

**COLONIALISM, NEO-COLONIALISM AND
FORGOTTEN MISSIOLOGICAL LESSONS**

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Abstract

The missiological lessons from our not too distant past have gone seemingly unnoticed. While colonialism, when understood as western political expansion, has to a certain degree been eradicated, colonialism as expressed in American Christian cultural hegemony has only increased. Missionaries need to answer the question “Are we contextualizing or are we neo-colonializing?” Roland Allen expressed this concern nearly a century ago yet the issue persists. There are at least four avenues that present day missions can pursue in order to adequately answer the growing cry against American Christian cultural superiority: cultural, theological, ecclesiastical and historical.

Introduction

“We have spoken of America as the first of the modern empires; it was also the first colonial independence movement, and one can see how powerfully the American movement appealed to the first generation of nationalist leaders in both India and Africa” (Walls, 1996: 233). Can it be that America was once viewed as a force that contributed to the demise of colonialism? Andrew Walls seemed to suggest that it was and it does not seem so far fetched if consideration is given to the fact that the United States was once a colony under British rule just as India. Without

question there is a marked difference between India and the United States, namely that the United States was a colony of Europeans that ultimately exploited Native Americans and imposed European Christianity upon them.

Today, as western missions continues to dominate the world-wide missionary effort (Jaffarian, 2002) and is burdened with guilt related to colonialism (Sanneh, 1995), it is this missiologist's contention that we have not fully learned from our past. In fact, under the guise of globalism, a new form of colonialism has emerged and threatens to confuse the notion of bringing Christ to the nations with bringing Him to the nations in western garb. This paper will discuss neo-colonialism by locating it within the context of mission history and forgotten missiological lessons. Then, it will offer suggestion in order to guard against repeating history.

Defining Colonialism

Colonialism held the idea of bringing western civilization to the uncivilized. Stephen Neill, writing the first extensive study of colonialism from a missiological viewpoint, suggests that "all the West has done tends to be interpreted in terms of aggression" (1966:12). That aggression encompasses political, economic, social, intellectual and the "most dangerous of all forms of aggression" missions (Neill, 1966:12). Neill points out that the colonial idea is "used almost exclusively as a term of reproach" with the notion of European exploitation and impoverishment of cultural others who are normally considered weak and inferior. However, colonialism was not an idea birthed at the beginning of the modern mission era.

Constantine's conversion to Christianity in 312 AD wed the church with the state and set the framework for later colonialism. Without a doubt St. Augustine's *bellum iustum* legitimized the Christian state's use of force to bring the "heretic" and later the "heathen" in subjection to the church (Grunder, 1995:18-19). The predisposition of mission-minded Christians to the church-state paradigm advanced the Western political and religious agenda across the world. Neill posits that colonialism's roots lie in ancient Greek civilization and today we rarely, if ever, talk about Islamic colonialism or Russian colonialism. According to Neill, the term is almost exclusively used for the time period of European expansion beginning with Vasco da Gama (1966:11-34).

Others have summarized colonialism with the three C's: Christianity, commerce and civilization. David Bosch suggested that "mission" was equated with "colonialism" from the 16th century onward. In fact, whether knowingly or not, missionaries were pioneers of western colonial expansion (Bosch, 1991:303-305). Mission societies had a dual mandate, one to evangelize and one to civilize (Jacobs, 1993:237); and up until the 19th century "to become Christian" meant "to become civil" (Hiebert, 1994:76). In essence, colonialism rejected the need of using traditional cultural forms for its belief in the superiority of the western "Christian" civilization. Through the extension of the gospel missionaries believed that "pagan" culture would become both Christian and modern (Hiebert, 1994:77).

Forces that Undermined Colonialism

Increasingly during the late 18th century through the 19th century, primarily with the rise of the Protestant mission force, missions became less dependent on the colonial agenda. Granted, missionaries often enjoyed the benefits of serving in regions under the control of colonial empires, but just as the commercial agenda of colonial expansion became disenchanted with the moral virtues of missionaries coming from their homeland so, missionaries began to recognize the worldliness of their countrymen. Like no other time in the history of the church since Constantine's conversion, the Western governments were not the impetus for the missionary movement (Latourette, 1965:336).

