

## SOME HISTORICAL DIMENSIONS OF MISSION

By John Corrie

### 1. Introduction: The Importance of History

Before we think specifically about mission history, it's important to get our bearings: why is history important? How do we interpret it, so that it speaks to us today? Anglicans have a strong sense of history since our identity has been forged out of historical events – events often politically very ambiguous and even embarrassing. But that is just as true of all history, and no less true of the history which shaped the people of God in Scripture! That was also sometimes very ambiguous and embarrassing. Biblical faith is itself a historical faith, and God reveals himself through its story. As we interpret the past we try to understand what God has been doing in history and therefore how he is at work today. If we believe that the Lord of history was in providential control of past events to fulfil his *missio dei* mission purposes, so we trust that 'God is working His purpose out' today, even through the tortuous complexity of human affairs.

#### 1.1 The value of mission history

Max Warren General Secretary of CMS from 1942 – 1963 said:

“only a right attitude to the past provides me with any possibility whatever of a right attitude to the future...not that we treat the past as sacred...but our judgments will be passed with due humility for we will remember that we are ourselves in history and that God is at work today. I believe that history matters tremendously and that we must take the past as seriously as I hope the future will take us”.  
(Ward and Stanley, 2000: 41)

I suggest at least three reasons why mission history is important:

**1. For our identity.** Who we are as people is shaped by our background and upbringing. If we say that mission is at the very heart of the identity of the Church, we will not be able to understand ourselves as the Church today without seeing how the Church arrived at this point through her own mission history. To construct an Anglican identity today in our own context we will have to take Anglican history into account, both our own history and the history of the tradition that has come to us from outside of our context. For the majority world church a huge amount of history was brought to them by the missionaries, and as they accepted their message, and became Anglicans (say) they also took on all that history as part of their own identity.

**2. For our independence.** Many peoples in the Majority World have realised through studying the past that their history was made for them by outsiders and they were victims of the imposition of a history which they did not choose. To be able to own the story of their culture and take control of their own destiny is a liberating experience which sets them free from that dependency. This is one of the great themes of Liberation Theology. As Anglicans they will only be able to have a distinctive Anglicanism that they can own for themselves when they recognise what history has done to them as well as for them. This question therefore is especially important for the churches of the Majority World.

**3. For our inspiration.** To learn of the great examples of mission, to draw encouragement from the great

movements of history, and to appreciate the flow of historical developments gives us inspiration for our own mission today as we see ourselves in continuity with all of that. But also as we realise the mistakes of the past, we hope that we are not condemned to repeat them. We need to be careful that we are not triumphalist about the successes of mission, but neither should we be consumed by guilt for our mistakes. If we are constantly apologetic and full of self-doubt, that will inhibit a positive and confident contribution to mission in the present. Some feel that the west is too much ridden by guilt for the colonial era. Others see mission practice today repeating many of the mistakes that were made then because we have not listened to history. As poet Steve Turner wryly observes:

“History repeats itself. Has to. No-one listens” (Turner, 1980: 79)

## 1.2 The interpretation of mission history

Historians argue about whether the pure objectivity of fact concerning ‘what happened’ in the past is ever possible, or whether we only have interpretations. We all read history through the spectacles of our own cultural preferences. We need to beware then of certain pitfalls, not least in interpreting mission history. What are the dangers?

**1. *Seeing mission history from an exclusively western perspective:*** this reinforces the view that mission has been about the movement from ‘the west to the rest’. But the movement of mission has never been only in one direction, even if today it is more than ever ‘from everywhere to everywhere’. There always were indigenous missionaries – it’s just that we never hear about them!

For example, alongside the development of medieval western church, there were well established ‘christendoms’ in Armenia (the first nation to become Christian) and in Ethiopia. Persian Christianity has roots in the apostolic age. The Indian church regarded itself as having been founded by the Apostle Thomas. The Coptic Church of Egypt claims apostolic origin, and it was in the deserts of Syria and Egypt that the monastic tradition originated with its own kind of missionary vision. The Coptic church sent missionaries to Ethiopia, and the Ethiopian church itself has a long missionary history. The Church of the East has a glorious history of mission, with the Orthodox especially active in many parts of Asia and Africa.

