3 Beyond Nation. Beyond Methodism?

What [the mission of Methodism] is may be expressed in one brief but pregnant sentence: Patient, loving, Christlike leadership towards all that make for the salvation and uplifting to complete manhood of the backward peoples.

Bishop George E. Clinton, A. M. E. Zion Church, 1912

Like Rob Nixon’s work, James Campbell’s *Songs of Zion* contributes to the new impulse in comparative history of uncovering the connections between societies under comparison. Campbell describes the conduit between two societies acting as a ‘looking glass in which Africans and African Americans examined one another, and, in the process, reexamined themselves’. Campbell’s focus is the connection between the African Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States and the Ethiopian Church in South Africa. Aware that historians have ‘paid insufficient attention to Africa’s pervasiveness in African American intellectual and imaginative life’, he undertakes ‘a study of transplantation, showing how a creed devised by and for African Americans was appropriated and transformed in a variety of South African contexts’. In the process, Campbell reveals a narrative range that has seldom been matched in comparative history. Partly, this derives from the fact that *Songs of Zion* is based upon dissertation research, so the author has not come at the study of South Africa as an addition to an already-mastered field. Also, in bringing together intellectual and social history he has needed to undertake research in archives on both sides of the Atlantic, rather than rely on secondary literature that may be unbalanced in favor of one country or the other. The work thus represents a new generation of scholarship in comparative history, one made possible by and building on that of the earlier generation, but able to depart from it because of the new vantage point attained.

The work is divided into three parts. The first covers the establishment and spread of African Methodism in the United States, the growth of interest among African Methodists in the missionary enterprise both in the American South and abroad, and their increasing
preoccupation with Africa as a site for emigration, colonization, and missionary work. Campbell shows that while ‘African’ in the denomination’s title did not mean that its members identified with African forms of worship, and that these northern free men and women often conformed to the belief that slavery was a divine vehicle bringing ‘benighted Africans’ into the light of Christian civilization, they none the less retained a strong interest in Africa, which in times of increasing racial oppression could quickly become the focus of colonization schemes. Particularly strong in this section, I felt (and I was disappointed that it rather fell by the wayside in later parts of the book), was Campbell’s analysis of women in the A. M. E. Church. Campbell shows that at the very beginning of the church’s history the issues of the rights and privileges of women, and what these might signify for a people attempting to establish their collective ‘manhood’ at a time when people seemed particularly preoccupied with issues of masculinity, were at the forefront of the denomination’s political debates. While Campbell suggests that an analogy can be drawn between the treatment of women in these early years and the response to African co-religionists at the end of the century, this is never fully developed. Given the increasing preoccupation with the intersection between gender and imperialism, this may be something that he or others will wish to expand upon in the future.

The second section focuses on Ethiopianism in South Africa, the forging of a relationship with the A. M. E. Church after 1896, and the development of a ‘populist’ social movement around the congregations which ‘sprouted’ from Cape Town to Barotseland. Campbell provides a richly detailed social history of this movement, and makes a bold effort to move beyond the generalizations about the Ethiopian movement evident in the historical literature that it was merely an urban movement, appealing to the ‘educated’ and ‘de-tribalised’ (p. 141). Revealing an unusual ability, for a comparativist, to comprehend the diversity of social systems and people present in Southern Africa, Campbell shows that the social movement reached into the reserves of the eastern Cape and Transkei, and that there was a ‘lively traffic between the A. M. E. Church and revanchist African chiefs, several of whom adopted the church as a kind of state religion’ (p. 142). In the process Campbell rescues the Ethiopian movement from the common dismissal of being ‘proto-nationalist’, as merely being a precursor to the South African Native National Congress, and therefore not really worthy of consideration as a social movement in its own right. Here, most clearly, Campbell tries to move beyond one aspect of the nationalist teleology.