

**Lecture on Mission and Racism at summer school of Missin 21 in the topic „mission and church- between Racism and respect“ between September 11th to Friday 17th,2021**

**Glances on the current situation:**

**I would like to start with some observations of the current decolonization and racism debate. Here are four highlights:**

1. First there is the Black Lives Matter movement, which came to greater prominence as a reaction to the murder of George Floyd in May 2020 by a police officer in the USA. It has also provoked corresponding movements in Germany and exposed the still-immanent racism in society and culture. I would like to mention here the current exhibition “Hey Hamburg, Du you know Duala Manga Bell? The King who was calling for justice?” at the MARKK in Hamburg but also the project “The Visual History of the Colonial Genocide” by the Namibian artist Vitjua Ndiharine in collaboration with the above mentioned museum. There are also an increasing number of publications and statements by German-African authors and politicians, as well as actions like Decolonizing Berlin, the African Literature Festival and similar actions, which express the vitality of the African community in Germany
2. The restitution debate regarding the return of artwork and treasures brought to Germany/Europe during the colonial era is gaining intensity in the public and on social media. Some examples: The planned return of the Benin figurines, the dispute over the design and concept of the Humboldt Forum in Berlin, which focuses on the so-called “magnificent boat” that was brought to Berlin from the

island of Luf in the South Seas in 1904. (The controversy regarding the book of the same name by Götz Aly in Zeit). The restitution debate has sparked a fierce dispute between colonial historians and ethnologists. The discussion about the restitution of looted property, initiated by the French art historian and presidential advisor Benedicte Savoy and the economist Felwine Sarr from Ghana, does not stop with the Pergamon Altar, the Ishtar Gate and Nefertiti.

3. Another observation: The discussion about the relationship between the destruction of non-European cultures and ethnic groups during the colonial period up to the Holocaust is intensifying. The genocide debate is currently being argued out in the newspaper „Die ZEIT“ between the Jewish-American historian Saul Friedländer and Dirk Moses, an Australian historian who teaches in the USA. Prof. Jürgen Zimmerer, head of the research unit “Hamburg’s postcolonial heritage/Hamburg and the early modern period” at the University of Hamburg describes the postcolonial debate as THE central debate about identity in Germany and Europe.
4. These debates also touch on the involvement of the mission societies in Nazi history. As the book “Dein ist das Reich” by the journalist Katharina Döbler shows, the involvement of her grandparents in Nazi ideology in Neuendettelsau caused a surprising media frenzy at “Mission EineWelt.” Research into the attitude of mission societies toward National Socialism will be the topic of this year’s conference of the German Society for Mission History.

**How do churches and mission agencies relate to their colonial heritage?**

## **First, a look at the history:**

Today, there are Christian congregations and churches on every continent and in almost every country. This is also a result of European mission as a cross-border and cross-cultural spreading of the Gospel. It had its beginnings in the end of the 16th and beginning of the 17th century. A special dynamic developed in the 19th century against the background of industrialization and expansive colonial policy. In the beginning, it was young craftsmen and farmers who were won over to the idea of global mission. They were sent to southern Africa, India and Ethiopia. There they founded mission stations. The transmission of the Christian faith, but also schooling and medical care characterized the early stages of mission. However, the history of mission is increasingly perceived in a critical light today.

The preoccupation with their own colonial past began in the mission agencies in the 1960s with the examination of their own names. The mission agencies became ecumenical, One world or worldwide centers (Mission one World, Center for ecumenics and mission). Some went down the path of internationalization (as is the case with United Evangelical Mission and Evangelical mission in Solidarity), others saw themselves as part of the ecumenical department of their regional church (Berlin Mission). Still others kept their association structures (Evangelical Lutheran mission agency in Lower Saxonia or the Gossner mission).

In 2015, an international conference on the Maji Maji uprising in former German East Africa was held in Berlin. This was a cooperative endeavor between the Berlin Mission and the

German Historical Museum in Berlin. Here, representatives of academic institutions from Tanzania and Germany exchanged results of their research. Former missionaries and the nationwide Tanzania Network contributed their narratives. The Basel Mission and the United Evangelical Mission in Wuppertal started in the 80ies with the collection, sifting and academic studies of their museums and archives and made them accessible to an international research community. The momentum has now spread to all mission agencies. The United Evangelical Mission recently launched its own web page on racism and the church. The Leipzig Mission and Mission 21 organize lectures, seminars and a summer school on mission and colonialism throughout the year. And the journal of the Center for Ecumenics and Mission in Hamburg regularly publishes an article on the topic of "Mission Decolonize," as the fruit of a working group founded especially for this purpose. Decolonising mission agencies and church has become a high priority. We can conclude that the topic has arrived at the mission agencies.

