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AMBASSADORS OF CHRIST OR AGENTS OF COLONIALISM? PROTESTANT MISSIONARIES IN AFRICA AND THEIR CRITICS

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The Protestant missionary movement of the 19th and early 20th centuries has for some time now come under severe criticism both by many Western scholars and an increasing number of their African peers.¹ Missionaries are charged with displacing indigenous cultures and supporting the political and economic colonisation on the African continent and other parts of the world.² They were driven by an attitude of spiritual and ethno-cultural superiority, so the critics claim.

SPIRITUAL AND CULTURAL SUPERIORITY

In their book *Mission in an African Way*, Thomas Oduro, Hennie Pretorius, Stan Nussbaum and Bryan Born critically reflect on the role of Protestant missionaries who came to Africa in the 19th century. They write:

When the missionaries came to Africa they did not simply bring the Gospel message, they also brought Western culture. The issue was not pure Christianity against impure indigenous belief, but Christianity plus Western culture on the one hand, and indigenous African beliefs and culture on the other [...]. The important difference between genuine elements of Christianity and Western culture was generally not understood and valued.³

¹ E.g. E.A. Ayandele, *Nigerian Historical Studies* (-:Taylor & Francis eLibrary, 2005), pp. 69-108; J. Bonk, 'All Things to All Persons: The Missionary as a Racist-Imperialist, 1860-1918', *Missiology* 8/3 (1980), pp. 285-306; A.K. Tiberondwa, *Missionary Teachers as Agents of Colonialism: A Study of their Activities in Uganda, 1877-1925* (Kampala: Fountain Publishers, 1998); C.J. Koriech & R.C. Njoku (eds.), *Missions, States, and European Expansion in Africa* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

² R. McLaughlan, *Re-Imaging the 'Dark Continent' in Fin De Siecle Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), p. 15.

³ T. Oduro, H. Pretorius, S. Nussbaum & B. Born, *Mission in an African Way: A Practical Introduction to African Instituted Churches and their Sense of Mission* (Wellington: Christian Literature Fund / Bible Media, 2008), p. 37.

The authors attribute a strong sense of cultural and spiritual superiority among the Western missionaries as the source of this problem.⁴ The missionaries believed that their own culture with its customs and values was not just more advanced than African cultures but matchless in every way. Western missionaries, Oduro and his co-authors argue, were convinced that the traditional African cultures for new indigenous Christians were not only 'undesirable' but also 'dangerous'. In addition, these missionaries were also heavily shaped in their thinking and practice by the Enlightenment which had freed them from the superstitious beliefs and customs of the Middle Ages.⁵ The same view is expressed by Chukwudi Njoku, who writes that Western missionaries 'embraced the idea of a civilizing mission, the idea of being heirs of a culturally superior people going out to share the riches and glories of their culture with people from cultures they generally assumed to be inferior to their own'.⁶ Paul Leshota writes that missionaries, like many of their contemporaries, had accepted the myth of the 'Dark Continent'.⁷ They believed that in contrast to Europe or North America 'Africa was an embodiment of savagery, intractable ignorance, callous barbarity, and an epicentre of evil'.⁸ According to Mia Carter and Barbara Harlow missionaries considered themselves to be involved in a cultural war: 'The missionaries' early rhetoric combined idealistic discourses of enlightenment and salvation with aggressive militaristic jingoism; the Christian mission was to enact a war on barbarism and heathenism'.⁹ Similarly, Rufus Ositelu speaks of a cultural imperialism which the missionaries practised. He notes:

In consequence of this cultural imperialism, African men were not considered to be true Christians if they did not wear coat, tie and trousers and were not sons of God if they did not take the name of Jack, Robinson, Jones, Stone or Smith. In short, conversion to Christianity meant rejecting traditional forms of dressing, authority, custom, culture, marriage, medicine etc.

⁴ Ibid., pp. 37 & 39.

⁵ Ibid., p. 39.

⁶ C.A. Njoku, 'The Missionary Factor in African Christianity', in O.U. Kalu (ed.), *African Christianity, 1884-1914* (Pretoria: University of Pretoria Press, 2005), p. 228.

⁷ P. Leshota, 'Postcolonial Reading of Nineteenth-century Missionaries' Musical Texts: The Case of Lifela Tsa Sione and Lifela Tsa Bakriste', *Black Theology* 12/2 (2014), pp. 139-40.

⁸ Ibid., p. 140.

⁹ M. Carter & B. Harlow, 'The Mission: Christianity, Civilization, and Commerce', in M. Carter & B. Harlow (eds.), *Archives of Empire Volume Two: The Scramble for Africa* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 243.

