

Mission 21 Summer School

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Topic: “Racism in the Context of the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon”.

Introduction

Besides the phenomenon of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, the colonial enterprise and the Christian missionary enterprise together constitute the two most important events that have positively or negatively shaped contemporary Africa (Njoku 2005). While the former focused on the economic and political dimensions, the later impacted heavily on the religious and cultural landscape of Africa and considerably tinkered with its dominant worldview and value system.

This presentation critically examines the impact of the colonial enterprise on the missionary enterprise in Cameroon, and to highlight how it has continued to influence Mission(s) in contemporary Cameroon. May be in order to appreciate the way missions has been done since the 19th century, it is crucial to examine the why, the how and the consequences of the methods employed.

Our method is distinctly thematic rather than detailed, aiming to representatively highlight the key racist tendencies that characterised the missionary endeavours of the Basel Mission in the Cameroons.

Cultural Background

The following quote by David Bosch situates the European worldview at the time:

“The entire Western missionary movement of the past three centuries emerged from the matrix of the Enlightenment. On the one hand, it spawned an attitude of tolerance to all people and a relativistic attitude toward belief of any kind; on the other hand, it gave birth to western superiority feelings and prejudice....” (Bosch 1991).

Culturally, the age of enlightenment led Europe to translate its civilisation into an unmatched cultural arrogance and superiority. The spirit of cultural superiority ran deep and high in the mentality of the West (Fanon 1967). Njoku notes that it is with this spirit of cultural pride that Europe went into colonialism with the missionaries fully embracing the idea of a “civilising Mission” (Njoku 2013: 228). For instance, on the relationship between Christianity and the Cameroonian culture, Oehler said; “a Christian mission cannot avoid being an agent of higher culture among ‘cultureless’ or ‘poor cultured peoples’”. The idea of “cultureless” or “poor cultured people” confirmed the general European view about the so-called pagan world (see Edinburg 1910). Built on the structures of racism, the German colonial administration’s policy of *Herensvolk* (“master race theory”) greatly influenced the Basel mission’s strategies and methods in the Cameroonian mission field.

Missionary motivation

Based on the cultural background of the West at the time, the Basel Mission came to Cameroon propelled by the following goals as elaborated by Theodor Oehler and D. Johannes Riggenbach (Dah 1983): amongst others, they included,

- To plant evangelical Christianity among the heathens;
- To control the religious and moral life of the people through the introduction of a Christian church order and education;
- To articulate Western civilisation as a blessing from God for the spreading of the gospel, based on the idea of “manifest Destiny”.
- To emphasise Western Christianity as the standard for knowledge, social position and economic strength (Oehler & Riggenbach in Dah 1983).

Missionary method

Amongst the methods employed by the Basel Mission for evangelism including education, health care, infrastructural development, the idea of “villagisation” was the method that overtly extended the ideology of “racism”. The creation of “Christian Villages” was a racist idea which enforced the binary categorisations of superiority and inferiority among the natives. Christian villages were an attempt to separate converts from their ‘so-called’ pagan environments, by the same racist perspective.

While the Missionaries lived in the Mission Stations, those in the “Christian Villages” lived a little distant from them, separated from the village, thereby creating a new configuration of hierarchy and superiority: whites – superior blacks (who eventually became the middle class or elites) – blacks.

Dah advances two reasons why this idea could not work in Cameroon: firstly, other whites challenged the idea which according to them, brought natives in contact with the “superior races” and may facilitate a better and more civilised life for the natives. Secondly, the natives were disinterested in the idea of Christian Villages because they saw it as a re-invention of the “slave Quarters” usually situated at the entrances of the Master Villages during the days of slavery/slave trade. While the New Testament demands a spiritual separation, the missionaries emphasised a physical separation from the pagan environments. The missionaries failed to understand the traditional environment of the people which was based on group identity and solidarity.

Consequences of the missionary method:

- Raciality took the shape of ethnicity; emphasising ethnic superiority/inferiority whereby some major tribes, attempted to subjugate others with the complicity of the missionaries;
- Ethnic division/ break down in communality due to the spirit of denominationalism;
- The creation of an elite middle class who would become missionary/colonial band-boys;
- Native suspicion of missions as accomplices of the social, economic, cultural, religious and political genocide of the Cameroonian society.

- Social and economic inequality in the status and remuneration for local as opposed to foreign expatriates, no matter the qualification of the locals (the case of the PTS was glaring).
- Although gender roles are gradually changing for the better, early missionary perspectives relegated women to home duties.

Conclusion: Mission as reconciliation

Despite the racist tendencies that characterised missions during the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries, seen from the perspective of colonialism and “cultural Imperialism” (Porter 1997), the following appraisal can open the direction toward an ecumenical approach to mission:

“The Western missionary enterprise of the late eighteenth to the twentieth century remained; in spite of the valid criticism which may be aimed at it... they brought the gospel as they understood it. For this we owe them respect and gratitude” (Bosch 1991: 244).

Mission as reconciliation therefore suggests a turn towards the modification of individualism through its encounter with other realities in a cross-cultural manner, so that social relatedness can take centre stage over individualism. This introduces the idea of “interdependency”, what Bosch calls “the emerging ecumenical paradigm”. For Lamin Sanneh, “the worldwide Christian resurgence is proof of religion transcending ethnic, national, and cultural barriers” (Sanneh 2003: 7).

Faced by the challenges of globalisation and its implications for global power shifts which demand a combination of forces, David Bosch suggests that: poverty; wars; ecological crisis and a lot more contemporary issues can be mitigated from various and not a single perspective of mission.

Let me remind us of a statement made during the World Council of Churches’ Uppsala Assembly of 1968 which held on the theme: “Behold I make all things new”. It stated that:

“All men have become neighbours to one another. Torn by our diversities and tensions, we do not yet know how to live together. But God makes new. Christ wants his church to foreshadow a renewed human community. Therefore, we Christians will manifest our unity in Christ by entering into full fellowship with those of other races, classes, age, religious and political convictions, in the place where we live. Especially we shall seek to overcome racism wherever it appears”.

The extent to which we have done missions in relation to this statement 33 years later is among the questions we should answer during this summer school.

References

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