The Role of Missionaries in Conquest

Wallace G. Mills Hist. 322 9 Missionaries in Conquest

- there is an oft repeated comment (a favourite with Archbishop Tutu), “When the white man arrived, he had the Bible and we had the land; now, we have the Bible and he has the land.”

- the title for this lecture was the title of a book published just after World WWar 2. It was published under the name of Nosepho Majoke; despite the African name, it was written by a white woman, Dora Taylor, from a largely Marxist perspective.

- the book made a number of charges alleging missionary complicity and participation in the conquest; other charges have also been levelled. I shall not be dealing with the book specifically. Instead, we shall try to draw up a ‘balance sheet’; we have already touched on a number of issues, but we shall try to deal with the topic more systematically.

General comments
- missionaries were not a uniform group, especially in regard to ideas and opinions; thus, making generalisations is difficult because there are usually lots of exceptions and contrary examples. It is far too common for scholars to adopt a rather simplistic stereotype and caricature of the missionary.

- in our increasingly secular age, religious people and especially missionaries are not understood or empathised with. Moreover, as anthropology and sociology have developed and brought better knowledge and better perspectives of other societies and peoples, we increasingly find the missionary attitude and enterprise objectionable.

- only recently have more rigorous scholarly and social science methods begun to be applied to the study of missionaries themselves. Thus, much of the stereotype is ignorance.

- on the other hand, there has also been a hagiographical literature and approach which tended to make the missionaries heroic, saint-like characters; some of the negative stereotype is just a reaction against excessively fulsome adulation of the missionaries.

- evaluating the role of the missionaries requires that exaggerated images, whether positive or negative, be set aside. Especially, we should avoid minimising their diversity by the reductionism of stereotypes and caricatures.

    (a) Divisiveness (Christianity as a Fifth Column)
- without a doubt, the missionaries (and Christianity) tended to be divisive in traditional society (although the Basotho example shows that this need not have been so disruptive and could have been contained within manageable levels, just as Europeans eventually found ways to transcend religious differences).

    - most missionaries for a long time pursued the idea of separation of converts from traditional society and encouraged their converts not to participate in many national customs and rites. As noted earlier, this led to the ‘red’/’school’ split in Xhosa society.
- this problem was exacerbated when the missionaries urged their converts to remain neutral in the wars.

**How far was this an expression of nationalism?**

- the majority of missionaries were British (but not all—French and Swiss in Lesotho, as well as Germans, Americans and Scandinavians in other areas); some were unable and unwilling to put aside their nationalism and national loyalties.

- however, many others urged their converts not participate in wars, not because of nationalism, but because they felt certain that Africans would lose; they often refused—even in face of taunts by white settlers—to condemn those who did join the African military resistance by pointing out that everyone expected citizens in Europe to support their governments and to fight for their country (white settlers usually wanted to treat them as traitors—at least to confiscate all their land and cattle, but often even harsher punishments).

**Xhosa-Mfengu split**

- some missionaries did have a role in sharpening this conflict; it was a missionary who described the clientship of the Mfengu as 'slavery'. The subsequent 'emancipation' by the British governor resulted in a large proportion of the Mfengu becoming allies of the British, the seizure by the Mfengu of large amounts of Xhosa cattle, and the settling of Mfengu on land that had been seized from the Xhosa. Most of this was done by British officials, but the missionary certainly gave the rationale. Other missionaries continued to support the split in acting as Mfengu advisors and encouraging them to maintain the alliance with the British. However, not all missionaries agreed with this policy.

- early in the 20th C, Isaac Wauchope (a Xhosa Congregational minister, but one who refused to join the anti-Mfengu movement) asserted that some missionaries had also encouraged the split at a social level by being reluctant to perform weddings between Xhosa and Mfengu.

- however, the Xhosa-Mfengu hostility was disruptive and a real headache in the churches, especially after the missionaries began to employ African teachers and to ordain Africans to the ministry; in fact most missionaries were engaged in trying to diminish rather than encourage the conflict.

- on the question of whether Christianity created a ‘Fifth Column’, it is important to note that few if any missionaries urged their converts to fight against their chiefs; mostly, they urged that they stay neutral. The latter certainly has some of the same effect, it is true. However, as we noted earlier, most conversions took place after conquest; therefore conversion was largely an effect of conquest, not a cause.