Bishop Michael Nazir-Ali concludes:

“There is no single missionary history of the church. Different families of churches, different geographical areas and particular clusters of churches may each have had their own missionary history” (Nazir Ali, 1990:30)

So we need to see Anglican mission history in this context – it is one aspect of one family of churches fulfilling one episode of relatively brief period of history.

And yet it is nearly always the western perspective that we hear. It is true that there was a ‘golden age’ of missionary endeavour during which many missionaries went from western countries to the ‘uttermost parts of the earth’, but even then their success was significantly due to the indigenous missionaries. Local people were as much missionaries as the missionaries themselves. They were often the driving force of evangelisation, bible translation, education and health facilities, and pastoral care within the community. The faithful ministry of countless native catechists and evangelists is being increasingly recognised and recorded today, and it is widely agreed that each continent must write its own mission history and celebrate its own missionaries.

**2. Seeing those to whom we go as totally lost in cultural and spiritual darkness.** During the western colonial era of missionary expansion, Anglicans commonly assumed that the rest of the world was ‘heathen’ and the west was ‘christian’. This temptation for cultural superiority is in all of us. Indigenous peoples are generally seen as primitive, heathen, dark, idolatrous and even satanic both by outsiders and by the majorities in their own countries. This arrogance in Britain can be traced back to a charter by King Henry VII in 1482 “to conquer, occupy and possess lands occupied by heathens and infidels in whatsoever part of the world”. Some western leaders today characterise nations as ‘evil’, implying that the west is on the side of the good: What does the phrase “The Axis of Evil” say about our blanket rejection of some countries? But the distribution of moral qualities has never been so obvious, and there is plenty of evil in the history of the west to form large beams in their own eyes!

Mission is never independent of social and political forces. It is inevitable that the church in every context should share the assumptions of its own generation and culture, and these can easily become blindspots. So if western missionaries went out in the colonial era with many of the unquestioned assumptions of their contemporaries about the superiority of their culture and the need of others to become as ‘civilised’ as they were, maybe we should not be too hard on them. What we need to do is to recognise our own blindspots in our view of our own culture and that of others.

Bishop Stephen Neill invites us to be humble when he comments that they (missionaries)

“have on the whole been a feeble folk, not very wise, not very holy, not very patient. They have broken most of the commandments and fallen into every conceivable mistake”. (Neill, 1964)

It is good that we have a much more sober estimate of missionary history today.

**3. Seeing mission history in broad general terms.** It can be helpful to have a grasp of the sweep of history and to be able to summarise whole periods in one sentence or a single ‘paradigm’. But historians are always suspicious of this approach since it masks many variations and differences which qualify our generalities and make them less true. Sometimes it is convenient for those with an ideological agenda to paint history in broad brush strokes, because they can ignore the parts which would undermine their ideology. Thus the so-called ‘invasion’ of Latin America by the ‘conquistadores’ is seen as a totally devastating experience by those who have a radical agenda of political change. They call it a ‘black history’ as if the clash of cultures was totally negative. The colonial era of mission is often interpreted as totally destructive culturally by those who want to defend indigenous cultures. But these histories are complex and ambiguous, so generalities are nearly always inaccurate.

The history of mission is very different in different periods of history, and varies from context to context. And yet we can say that the gospel conveys to each context and generation a set of universals centred on the unchanging character of God, and that enable us to say that our experience today does in some senses correspond to the experience of previous generations and contexts. Each period of history is a time of transition which involves both continuity and change, tradition and transformation; so we are always living in creative tension between the past and the present, old and the new. Anglicans love their traditions. But too much emphasis on the traditions of the past and we will not be open to change. Too much emphasis on change and we will lose the riches of our tradition. Appreciating history means discerning what is of value, what we can learn and what we must hold on to – but also what we need to let go of!

