary interests played an important role in dissuading the government from cutting their losses and abandoning Uganda in 1893. Not all British missionaries, however, welcomed government support. Some saw it as compromising and likely to arouse the suspicions of their potential converts.

Foreign missions often paralleled home missions. The pious, particularly in England and in Germany, were alarmed that the working classes were becoming 'unchurched' under the

pressures of industrialisation. Some saw overseas expansion as a means of relieving distress at home. Among the latter - although not perhaps particularly pious - were men like Cecil John Rhodes and Joseph Chamberlain in England. Opposed to them were men like J.A. Hobson, who saw overseas adventures as a potentially dangerous distraction from the real solutions at home.

Overseas expansion, domestic distress and piety were a complex amalgam in the late nineteenth century. Friedrich Fabri, the Director of the Barmen Rhine Missionary Society from 1857 to 1884, is a key figure in trying to understand it. Fabri himself believed that his book, *Does Germany need Colonies?*, first published in 1879, triggered the whole German colonial movement. He exaggerated but it was an important catalyst.

Friedrich Fabri

Fabri was born in 1824 in Schweinfurt in Bavaria of an established and scholarly family. His maternal grandfather was a doctor and a pioneer in forensic medicine. His paternal grandfather had been Professor of Geography and Statistics, first at Jena and later at Erlangen. Fabri himself was educated at the universities of Erlangen and Berlin and, after two years at a seminary in Munich, took up his first curacy at Würzburg in 1848. Fabri was himself a Lutheran but he had spent his adolescence in Würzburg with its famous Jesuit university and the influence of both Protestant and Catholic social thinking is clear in his later writings.

For different reasons the views of both German Catholics and German Protestants were in turmoil in the nineteenth century. For Catholics there were the obvious problems of the Vatican decrees of 1870, the secession of the Old Catholics and the *Kulturkampf* with Bismarck.

For both communities there were the problems of industrialisation and urbanisation. The turmoil was often creative. The main influences on Fabri seem to have been August Neander and P.K. Marheineke in Berlin, Johann Heinrich Wichern, the three Blumhardts - Gottlieb, Johann and Christophe - and Franz von Baader, the last a Catholic, who is said to have been the first German writer to use the term 'proletariat'. From an early age Fabri was an indefatigable pamphleteer one biographer listed over 40 publications.³ Most were on church-state relations but others were on social questions such as his pamphlet on workers' housing in 1861. Fabri was also well informed about developments in England. Both Methodism and Quakerism interested him and he had strong views about the Bradlaugh-Besant trial, which coincided with the writing of *Does Germany need Colonies?* His understanding of the British colonial system and the semi-independence already achieved by older colonies such as Canada was very sophisticated as his book was to show.

In 1857 he was elected Director of the Barmen Rhine Missionary Society. His election was a surprising one. He had no experience of the mission field and his selection was due to internal struggles, which eliminated all the more obvious candidates. The Society was an interdenominational Protestant one, founded in 1828. Its main mission fields were in southern Africa, Borneo and the Dutch East Indies. It had wished to establish itself in Brazil but had been thwarted by the Catholic establishment there.

Fabri never visited any of the mission stations but the theoretical knowledge he gained of them formed his views on colonisation. His work for the Society also brought him into contact with the merchants of Hamburg and Bremen, as well as with politicians and officials interested in colonisation. Among his friends was the Hamburg lawyer Wilhelm Hubbe-Schleiden, another

fervent advocate of colonisation. Fabri never adopted the strident nationalist tone of either Schleiden or Heinrich von Treitschke, although he did think that an empire would give the newly united Germany a common objective, which would bind together its still particularist states.

His main reasons for backing colonialism were, however, social and economic. He wrote *Does Germany need Colonies?* during the Great Depression. The Great Depression was an extremely complex phenomenon but there is no doubt that it frightened people at the time. They were already familiar with the concept of cyclical booms and slumps but this seemed to be a slump with no end to it. In Germany it began with the financial crash of 1873-4. Many moralised about the wickedness of financial speculation - the stock exchange was described as 'Monte Carlo without music'. Some turned to anti-Semitism. In fairness, Fabri did not. On the contrary, he deplored the Tsarist oppression of Russian and Polish Jews. But he was seriously alarmed by the potential social consequences of depression and unemployment. The spectre of the Paris Commune of 1871 was continually before his eyes. Even more he feared over-population - the German population was expanding at an unprecedented rate. He rejected birth control with horror - witness his attitude to the Bradlaugh-Besant trial. The only alternative was emigration. Emigration was already running at a very high level. Over a million Germans emigrated in the 1850s and were to do so again in the 1880s. Fabri deplored that these went to the United States, South America or the British colonies and were lost to the Fatherland.

