BIBLE TRANSLATION AND COLONIALISM

Posted on August 12, 2020 by Eddie

It is one of the interesting ironies of the Western missionary enterprise that the evangelical motive actually helped to shield indigenous populations from the unmitigated assault of the West and that through the elevation of the vernacular in translation, missions furnished the critical language for evaluating the West in its secular and religious impact.
Category: Observations

I was recently asked to write a short briefing paper on this subject and I thought that I'd post it here, too. This is a complex topic and a 600-word article cannot hope to capture all of the nuances - so please don't bother writing to tell me that I've not covered it in detail, I know that already.

ACKNOWLEDGE THE PROBLEMS

The links between Christian mission and colonialism are complex and you cannot simply say that all missionaries were colonialists, nor can you say that there was no link between the two. William Carey is arguably the first modern British missionary and he was not allowed to live in British controlled India because the authorities were not happy with his work. Often, because of their belief in the inherent dignity and importance of all people, missionaries did stand up against the injustices of colonialism. However, it cannot be denied that at times they collaborated with European governments in the colonial project, too.

Today, there are still issues of power and equality to be faced when missionaries from rich and powerful countries operate in the developing world. These are the realities of our world and Wycliffe seeks to be as sensitive as possible and to partner well with others.

BIBLE TRANSLATION IN HISTORY

The aim of colonialism was to dominate and exploit other people by imposing external values on them. This often included the imposition of a foreign language. Bible translation, which elevates the value of local languages and which gives people the opportunity to explore Godâ€™s Word for themselves, rather than have it explained in foreign terms is directly opposed to this. Professor Lamin Sanneh, a Gambian professor at Yale, wrote:

> *A recognition of the power of the vernacular Scriptures to force a serious reckoning of the whole matter of gospel and culture, and to do this without the controls of the Western churchâ€¦ It follows from this that radical pluralism is radical in the boldness with which the word of God is assumed to have a vernacular form, and pluralist in denying to any one language an exclusive claim in the â€œplan of salvation.â€ It is one of the interesting ironies of the Western missionary enterprise that the evangelical motive actually helped to shield indigenous populations from the unmitigated assault of the West and that through the*

> *elevation of the vernacular in translation, missions furnished the critical language for evaluating the West in its secular and religious impact.*
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> *(Sanneh 1989 p.203)*

WYCLIFFE

Wycliffe UK and Ireland are part of an international body, the Wycliffe Global Alliance; this includes groups from all parts of the world and the leadership has representatives from all parts of the world. In the Global Alliance, groups from Africa, Asia and Latin America have just as much say on policies and the future of the organisation as those from Europe, North America and other traditional missionary and colonial countries.

Wycliffe does not impose translations upon people. For the most part, translation projects are started in response to requests from local churches or groups and in many cases, a local committee takes responsibility for many aspects of the work. Increasingly, the translations themselves are carried out by speakers of the language with Wycliffe staff providing financial, logistic and specialist support.

Wycliffe shows its commitment to local voices here at home by having separate offices in different parts of the UK and Ireland. The Welsh office produces materials in Cymraeg.

THE BOTTOM LINE

We believe that Christians are sent into the world to be witnesses to Jesus (Acts 1:8) and to make disciples. At first sight, this might seem arrogant. However, in John 20:21, Jesus says that he sends his disciples out into the world in the same way that the Father sent him. Jesus came in humility, emptying himself and leaving behind the glory that was his right. He became a servant and humbled himself to the point of death. We, too, are to go into the wider world as humble servants, giving ourselves in service to others and pointing them to Jesus through the way that we serve him as well as through our words.

REFERENCES

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