Paul Hiebert suggests that there were three forces that undermined colonialism beginning in the 19th century (1994:81-82). First, there were growing Western cries against exploitation of colonial lands led by humanists and evangelical Christians. In 1841 Henry Venn became secretary of CMS and took up the cause once championed by William Wilberforce and Thomas Fowell Buxton to eradicate slavery by promoting the "Bible and plow." Around the same time the famed missionary explorer, David Livingstone, arrived in South Africa. He believed that missionaries should be settled in an area before the arrival of western commerce in order to impede "lawless conditions and racial friction" (Livingstone, 1930:16). However, following Buxton, he sought to use commerce as a means to rid Africa of the slave trade rather than as a means of European exploitation of Africa. Neill states, "It is clear from everything that he said and wrote at the time that his primary, indeed, his only concern was the welfare of the African people" (1966:277).

Venn's American counterpart and secretary of ABCFM, Rufus Anderson, opposed the long held belief that civilization needed to precede evangelization. Instead, he stressed the supremacy of evangelization over civilization and asserted that social change would come as a consequence of the impact of the gospel (Beaver, 1979:95). Venn and Anderson are both credited for the development of the "three-self" triad, but even more, their focus was on establishing "indigenous" churches. To them, indigenous did not share the same meaning as in the social sciences. Instead, "indigenous" churches were those churches that were self-supporting, self-governing and self-propagating according to American and European church standards (Shenk, 1981:170). Distressing as it may seem, Venn and Anderson both acknowledged the superiority of western civilization.

The second force contributing to the downfall of colonialism was the rise of highly educated national leaders. Particularly in India these leaders brought a nationalist vision that adopted Western governance by nationals. Correspondingly, national churches sought autonomy by self-governance. Walls suggests that the British colonial powers of India were especially concerned about American missionaries who, in stressing the separation of church and state plus individualism, could undermine colonial authority (1996:232). Finally, according to Hiebert, "indirect rule" by the British government in Africa sought to understand how indigenous political structures functioned at the tribal level and adopted indigenous forms of social organization.

There was also a fourth force that undermined colonialism, not mentioned by Hiebert, and that force was theological. The focus of missions was changing from bringing the nations to Christ via civilization to bringing Christ to the nations via evangelization. By the late 19th century missionaries began to embrace a premillennial view of Christ's return. There was growing recognition that the world was not becoming more civilized. A. J. Gordon, founder of the Boston Missionary Training School which later became Gordon College and Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary, believed that society was on a decline equal to Sodom and Gomorrah (Gordon, 1886:30, as cited in Robert, 1998:22). With the growth of the prophetic movement in the United States, mission emphasis changed from civilizing the world to preaching the gospel (Robert, 1998:22). This emphasis resonated through the Student Volunteer Movement's watchword "the evangelization of the world in this generation."

Given these forces that undermined colonialism, the question must be posed, "Was colonialism eradicated?" The answer must be "no." Colonialism, when understood as western political expansion, has to a certain degree been eradicated. Hiebert, Neill and others suggests that the close of World War II saw the end of this form of colonial expansion (Hiebert, 1991:267; Neill, 1966:414). However, colonialism as expressed in western cultural hegemony has only increased. The Southern Baptist missiologist James Chancellor correctly asserts that American missionaries are viewed as a symbol of western cultural hegemony (1997:71). Moreover, Lesslie Newbigin's (1987:7) assertion that the West must be open to criticism from our brothers and sister in Christ around the world gives credence for asserting the Latin American theologian Ismael Amaya's opinion of American Christianity, "Much of the motivation behind the colossal effort to support the gigantic missionary enterprise around the world, is the conviction that God has raised America – especially Anglo-Saxon America – as the vessel of redemption of the world" (1983:20).