From all these numerous efforts to review mission history, the following picture emerges:

1. Mission history is a story of light and shadow. On one hand, there were missionaries who were imbued with the idea of belonging to a master race and became accomplices of colonial rule. This includes the involvement in the genocide of the Namas and Hereros and the role of the Rhenish Mission. Also worth mentioning is the dark chapter of the missionary children who grew up separated from their parents for years in Germany and were educated during the Nazi era in the spirit of the prevailing ideology.

2. There have always been individuals who swam against the tide, such as Karl Gützlaff, the first Protestant missionary in Korea; or the Anglican priest Trevor Huddleston in South Africa; or Dirk Vedder, who drew attention to the situation of the Namas and Hereros prisoners of war in concentration camps in Swakopmund through his stirring reports (1904). Thus, there were definitely missionaries who sympathized with the indigenous population and who had foresight. They learned language, culture, crafts and agriculture, acquired medical knowledge, were interested in flora and fauna, social structures, and the relationship between men and women. The goal of their efforts was to make the proclamation of the Gospel as contextual as possible. In this way, they laid the foundation for the detachment of the African churches from their mother churches in the course of the independence movement of the African states.
  
3. The emergence of missionary societies in Germany, as a counter-movement to the established church, was a response to Germany's colonial adventure in the race for the "place in the sun". The people who felt called to mission were typical representatives of the Wilhelminian, authoritarian society. And in the encounter with a foreign culture, the best and the worst of them emerged. How were they prepared for their often lifelong mission? In the missionary seminaries they certainly received a practice-oriented education. Nevertheless, we must make it clear: Mission took place in a colonial context. Mission work was dependent on colonial structures. It was also corrupted by them. This includes the general conviction that European civilization was superior to other cultures. That conviction

underpinned the missionary mandate to fight paganism and to introduce the people of Africa to Western civilization.

## **Conclusion and outlook**

The current debate on the topic of mission and colonialism is not about apologetics, in the sense of arguing that it wasn't all so bad after all. Rather, a clear confession of guilt and failure is needed. Yes, missionary societies have become guilty where peoples they wanted to missionize were degraded to second-class people (Nickneger). Practical consequences grow out of the confession of guilt. Some mission agencies are engaged in the restitution of cultural assets and digitized archival material. In 2018, in the commemorative year of the genocide of the Namas and Hereros, the VEM played a leading role in the commemoration in Berlin and in the restitution initiative of the German government and the EKD. In Leipzig and Neuendettelsau, negotiations are taking place with ecumenical partners on the return of art objects to Tanzania and Papua New Guinea. In cooperation with the Heinrich August Francke Foundations in Halle/Saale, the Evangelical Lutheran Mission in Lower Saxony has established the Ziegenbalg House in Tharangambadi /South India as a museum for intercultural dialogue and study center. The Berlin Mission handed over its digitized South Africa Archive to the South African government on the occasion of a state visit.

## **How have the relationships with our ecumenical partners changed as a result of the decolonization debate?**

In his article for the magazine Politik & Kultur, September/2019, the cultural representative of the EKD Johann Hinrich Claussen

has pointed out three unintended side effects of mission. These effects are, however, of decisive importance for our present relationship in ecumenical partnership. Quote: "First, the mission societies initiated a multifaceted cultural transfer that did not occur in only one direction. They brought European civilization to foreign countries, but at the same time imported cultural discoveries from these regions to Germany. Secondly, the people overseas did not remain recipients of the faith, but rather integrated an astonishing independence. They accepted the faith by transforming it. Therefore, the evangelical mission did not lead to a Europeanization of the missionized areas of the world, but to a globalization and pluralization of world Christianity." (end of quote)

We are experiencing this dynamic today in the three major world alliances: the World Council of Churches, the Lutheran World Federation and the World Communion of Reformed Churches, and also in the congregational partnership activities in our regional churches. The WCC Assembly in Karlsruhe in 2022 will bear eloquent witness to this involvement.

To continue the Claussen quote: "Third, this religious emancipation shows political consequences. As Nelson Mandela once remarked, the anti-colonial struggle would not have been possible without the mission schools. The anti-apartheid movement also owes much to the networks of mission societies." Archbishop Desmond Tutu testifies in his biography that he would never have become the man of the Church, a charismatic fighter against apartheid and head of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission after the end of apartheid, if he had not met in his youth the missionary and pastor of the Anglican Church Trevor Huddleston. He became Bishop Tutu's spiritual father and mentor. We will celebrate the

90th birthday of Bishop Tutu in the EMW/Association of Protestant churches in Germany on November 13th with a study day including contributions from companions in South Africa and Germany.

As an expression of the demographic changes in our society, the number of international/migration congregations are also increasing. They have their permanent place in the national churches, yet struggle for recognition of offices and financial support. Therefore, with the multicultural and multireligious changes, the need to overcome colonial amnesia and to fight racism in all its forms is also growing in the churches.

Thank you for your attention