

MISSIONS AND COLONIALISM

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Introduction

Let me briefly outline for you the journey we are about to take. I will first of all try to define or describe colonialism for you with particular reference to Northern Nigeria (NN). Then I will summarize mission involvement in it right here in NN with specific reference to Sudan United Mission/British Branch (SUM). I want also to indicate public reaction to colonialism, public criticism, if you will, as it came from two prominent groups – African nationalists and the ecumenical missionary movement, both Evangelical and that branch embodied in the International Missionary Council (IMC). Then come three basic questions:

- (1) What was the reason for mission involvement?
- (2) What was its effect in Nigeria?
- (3) What can be learned from all this?

I want to stress that this is a very big topic. I can do little more than touch upon it and then leave time for discussion.

Colonialism Described

Hendrik Kraemer, a Dutch missiologist, once defined colonialism as follows:

A country is a “colonial” country where the real dynamic economic activity is in *foreign* hands, nourished by *foreign* capital, directed by *foreign* personnel, inspired by a *foreign* spirit of enterprise, primarily directed

towards *foreign* interests. A “colonial” country is therefore a country which lives ... in a state of helotism; a country of which people and land are, in the last instance, instruments and means for *foreign* purposes and where *foreign* decisions determine these people’s destiny.¹

You will notice that the definition emphasizes the *economic* nature of modern colonialism. In a colony, the “real dynamic economic activity” is in foreign hands, run by foreign capital for foreign purposes and in a foreign spirit. This definition does not mean that not more can be said for colonialism. It has often been described as a movement driven by God Himself to open up stagnant cultures, to make available for all mankind the natural resources that were either not utilized at all or under-utilized. It can be said to have brought strangers closer to each other and enriched cultures by cross fertilization. It has constantly been said by Christians that it has prepared the way for the Kingdom of God in the sense that it has made missions possible. All of these are true and they may even have constituted the motive for some westerners to join the colonial teams.² However, after all is said and done, when you study the specific reasons for which colonies were established, you will find an economic reason behind it all.

This was certainly true for Africa and Nigeria. Allow me to quote one of the most famous and most often quoted statements from one of the most infamous colonial architects in Africa, Cecil Rhodes.

My cherished ambition is a solution for the social problem, i.e., in order to save... the United Kingdom from a bloody civil war, we colonial statesmen must acquire new lands to settle the surplus population, to provide new markets for the goods produced by them in the factories and mines. The

¹ Hendrik Kraemer, *World Cultures and World Religions: The Coming Dialogue*. London: Lutterworth Press, 1960, p. 65. Quoted in Boer, 1979, p. 49; 1984, p. 23.

² Kraemer, p. 246.

Empire, as I always have said, is a bread and butter question. If you want to avoid civil war, you must become imperialists.³

More specifically for the Nigerian interior, we must turn to Liverpool in Great Britain (GB). This city had long been a great centre for the slave trade. In the development of this trade, her merchants had developed strong relationships with a group of what we now call Nigerians. They were known as Brassmen. These Brassmen were the middle men for Liverpool. They in turn had developed trading relationships with the interior people from whom they bought slaves. When the slave trade was abolished, Liverpool used the same contacts to obtain other tropical products from the interior – palm oil, beeswax, ivory, timber, etc. The trade was lucrative and soon other parties in GB sought to enter the interior, bypassing the Brassmen.

Both Liverpool as well as Brassmen opposed this new intrusion, but it was welcomed by interior peoples who thought it more advantageous to have direct contact with these foreign agents. We do not have time to describe all that took place, but the scramble and competition and violence that took place clearly belies any humane motives in the establishment of British presence in Nigeria. Eventually one company emerged, the Royal Niger Company, that absorbed most of the competition. This company again did all it could, by hook and by crook, to pursue its aims—profit, nothing else. It eliminated all other parties when it was thought necessary. And in spite of propaganda that it was training Nigerians, it did not hesitate to eliminate Nigerians and their native commercial establishments. Instead of encouraging native industry, it eliminated it. Instead of encouraging agriculture and modernizing it for the sake of Nigerian needs first of all, only those crops were encouraged that were useful for British industry, especially cotton. It did this also by tricking local chiefs into signing contracts that in effect gave the company exclusive rights for an annual pittance. This mostly continued after the British government took over and a colony was formally established.

³ Boer, 1979, p. 47. It is there, in footnote 13, where you can find other places where this quote appears.