## **2. The 19C Missionary Movement: the Great Century of Mission**

## 2.1 What led up to it? The Antecedents

### 2.1.1 The Reformation

There is no doubt that the Reformation sowed many seeds of mission, especially in its recovery of the truth of the Bible and therefore of the gospel. It led to the renewal of the Church, sweeping away much of the Medieval corruption of the Catholic Church. However it is strange that the Reformers themselves were not especially mission-minded. There may have been several reasons for this:

- ***Protestantism was so engrossed in making a place for itself against Roman Catholicism.*** It was working out its own theology and organization and there were many controversies amongst its leaders. This left little time for concern for non-Christians outside of Europe.
- ***Several of the great Reformers saw no obligation to preach the gospel to the ends of the earth –*** the Great Commission was for the first apostles only. Some of them also had such a strong doctrine of election that they believed that God would call those whom he had chosen without the need for human intervention.
- ***Protestantism was preoccupied with religious wars,*** especially in Germany, France and the Netherlands. Sometimes the reformers were fighting for their very existence.
- ***Protestant governments were largely indifferent to foreign mission,*** but several RC monarchs, notably Philip of Spain (1556 – 1598) actively encouraged missions. This was also for political reasons of course, but in the medieval paradigm there was no division between religion and politics. But the 16C to the 18C was largely characterized by RC expansion, most notably in the Americas, to where Spain and Portugal carried their Catholic identity and supremacy in the wake of the ‘discovery’ of the New World by Columbus in 1492.
- ***Protestants had rejected monasticism, so they had no monks to be their ‘professional missionaries’,*** as they had been for the medieval Church.
- ***It was only into the 17C and 18C that the Protestant British and Dutch became important maritime powers*** and therefore able to reach out across the world and have significant contact with non-Christian peoples.

However, although the Reformers did not think in terms of missionary expansion, they did think in terms of what God had done in Christ being something available for every person as an individual. This was the heart of the gospel. They believed that the proclaimed Word would make its own impact. The gospel, said Luther, was like a pebble thrown into a pond: its waves would extend out quite naturally. Their emphasis on grace also released them from the theology of coercion, which inspired the ‘conquistadores’ in South America, who made the Indians become Catholics on pain of death. Mission by coercion never worked! To be fair Calvin spoke much of the believer’s responsibility in the world.

There were other movements that were more mission minded. The ***Anabaptists*** began 1525 in Switzerland as a renewal movement within the Reformation; they argued that the link between church and state should be broken; and people should only be baptized on profession of faith. Their missionary spirit was strong,

and they had wandering preachers going all over Europe with the gospel. And at the beginning of the eighteenth century a renewal movement known as *Pietism* began, which sought to combine the joy of personal faith and devotion with a commitment to proclaiming the gospel. Linked with that Nikolaus von Zinzendorf founded a movement called *Moravianism*, which was very committed to winning souls for Christ, and sent small bands of missionaries out to places like India. In Britain *Puritanism* had a strong missionary vision. One of the most famous puritans was John Eliot (1604 – 1690) who spent most of his life and ministry with the Indians of Massachusetts.

### 2.1.2 The Enlightenment

So it was not true that there was no Protestant mission going on prior to the nineteenth Century. But with the rise of the *Enlightenment*, (a philosophical movement which began with Rene Descartes (1596-1650) in the 17C which exalted reason as the sole arbiter of truth) the Church in Europe found itself more and more on the back foot as rationalism gradually emptied faith of its mystery, and made it OK not to believe in God.

The Enlightenment, positively and negatively, contributed significantly to the spirit of 19C mission: I will mention just three main influences:

1. ***The privatization of religion.*** The Enlightenment separated public and private religion. It did this by making a divide between facts and values: facts are what can be proved scientifically to be true, but values are subjective, matters of faith or opinion, and cannot be proved by reason. So facts can be accepted in the public realm, but faith is personal and should be confined to the private sphere. This caused a divide between Church and State, and was the beginning of what we call secularism. It led to an individualism of faith, which ironically helped the missionary movement because Christians no longer relied on the Church to tell them what to do, but took initiative themselves. They were free, autonomous, responsible. They believed in personal salvation for all, and could now do something about it themselves. This led to what became known as ‘voluntarism’ – people who volunteered to be involved in mission on their own initiative, and who formed missionary societies.
2. ***The ideal of progress, optimism, possibilities, vision.*** In the Enlightenment spirit anything was possible for humanity. Progress was assured through science, everything was solvable. This led to a pioneer spirit, the spirit of adventure, and a huge increase in foreign travel. It was a very confident age, and this confidence fed into the pioneer spirit of the early missionaries.
3. ***The superiority of western thought.*** The Enlightenment brought with it a certain arrogance in the West. Enlightenment meant literally that we had ‘seen the light’ – whereas other peoples of the world were still in primitive darkness. There was the feeling that Britain had a providential destiny to carry that light to the world – in missionary terms this translated into the belief that God had chosen Britain to be a ‘light to the nations’, to bring civilisation, reason and truth to the ignorant peoples of the world.