Modern Missionary Motives

In spite of the distancing between colonial governments and missions, missionaries continued to bear the stigma as the ecclesiastical arm of the western colonial powers (Latourette, 1965:338). For example, the Boers suspected Livingstone's missionary efforts to be motivated by the desire to open trade routes through their lands. To the Boers, missionaries were agents sent ahead and soon to follow were traders and governments with armed forces to subjugate them (Livingstone, 1930:30).

Certainly no missiologist, whether historian, theoretician or missionary, would question the motives of these early missionaries as anything less than directed by the desire to see the kingdom of God established on earth. Speaking about the volunteer missionaries of the 19th century, many of whom he had personal contact, the missionary statesman Sherwood Eddy asserted, "With all their shortcomings and limitations, they were the finest body of men I have ever known" (1945:6).

The former professor of missions at Moody Bible Institute, Robert Glover, wrote of two realms of missionary motivation: external and internal. The external motivations were based upon consideration of the state of the “heathen” while the internal motivations were based upon consideration of our relationship to Christ. What is compelling in light of the current discussion on colonialism was the appeal to the temporal and moral condition of “heathen” lands. As late as 1931 when the third edition of his book appeared, Glover still reflected Western cultural hegemony in writing,

Their dire poverty, wretched homes, unremitting toil, gross intellectual ignorance, unrelieved physical sufferings, and their utter absence of a thousand features which brighten and bless the homes and communities of Christian lands - all this is a mute and pathetic appeal for help.... Heathen lands reek with filthy and degrading habits, abominable practices, unmentionable cruelties and crimes, and every form of moral corruption freely tolerated and indulged. (1931:23)

Glover’s career as a missionary in China for eighteen years and then as a mission administrator for eight spanned from the end of “Great Century” to the First World War. It would appear that Venn and Anderson’s view of western cultural superiority bridged into the twentieth century.

A Forgotten Missiological Lesson

As a missionary in the latter part of the decade of the 1980s and continuing through the 1990s, I had the life altering experience of visiting and/or ministering in many churches in Asia and Europe as well as being a part of beginning several churches and training many national church planters in Eastern Europe. It has only been in the past couple of years that personal reflection on that experience has resulted in posing the question, “Are we contextualizing or neo-colonializing?” What was once thought as being the unique unity of churches across the world reflected in similar liturgical styles and familiar hymns and worship choruses is now thought of as the propagation of Euro-American Protestant Christianity. Evangelical missions around the globe are to be commended with shunning the colonial mentality of the past and implementing the three-self formula promoted by Venn and Anderson. However, the “indigenous” church is undoubtedly a reflection of Euro-American Protestant ecclesiastical forms and values.

Gailyn Van Rheezen raises this issue more eloquently in a Monthly Missiological Reflection entitled “Transplanted and Contextualized Churches.” Inspired by his first visit to a “three -self” church in China, Van Rheezen was impressed with the similarities of these churches with those in the West. In the article he defines the issue:

A transplanted church is like a potted plant transferred to a new culture. It is expected to grow and reproduce exactly as it did in the original culture. A contextualized church is like planting “God’s seed” in new soil and allowing the seed to grow naturally adapting to the language, thought processes, and rituals of the new culture without losing its eternal meanings. These eternal meanings

include a biblical perspective of God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, the church, humanity, time and eternity, and salvation. (2001)

It seems apparent that the “transplanted church” is consistent with Venn and Anderson’s understanding of the “indigenous” church.

More recent missiological reflections on contextualized ecclesiology seem to suggest that church polity and liturgy should represent acceptable cultural forms rather than Euro-American systems brought from abroad. Writing about ecclesiastical forms of the first century Ralph Winter states,

In fact, the profound missiological implication of all this is that the New Testament is trying to show us how to borrow effective patterns; it is trying to free all future missionaries from the need to follow the precise forms of the Jewish synagogue and Jewish missionary band, and yet to allow them to choose comparable indigenous structures in the countless new situations across history and around the world - structures which will correspond faithfully to the function of patterns Paul employed, if not their form! (1981:180)

Similarly, David Hesselgrave notes that, “A careful study of representative church polities will reveal that historically they have tended to reflect the social structures of the times and places of their inception” (1980:367).