The British government at first did not want to get involved, for it was the day of laissez faire. However, threats from French quarters coming from Niger forced the British government to intervene, for the Niger Company was not able to face the French, since they came with the aid of their government. Furthermore, complaints about the behavior of the Niger Company reached London and it became clear that if British commercial interest was to continue, the government would have to intervene.

January 1, 1900, Lugard hoisted the British flag over NN and proclaimed it a British protectorate. One of the first accomplishments of the new government was to restore order among foreign companies as well as stop tribal wars and slave trading. Once that had been accomplished, it went about encouraging economic development in the interests of the UK, not Nigeria. The whole economy was geared increasingly to foreign interests. Developments took place – railroads, telegraph, roads, etc., but all in order to facilitate trade. Little or nothing was done to develop Nigerian companies or to build roads etc. for Nigerian social needs. Everything was geared to export through Lagos, while the ancient indigenous trans-Sahara trade routes to North Africa were closed down. Lugard knew it and he was not happy about it. But he could not do much about it, for it was the day of laissez faire – not at home anymore, but certainly in the colonies. The British government came in to make it possible for British economic interests to tap Nigeria. By the time independence was granted, the government's job was done. The main streets in all the cities were lined with foreign businesses, predominantly GB. It was now safe enough for these companies to go on without the government – so, the colonial task was completed. It was oil that eventually enabled Nigeria to call the shots.

Now, missions cooperated enthusiastically in all of this. They expected great things from colonialism. They thought it was going to build up Africa. They thought also that it was actually going to usher in something of the kingdom of God, language they freely used. They saw nothing but darkness in Africa and hardly anything but light in the West. Allow me to quote a bit from my dissertation on this subject. You Germans will be surprised that I specifically concentrate on the *German* founder of the British SUM, Dr. H. Karl W. Kumm, a most colourful and influential figure in

these developments. I do not focus on him simply to draw your German attention, but because he was indeed the central force in all of this—the founder of the SUM.⁴ “‘Darkness’ was the key concept to describe the essence of Africa.” He wrote in his book, *The Sudan: A Short Compendium of Facts and Figures about the Land of Darkness*, “There is a land in this wonderful world, called ‘The Land of Darkness;’ ...dark are the bodies of the people;... darker are their minds, and darker still their souls...”⁵ I could keep you engaged in this kind of discussion for quite some time, for this was the language used to entice British Evangelicals to join the new Sudan Mission. His were sentiments typical of the times.

One often hears it said that it is not fair to criticize missions for such involvement, for they were but children of their time. I reject that notion wholeheartedly. They were children of their time in a very uncritical way, something that is always illegitimate for Christians. Moreover, there were a lot of critics of colonialism. In addition to Marxists and socialists, there were African nationalists, most of them Christian. They were very noisy and wrote a lot in books and newspapers. They freely criticized colonialism as an institution geared to foreign interests, not African. They also freely warned missions against identification with colonialism.

Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe was one of Nigeria’s most prominent, activist and nationalistic opponents of colonialism. Though educated in mission schools and using Christian language, he was sharp in his criticism of missions for their support of colonialism. Referring to the “Trinitarian tragedy” of the politician-trader-missionary team, he repeated the classic accusation:

The religious man must, and did, teach the Native not to lay up treasures on earth; this enabled the commercial man to grab the earthly treasures; and this facilitated the role of the Government to regulated how these earthly treasures are to be exported for the use of the world’s industries.

⁴ See Boer, 1979, pp. 112-124; 1984, p. 33

⁵ Boer, 1979, p. 125; 1984, pp. 35-40.

By their emphasis on eternal rewards for suffering in this life, he charged, missionaries broke African physical resistance. He regarded missionaries as colonial tools. Azikiwe represented all of his nationalist compatriots in this regard.⁶

In response, missions generally simply ignored nationalist charges. When they did refer to nationalism, it was generally in an uncomprehending way. They could not understand how Africans could be so ungrateful and assumed that such nationalists were just selfish people who were prepared to sacrifice the good of their people for their own aims.

Then there were the ecumenical warnings against the negative aspects of colonialism as well as against mission cooperation. The reason missions cooperated it was said by fellow missionaries at the Jerusalem Conference in 1928 was a kind of dualism in missionary thinking that led missionaries to think of spiritual things and ignore the world. Like that of African nationalists, so did European ecumenicals express similar deep critique of mission participation in colonialism. I only have time to refer you to the relevant pages in my dissertation on this subject,⁷ but it cut deep and openly to the public. Every Christian and every missionary had access to this sharp criticisms. My dissertation contains a lot of such discussions that clearly indicate that such criticisms are not mere hindsight of an armchair missiologist in the 1970's. These criticisms were common and available. One who did not hear them could only purposefully close his ears by shutting himself off from external influences.