Under the powerful arguments of the Enlightenment, the influence of Pietism declined, and the Church of the 18C in Britain was too preoccupied with maintaining its place in society to think much of the wider world. But the Enlightenment did not have it all its own way: there were three significant revival movements in the 18C, which paved the way for beginning of world mission:

### 2.1.3 The Great Revivals

1. **The Great Awakening:** this took place in the United States from 1726 – 1760, and its leader was the great reformed preacher Jonathan Edwards. He had a consuming passion for God’s glory and a great concern for the salvation of the lost. It was a mixture of Puritan and Pietist spirituality, with remarkable ‘charismatic’ phenomena associated with it. However this first awakening did not result in much missionary activity, although it did lay the foundations for later missionary zeal from the States.
2. **Methodism:** In 1735 John and Charles Wesley went to Georgia to hear Jonathan Edwards, and they came back to Britain and began revival meetings here, which became the Methodist revival. They had also been greatly influenced by the Moravians.
3. **The Second Great Awakening:** this movement began after about 1776 in the States, after the first awakening had run out of steam. By 1797 this revival was at its peak in the USA, generating a new optimism for evangelicals. The equivalent in Britain the Evangelical Revival, approx 1787 – 1825. This second great revival did result in an awakening of missionary zeal to have as many people saved as possible before Christ comes again. This theme of eschatology was to become a very important motivation for mission in the 19C. There was high expectation that these revivals were the precursor to the Second Coming of Christ. Mission became motivated by completing the task so that Christ could come again. This was usually premillennial, which views mission as getting as many people saved as possible before the world faces judgment as Christ returns to usher in the millenium.

## 2.2 William Carey

The stage was set therefore for William Carey, who some think is the father of the modern missionary movement. He was a Baptist preacher who produced in 1792 a pamphlet entitled an *Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathen*. This did not come out of the blue, though, as we have seen; and Carey was not the only one emphasizing the need for mission.

So Carey’s booklet comes in the middle of this period of revival. He wanted to say that revival should result in mission and not be just for ourselves or the Church here. The booklet set out in some detail the current state of the world and the numbers of peoples in the world living in the darkness of sin and pagan practices. It took Matt 28.19 – the Great Commission – as a call to “Go – and make disciples of all nations” and called on Christians to obey this command of Jesus. He inspired the vision with his famous phrase “*expect great things from God, attempt great things for God*”.

He founded the *Baptist Missionary Society* in 1792, based on the principle of ‘voluntarism’ – appealing to people to volunteer to be involved in mission. No longer could people leave it to the institutional church to organize mission. Rather, individual Christians, from across the denominations, could band together to support mission to the world. This became the principle on which a string of missionary societies were founded in the next twenty years, such as the London Missionary Society (1795) and the Church Missionary Society (1812). Together with two other men who went with Carey to Serampore, India, he founded a church, set up a printing press, engaged in itinerant evangelism, and translated the Bible into various eastern languages. Most significantly the so-called ‘Serampore Trio’ set up a college for the training of Indians to spread the gospel, a model of training which was to be reproduced in many places elsewhere.

## 2.3 Missionary Societies

The missionary societies nurtured this new spirit of individual heroism in responding to the call to go to the uttermost parts of the earth. And the further you went the more of a missionary you became. It is

challenging to think that many of these pioneers died within six months of being there in Africa, Asia and India, as they caught the foreign diseases which they had not be vaccinated against as we are today. It was very idealistic and romanticized, but they went with little or no preparation for what they were to encounter. There a classic title for a book, which you will find in the library by a one E C Dawson. Written in 1909 it is called: *“Heroines of Missionary Adventure. True stories of the intrepid bravery and patient endurance of missionaries in their encounters with uncivilized men, wild beasts and the forces of nature in all parts of the world”* That’s published by the Library of Romance!