Interestingly enough, Roland Allen was expressing concerns about the “grave danger in importing complete systems of worship and theology” well before Hesselgrave and Winter drew our attention to contextualized ecclesiastical forms (1912 [1959]:117). Yet, it seems curious that almost a century later “complete systems of worship and theology” are prevalent across the globe. Could it be that too many of us missionaries have neglected the missiological lessons of our missions’ past?

Allen pointed out what he called three “disquieting symptoms” in foreign missions. To Allen, Christianity was not indigenous to any country. This implied that foreign missions were not employing Pauline methodology, for if St. Paul’s methods had been applied the church would be indigenous. It must be pointed out that Allen understood indigenous differently than Venn and Anderson. To Allen, an indigenous church did not take on Euro-American systems nor did it have to meet the standards of Euro-American ecclesiastics. For a church to be truly indigenous it must have national leadership from its inception with national systems (Allen, 1912 [1959]:181).

Allen was concerned that missions were too dependent on home boards for personnel and finances for too long of a period. His fear was that this dependence would continue without an end in sight. This fear was not unfounded. Allen saw that by the missions’ creation of foreign systems, nationals would not be able to carry on the work unless substantial funds were secured from home boards and personnel were sent that understood the systems and could maintain them. He was also concerned with the uniformity of types. In spite of the fact that missions were in different countries with diverse cultures, they bore “a most astonishing resemblance one to

another” (Allen, 1912 [1959]:182). Allen fully expected to see differences in the nationals’ understanding of the gospel as much as differences in forms of the Christian life.

These symptoms precipitated what Allen described as a deficient missiological method employed during his day. With seemingly prophetic sharpness, his description is applicable to our day. Allen stated that there are three stages in contemporary mission theory. The first stage launches the missionary to his assignment with the expressed goal of establishing a “system” (to use Allen’s language), in which he can operate according to his training. The second stage entailed training converts in the missionaries “transplanted” (to use Van Rhee nen’s language) system until they are apt to practice it on their own. Finally, after the missionaries depart, the converts might choose to modify the missionaries’ system. Allen’s objection was that there should never be a first stage in this mission theory. He argued that the same Holy Spirit that guides and illumines the missionary is the same in the convert. Therefore, it would only seem natural that the convert be allowed to set up a system that is culturally acceptable (Allen, 1912 [1959]:188).

Guarding Against Neo-Colonialism

Colonialism is an issue that has not been completely extinguished. As an American evangelical missiologist, this author has to consider the issues presented in this paper with careful reflection. While the days of western colonial expansion have seen their end, a neo-colonialism has risen within American evangelical missions. Walls might have suggested that America played some part in the demise of colonial expansion, but he also states that, “Christianity as represented by Americans has been shaped by essentially American cultural influences. American missions are thus both products and purveyors of American culture” (1996:226).

Walls continues his critique of American Christianity and asserts that the same characteristics found in American business, entrepreneurial activity, efficient organization and conspicuous financing, are also found in American missions (1996:230). One need only consider the issue of partnerships or leadership development for an example. A look back at our mission history helps us realize that there are at least four avenues that present day missions can pursue in order to adequately answer the growing cry against American Christian cultural superiority: cultural, theological, ecclesiastical and historical. While these are not revolutionary avenues by any means, they must be revisited afresh with the understanding that our culture has affected our missions more than we have realized.

Cultural

American missionaries must adopt a holistic approach to culture and theology that creates an encounter of the gospel with the culture. The objective, thus, is to seek an interpretation of the gospel via a cultural conceptual frame of reference. Hiebert calls this critical contextualization. Critical contextualization is a method that neither uncritically accepts cultural practices nor denies the validity of the practices, but deals with the practices critically and constructively. After determining meaning and function of particular cultural practices in a society they are

examined in light of biblical norms. The process of critical contextualization begins with the missionary becoming aware of the need to deal with cultural practices in the context of the community (Hiebert 1984).

