MISSION, COLONIALISM AND THE IMPERATIVE OF TRANSLATION

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Category: Bible Translation in History

As you can tell from all of the long words, this is not something I wrote:

> *Indeed, an essential question for Christian theology from the beginning has been how to â€œtranslateâ€ the message in a way that would, on the one hand, come across in the most culturally authentic way, and on the other hand, help local Christians in their specific contexts to embody the gospel in liberating, life-affirming, and inclusive ways. While this challenge has always been with Christian theology â€" only think of the hybrid nature of earliest Christianity â€" never before has it been more acute.*
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> *Much has been written on the failures of Christian missionaries as agents of colonialism, Western hegemony, and economic and political power plays. With the advent of the postcolonial paradigm, a more nuanced and more deeply exposing critique of forms of colonialism emerged. The term â€œcultural imperialismâ€ came to be used in a wider and more inclusive sense referring to any cultural dominance, including academic and â€œhigh culture.â€ Europe and the United States still hold the power in terms of access to and resources of education and publishing, and above all still possess linguistic hegemony â€" the use of English. The Christian church and its Scriptures have been closely linked with this colonialistic critique.*
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> *To put the missionary translation work of the past in perspective, the other side of the colonial story that has emerged in the newest missions history has to be highlighted. In this context, we are less concerned about â€œexoneratingâ€ Christian mission; rather, the purpose is to take a closer look at the relation of Scripture and translation work to culture and liberation. The current research has challenged the standard accusation against Christian mission according to which it constituted â€œcolonization of the mind.â€ Similarly, the accusation that missionaries served as agents of â€œcultural imperialismâ€ has been subjected to critique. For example, the British missions historian Brian Stanley has demonstrated a lack of evidence for the claim that the British churchesâ€™ support for mission and the peak of British imperialism were connected. In other words, missionaries did not support but were indeed critical of the way the British rules were taking advantage of the resources of the colonised lands...*
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> *Hence the translation work, rather than being an agent of Western colonialism, power plays and exclusivity, more often than not has been in the service of local empowerment, cultural development, ethic affirmation and other forms of inclusivity and liberation. According to Sanneh, the translation of the Bible and the gospel story, which helped the vernacular, local languages become important factors in culture, played a crucial role not only in the spread of Christian mission in the non-Western world, but also in the liberation of the indigenous people.*

This quote is from the remarkableÂ Trinity and Revelation: A Constructive Christian Theology for the Pluralistic World, Volume 2Â byÂ Veli-Matti KÃ¤rkkÃ¤inen. It's not a book that everyone will want to read and, frankly, it's blooming hard work, but it is absolutely excellent. If you are interested in the theology of the Bible (as opposed to Biblical theology, which is something else), this is a must read - but it's a bit pricey.