Missionary societies became the channels of service for thousands who felt “constrained by Jesus’ love” (2 Cor 5.14) to deliver heathen lands from the darkness and error of their ways. Love, compassion, genuine concern for the suffering of the world’s poor, without Christ and without civilization, were powerful motivations. They saw no dichotomy between saving souls and saving bodies. Missionary endeavour was certainly fervent, optimistic and totally committed, and that is surely something to be admired.

Consider this typical missionary hymn by Bishop Reginald Heber (1783 – 1826)

From Greenland’s icy mountains	Can we, whose souls are lightened
From India’s coral strand,	With wisdom from on high,
Where Afric’s sunny fountains	Can we, from men benighted
Roll down their golden sand,	The lamp of life deny?
From many an ancient river,	Salvation! O salvation!
From many a palmy plain,	The joyful sound proclaim
They call us to deliver	Till each remotest nation
Their land from error’s chain.	Has learnt Messiah’s name.

As the 18C progressed many Protestant Mission Societies (PMS) were founded on the ‘voluntary principle’, which became the organizational model for overseas mission. Their vision was for evangelism committed to seeing people converted, for gospel values to be established in each culture, and for churches to be planted. The vision was to plant ‘three-self’ churches: self-supporting, self-governing and self-propagating – a principle heralded by CMS missionaries Henry Venn and Rufus Anderson. The voluntary principle led to what Andrew Walls called the ‘fortunate subversion’ of the western church, undermining its hierarchical authority and control, something that needed to happen if it was going to change.

However there were some not so good consequences:

**1. Missionary societies took on themselves the responsibility of mission**, so the Church felt it could delegate mission to them, with the result that the institutional Church did not take mission seriously until the latter half of the 20C. Mission was for the societies and their enthusiastic volunteers. Even now the attitude is there that mission is something that happens ‘over there’ which missionary societies promote, but the church does not need to take it seriously.

**2. The churches which they planted were in their own denominational image.** Anglicans planted Anglican churches that were exact replicas of the churches at home, with all the paraphernalia of vestments, hymn books, candle sticks etc etc. This led to competition between societies with different denominational allegiances. Even within Anglicanism the CMS (evangelical) and the USPG (anglo-catholic) did not work together, but carved out their own regions of influence which in some parts of Africa survive to this day.

3. The PMS focussed on strategy for evangelisation and developed a kind of pragmatic

ecclesiology, which cut

them off from the institutional churches at home, and led them to becoming 'para-church' and independent.

They became radical, a disturbing and unconventional challenge to the Church that cause them to separate from one another.

Rowan Williams, the current Archbishop of Canterbury, has asked 'What is it about the Church, that requires mission agencies to exist to remind the Church of what the Church is?'

### **3. Mission and Colonialism**

#### **3.1 Common views about Mission and Imperialism**

It was said that when the colonisers came they had the Bible and the Africans had the land. Then the missionaries said "let us pray", and when they opened their eyes the Africans found that they had the Bible and the colonisers had the land. An easy joke – but how true is it?

The standard interpretation of the 19C has criticized the missionary movement for being hand in glove with western imperial expansion. This view was especially strong during the period of anti-colonial thinking in Britain from the 1950's onwards. It was said that the missionary movement was a product of the expansionist impulse of western capitalism and therefore functioned as an instrument of 'domestication' of the colonised nations. The Chinese said that Christian mission was the ideological arm of western imperial aggression. After 1960 the debate shifted to Africa and western guilt about their imperial past led to the search for scapegoats: the missionaries were given their share of the blame. In the minds of many nationalist leaders who came to power after independence Christian missions became identified with western imperialism.

We need to distinguish political, economic and cultural imperialism. Most of the opposition to the missionary movement has been because of its supposed imposition of a western 'culture-christianity'. It was assumed that 19C British culture was a model of Christian values and society. Christianity had made Britain great, and she was the archetypal Christian nation, so it was natural that Christianity and Civilisation should go hand in hand in the imperial enterprise. But it is another thing to accuse the missionaries of being hand in glove with the political dimension of imperialism.

