

Africa: A Troubled Continent (2)

The Role of Missions in Africa.

In the 1920s G.K.Chesterton observed: "The modern missionary, with his palm-leaf hat and his umbrella, has become rather a figure of fun. He is chaffed among men of the world for the ease with which he can be eaten by cannibals and the narrow bigotry which makes him regard the cannibal culture as lower than his own." Today little has changed. Secular Western scholars harshly criticize mission work. It is viewed as a kind of cultural leprosy. Missionaries are called villains; their preaching synonymous with imperialism; their African converts, yokefellows of colonial oppression. Modern secular authors share this derisive view of mission work. For example, Barbara Kingsolver's novel *The Poisonwood Bible* portrays Christianity as a package of Western prejudices and inhibitions. In her book *A Missionary Girl in the Belgian Congo*, she recalls how "We came from Bethlehem, Georgia, bearing Betty Crocker cake mixes into the jungle." And even a disparaging remark is made about prayer. "One girl prayed the dumb prayers of our childhood: "Our Father which art in heaven."

But if there had been no missionaries, there would still be crowds of gods, local and other, for African natives to worship. But harsh criticism of and profound antipathies toward mission work are not new. The governor of Cape Colony in 1853 spoke derisively of missions having stimulated among Africans the appetite for muskets and gunpowder.

Colonial governments had an ambivalent attitude toward missions. Missionaries were not always welcomed with open arms. It is not the case that colonial rule made missionary work that much easier everywhere. French colonial authorities quite arbitrarily prevented Protestant missions from working in their domains. And they didn't want non-French missions in territories under their control. Their attitude affected Protestant work in Madagascar, Gabon, and Cameroon. Protestant missions in Portuguese Angola and Mozambique were under suspicion and their activities restricted. In British Sudan Christians were not allowed to evangelize in the Muslim zone, although they were allowed to follow up Christians who had moved into it. In 1897, the *American Disciples of Christ* had sent out a scouting party to the Congo but received little encouragement from Belgian officials. But wherever the welcome mat was laid out for missionaries, they were not always aware of the danger of their close ties with the colonial administration. They were tempted to cooperate too closely without fully realizing the deep interests, concerns, and hurts of the African people.

The colonial era coincided with the rise of the evangelical faith missions movement, which had its roots in the eighteenth and nineteenth century revivals. In fact, they were the prime factor in the extraordinary burst of missionary enthusiasm, first in Britain, then in Europe and North America. Kenneth Scott Latourette calls the period 1800-1914 the "Great Century" of world missions.

Like other people of their time, missionaries shared the naivety of their contemporaries, and affirmed the values of liberal democracy and Western culture. Consequently, they lived in an uneasy tension with colonialism, having different goals. Most missionaries supported colonialism even as they fought against its abuses. They recognized its achievements. For example, in Central Africa missionaries encouraged British control, believing it gave protection against the slave trade by Arabs, Portuguese, and others. One missionary wrote, "Gone is the slave trade and intertribal wars. A new era of civilization has dawned for Africa." However, it is a vital error to believe that the results of missionary work were dependent on colonial powers.

Why did missionaries leave their homelands and loved ones for an uncertain future in Africa? Obviously, they did not go to Africa for pleasure, or their health, or to gain wealth. They were not in Africa for spoils, but to proclaim the transforming love of God. They went in obedience to our Lord's Great Commission. Their commitment carried them into continual danger and almost always guaranteed a greatly shortened life span. Between 1878 and 1888, half of the Baptist missionaries in the Congo died of disease, between 1835 and 1905, nearly a third of all the Wesleyan missionaries to West Africa. Missionaries brought hope. These missionaries knew they were in the forefront of the battle against "the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. (Eph. 6:12) They proclaimed the Gospel of peace while not forgetting the powerful forces of darkness. They took the revolt in heaven seriously, and Satan's attempt to destroy the world he did not create. They had no desire to see Africans die spiritually of broad-mindedness and brotherhood of all religions. They believed in a heaven to be gained and a hell to be shunned. They were convinced that all who do not believe in Christ are eternally lost. Therefore, Christians must make every effort to present the Gospel everywhere so that everyone has a chance to hear or read it and to accept Christ as Saviour. In faith mission publications, there are no hints that non-Christians might find a way to salvation within their own religions. *Prairie Bible Institute*, the most important faith missions school in Canada, formulated the reason for missions in these telling words: "If we believe that all are lost without Christ, we'll give our lives for the perishing millions."

One of the greatest pioneer missionaries to Africa was David Livingstone (1813-73). His fame exceeded all other notable nineteenth century missionaries, despite his failure as an evangelist (he saw only one convert, who eventually fell away). His achievements as an explorer, an anti-slavery crusader, and mission promoter established his place in history. He exposed the atrocities of the slave trade. His belief in "commerce and Christianity" represented an anti-slavery ideology, the hope that commerce would introduce prosperity and thus end the slave trade. In 1858, a new generation of prospective missionaries was inspired by the appearance of David Livingstone's book, *Missionary Travels and Researches in South Africa*. Many of the legendary missionaries of this era began their career in mid-century, while whole new areas of Africa were opened in the 1870s by the establishment of missions around Lake Malawi and Uganda. The early missionaries in Africa were strongly influenced by the Holiness Movement. But their search for holiness did not mean primarily the search for private perfection, but for power to serve. They were engaged in all kinds of social services: help for the

destitute; rescue missions, self-help schemes and orphanages. These activities were never divorced from evangelism. There was no missionary without a medicine box. Only in ignorance or prejudice can it be said that the evangelical missions did nothing but evangelistic work. Throughout Africa, wherever allowed by the government, missions supported a regular school system and hospitals. And in our 21st century, missions maintain many development projects, including youth clubs, chicken farms and forestation projects.

Most missionaries defended Africans against the exploitation of European colonial governments and political forces. In the Congo they took up the task of defending the human rights of the African people. For example, Henry Grattan Guinness (1835-1910), Irish evangelist and founder of the North Africa Mission and the Livingstone Inland Mission, with prophetic courage and honesty worked hard to stir the conscience of the Belgian colonial power. He protested the Congo atrocities, perpetrated by the Congo Free State ruled by Leopold II, in which whole villages were depopulated to get more rubber. In May 1896, he travelled to Brussels to intervene with Leopold II. He told the king what he had seen. He wrote: " Just because the missionaries know the possibilities of the Congo natives, they stand in the front row of those who demand that they shall be freed from their present oppression."

Instead of deriding missions, secular Western scholars could learn from them a thing or two. The missionaries' contribution to the modernization of Africa has been enormous. They endeavoured to deliver tribes-people from scheming witchdoctors, opposed the smelling out of witches, trials by ordeal and brutal torture or execution at the whim of a tribal chief. It is no exaggeration to say that without the groundwork laid by them, especially in the area of education, the political forces which led to independence would not have achieved success. Most of the first generation of independent Africa's political leadership were products of mission schools, and these pioneers were often active church members in their own right. Zambian president Kenneth Kaunda was the son of a Presbyterian minister. Tanzanian Prime Minister Julius Nyerere praised the missionaries who, he felt, "had brought the best they knew to Africa, their church and way of life."

Pioneer missionary work bore rich fruit. Since the 1960s the main issue still is how to cope with the tremendous numerical growth. For example, the number of Christians in the sphere of the Africa Inland Church in Kenya counted a few thousands in the 1950s; now there are more than one million Kenyans who claim some kind of allegiance to that church. The task of the Church has not changed. She remains engaged in the battle against the forces of darkness under the banner of her Lord and King.

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