**(b) Economic change**

- without question, missionaries were an important factor in promoting economic change. They introduced and encouraged the use of foreign products (clothing, tea, etc.) which undermined the former self-sufficiency of the subsistence economy. This brought Africans more and more into a market economy. To pay for these goods, Africans would have to produce surpluses of agricultural products to sell or find other ways to get money; for many this meant going to work for wages—what some call 'proletarianization'.

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- many missionaries adopted a theory that linked Christianity and trade. The person most commonly linked with this theory of ‘Commerce and Christianity’ was David Livingstone, but he was by no means alone.

- it was argued that commerce and Christianity reinforced each other; that participation in one predisposed people to become involved with the other. As a result, they could advocate trade as a means of furthering the spread and success of the gospel and vice versa.

- this has led some scholars, especially Marxists, to argue that this was the crux and purpose of missionary activity, another evidence of how crafty capitalism really is:

  - either the missionaries were eager, willing and conscious henchmen for the capitalist classes, or
  - the missionaries were manipulated and used. Religion as ‘the opiate of the masses’ sucks the masses into allowing themselves to be used and exploited. The missionaries were perhaps more gullible than ordinary as they were manipulated into going abroad to preach the gospel and thus suck the ‘native’ people into the same net (i.e., a kind of Judas goat).

- by no means did all missionaries agree that commerce and Christianity were mutually reinforcing (in fact Livingstone was fired by the LMS for engaging in trade, contrary to its rules). As John Smith Moffat (he was 3rd generation in the famous missionary family) stated it in 1903: “I do not believe in missionaries or societies putting themselves under obligation to the rich men in South Africa. The time is coming when there will be a life-and-death struggle on the native question. The capitalists are worse than the Boers, and we who stand by the native will have to fight to the death over the question.”

- also, it is clear that businessmen were not the main contributors to mission work; the main contributors (i.e., the suppliers of most of the funds) were the middle and upper working classes, especially in the non-conformist churches. Thus, the theory of capitalist manipulation owes as much or more to the imaginations of scholars steeped in Marxist conspiracy theory as to reality. It is in fact a complex issue.

  **Was economic change an effect or cause of the conquest?**

- while there was a certain amount of trade (and therefore economic change) before conquest, most of the change and economic impact came after the conquest.

- also, economic change and innovation was by no means all induced by the missionaries. Some non-Christian Africans saw the potential and began to innovate; the wealthy in traditional society were often in the best position to take advantage. Thus, economic change was coming and being induced by other factors than missionary actions.

  **(c) Annexation (Were missionaries strong ‘imperialists’?)**

- this is an often made charge, and indeed some missionaries were imperialist. However, this issue too shows much complexity and it is difficult to make categorical generalisations as there were wide divergences in missionary opinion; also, attitudes tended to change over time or had to adapt to changing realities.
- Wesleyan Methodists tended to be more closely tied to British white settlers; more of them tended to support annexations in the wake of the wars with the Xhosa.

- however, most missionaries opposed annexations in South Africa up to the 1840s; one of the best examples of this was the missionary opposition to the annexation of Queen Adelaide Land in 1836-37.

**Change after the 1840s**

- an analogous change occurred in New Zealand in the 1840s. There, the missionaries were increasingly disturbed that whites (whalers, criminals, etc.) were disrupting Maori society (introducing guns, alcohol, prostitution, etc.).

- similar concerns were emerging in South Africa: white traders were going farther afield introducing alcohol; as well, the invasion of the high veld and Natal by the Voortrekkers was causing concern about the impact and destruction of African societies there.

- frustration was also clearly another factor:
  
  - lack of converts,
  - disruption and destruction of their work by the recurrent wars,
  - a feeling that chiefs and the political systems needed to be destroyed before conversion and change could take place. J. C. Warner, a Methodist missionary who later became a government agent, expressed it this way in the 1850s:

    “And above all, as they have so resolutely and so perseveringly refused to give to the Gospel even an attentive hearing; it seems to me that the way on which they themselves are so obstinately bent is the one which God will make use of to bring about this desirable object; and that the sword must first—not exterminate [sic] them, but—break them up as tribes, and destroy their political existence; after which, when thus set free from the shackles by which they are bound, civilisation and Christianity will no doubt make rapid progress among them.”

- nor can this feeling be attributed mainly to nationalist feelings. American and Norwegian missionaries in Natal came to advocate a similar position regarding the annexation and dismantling of the Zulu Kingdom after the 1840s—very unlikely British imperialists!

- it could also be protective; French missionaries in Basotholand assisted Moshoeshoe in his attempts to get annexed by Britain to protect them from the Boers. Later, in the 1880s, British missionaries in Bechuanaland were doing the same thing without it being primarily an expression of British imperialist feelings.