So in recent years these assumptions have been questioned, notably by Andrew Porter and Brian Stanley. The period of British imperial expansion covers more than a century – and during that time the relationship of mission to the governing authorities changed all the time; so it is difficult to generalize. At the beginning of the 19C many of the missionaries opposed the slave trade: the Act of Abolition was passed in 1807, but it was not until 1833 that slaves were fully free. At the height of the Empire 1890 – 1914, missionaries increasingly distanced themselves from identification with imperial interests. They became more independent and developed an aversion to politics. Many saw themselves as anti-imperialist and their relationship with empire as deeply ambiguous. It may be that they were often identified by the nationals with the colonizers, but in fact the relationship was complex and ambiguous.

The standard view also says that missionaries destroyed indigenous culture and values. But ironically through translation of their languages which the missionaries undertook those cultures were given the tools

to assert themselves against imperialist advance. The structures of education which the missionaries established sowed the seeds of the collapse of the Empire as nationalist movements were empowered. Lamin Sanneh, a Gambian missiologist, points out the cultural effect of translation: for people in Africa and India to have God's word in their own vernacular languages was a very self-affirming thing – it taught them to question the political and religious systems that had been brought to them as they saw them in the light of God's word. It helped them to establish their own independent identities, much as the Reformation had taught individual Christians that they had the right to read and interpret scripture for themselves without the need for the church to tell them what to believe. Bible translation is a very subversive activity! (Sanneh, 1989)

### **3.2 The Empire and Divine Providence**

There was a very strong sense in the missionary movement of the providence of God in opening up opportunities for the gospel through imperial expansion. The Empire was seen as God's appointed means for bringing the light of salvation to the darkest places of the earth. Many believed that imperial rule was God's way of bringing human liberation and civilization. This was distorted by national pride, and they did not see it as oppressive but liberating. There was a powerful sense of 'national mission' in empire building, but for colonizers this did not *always* include a *Christian* perspective. Britain (and the west) had been uniquely blessed by God and was called to bring that blessing to the rest of the world. Undoubtedly there was a certain paternalism in that. But missionaries did find it hard to shake off attitudes of cultural and racial superiority. There are many examples of the way in which missionaries showed

“arrogance, insensitivity and lack of trust in non-European capacity to discharge responsibility in the Church” (Stanley, 1990:182)

But Empire was seen as just one amongst many means used by God in his providence – also exploration, commerce, science etc played their part. Also the early missionaries had a global vision, which was not restricted to the boundaries of the Empire. Christ died for *all* people. The missionary enterprise therefore was no crudely national or British 'imperial project' – it was an international undertaking.

So while there was an expanding territorial empire throughout the 19C there was no deep-rooted commitment to Empire and direct rule as such by the missionaries. They held on to their long-held preference for avoiding politics. Africa was volatile and insecure – so it was to their advantage for the missionaries to have the stability of the Empire. So the Empire was valued for its usefulness. In turn colonial officials valued missionaries for their local knowledge, frequently amongst the first Europeans on the scene.

### **3.3 Christianity, Commerce and Civilization**

It was generally assumed that these three would go together and mutually support one another. However there was a debate about which one of these should be introduced first. Some said that civilization would prepare the way for Christianity: education and health had to come first. Some said that Christianity should prepare the way for commerce – but commerce often blazed the trail into unknown places, and that was an advantage for the missionaries. Wilberforce argued that commerce, by the providence of God, would carry with it the message of salvation in its train. It is interesting to see how evangelicals came to terms with the reality of growing capitalism, adapting its Christian message to the characteristics of commerce and its supposed civilizing influence.