Therefore, one should not be surprised that the Christianity imbibed by the Africans from these Western Missionaries was veneer, that is superficial, and in most cases hypocritical.¹⁰

Frances Adeney argues that the idea of Western superiority went hand in hand with the growing economic imperialism in the second half of the 19th century.¹¹ This development, she believes, also affected the world-wide Protestant mission movement:

The lethal cocktail of Western economic imperialism, the notion of a calling to spread Western civilization, and the idea of racial competition and the superiority of the Anglo-Saxon peoples had devastating consequences for Protestant missions. Protestant missionaries, on the whole, were children of their era. Most accepted the idea of Western superiority, believing that God was calling them to spread their ideas of civilization. Even missionaries who seemed to feel that the heathens should be strengthened by bringing them the gospel, not that they should be replaced with “finer materials” [...], embraced a vigorous program of Westernization in their mission outposts.¹²

According to the authors of *Mission in an African Way* the attitude of ethno-cultural and spiritual superiority had far reaching implications. It resulted in a number of serious mistakes in the practices of Protestant missionaries.¹³ Thus, missionaries treated their African church members in a paternalistic way and did not take their African worldview seriously. They rejected as superstitious traditional customs and beliefs, such as belief in ancestors and witchcraft, and refused to discuss them with their African converts.¹⁴ Furthermore, they ignored the importance of dreams and visions in African cultures by discarding them as mere imagination. Western missionaries also introduced book-based education which gave African Christians ‘a sense of self-worth and independence’ but left no room for the rich African oral tradition wherein knowledge and wisdom were passed on from the older to the younger generation.¹⁵ Adeney speaks

¹⁰ R.O.O. Ositelu, *African Instituted Churches: Diversities, Growth, Gifts, Spirituality and Ecumenical Understanding of African Instituted Churches* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2002), p. 31.

¹¹ F.S. Adeney, *Graceful Evangelism: Christian Witness in a Complex World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2010), p. 50.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 50-51.

¹³ Oduro, Pretorius, Nussbaum & Born, *Mission in an African Way: A Practical Introduction to African Instituted Churches and their Sense of Mission*, p. 40.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

of a 'benevolent colonialism', which led to a sense of inferiority that can still be observed in some African societies today.¹⁶

ETHNIC SUPERIORITY

Other critics like Leon Kabasele, a Congolese theologian, hold that Western missionaries in Africa had an ethnocentric attitude. Kabasele argues that missionaries introduced the Bible to black Africans but did not allow them to read the Bible themselves.¹⁷ He goes on to say that 'in most parts of Africa, the Christianity of the missionaries was also racist because the churches were controlled by the colonists'.¹⁸ Likewise, Paul Hiebert argues that the majority of Protestant missionaries, though they rejected the idea of biological evolution, believed in white supremacy.¹⁹ This conviction had practical consequences. He notes:

Unlike Spanish Catholic missionaries, who often settled abroad and intermarried with the local people (as in Latin America), Northern European Protestant missionaries considered their "homes" to be the country from which they had come. They often lived in compounds segregated from the natives and discouraged the marriage of their children to local people. They looked forward to furloughs and retirement at *home*. This practice protected their sense of superiority.²⁰

Hiebert goes on to say that the belief in the superiority of the white race was also reflected in the missionaries' preaching.²¹ He states that missionaries taught that Africans were under the curse of Ham, and therefore unable to govern themselves. In a paper entitled *Missionaries Go Home: The Integrity of Mission in Africa* David Adamo and Joseph Enuwoza give a concrete example of such ethnocentric missionary practice. Thus, they write the following about the treatment of indigenous clergy by British missionaries in Nigeria:

The missionaries were also high-handed in dealing with the Africans. There was racial discrimination in the appointment of bishops. The ordination of ministers [was] done in favour of the British. The conditions of service made

¹⁶ Adeney, *Graceful Evangelism: Christian Witness in a Complex World*, p. 51.

¹⁷ L. Kabasele, *African Inter-religious Dialogue: Philosophy and Theology* (Bloomington: AuthorHouse UK, 2013), p. 7.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

¹⁹ P.G. Hiebert, *The Gospel in Human Contexts: Anthropological Explorations for Contemporary Missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2009), p. 81.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 81-82.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

by the missionaries for African clergies were poor and offensive to many Africans. A case study here is the treatment, which Western missionaries gave to Bishop Ajayi Crowther in Nigeria. Crowther was the first African bishop. The white missionaries under him were not loyal. They were disobedient and racial. In 1889, [...] white missionaries under Crowther, incited the CMS youth from Cambridge to write a damaging report on the black bishop. They did and the CMS authority stripped Crowther of all power. He died in 1891.²²

A SEXIST AGENDA

For other critics, Protestant missionaries were oppressors whose attitudes and actions were not only racist but also sexist in nature. Sara Boulanger, for example, states that the missionaries' agenda was to permanently reshape the lives of African women.²³ She writes:

At the forefront of this oppression were missionaries who used Christianity in an attempt to mould Kenyans into the kinds of societies that fit into the "civilizing mission" of colonialism. The missionaries' outlook mixed turn-of-the-century ideas of white supremacy with ideas from the Victorian era, which placed women in subservient roles, stripping them of authority and status. The burgeoning power of colonial rulers and the heightened status of missionaries were bringing about a total restructuring of society's gendered norms.²⁴

According to Boulanger one of the polarising issues was the circumcision of women.²⁵ Together with the colonial government and newly formed political parties Protestant missionaries strongly opposed this practice for ulterior reasons.²⁶ Boulanger claims that the campaign to abolish female circumcision, an important rite of passage that was widely accepted among the Kikuyu people, was extremely divisive.²⁷ The campaign, she

²² D.T. Adamo & J. Enuwosa, 'Missionaries Go Home: The Integrity of Mission in Africa. Paper for the IAMS Assembly Malaysia 2004', <http://www.missionstudies.org/archive/conference/1papers/fp/Adamo_&_Enuwosa_Full_paper.pdf> (Date of Access: 30.01.2019).