We should ask how it came about that missionaries became so involved in colonialism. To answer that, we must remember that missionaries are representatives of a larger Christian community whose ideals they were/are expected to carry out. The missionaries I were representatives of the British Evangelicals. Those studied by De Vries were representatives of German

⁶ Azikiwe, pp. 52, 190. Boer, 1979, p. 237; 1984, p. 106.

⁷ Boer, 1979, pp. 237-261; 1984, pp. 113-129.

Lutherans. Thus we are not talking simply about missionaries; we are really talking about the sending constituencies.

The British missionaries came out of a constituency of Evangelicals who had done very well in the Industrial Revolution. They were among the middle class that had taken over the politics and economics of the country. As a class they were naturally inclined to favour the capitalistic structures that evolved in GB during the 19th century. Thus, class interest was a major reason and what always goes with it: class blindness.

Potentially, class interest can be overcome or, at least, recognized if one is open to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. However, Evangelicals and their missionaries were products of the Revivals. A study of the Revivals has made it clear that its influence has not been wholistic. It served to bring many people to Christ and it served to introduce a great measure of pity and benevolence in the hearts of Christians so that Evangelicals did much to relieve suffering and, where they recognized social immoralities, they were among the first to tackle them. However, the Revivals inherited a basic dualism that paid more attention to spiritual affairs than to those of the world. Capitalism as such was fully approved, not subject to scrutiny. The priority of profits as such was fully accepted. Laissez faire philosophy in general was part of Evangelical thinking. The dualism they inherited from past ages was admirably suited to prevent them from engaging in criticism of economic structures, except in the *obviously* immoral aberrations – e.g. slavery. It was a dualism that came down to them from Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther and Pietism. It is a dualism that assumes that human reason is basically sound when it addresses matters of the world. The light of the Bible is not necessary for economics, for our common sense is sufficient at that level. Aquinas spoke about nature/grace that were guided respectively by reason and revelation. Luther spoke about the two kingdoms. While we need the Bible for religious affairs, he considered common sense sufficient in other realms.⁸

⁸ Boer, 1979, pp. 449-456; 1984, pp. 132-137.

The revivals were influenced greatly by German Lutheran Pietists. They also contained, though largely unconscious, such inherent dualism. Like Lutherans, they knew they should be busy in the world (Kingdom of the world, as Luther called it), but they did not use Scriptural categories to analyze their economics and politics. This sort of Pietism was well suited to confirm them in their class identity, for it presented no religious challenge to their economic thinking.

The results have been serious in the Nigerian church. Business is business, is the popular thought amongst Christians. Do not use your religion in politics, is the slogan, but be neutral. A few years ago during the Shari'a debate, it became very clear that Muslims had come to understand Christianity as a narrow religion, not a way of life. Even Christians themselves saw it this way, judging from newspaper articles. In short, we have a Christian community that is dualistic and therefore secular in their approach to the world. It has resulted in politico-phobia that they are trying to overcome only now, under the pressure of Islam, not the Bible.

But you are not living in Africa; you live in Europe. What does all this have to do with you? There are some important lessons to be learned from this. One is the danger of unconscious and unexamined theological and philosophical ideas. The dualism with which the mission operated was an inheritance from history. However, people in missions seldom realize the importance of theology and philosophy, including historical studies of these fields and so they worked with a negative heritage without realizing. You in Germany are now or should be Christians facing a mission situation in your own country. One thing you should realize from this is that you cannot do effective missions without a sense of the breadth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. You are heirs to a dualism and one of your most crucial tasks is to overcome it so you can see the relationship of the Gospel for the world. There are no two kingdoms. You cannot have a mission program that will have some meaning if your gospel has nothing to say about their businesses or professions. It must be a full gospel that is a viable alternative to western secularism and to Marxism. I am not saying that you cannot get people converted to a narrow gospel. I am simply saying that in the long run this will count against the Gospel, because it is a false gospel, an incomplete gospel. The Nigerian church has a hard time keeping educated people because of the shallow

gospel they have received. The church is gaining millions of people in Africa, but is losing them through the universities. The same will hold true for Europe.

In short, the one thing to be learned is that we must analyze all of our culture by Biblical categories, not by common sense, which is always local and provincial. Furthermore, we must listen to the radical critique the Bible offers of our economics and politics. And then, we must find the spiritual courage to apply these insights.