“Pursuit of the missionary goal was unavoidably associated and underpinned by the fortunes of legitimate trade” (Porter, 2004: 99)

But it was also realized that the promotion of Christianity did not necessarily further trade. This was more governed by the sheer poverty of (say) India than their religious or moral status. But also freer trade had little to offer evangelicals: they focused on teaching, preaching and translation. However they also needed to support the work of mission – and that required money! So mission stations developed agricultural projects to sustain them, learnt to trade in commodities in exchange for medicines and copies of the gospels etc – and they could not avoid the link with commerce! Eventually the three came to be seen as complementary and coexistent: freer trade would assist moral and religious transformation; Christianity would bring social improvement. So there was huge investment by missionaries in the first half of the 19C in hospitals and schools, agricultural projects etc.

Local people have always believed that missionaries contributed positively to their societies: they contributed massively to structures of education, literacy and health that have existed to this day. Some say that the nationals exploited mission schools to educate their own elite. Their education was helping them to acquire the white man’s advantages. But education also had a liberating impact, empowering local people to question and subvert traditional and colonial assumptions. That way local societies were able to deflect or selectively absorb western influences, or turn what the missionaries offered to their own advantage. “Indigenous choices and capacity for resistance or adaptation shaped a process of cultural exchange which often bore little relation to broader imbalances of material power between colonizers and colonized” (Porter, 2004: 322). So missionaries were in fact amongst the weakest agents of colonial imperialism, and unwittingly worked against it. The Christian faith was intrinsically egalitarian. But missionaries were not always welcome, so they had to learn to be flexible and compromising.

“By and large most missionaries did not want to be imperial propagandists and colonial rulers, any more than they intended to be consistent or uncritical supporters of capitalist enterprise”...their involvement with empire was “both patchy and discontinuous while also highly competitive, decidedly negative as well as optimistically engaged” (Porter, 2004: 323).

Porter maintains therefore that missions could not avoid empire, but they were determined to put it in its place.

### **3.4 The Gospel and Politics**

Colonialism was by no means necessarily conducive to mission, although there was a certain ‘obligation’ given by Empire: there was a duty to christianise it. So there was no escape for missionaries from encounter and engagement with, even dependence on, governments. At first neither State nor mission societies wanted any dealings with one another; the missionaries argued: “By affecting the favour of the great we degrade our ministry”. But by 1830 it was impossible to avoid entanglement with political powers.

“Missions had no alternative but to enter imperial politics, developing the arguments of British self-interest as well as Indians’ well-being and cultivating secular political alliances that would add weight to their cause” (Porter, 2004: 68).

It is interesting that William Carey had no problem professing loyalty to the Governor-General of India.

But tight restrictions on missionaries began to be imposed to control and contain missionary activity lest they unsettle the natives and empower them. Some Anglicans believed it to be important to keep in with the

governing authorities to help prevent corruption – missionaries exercised a civilizing influence also on the colonial powers, not just the nationals! Evangelicals also wanted their presence to be tolerated so that they could be free to promote the faith – and that overruled any objections to being involved in politics. So the future of missionaries was always contested between missions and governments.

But it was impossible for missionaries to escape the control of government however much they wanted to be independent. Nationals were often disappointed by their limited capacity to influence the colonial authorities and they were suspicious of missionary partiality. But the missionaries were caught: on the one hand they wanted to defend the natives – identified for example with the abolitionist cause, and seen by white settlers as enemies of the plantation system; on the other hand they needed to keep in with the colonial rulers to maintain their privileges. But the priority was evangelism, so missionaries were often told by their societies to keep out of politics! But it was impossible not to be identified with the anti-slavery movement: such was the cruelty, social injustice and oppression. Legislative emancipation of slaves was achieved by 1833, and the missionaries struck a bargain: in return for support of missions, they would provide instruction and family support to the freed slaves. But alignment with the anti-slavery movement was not so much because of commitment to the cause as such, but so that an environment might be created in which missionary activity could proceed unhindered and Christian principles lived out in practice.

### **3.5 The Bible and the Flag?**

So there is little evidence to suggest that the Bible naturally or automatically either followed or preceded the Flag. New mission between 1834 and 1850 was started with a variety of local initiatives, missionaries branching out from existing colonies, or impetus from the Home base. It might be response to a local request for a hospital or mission school, or merely personal ambition of certain individuals. It did not necessarily follow the lines of imperial expansion. It was a period of great optimism and self-confidence.