²³ S. Boulanger, 'A Puppet on a String: The Manipulation and Nationalization of the Female Body in the "Female Circumcision Crisis" of Colonial Kenya', in L. Bernstein, C. Kattau, C. Ndinda & K. Russell (eds.), *Wagadu, Volume 6: Journal of International Women's Studies, Volume 10.1* (2009), p. 140.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 140.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 140.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 141.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 140.

argues, destroyed friendships, split whole families, helped to maintain colonial rule, and increased the influence of Christianity. She notes:

By participating or not participating in the practice of female circumcision, many young women were severing ties with their families and clans, and through these with Kikuyu culture. Often, when these ties to family and culture were lost, young women turned to Christian religions and related practices to fill the void. [...] [T]he Kenyan woman faced double-binds in that no matter what she did, she alienated herself from one side or the other. This dilemma marked her oppressed status and represented the nationalization of the female body.²⁸

Boulanger's negative evaluation of the role of missionaries is shared by Cynthia Hoehler-Fatton who calls the Church Missionary Society, a British evangelical Anglican mission, a 'sexist organization'²⁹. She goes on to say: 'Missionaries – and the government officials who often depended on them for insights into indigenous culture – generally espoused pejorative views of African women.'³⁰

A CRITICAL EVALUATION OF THE CRITICS AND THEIR CRITIQUES

It is certainly true that many 19th century 'missionaries from Europe and North America came out of a context that assumed supremacy of Western culture and "Western religion" that is, Christianity, in a single breath.'³¹ Neither can it be denied that there were Protestant missionaries who demonstrated an inexcusable attitude of superiority towards indigenous people. However, it would be wrong to suggest, as some authors seem to do, that this was true for the vast majority of missionaries. To claim that Protestant 'missionaries in general were blind to their ethnocentrism and followed a more *tabula rasa* approach in terms of the interaction between gospel and culture'³² does not do justice to the ministry of many missionaries who served on the African continent. For various reasons the highly critical evaluations of the 19th and early 20th centuries' Protestant mis-

²⁸ Ibid., p. 141.

²⁹ C. Hoehler-Fatton, *Women of Fire and Spirit: History, Faith, and Gender in Roho Religion in Western Kenya* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 12.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 12.

³¹ S.B. Bevans & R.P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Maryknoll: New York, 2005), p. 230.

³² Ibid., p. 231.

sionary movements appear somewhat unrepresentative of all the available evidence.³³

CHALLENGING SINFUL VALUES AND PRACTICES

Firstly, the critics seem to overlook the fact that Western missionaries were often confronted with sinful cultural values and practices, such as female genital mutilation or other forms of gender based violence, which prompted them to act. While some of the extreme practices may have been deliberately overstated in order to promote the missionary endeavour in the West,³⁴ they were nonetheless real and could not be ignored. The dividing line between genuine concern for justice and human welfare and insensitive cultural imposition was sometimes blurred. Consequently, '[s]tereotypes of culture-destroying missionaries must thus be nuanced.'³⁵

In the case of female genital mutilation, the response of some missionaries, for example, to threaten African believers with excommunication from churches and expulsion from schools, turned out not to be very helpful.³⁶ However, other ways of dealing with these challenges were more appropriate and effective. Thus, Daniel Karanja³⁷ writes the following about the situation in Kenya at the beginning of the 20th century:

Scottish missionaries understood female genital mutilation, as demonstrated by their approach to conducting systematic education from the medical perspective, and they deserve to be commended. In 1906 Dr. John W. Arthur, a missionary, medical (gynaecologist), started his operations in Kikuyu hospital. He joined efforts with Miss M.S. Stevenson, a school teacher (1907-1930) to design a curriculum of instruction for the natives to highlight the dangers of female genital mutilation. Dr. Stanley E. Jones (1914-1924) backed up their efforts by openly campaigning against FGM using education and medical

³³ See also A. Barry, J. Cruickshank, A. Brown-May & P. Grimshaw (eds.), *Evangelists of Empire? Missionaries in Colonial History* (Melbourne: eScholarship Research Centre, 2008).

³⁴ C. Ott, S.J. Strauss & T.C. Tennent, *Encountering Theology of Mission* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), p. 125.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

³⁶ Cf. K. Fiedler, *Christianity and African Culture: Conservative German Protestant Missionaries in Tanzania, 1900-1940* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1996), pp. 75-76.

³⁷ Daniel Njoroge Karanja is a Kenyan born academic who received his first doctorate in Ministry from Andover Newton Theological School in 1999 and his second doctorate in Conflict Analysis from Nova Southeastern University in 2015. He is an adjunct professor at St. Mary's University, San Antonio, USA.

knowledge to show the local people the extent of damage to the female body. For example, the scar tissues hardened the exterior part of the vagina, making it difficult to dilate during labor. The hardening put the child and the mother at a very high risk of losing their lives [...]. The missionaries coached local native female assistants to work as nurses and exposed them to the agony experienced during labor and childbirth as a result of female genital mutilation. The nursing assistants were highly effective in spreading the message about the dangers of FGM and their families.³⁸

Approximately two decades after the campaign to abolish female circumcision had been started by the Scottish missionaries, a significant number of Kikuyu Christians opposed the practice.³⁹ They also rejected the idea that they were just giving in to pressure by the colonial government and adopting Western values. They insisted that their resistance was an expression of their newly found Christian faith.⁴⁰ Elaine Storkey comments:

It was a brave stand, yet the strength of feeling in the culture as a whole was largely against them. Older women, traditionally given authority as overseers of the practice, were reluctant to give it up. And because so much status hung on this essential rite of passage for girls, even church elders could not always prevent their wives and daughters from carrying it out.⁴¹

While Boulanger is right in saying that the campaign to abolish female circumcision led to divisions among the Kikuyu people,⁴² her positive view of this practice, which caused women a lot of pain and posed a serious health threat to them, is nonetheless difficult to comprehend. It seems that critics like her have an idealised view of culture, which considers indigenous African culture with all its traditional values and practices as intrinsically good and worth preserving. This, however, is a rather naive view, as it denies that in every human culture we may find positive elements, which Christians can affirm, and negative elements (i.e. morally evil or theologically heretical views and practices), which they need to reject. ‘The myth of the “noble savage”’, as Marvin Newell puts it, who is

³⁸ D.N. Karanja, *Female Genital Mutilation in Africa: Gender, Religion and Pastoral Care* (=: Xulon Press, 2003), pp. 46-47.

³⁹ E. Storkey, *Scars Across Humanity: Understanding and Overcoming Violence Against Women* (London: SPCK, 2015), p. 33.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 33.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 33.

⁴² Boulanger, ‘A Puppet on a String’, p. 140.

‘tucked away somewhere in a remote corner of the earth, enjoying some kind of social utopia, is just that – a myth.’⁴³

THE MISSIONARIES’ TRUE MOTIVATION: DRIVEN BY COMPASSION FOR LOST PEOPLE

Secondly, many critics seem to ignore that European missionary activities in Africa (and other parts of the world) ‘did not originate in colonial overlordship but in the Evangelical-Pietist mindset of Protestant missions and their cultural background in Europe’.⁴⁴ Among those involved in the formation of Protestant mission societies in the 1790s were key leaders of the anti-slavery movement.⁴⁵ David Smith notes: ‘Within the evangelical movement in Britain in the nineteenth century there was a deep and persistent awareness that a great wrong had been done to Africa and its peoples through the terrible trade in slaves that had blighted the continent’⁴⁶. Like their evangelical leaders, nineteenth century evangelical missionaries were people of strong theological convictions and deep compassion.⁴⁷ They were, as Brian Stanley points out, driven by the conviction ‘that non-Christians were lost in their sin and dependent on the gospel of Christ for salvation’.⁴⁸ In other words, evangelical missionaries had a motivation for their involvement in Africa which was very different from that of their home governments in London or Berlin.

While many missionaries worked together with colonial administrations, it would be wrong to claim that they were all willing agents of colonialism (though they may have given exactly that impression at times). The relationship between missionaries and the colonial powers was much more complex than many of the critics suggest. Not all missionaries saw

⁴³ M.J. Newell, *Crossing Cultures in Scripture: Biblical Principles for Mission Practice* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2016), p. 26.

⁴⁴ B. Herppich, *Pitfalls of Trained Incapacity: The Unintended Effects of Integral Missionary Training in the Basel Mission on its Early Work in Ghana* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2016), p. 15.

⁴⁵ C.H. Kraft, *Appropriate Christianity* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2005), p. 39.

⁴⁶ D.W. Smith, *Against the Stream: Christianity and Mission in an Age of Globalization* (Leicester: IVP, 2003), p. 106.

⁴⁷ J.H. Kane, *A Concise History of the Christian World Mission: A Panoramic View of Missions from Pentecost to the Present* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1982), p. 96.

⁴⁸ B. Stanley, ‘Christian Missions and the Enlightenment: A Revaluation’, in B. Stanley (ed.), *Christian Missions and the Enlightenment* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 9.

themselves as full-blooded partners of the colonial governments and supporters of their policies. British evangelical missionaries, in particular, 'were simultaneously attracted and repelled' by British colonialism.⁴⁹ While they considered the colonial authorities as 'potential benefactors who might eliminate evil practices', they were concerned about the conduct of many colonial officials who 'committed wrongs such as promoting false religion themselves'.⁵⁰ The following passage from Andrew Porter's book entitled *Religious Versus Empire: British Protestant Missionaries and Overseas Expansion, 1700 – 1914* is certainly worth quoting. Porter writes about the attitude of British missionaries towards the British colonial project:

Their engagement with empire more often than not took the form of bitter experience. This taught them the lessons that independence was a chimera, and more positively, that selective engagement was nevertheless both possible and at times advantageous to the pursuit of their own distinct goals. Missions thus saw themselves much of the times as 'anti-imperialist' and their relationship with empire as deeply ambiguous at best. Viewing the scene from stand-points other than their own, they may have been wrong in this perception. The extent to which missionaries were identified by local peoples with conquerors and colonisers, damned by proximity to settlers and their own ministrations to administrators, was often seriously underestimated at the time. It has subsequently been a focus for those keen to demonstrate the impossibility of missionaries being other than essential agents of colonialism.⁵¹

Likewise, the attitude of German evangelical missionaries towards their home country's colonial endeavour can be best described as ambiguous. Among the missionaries of the Rhenish Mission Society (RMS) in South West Africa (Namibia), for example, the annexation of the territory by Germany in 1884 was not undisputed; and not every missionary who supported this move did so for geopolitical reasons. Marion Wallace comments:

In Germany the head of the mission, Friedrich Fabri, had been an active supporter of the German annexation of South West Africa since 1880. Yet the RMS' support for German rule was not unequivocal as historians like

⁴⁹ D. Bebbington, 'Atonement, Sin and Empire, 1880-1914', in A. Porter (ed.), *The Imperial Horizons of British Protestant Missions, 1880-1914* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), p. 21.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 21.

