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Ravinder Salooja, How Mission Contributed to Racism

1. “How Mission Contributed to Racism” – that is the headline of my contribution. There is a question: Did at all mission contribute to racism? Is it not rather that mission wanted to overcome racism, treating all people as equals, all people as the same, equal image in God?

When I am talking of “Mission” and “Racism”, as Director of Leipzig Mission I am having in mind a historic mission organisation founded in 19th century, with its centre of operation in good old Europe, reaching and sending out missionaries to countries with cultures different from that time Europa, proclaiming to Gospel to people the missionaries perceived as “heathens”. Accordingly, I am not talking about the rise of Christianity and the spreading of the Gospel in the centuries before. I am also not talking about how we understand and what we talk of mission today. But I am referring to this historic mission movement which started in late 18th, early 19th century. That is the first preliminary remark.

A second preliminary remark must be made: What do I mean by racism? Sticking to a definition of the European Union, racism means “ideas or theories of superiority of one race or group of persons of one colour or ethnic origin”¹, and, as I am adding, inferiority of other groups of persons. I am aware of the problem, that this definition presupposes the existence of different races, which of course is to be rejected and is rejected by the European Union², too. But what is central to me in this definition, (a) is the term “superiority” versus “inferiority”, (b) as well as that it is understood as an “idea” or “theory”. Because we “Church” and “theologians” we are not plying wood or constructing cars, but we work in the field of ideas, we construct theories, and therefore influence the mind of people.

To sum up: Did at all Mission contribute to racism, if I am proposing “Mission contributed to racism”? Rather than being to uncritically soothed, I want to take this statement as critical search criteria: as the starting point within a hermeneutic of suspicion.

2. There is one good reason for this hermeneutic approach: Europe’s historic mission agencies were founded in the colonial century. So if “racism” is somehow connected with “colonialism”, and if there is not a clear-to-see separation of the mission movement/mission agencies from the colonial context, then it is very likely that there is a kind of contribution of mission to racism.

There is another good reason for suspicion – let me quote from a 1912 publication of my pre-pre-pre... predecessor Karl v. Schwartz, Director of Leipzig Mission 1891 – 1911. His booklet is called “Mission and Colonisation in their mutual relation”. He writes: *“But one can infer so much from it that according to the divine order it is not absolutely and under all circumstances reprehensible if peoples who need it take possession of countries in which milk and honey flow for them, in which they have the surplus of their population, where they can obtain raw materials for industry and sales areas for their products. [...] Where the divine commandment [...] is not fulfilled, where large tracts of land lie desolate, only roamed by sparse hordes of nomads, because slave hunts and constant wars depopulate them, because the inhabitants degenerate through indolence, drunkenness and fornication, because overexploitation and deforestation rob the land of its natural fertility, then it is right and just and in accordance with the divine will when other peoples take the solution of the task in hand, the solution of which they eluded. [...] Whoever grows needs a bigger dress.”*³

Time does not permit to reflect in detail which picture of “the other” in Tanganyika (the that time Deutsch-Ostafrika and today Tanzania) is transferred through this mission production – instead of being detailed I am referring to two academic publications: Nicholas B. Dirks, *Castes of Mind* (2011) shows how the western-british access to South India helped to establish the Brahmanic “varna” cast-system as the one and only social order of today India. According to his researches it was the western access to South Asia that gave the cast system its today dominant appearance. – And Geoffrey A. Oddie,

¹ https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/orphan-pages/glossary/racism_en (10.9.2021)

² “The European Union rejects theories which attempt to determine the existence of separate human races.” (Directive 2000/43/EC (Racial Equality Directive); cf. https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/orphan-pages/glossary/racism_en (10.9.2021)

³ Karl v. Schwartz, *Mission und Kolonisation in ihrem gegenseitigen Verhältnis*, Leipzig 1912², p. 4f. (translation by R. Salooja)

Imagined Hinduism (2006) researched how British Protestant Missionaries constructed today Hinduism, and how stories of true or imagined social evils in South Asia (like Hook-swinging or Sati) helped to raise funds in the home base.

My thesis is: Yes, Mission contributed to construct the idea of the other in Africa, Asia and elsewhere as the strange, the needy, the infidel, barbarian, non-civilized person and culture, who needs the help by and Godly salvation through the Mission organisation, the self-sacrificing missionaries. And the money and resource people in Europe could collect and contribute to this godly and god-willed enterprise.

3) Jumping to the presence: Where should we expect “racism in mission” in the line of historic mission movement?

We (Mission organisations, Churches, partnership groups “in the North”, “in the West”) quarrel with equal relations:

- one partner is in need, the other helps, so one is raising funds and transferring it to the other;
- the projects the funds are send to underly strict regulations set up by the donors;
- the context of the partner in the south very often is regarded as “insufficient” to allow self supported existence of the partner;
- in the framing of the help sought, funded, and transferred, texts and pictures about the partner underline their need.

Is all of this really to be named “partnership”? If we in Germany try to realise projects in Germany, funded by third parties, with other people’s money, we would not call them “partners”, but rather “donors”, “financing agencies”, “third party” etc.

We quarrel with equal relations: Who decides on projects, travels, visits, programs..., who has the knowledge, sets up the regulations?

We quarrel with equal relations: Is the relation really a two-way-street? What do “we in the West/North” really expect from “them in the South” to support us, where we can learn from? – There are some preconceptions:

- “in the south” faith is more vivid;
- “from the south” “we in the north” can learn how to live with less comfort, less technics, less..., because he/she is more “natural” ... “we can learn” what “finally counts...”

I don’t have to tell you, since you know even if these preconceptions sound friendly, they are racist, because they include a relation of superiority – inferiority, and they nail down individuals to groups and assumed group characteristics.

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