However, between 1850 and 1870 there was a waning of missionary enthusiasm and a loss of momentum. They became less convinced of the links between Christianity, commerce and western-style education. Involvement in humanitarian projects declined. In some places there was a lack of converts and limited indigenous involvement in the church. People at home began to ask: maybe there was too much focus on education – it did not link with church growth. Where were the converts? What about native churches? Support at home became restless, but missionaries on the ground recognized that conversion from deeply entrenched religious traditions would take time.

Also there were bitter controversies at home, theological division, internal division, and a developing crisis in biblical scholarship – all diverted attention from missionary expansion. In the 1860's CMS had far fewer candidates than in the previous decade. Denominational rivalry grew with the rise of Anglo-Catholic Anglicanism.

Renewed impetus came from revival movements, especially the Keswick movement. Revivalism has always been seen as the answer to a low ebb in enthusiasm amongst evangelicals. A wave of revivalism from the USA associated with Moody and Sankey spread to Britain; and the Keswick movement's revival of personal holiness and devoted generated new commitment to mission. Also in the 1870's there was a movement to establish Anglican evangelical training colleges: Ridley Hall and Wycliffe Hall were the first. Christian work in the universities grew tremendously: leading to the famous Cambridge Seven who went to China in 1885.

## **4. To what extent is christianity inherently 'imperial'?**

There was a natural dependence created between missionaries and national churches by the assumption that we have something that they do not have and need. It claimed a revealed truth that made demands on people to renounce their idolatry. But it also equated Christian values with an exalted pride in their own cultural superiority and created a 'culture christianity' which was too unself-critical.

“(The missionary) relationship to the diverse forces of imperialism was diverse and ambiguous. If it was fundamentally misguided, their error was not that they were indifferent to the cause of justice for the oppressed, but that their perceptions of the demands of justice were too easily moulded to fit the contours of prevailing western ideologies”. (Stanley, 1990:184).

Up to 1860 most missionaries “cast themselves in the role of defenders of native interests against the exploitative designs of European commercial and political forces” (Stanley, 1990:110). In the latter half of the 19C protection of the native turned into imperial annexation of their land, and although more missionaries were wary of political involvement, they were “more frequently and more enthusiastically drawn into the advocacy of explicitly imperial solutions”. (Stanley, 1990:132). Maybe this was because they saw imperial structures as advantageous to the spread of the gospel.

Porter however suggests that in the latter half of the 19C the missionaries became increasingly distanced from the imperial project. In the late 19C Missionaries and Empire needed each other less and less. They were missionaries first and Imperialists second. At the beginning of the 20C missionaries became more and more critical of imperial subjugation of indigenous peoples. Anti-British, anti-colonial movements grew, and the missionaries found themselves equally criticized. Sometimes the missionaries were an embarrassment to the colonialists and ignored by imperialists.

## **5. Conclusions**

The relationship between Mission and Colonialism was much more ambiguous than is popularly assumed. A relationship to some extent was inevitable as the missionaries were people of their time – they went with many of the subconscious assumptions which their contemporaries shared, and maybe they were too unself-critical. They took with them all the trappings of ecclesiastical establishment and transplanted them in Africa and Asia with the paternalistic assumption that this would be the best way for the African to worship. There is no doubt that paternalism has been a major problem in mission, and correspondingly the national churches have had to live with a massive inferiority complex. In spite of the very best efforts of men like Henry Venn, the national churches did not become self-supporting, self-governing and self-propagating anything like quickly enough. So although the relationship with the political authorities was ambiguous, there is no doubt that many missionaries did go with colonial cultural attitudes.

After the 1939-1945 war the American missionary force became significant, and the problem of imperialism shifted. The idea of 'christian civilisation' identified with the west was discredited, western culture lost its self-confidence, and mission involvement began a period of profound re-evaluation.

Speaking of independence W E Owen, head of the CMS Nyanza mission said:

“A new era of civilisation has dawned for Africa, and out of the deep sleep of ages Africa awakes to

find laid at her feet the rich treasures of knowledge and achievement which has taken us hundreds of years to acquire” (Stanley, 1990:154).

From today’s perspective we might ask: what happened to all that treasure?

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