WHITE SUPREMACY, COLONIALISM AND WORLD CHRISTIANITY

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Category: Observations

I've linked to videos and talks by Harvey Kwiyani on a number of occasions. Harvey is a Malawian theologian and scholar of mission and a thoroughly nice bloke. Today, I want to point you to a piece that he has written on Mission After George Floyd in the latest edition of the Anvil Journal.

A couple of days ago, I suggested that listening is an essential part of mission and evangelism. A little earlier than that, I complained that a paper that was presented as a significant piece of research into the future of missions was flawed because it didn't involve voices from the majority world. Well, reading this article is an easy way to start that listening process. I simply cannot conceive of a reason why any mission leader or agency board member would not read this paper.

Well, that's not entirely true.

The thing is, this article does not pull its punches in its observations of the history and present of the Western Mission movement. I am sure that many people will find it difficult to read and I suspect that a significant number will leap to the defensive and dismiss everything that Kwiyani says. The ones who do this, are the losers here. Just assume, for the sake of argument, that he is overstating his case. He is still providing a balance to a mission narrative which has predominantly been from the point of view of the powerful. We might wish to deny that racism and colonialism have anything to do with mission, but from the point of view of the colonised and the victims of racism, this is simply not true and we need to hear their voices if we are to have any relevance in God's mission today.

So, go away and read the article.

Kwiyani starts the article by recounting his own story as a church planter in the Twin Cities area. He lived not far from where George Floyd was murdered and the incident is very real to him. From this starting point, he moves into mission history, particularly focussing on his home area in Malawi. This is not comfortable reading. Colonialism, white supremacy and the gospel are far too closely intertwined and there is only one loser in that equation.

I want to close by highlighting some quotes which I found particularly relevant to the world of western mission agencies today. In isolation, these might seem to radical (so go and read the whole thing and see them in context), but I believe that they are valid descriptions of where we are today, even if they are uncomfortable.

> *Essentially, we need to rethink mission for a world where images of a blue-eyed blond-haired*

> *Jesus are questionable. We need to learn how to engage in mission when all that the missionary brings is the liberating gospel of Jesus Christ minus a superior culture that seeks to civilise.*

> *Non-western Christianity (which forms almost 70 per cent of world Christianity) is a religion without imperial powers. In many aspects, it is a religion pushing back against empires and in this sense, it is closer to pre-Constantine Christianity. Of course, it helps to remember that Jesus Christ was executed in his home country by a colonial power. The challenge for all of us as followers of Christ in the world is to put into practice the words of Paul that we are one in Christ â€“ that in him, there is neither Greek nor Jew, neither male nor female, and neither free nor slave. Our baptism into the body of Christ makes us all equal, and that is the most important thing. But the call is not only to treat those of our faith as equals, as if it gives us a warrant to treat those outside the faith as less than us.*

> *Many mission agencies will have to find new ways to exist with diminishing help from western empires due to growing secularism on the one hand (which has weakened western Christianity) and the rise of non-western empires on the other.*

> *Current western dominance in mission does not reflect the true picture of world Christianity, and the only way we can justify it is by pointing back to the colonial era â€“ this is how it has always been.*

> *The very methods of western mission in the world are questionable today, and yet many of them cannot afford to let others lead. In a world without racism or white supremacy, most of the mission agencies in the West would be led by Latin Americans, Africans or Asians, to a greater success and better faithfulness to Godâ€™s mission. Any European or North American (we can include Australian and New Zealander) mission organisation that sends missionaries to other parts of the world and has more than half their leadership and personnel as white is part of the problem. This is a gross incongruency in a world where, potentially, most missionaries will come from Latin America, Africa and Asia. (Emphasis mine)*

> *For missiology â€“ the teachers, their pedagogy and the resources they use â€“ must reflect the very fact that mission is no longer a western phenomenon. The very fact that black and brown people form less than 5 per cent of theology and missiology lecturers in the UK is symptomatic of the problem. Black and brown people form 14 per cent of the population in the UK, yet they comprise a significantly large percentage of theology and missiology students across the country. It should not be possible to teach mission in any of our cities with an all-white team. Yet this is common, and generally speaking, most theology and missiology syllabi across UK institutions will have no less than 100 per cent white-authored books for students to read.*

I would argue that key to mission agencies dealing with the issues that are raised in this article lies in the way that trustee boards govern their organisations. I have written a booklet which aims to help boards grapple with the challenges that they face. You can find the details here.