⁵¹ A. Porter, *Religious Versus Empire: British Protestant Missionaries and Overseas Expansion, 1700 – 1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), pp. 12-13.

Drechsler have implied. It was not until 1884 that the Society gave public backing to the annexation [...]. Although there was much German patriotism among missionaries on the ground, there was also a pragmatic desire for security from the violence of the times; in addition, missionaries like Bam, who favoured German intervention, differed from those, like Gottlieb Viehe, who identified themselves more closely with the interests of Africans and attempted to remain neutral.⁵²

While mission director Fabri was 'famous as a theoretician of early German colonialism'⁵³, Gottlieb Viehe was a pietist for whom Christian mission was solely a spiritual endeavour, and not a political enterprise.⁵⁴ As such, he was, as Nils Oermann notes, not 'an enthusiastic, or over-patriotic, advocate of Germany's colonial aspirations'⁵⁵. Viehe was known to be very critical of the role which the German military in general and their commander, Curt von Francois, in particular played during the Nama uprising in 1893.⁵⁶

DEMONSTRATING HUMILITY AND SACRIFICIAL SERVANTHOOD

Thirdly, there are too many examples in African church history of Western missionaries who came to Africa exercising a great deal of humility and displaying sacrificial servanthood. Hiebert distinguishes between the early Protestant missionaries and those who came to Africa in the late 19th century.⁵⁷ He argues that the former showed a high degree of love, sacrifice, and cross-cultural sensitivity whereas the latter believed in the superiority of European and North American civilisation. Likewise Pieter Boon states that the early Moravian missionaries in South Africa 'excelled in the essential qualities of humbleness, friendliness and faithfulness'.⁵⁸ Richard Elphick stresses that the early Protestant missionar-

⁵² M.A. Wallace, *A History of Namibia: From the Beginning to 1990* (Auckland Park: Jacana, 2011), p. 117.

⁵³ L.H. Gann, 'Economic Development in Germany's African Empire, 1884-1914', in P. Duignan & L.H. Gann (eds.), *Colonialism in Africa, 1870-1960, Volume 4: The Economics of Colonialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. 221.

⁵⁴ N.O. Oermann, *Mission, Church and State Relations in South West Africa under German Rule (1884-1915)* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1999), p. 35.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 35-36.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

⁵⁷ P.G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), p. 287.

⁵⁸ P.G. Boon, *Hans Peter Hallbeck and the Cradle of Missions in South Africa: A Theological-critical Study, unpublished doctoral dissertation* (Bloemfontein:

ies in Southern Africa, like Johannes Theodorus van der Kemp, did not display any signs of superiority in his attitude.⁵⁹ On the contrary, they not only showed a great interest in the cultures of the indigenous people but also challenged the ethnocentric views of their white fellowmen and women:

To early Protestants missionaries like Van der Kemp, the gospel affirmed that Africans were potential brothers and sisters in Christ. They believed that African languages were the most appropriate instruments of evangelization and that African preachers were the most effective heralds of God's word. These convictions challenged white settlers' confidence that Christianity was a badge of their own superiority and their charter of group privileges.⁶⁰

Van der Kemp and his successor John Philip, who were both outspoken critics of slavery, experienced strong opposition from the white settler community.⁶¹ This to the extent, that some of the settlers even attacked van der Kemp's mission station.⁶² These kinds of hostility, however, did not prevent him, even in his sixties, from marrying a woman of Malagasy descent.⁶³

Like van der Kemp, Johann Hinrich Schmelen, a German missionary of the London Missionary Society, who came to Namibia in 1814, got married to a non-European woman.⁶⁴ Together with his wife Zara, a member of the Nama tribe, Schmelen translated the four gospels into the Nama language.⁶⁵ In Namibia, such marriages between white missionaries and black women were not unusual in pre-colonial times.⁶⁶

There are, however, also examples of missionaries who served in Namibia in the second half of the 19th century and who demonstrated

University of the Free State, 2015), p. 400.

⁵⁹ R. Elphick, *The Equality of Believers: Protestant Missionaries and the Racial Politics of South Africa* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2012), p. 17.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ J. Cox, *The British Missionary Enterprise Since 1700* (New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 108; A. Hastings, 'Mission, Church and State in Southern Africa', *Mission Studies* 2/1 (1985), p. 23.

⁶² Cox, *The British Missionary Enterprise Since 1700*, p. 108.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ U. Trüper, *The Invisible Woman: Zara Schmelen, African Mission Assistant at the Cape and in Namaland* (Basel: Basler Afrika Bibliographien, 2006), p. 7.

⁶⁵ A. Ejikeme, *Culture and Customs of Namibia* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2011), p. 49.

