

Racism and/within the Church : Focus on Africa

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September 2021

Each continent has its own history. Africa has its own. The arrival of the missionaries in Africa has left several consequences in African societies. These are realities that are not always praiseworthy. This is the context, in which the main question of our reflection today is focused: racism. *“Racism, as we know, is one of the most difficult scourges to eradicate because of its protean nature. Theorised in various forms since the 16th century, it has been embodied in history in an acute manner and in the form of genocide at certain periods: the Black Trade, the Second World War. It still survives as a monstrous challenge in South Africa and elsewhere. This is despite the work of UNESCO and other institutions to demonstrate its irrational nature. But the cure for prejudice is long, for racism is diffused and immanent in school textbooks, biased audio-visual presentations, and the legacy of more or less conscious psychic ‘givens’ carried sometimes by religious education and more often still by ignorance and obscurantism.”* For this reason, the church cannot remain on the sidelines of the debate on racism. Going down memory lane, can we say that the history of the gospel mission in Africa has been characterized by episodes of discrimination against the black race? Is the Church affected by such a practice, nowadays? If so, how? and what can be done about it?

These are the various questions that we are going to answer in this reflection on the African racism context. In this regard, we will start from the history of mission in Africa and end up with the impact of racism on the church nowadays.

A- A missionary history marked by racism

Beyond discriminatory analyses, Africa has not had glorious history pages, but rather black pages, including colonisation. Indeed, with the advent of the three M (Merchant, Military, Missionary), a strategy was put in place to monopolise Africa. Therefore, the missionaries came to Africa. They began what can be called the “Christianisation” of Africa. Moreover, “Christianisation and missionary teaching were also important factors in the evolution and nature of African resistance to colonial conquest.”¹.

As a strategy, the missionaries set up groups considered to be the African middle-class, charged with perpetuating the so-called superiority of the white man or rather the inferiority of the black race. Thus,

*“The missionaries had created a class of African petty bourgeois (catechists, teachers, journalists, businessmen, lawyers and clerks), who recognised the alleged cultural inferiority of the Africans, accepted white colonisation as a fait accompli and admired the whites for their power, wealth and technology. We can cite several representatives of this elite. **Tiyo Soga** (1829-1871) was the first African missionary ordained by the Presbyterian Church of England and the founder of the Mgwali mission, where his followers were drawn from both Africans and Europeans; He translated John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* into*

¹ J.Ki-Zerbo, *Histoire générale de l’Afrique*, Paris, Editions UNESCO, P220.

Xhosa as U-Hambo LomHambi, the first work by an African to be published by Lovedale Press in 1867; John Langalibalele Dube, a Methodist minister and a strong supporter of Booker T. Washington, the Black American educator, was the first African to publish a book on the subject. Booker T. Washington, a black American educator, was the founding president of the Zulu Christian Industrial School and the Natal Bantu Business League, and the first president of the African National Congress; John Tengo Jabavu (1859-1921), a devout Methodist, became the chief founder of Imvo Zabantsundu, a bilingual Xhosa-English weekly newspaper; and Walter Rubusana, a Congregationalist minister, was the only African ever to be elected to the Cape Town provincial assembly. (...) Like the missionaries, they believed the African masses to be 'noble savages but immersed in the darkness of ignorance' and they believed they were appointed to advance traditional Africa through the introduction of Christianity, education, capitalism, industrialisation and the Protestant work ethic. In general, they approved of colonial expansionism and conquests, partly because they equated colonialism with Christianisation and 'civilisation', and partly because they recognised the 'overwhelming superiority' of European arms and armies.”²

Indeed, the most important criterion for establishing superiority at that time, the most obvious evidence of these differences, was skin colour, and some Africans were automatically placed at the bottom of the ladder because they seemed to differ most from Europeans, who were automatically awarded the top. The middle-class Africans of the time were followers of this belief. The slave trade was therefore no longer just an ideological war between blacks and whites, but also between blacks and the so-called emancipated.

Moreover, “Neither churches, nor governments, nor civil society, nor the victims, nor the offenders can repair - restore - what has been lost or broken. Centuries of racism, racial discrimination and sexism - historically, collectively and individually - cannot be erased with the stroke of a pen”³. Hence the need for the church today to face up to this reality.

B. A mixed contemporary Church

In the 21st century, racist acts continue, including the recent death of George Floyd in May 2020, which reopened the debate on racism. The latter has an effect on the church and the church must address it to transform social relations.

Racism has long been studied by church associations, theological faculties and so on.

In fact, racism and all forms of discrimination have an influence on the life of the Church. If it is true that the Church functions only because of the quality of its members, who constitute the

² J Ki-Zerbo, op cit, P 220-221

³ Conseil Œcuménique des Eglises, COMITÉ CENTRAL Genève, « être Eglise et vaincre le racisme : le temps d'une justice transformatrice est venu, Suisse 26 août - 3 septembre 2002 en ligne sur <https://www.oikoumene.org>, consulté le 25/08/2021 à 21h42minutes.

body of Christ, we are tempted to say that the suffering of one member damages the whole body. It is important to emphasize that racism is a violation of people integrity. Worse, according to the All Africa Conference of Churches, “racism is a sin in any form”.

Racism in society emphasizes the idea of inferiority of some to others, just as this belief is widespread in the relationships within the church. But a church prone to racism is divided. It cannot thrive in the proclamation of the gospel, which is essentially about love. Racism is thus an obstacle to the proclamation and implementation of the faith in Christ.

Considering the hindrance that racism is for the Church, solutions must be found, not necessarily to heal the wounds already caused but to transform its effect. This may also aim at peaceful cohabitation without considering discriminatory criteria. For this purpose, a healing process must be initiated.

Indeed, according to the Ecumenical Study on Racism, churches nowadays have several responsibilities, as far as the fight against racism is concerned. According to the study, and I agree with its statement, *“Being the church today means that the churches are committed to overcoming their own racial and ethnic divisions. Being the church today means overcoming racism by re-establishing right relationships with all those who make up the churches: women and men, indigenous peoples, Africans and people of African descent and ethnic minorities. It means that the churches must acknowledge the reality of the deadly harm they may have done to people in the past through racial and ethnic oppression and through their acts of ecological racism. It means seeking and proclaiming the truth about the realities of racism as expressed in policies of assimilation, myths of superiority, disrespect for the diversity of cultures and identities and disrespect for creation.”*⁴

Values including tolerance, love, forgiveness, solidarity and brotherhood will help to restoring a united society.

Altogether, racism, experienced in the past as well as in the present, impacts the church in its essence. Racism is a sin and a violation of the law of love. Therefore, it is urgent to respond to it.

⁴ Conseil Œcuménique des Eglises, COMITÉ CENTRAL Genève, « être Eglise et vaincre le racisme : le temps d’une justice transformatrice est venu, Suisse 26 août - 3 septembre 2002 en ligne sur <https://www.oikoumene.org/fr/resources/documents/being-church-and-overcoming-racism-its-time-for-transformative-justice>, consulté le 20/08/2021 à 21h42minutes.