Becoming aware of a need entails entering a conversation with cultural others. Loring Danforth describes this conversation as taking place,

in a literal sense when a person talks with significant others. During this conversation each person expresses or externalizes his subjective reality. He objectifies it linguistically by talking about it. It becomes real. However, speech is only one of the many “languages” in which this conversation takes place. All the symbolic systems that constitute a culture, such as myth, ritual, or art, can be seen as languages. In other words, the symbolic systems of a culture communicate; they convey information; they express meaning. The task of the anthropologist is to interpret the meaning of these cultural forms. (1982:29).

The analysis of culture, then, is an interpretative one, as opposed to an experimental one, that searches for meaning rather than law. According to Clifford Geertz, analysis of a culture is “sorting out the structures of signification and determining their social ground and import” (1973:9). In other words, it is the intelligibly described context of humanity. It is only after the analysis of a culture that a correct understanding of indigenous can be obtained. However, the analysis must be conducted together with nationals while listening to them express in their own terms the meaning of their culture.

This is not new information. Yet, given the apparent fact that many churches planted by American missionaries have taken on American culture, we must take another look at how we understand culture. More than that, we must entrust nationals with the responsibilities of developing their own understanding of what it means to be Christian in their context. American missionaries must take a subordinate role and trust that the same Holy Spirit that is in them is in the national as well.

I worked with a group of ten national church planters for over a year in one East European country. These East Europeans had two years of TEE conducted by lay leaders, as well as students and professors from Columbia International University working through the sponsoring mission Crossover Communication International (CCI) and one year of church planting training conducted in partnership between CCI and Christian Associates International. They are now embarking on planting new churches.

I initially went to train these church planters with a clear understanding of what was anticipated and I saw these men evolve from simply having a desire to extend the kingdom by church planting to formulating their own culturally relevant strategies to plant churches. Rather than presenting them with models of church planting, we concentrated on principles. The one issue that I am assured of is that the way in which they plant their churches and the forms that they will take will look differently than the West simply because they have the freedom to apply church

planting principles by using East European methodology influenced by their cultural context. These church planters will employ acceptable traditional forms that preserve their cultural heritage while adapting other forms that reflect the emerging cultural context of post-communist Christianity.

Theological

Hiebert has called for a fourth “self,” self -theologizing, to be added to the “three -self” triad of Venn and Anderson (1994:96-97). Wilbert Shenk (2001) has called for a recasting of western theology. Whatever the call, it is apparent that the western missiological community has recognized the need for contextual theologies. In 1982 at the Third World Theologians’ Consultation in Seoul, Korea fifty delegates from Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean and the Pacific Islands met to consider their theological task. In the resulting document, “The Seoul Declaration Toward an Evangelical Theology for the Third World,” the delegates recognized their

indebtedness to the creeds of the Early Church, the confessions of the European Reformation, and the spiritual awakenings of the revival movements of modern times. We recognize the contributions of western churches and missionary agencies in the birth and growth of churches in many parts of the Third World. (Nicholls, 1983:8)

The Declaration expressed the desire of evangelical Third World theologians to formulate their theology in such a way as to “interpret the Word of God in the light of our own historical context for the sake of Christian obedience” (Nicholls, 1983:8). The fifty delegates correctly and graciously recognized that the western approach to theology is couched in the Enlightenment and is incapable of articulating its theology in a way that meets the needs of people living in contexts of “religious pluralism, secularism, resurgent Islam or Marxist totalitarianism” (Nicholls, 1983:8 - 9). To these evangelical Third World theologians, if evangelical theology is to be efficacious it must be liberated from “captivity to the individualism and rationalism of Western theology . . .” (Nicholls, 1983:9). This is seen, for example, in Kwame Bediako’s suggestion that modern missionary efforts have had a Judaizing effect on African Christianity (1992:251-252).