⁶⁶ Cf. Oermann, *Mission, Church and State Relations in South West Africa under German Rule (1884-1915)*, p. 195.

the characteristics of their predecessors. Thus, Tuundjakuye Spencer Tjijenda,⁶⁷ a Namibian Baptist theologian, writes the following about the German-Baltic Lutheran missionary Carl Hugo Hahn who worked in Namibia:

Carl Hugo Hahn [...] was a true follower of Christ, a peacemaker, church planter and the spiritual father of the Herero nation. He loved our people very dearly and he earnestly wanted to see true spiritual transformation that can only come from hearing, believing, and calling upon the name of Jesus Christ and accepting his gospel [...]. This is what motivated Hahn to be concerned about the spiritual condition of the Herero-Mbanderu people.⁶⁸

Hahn has been heavily criticised by Western scholars and popular authors for the derogative language he used to describe the Herero and other ethnic groups in the early years of his ministry.⁶⁹ Tjijenda, who is aware of Hahn's negative statements, sees those in a different light. He writes:

It was Carl Hugo Hahn's love for our people which led him to make such a careful observation about their spiritual condition. It was Hahn's love for our people that led him overcome the language barrier so that he could share the liberating and life transforming message of Christ with us [...]. It was only after three years that Carl Hugo Hahn could preach his first sermon in Otjiherero after intensive study of the language. In other words, his view was not slanderous in nature but came from the heart of a loving shepherd, from a heart full of concern for people who were in spiritual and moral decay and who needed a saviour.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Tuundjakuye Spencer Tjijenda is the pastor of Grace Reformed Baptist Church in Windhoek, Namibia. He was chairman of the Evangelical Baptist Mission in Namibia and lectured in systematic theology and biblical studies at Namibia Evangelical Theological Seminary (NETS).

⁶⁸ T.S. Tjijenda, 'Hugo Hahn and the Spiritual Condition of the Herero-Mbanderu People', in T. Prill (ed.), *Mission Namibia: Challenges and Opportunities for the Church in the 20th Century* (München: Grin, 2012), pp. 144-145.

⁶⁹ E.g. C. Pfeffer, 'Koloniale Repräsentationen Südwestafrikas im Spiegel der Rheinischen Missionsberichte, 1842-1884', *Stichproben: Wiener Zeitschrift für kritische Afrikastudien* 12/22 (2012), pp. 9-10; P. Erichsen, *Hoffnung auf Regen: Beobachtungen und Erlebnisse aus Namibia* (Berlin: epubli, 2014), p. 308.

⁷⁰ Tjijenda, 'Hugo Hahn and the Spiritual Condition of the Herero-Mbanderu People', p. 145.

If Hahn was the spiritual father of the Hereros, Martin (Martti) Rautanen deserves the title of spiritual father of the Ovambos, another Namibian people group. Rautanen came to Namibia in 1869 and worked in the country for over fifty years.⁷¹ During this time he translated the Bible into the Ndonga language, one of the main Oshiwambo dialects.⁷² Joachim Rieck, a Namibian theologian, comments on his life and ministry:

His life was incarnational. He lived very humbly among the people he preached to. He respected the authorities of the kings, even when he radically disagreed with them. By and by he won the battle of faith and before long the gospel had taken hold of many people. Today the work in Ovamboland rests on this gospel foundation.⁷³

Rautanen demonstrated a high degree of both cultural and socio-political sensitivity. Bengt Sundkler and Christopher Steed believe that Rautanen's own background as a Finnish-speaking serf from Russia was a contributing factor. They write:

Born a serf [...] and thus possibly unique among nineteenth-century Western missionaries to Africa, this sturdy Finn was an example of the liberating effect of the Gospel. He became missionary in charge and chief translator of the New Testament into Oshindonga, 1903, and of the whole Bible, 1927. There was widespread hunger to read the Holy Book [...]. Rautanen was to play a subtle political game on behalf of the Ndonga communities in the north of the country. Were they to join the Herero against the commonly detested European power or not? [...] Rautanen advised King Kamonde and his brother Chief Nehale against what appeared military recklessness. Rautanen was as decided an anti-imperialist as any of the Ndonga chiefs but the spectacle of the Herero ethnocide was a warning for the Ndonga to heed.⁷⁴

⁷¹ D. Henrichsen, *Hans Schinz: Bruchstücke: Forschungsreisen in Deutsch-Südwestafrika* (Basel: Basler Afrika Bibliographien, 2012), p. 172.

⁷² R. Simola, 'Encounter Images in the Meetings between Finland and South-West Africa/Namibia', in M. Palmberg (ed.), *Encounter Images in the Meetings between Africa and Europe* (Uppsala: Nordisk Afrikainstitutet, 2001), p. 195.

⁷³ J. Rieck, 'Dr Martin Rautanen ("Nakambale") – Apostle of the Ovambos', <<http://jrieck.blogspot.com/2009/10/missionary-pioneers-in-namibia-3-martin.html>> (Date of Access: 30.01.2019).

⁷⁴ B. Sundkler & C. Steed, *A History of the Church in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 443.

