DANGER IN THE RAINFOREST?

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"Brazil has put a former evangelical missionary in charge of its isolated indigenous tribes, provoking concern among indigenous groups, NGOs, anthropologists and even government officials, who fear the government of the far-right president, Jair Bolsonaro, is overseeing a new push to spread Christianity among Brazilâ€™s indigenous people." So what?
Category: Observations

My friend Chris pointed me to an article in the Guardian with the rather alarming headline: Genocide' fears for isolated tribes as ex-missionary named to head Brazil agency.

The essence of the article can be found in the first couple of paragraphs:

> *Brazil has put a former evangelical missionary in charge of its isolated indigenous tribes, provoking concern among indigenous groups, NGOs, anthropologists and evenÂ governmentÂ officials, who fear the government of the far-right president, Jair Bolsonaro, is overseeing a new push to spread Christianity among Brazilâ€™s indigenous people.*

> *TheÂ appointmentÂ of Ricardo LopesÂ Dias, an anthropologist and evangelical pastor, to head the department for isolated and recently contacted tribes at the indigenous agency Funai, was announced on Wednesday.*

The article raises a number of issues but rather than work through it line by line, I'd like to make a number of points which emerge from the text as a whole. Some of these might seem contradictory, but this is a complex subject.

The Rainforest Tribes Are in Danger. It is indisputable that the tribes in the Brazillian rainforest are under extreme pressure. Whether or not there is a danger from evangelical missionaries, logging companies and other forms of commercial exploitation are expanding their activities in the rainforest threatening the livelihood of the indigenous peoples who live there. This problem is compounded because the indigenous people groups are the best guardians of the forest itself. There is a vicious circle whereby a loss of forest leads to pressure on the tribal groups, which leads to more forest loss.

Christians Sound Weird! This quote from the article is interesting. "Between 1997 and 2007, Dias worked as a missionary in the same reserve for the controversial group New Tribes Mission, who pledged to convert every last 'unreached people group' on earth.Â " This is the sort of thing that is said in hundreds of Christian books and blog posts, but in the context of a secular newspaper, it sounds rather odd - sinister even - to those who don't share the same convictions. While not disagreeing with the position that NTM holds, it is understandable why a newspaper would think that

they sound suspicious. I'm not sure what can be done about this, and it's something we have to live with.

Not All Evangelicals are Saints. (Well, theologically speaking they are, but...) There are approaches to evangelism which see people as little more than disconnected souls which need to be saved. These sorts of views, ignore things like culture, language and the relationship between a people and its land (something the Bible takes very seriously). Well motivated, but theologically inadequate approaches like these do indeed threaten the future of the indigenous tribes by separating them from their roots.

Many Evangelicals Are Saints. Equally, it is true that many evangelical missionaries have done a great deal to preserve the lives of indigenous peoples and their ways of life. Providing medical help and basic education, the way in which the gospel has addressed issues such as blood feuds have all gone a long way to help indigenous groups face up to the huge challenges which modernity brings. I've linked to a couple of books below which give a warts and all picture of mission life in Amazonia, please give them a read.

The Article Is Right. It is clear that while the article mentions the danger from logging and commercial exploitation of the rainforest, the author's real concern is the spread of Christianity. Towards the end, he seems to prefer the idea of people dying in suicide rituals to the spread of the gospel, which I find particularly striking. However, he is correct to be concerned about the spread of Christianity, because it does challenge the lives and culture of the people of the rain forest - as it challenges all lives and cultures. Sometimes missionary apologists say that mission work preserves culture and doesn't change it. If that's the case, what's the point? Even something like introducing literacy is a massive change and the upside-down world of the gospel involves huge transformations in the lives of individuals and communities who take it seriously. Our problem, in the West, is that we have allowed our faith to be so compromised by our culture that we are surprised when people attack us. We are so syncretistic (a term we normally reserve for others) that we have lost the cutting edge of the gospel that challenges established norms, that calls us to an allegiance beyond our nation or people and which turns the whole world upside down. In demonstrating such a degree of concern about evangelism, the author has grasped the radical nature of the Christian gospel in a way which many of us haven't. Of course, his fundamental premise is flawed.

To be honest, I've no idea what this appointment means for the rainforest peoples of Brazil. I'm concerned about many of the activities of the Bosonaro government and recent history has not given me much confidence in right-wing governments appointing Christians to sensitive posts. However, I think that the principles that I've raised here are important ones. Ultimately, I believe that

everyone needs to have the opportunity to hear and respond to the Gospel. Only then can they discover their true individual and collective identities as part of God's family. Equally, I don't expect that people who don't share my faith will agree with me.

Eternity will tell who is right. I'm quietly confident.