Ideally he wanted both 'trading colonies' in Africa and the Pacific to provide wealth for Germany and colonies of settlement for German emigrants but he recognised that the most desirable areas of the world for settlement were already in the possession of other Powers. He realised that the Monroe Doctrine would prevent the establishment of formal German colonies

in South America but he dreamt of making Brazil, where whole provinces were already settled by Germans, into an informal colony, which would not be more detached from Germany than Canada already was from Britain. The Boer Republics in South Africa, already colonised by people of Germanic stock, might also become quasi-colonies, closely associated by ties of blood and common interest with the Reich. Ideally a 'trading colony' would be as lucrative as the Dutch East Indies, which provided nearly one-fifth of the entire Dutch budget and Fabri considered a number of possible sites in Africa and the Pacific.

It is in his analysis of the role of non-European peoples that Fabri's attitude becomes at least to modern eyes - a strange one for the Director of a missionary society. At no time does he make serious reference to any duty to spread the Gospel to other continents. In the lands he considers suitable for European colonisation, the 'so-called red races' (*der sogenannten rothen Rasse*) were hunters and herdsman, destined to be displaced by the white man -turning to the plough instead of to the hunt.' In lands not suitable for settlement the native population, who were by definition lazy and improvident, needed to be trained up -to work and to a higher sense of morality' and an important aspect of missionary activity would be to give them practical instruction which would fit them to become labourers.⁵

How much practical effect did Fabri's theories have? His book was certainly popular and quickly went through several editions. J.A. Hobson later called it 'the most vigorous and popular treatise produced by the German colonial movement'. Fabri was associated with several of the burgeoning colonial societies of the period. He corresponded with leading politicians, including Heinrich von Kusserow, the head of the commercial division of the German Foreign Office and a committed colonialist, and even with Bismarck himself. When he published *Fünf Jahre*

deutscher Kolonialpolitik (Five Years of German Colonial Policy), criticising government policy in 1889, Bismarck wrote privately to him to explain the difficulties.

Germany did acquire an empire in the mid-1880s. How did the German position compare with that of Britain and France? The German government was pressurised into taking colonies by public, including missionary, opinion but Bismarck also exploited the colonial question in both national and international politics. Certainly in Germany, as in Britain, the desire to solve what contemporaries would have called 'the social question' at home, even at the expense of other races, played a significant role.

Fabri was undoubtedly a reformer, albeit a conservative one. He was an intelligent and exceptionally well-read man. He was compelled to resign as Director in 1884. His colleagues accused him of spending too much time on matters unconnected with the mission but, more particularly, they objected to the close connection which had developed between the mission and commercial activities, particularly in South-West Africa (the modern Namibia) - it would perhaps be too cynical to suggest that their objections arose mainly from the fact that the Society had lost a lot of money. Fabri continued to campaign on colonial issues until his death in 1891. Fabri was perhaps an extreme example of a missionary, who subordinated spiritual to material concerns - ironically he had written against materialism. But he was an influential one. What can reasonably be described as the 'debased social Darwinism' with which he viewed the world, however distasteful today, attracted little criticism at the time.

1. This paper is based on *Bedarf Deutschland der Colonien?/ Does Germany Need Colonies?* By Friedrich Fabri. Translated, edited and introduced by E.C.M. Breuning and M.E. Chamberlain, *Studies in German Thought and History*, Vol 2, Edwin Mellon Press, 1898.

2. *Service historique de la Marine*, BB 4/1344

3. M. Schmidt, 'Friedrich Fabri' in *Neue Deutsche Biographie*, Vol IV (1959)

4. Breuning and Chamberlain, p. 91, 121

5. Breuning and Chamberlain, pp.91, 121