In 2015 the tombstone of Friedrich Heidmann, another RMS missionary, was brought from Cape Town to Namibia.⁷⁵ One of the leaders of the Baster community welcomed the stone with the words: 'This is the tombstone of our spiritual Father.' Heidmann had faithfully served as a missionary among the Baster people for almost forty years.⁷⁶ He first joined the Baster community at De Tuin in the Cape Colony in 1866. Under his guidance the Baster council sought to secure land for their community from the Cape government.⁷⁷ However, their land allocation application was turned down by the colonial administration. In 1868 Heidmann accompanied 90 Baster families when they moved under difficult circumstances from the Cape Province to present day Namibia.⁷⁸ Cornelia Limpricht writes about Heidmann's decision to go together with 'his people' into a future full of uncertainties: 'No doubt he could have refused to move with them or he could have applied to be transferred elsewhere. Obviously he wished to continue his work with them, [which had] started two years prior.'⁷⁹ While Heidmann supported the efforts of the Baster community to organise their social and political life in Namibia, his work focussed on the spiritual development of the Baster people.⁸⁰

The examples of missionaries like van der Kemp, Schmelen, Viehe, Hahn, Rautanen and Heidmann show that the overall picture painted by the critics of 19th century Protestant missionaries, is most certainly prejudiced with negative strokes. The general charge of ethnocentrism, especially, lacks substance. The attitude of missionaries differed significantly from that of many white settlers or members of the colonial administra-

⁷⁵ 'Spiritual Father Returns to Rehoboth', New Era 11th May 2015. <<https://www.newera.com.na/2015/05/11/spiritual-father-returns-rehoboth/>> (Date of Access: 30.01.2019).

⁷⁶ See R.A. Brendell, *The Rhenish Missionary Society in Namibia: An Enquiry into the Reasons for the Formation of the Rhenish Church in Namibia (1957-1962)*, unpublished dissertation (Windhoek: Namibia Evangelical Theological Seminary, 2017), pp. 26-31.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 27.

⁷⁸ C. Limpricht & H. Lang, 'The Trek of the Rehoboth Basters', in C. Limpricht (ed.), *Rehoboth, Namibia: Past and Present* (Hamburg: Cornelia Limpricht, 2012), p. 11.

⁷⁹ C. Limpricht, 'Baster Territories in the Northern Cape (South Africa) and Great Namaqualand (Namibia)', in C. Limpricht (ed.), *Rehoboth, Namibia: Past and Present* (Hamburg: Cornelia Limpricht, 2012), p. 26.

⁸⁰ Brendell, *The Rhenish Missionary Society in Namibia: An Enquiry into the Reasons for the Formation of the Rhenish Church in Namibia (1957-1962)*, pp. 28-30.

tion.⁸¹ Smith certainly has a point when he writes, ‘missionaries generally resisted overtly racist stereotypes, insisting that the biblical understanding of humankind required them to treat all peoples as bearers of the divine image and objects of the redemptive love of God in Jesus Christ’⁸². The example of Carl Büttner shows that there were also pragmatic reasons why some missionaries rejected racist policies. Büttner, who served in Namibia and East Africa, strongly advocated mixed marriages.⁸³ He wanted the German government ‘to support intermarriage in order to protect Christian African women and their families from sexual and material exploitation from German men’⁸⁴. Büttner feared that such treatment of indigenous women could lead to resentment against the white minority population.⁸⁵

MAKING HONEST MISTAKES: MISSIONARIES AND THEIR LACK OF CROSS-CULTURAL EXPERIENCE AND TRAINING

Finally, it is too simplistic to identify, as many critics do, the attitude of cultural and spiritual superiority as the core root of all problems. An important factor which is often overlooked but which contributed to the mistakes missionaries made is the lack of cross-cultural knowledge and sensitivity.⁸⁶ ‘Many mistakes which older missionaries made,’ writes Alan Tippett, ‘were honest mistakes made in true zeal for the Lord.’⁸⁷ However, these mistakes, he concludes, were made because the missionaries had been sent out to the mission field without any anthropological training.⁸⁸

⁸¹ Cf. T. Altena, “‘Etwas für das Wohl der schwarzen Neger beitragen’ Überlegungen zum “Rassenbegriff” der evangelischen Missionsgesellschaften’, in F. Becker (ed.), *Rassenmischehen – Mischlinge – Rassentrennung: Zur Politik der Rasse im Deutschen Kolonialreich* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2004), p. 58.

⁸² Smith, *Against the Stream: Christianity and Mission in an Age of Globalization*, p. 105.

⁸³ L. Wildenthal, *German Women for Empire, 1884-1945* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), p. 87.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

⁸⁵ K. Roller, ‘Zwischen Rassismus und Frömmigkeit’, in F. Becker (ed.), *Rassenmischehen – Mischlinge – Rassentrennung: Zur Politik der Rasse im Deutschen Kolonialreich* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2004), p. 232.

⁸⁶ Cf. D.L. Whiteman, ‘Anthropology and Mission: The Incarnational Connection’, in S.B. Bevans (ed.), *Mission & Culture: The Louis J. Luzbetak Lectures* (New York: Maryknoll, 2012), p. 85.

⁸⁷ A.R. Tippett, *Introduction to Missiology* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1987), p. 384.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 384.