Eastern Europe needs more seminarians who can effectively exegete the culture in order to develop an East European theology. Iosif Tson is an example of one who developed a theology of martyrdom that is East European. Theological formulations of the Orthodox Church regarding *theosis* or *theoria* can be reformulated to provide a more distinct East European evangelical theology.

Western theology cannot assume primacy in the East especially when one considers that the major contribution to orthodox theology in the early church came from the East. A deeper appreciation of Greek patristics would serve evangelicals well in formulating East European theology. The idea of paleo-orthodoxy advanced by Thomas Oden should here be considered as relevant to East European missions (Oden 1993; Clendenin 1997).

Ecclesiastical

But a theological response to the future seems inadequate when we consider that churches worldwide have been transplanted rather than contextualized. Allen saw it in 1912; Neill recognized it in 1965; Van Rheezen draws our attention to it today. If theological reflection is going to be contextual then it must be conducted in an environment that is contextual. Currently, it appears that theological reflection is being conducted within Euro-American ecclesiastical forms. The church simply is not indigenous.

It is this missiologist's contention that we must strive for ascertaining the biblical data regarding ecclesiology in order to effectively contextualize the intentions of Christ and the apostles as they conceptualized the church. This is the launching point to an effective indigenized ecclesiology. By an effective indigenized ecclesiology I mean that we must evaluate cultural forms first in light of the biblical data and determine what is abiblical and cultural. Where there is apparent cultural diversity and yet congruence with the biblical data we can employ these forms to a culturally relevant indigenized church structure. Where there is departure with the biblical data and yet congruence with cultural data we must either change the meaning of the form to bring it in line with Scripture or eliminate the form altogether.

Contextualization occurs when biblical data is employed in a culturally relevant manner. Indigenization occurs when existing cultural forms congruent with biblical data are employed in order to construct cultural relevancy. It is apparent that the New Testament churches took on cultural forms that were familiar. There was freedom and diversity in the early church that allowed for the employment of acceptable cultural forms. Western church planters must strive to use indigenous forms of leadership and social organization to effectively contextualize the church (Hiebert 1994, 82).

Historical

It is said that Cicero posited, "Not to know what has been transacted in former times is to be always a child. If no use is made of the labors of past ages, the world must remain always in the infancy of knowledge" (source unknown). Any movement toward a future missiological agenda would be deficient if it does not include history. It is not simply enough to understand biblical and systematic theologies, but we need to understand the historical context in which they were developed. This leads us to a richer understanding of theology. The historical contexts helped shape the theologies and to not understand them is to remain in infancy.

While much of missions' history is tainted by colonialism, whether political or cultural, there are bright historical figures besides those referred to in this article and especially non-Western figures that have not been given a voice due to the focus on the West. American evangelicals must keep in mind that we share the same history with the Christian movement worldwide. However, historical references should not be focused primarily on the "Great Century." The resurgence of Paganism in Western Europe and the United States should draw our attention to the Celtic missionaries between 400-800 A.D. Latourette reminds us that Celtic missionaries

were not influenced or supported by Celtic chieftains (1965:331). In fact, Celtic missions give us an example of re-evangelization of a one-time “converted” West overrun by the invasion of social others (Hunter, 2001). It also provides us with an example of Christian missions unadulterated by a theology influenced with a political agenda and of an effective missional ecclesiology that was contextual and indigenous. Similarly, Bediako suggests that the influence of African Traditional Religions upon the church should lead us to consider how the Apostolic Fathers confronted the Paganism of their day in order to seek an appropriate cultural expression of Christianity (1992). Today’s missionary must be informed with the history of not only the church, but also the country where they serve.

Conclusion

Have we forgotten the missiological lessons of our past? Perhaps in part; perhaps they were never learned. All the signs of neo-colonialism are seemingly present in contemporary missions: the ideas of American cultural superiority, American ecclesiastic structures and polity, American mission and ministry methodology. So, it must be time, or past time, to revisit or possibly rediscover those lessons from our not so distant past.

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