- moreover, missionaries were active in trying to resist confiscations of land from Africans and in turn granting or selling that land to whites. Without missionaries and their direct and indirect influence, Africans would have ended with even less land than they did.

- nevertheless, there can be no doubt that missionaries were a significant element in the white intrusion. The divisive effects were, for the most part, an unintended contribution to ‘divide and conquer’, but that is different from arguing that the missionaries and Christianity were part of a
deliberate strategy to do this.

(d) Sources of Information (‘spies’) and Agents of Government
- many missionaries did act as informants by supplying information to government officials. It is not clear that this was always a negative thing; sometimes, missionaries were able to correct misinformation about Africans and their society being spread in the white community. They could also sometimes have some effect on policy.

- as a result of their connections and the trust that they had built, missionaries could be useful as government agents and several (including Warner above) did resign as missionaries and become agents. There were even a couple of cases where the transition went the other way. Even more numerous are the examples of the sons of missionaries who became government agents; they often could speak an African language and were presumed to have a greater knowledge of African societies. However, they often knew and understood a lot less than they thought and pretended.

- again, I’m not sure how to evaluate this. Africans were quite aware that the missionaries communicated with the authorities and in fact frequently relied on the missionaries to handle their communication with government. There are a few cases where missionaries did help to deceive Africans in these dealings, but the evidence is overwhelming in showing that missionaries used their role as intermediaries to help and to benefit Africans. Thus, if one asks the question, “Would Africans have been better or worse off without the missionaries?”, on the whole the answer is clearly worse off.

(e) Assimilators
- missionaries did see themselves in the role of integrating Africans into the social, economic and even political aspects of the colonial society evolving in the Cape Colony and South Africa.

- some degree of assimilation is implicit in any missionary endeavour; however, the degree of assimilation could vary. Some missionaries wanted and expected to see complete assimilation—i.e., ‘turning Africans into Black Englishmen’.

- however, this was not practicable nor entirely desirable. For example, on standards of living: as missions began to provide education and to ordain Africans, they became aware that complete assimilation would require much higher incomes and therefore salaries. But having to pay more would reduce the number of preachers and teachers they could hire. Also, higher standards of living would separate the few, the elite, from the masses. Would this not ruin much of their effectiveness?

- also, as we noted earlier when talking about traditional customs, there were limits on what Africans were prepared to give up, and in a number of areas, it was the missionaries who had to make concessions.

- a major component of Grey’s assimilation policy was education, to be provided by the mission organisations; as a result, the missionaries became full partners with government. However, the relationship was never free of friction. People in government tended to visualise Africans as occupying only the lowest social, economic and political position in colonial society while most missionaries were not so restrictive and were much more responsive to African aspirations.
- at any rate, it was the missionaries who provided most of the means to enable Africans to participate more effectively in colonial society by providing education and by opening teaching and preaching jobs, in providing high status employment opportunities.

- it was the missionaries who provided Christianity and education; these gave Africans access to the ideas and ideologies in western societies. These were means necessary for Africans to develop the so-called ‘secondary’ forms of resistance that would eventually bring independence and majority rule in Africa and South Africa.

- much of the ideology of African nationalism has been rooted in Christianity and postmillennialism; however, via education, provided mostly by missionaries until the 1950s, Africans also gained access to liberalism, socialism, Marxism, etc.

- it is true that missionaries were not always happy with the results as Africans could adopt ideas that the missionaries themselves rejected; however, few turned against education on that account and they continued to open the doors in this way.

Two questions to provide perspective:

• Would conquest have taken place without the involvement of the missionaries?

• Without the missionaries, would Africans have been able to resist more effectively and ended up better off?

- the answer to the 1st is that conquest would, without question, have taken place anyway. The ‘scramble’ for Africa was driven more by nationalism than by religious enthusiasm or even capitalism.

- the answer to the 2nd is only “possibly”; Africans (even the Xhosa) had not been united early in the century before missionaries had had any significant impact. It was only slowly and belatedly that Africans overcame these traditional disunities that had nothing to do with missionaries or Christianity. However, missionaries did induce or help to sharpen some new disunities.

- however, in some cases, missionaries tried to build up African societies and to maintain their independence; e.g., from the 1820s, missionaries tried to help the Griqua until the discovery of the diamond fields in the 1870s brought a flood of white miners. With all remaining hope of maintaining independence gone, missionaries worked to get the area annexed by Britain as the best (or least bad) option available.