Unlike Gottlieb Viehe, who was born in Germany but spent his childhood and youth in the United States,⁸⁹ or Carl Hugo Hahn and Martin Rautanen, who both grew up in the multicultural and multilingual context of the Russian Empire,⁹⁰ not every missionary who came to Africa from Europe or North America in the 19th century had cross-cultural experience like these three, let alone cross-cultural training as it is available today. Some were ordinary farmers or craftsmen⁹¹ who had not been exposed to other cultures before entering the African mission field. Andrew Walls writes that 'English missionary recruits were often of modest educational attainments'.⁹² He goes on to explain, 'the Church Missionary College at Islington was set up to give such people basic education'.⁹³ A similar approach can be found with American evangelical mission societies. For example, James Karanja⁹⁴ writes about the early recruitment policy of Africa Inland Mission (AIM):

What were the qualifications for one in order to work as a career missionary with AIM? At the beginning AIM only emphasized that Africa provided conditions that were "utterly different from those that call for the learning and culture of a Paul or an Apollos." To these early missionaries Africa was "no Ephesus with its learning, but only sin, darkness, ignorance, barbarism and primitivism." To meet these needs it was argued that missionaries did not need "so much scholastic and theological knowledge as that wisdom given by the Holy Spirit, energy, zeal, devotion, and a close walk with God that make great a man that is no scholar." Therefore, it was not necessary to "staff the mission with men who had received theological education of the kind that would qualify them for the ordained ministry." Great energy seems to have

⁸⁹ Oermann, *Mission, Church and State Relations in South West Africa under German Rule (1884-1915)*, p. 34.

⁹⁰ Cf. S. Heininen, 'Martin Rautanen in Namibia and the Mission Board in Helsinki', in K. Kunter & J.H. Schørring (eds.), *Changing Relations Between Churches in Europe and Africa: The Internationalization of Christianity and Politics in the 20th Century* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2008), p. 56.

⁹¹ Cf. B. Sundkler & C. Steed, *A History of the Church in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 110; Oermann, *Mission, Church and State Relations in South West Africa Under German Rule (1884-1915)*, p. 222.

⁹² A.F. Walls, *The Cross-cultural Process in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission and Appropriation of Faith* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002), p. 209.

⁹³ Ibid., p. 209.

⁹⁴ James Karanja is a Kenyan born theologian who studied in the USA, Switzerland and Germany. He lives in Germany where he works for *Evangelisches Jugendwerk* (EJW), a Protestant youth ministry.

been spent recruiting dedicated laypeople for overseas service and from this source it was envisaged the mission would fill its ranks.⁹⁵

Other missionary candidates underwent an intensive preparation which 'consisted of Latin, Greek, classical literature, philosophy, as well as theological training,'⁹⁶ but who were not necessarily prepared to live among people of other cultures. As Lyman Reed points out, most missionaries at that time were often not trained at all to minister cross-culturally.⁹⁷ They received spiritual and professional training, but nothing on cross-culturalism. As a result, these missionaries were prone to fall into cross-cultural pitfalls and erect barriers which would hinder the spread of the gospel and the growth of the Church.

CONCLUSION

Western Protestant missionaries who served on the African continent in the 19th and early 20th centuries have come under severe criticism by contemporary scholars of mission, anthropology and other disciplines. Missionaries, who left their home countries in Europe or North America to serve as ambassadors of Christ, are today portrayed as willing agents of the colonisation of Africa. They are portrayed as people who were motivated by strong convictions of ethno-cultural and religious superiority. The critics, however, seem to overlook that many Protestant missionaries were actually driven by a compassion both for God and for people who needed to hear and accept the Good News of Jesus Christ. Of course their zeal for God and the mission of the Church did not prevent those missionaries from making mistakes. Some of these mistakes, such as paternalism, which undermined the development of indigenous church leadership, and the imposition of Western culture and theology on the indigenous population, without question, became obstacles for the growth of the church. They resulted not only in practical dependency and a feeling of inferiority among African Christians, but also hindered the development of genuinely African expressions of Christianity. These barriers erected by missionaries, however, were, in general, not the fruit of ethnocentric, imperialist, or sexist worldviews and agendas, but often of a lack of cross-cultural competence.

⁹⁵ J. Karanja, *The Missionary Movement in Colonial Kenya: The Foundation of Africa Inland Church* (Göttingen: Cuvillier Verlag, 2009), p. 16.

⁹⁶ Leshota, 'Postcolonial Reading of Nineteenth-century Missionaries' Musical Texts: The Case of Lifela Tsa Sione and Lifela Tsa Bakriste', p. 140.

⁹⁷ L.E. Reed, *Preparing Missionaries for Intercultural Communication: A Bicultural Approach* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2000), p. 7.

The critics also seem to ignore the fact that the missionaries' views of colonialism differed significantly and were sometimes rather ambivalent. While some missionaries wholeheartedly supported the colonial structures, many others accepted them as a given reality in which they had to serve. In addition, there were those who were critical of colonial policies and the attitude and conduct of European settlers and officials, both civilian administrators and military personnel.

Finally, there are many African Christians today who have a much more differentiated and gracious view of the Protestant mission movement than many of the critics. While not denying the mistakes Protestant missionaries made, a feeling of gratefulness towards missionaries dominates among these believers. They still honour many of those early missionaries as spiritual fathers and mothers. They recognise the enormous sacrifices these men and women made in order to bring the Gospel of Jesus Christ to their foremothers and forefathers. They also respect these missionaries because they appreciate the difference the gospel of Christ brought by them has made in their own lives. As Jim Harries puts it: 'The enthusiasm of many African people's faith in the Gospel of Jesus is partly due to an awareness of the horror of the alternative they had prior to becoming Christians, difficult circumstances that many in the West have in recent generations forgotten.'⁹⁸

⁹⁸ J. Harries, 'Anthropology's Origin, Christianity, and a Perspective from Africa, *On Knowing Humanity Journal* 1/1 (2017), p. 2.