

Methodist Missions and some interactions with African Traditional Religion

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A refurbishment of the Museum of Methodism is currently underway at Wesley's Chapel. This is both an upgrade on the fabric and infrastructure of the crypt where the Museum is housed and a radical rethink of the exhibition so that it becomes less wordy and much more based on the artefacts which the Museum holds. The seed money for this has come from a big Methodist Church in Korea. (What a lot of interesting work could still be done on the interaction of Korean religion and culture with Christianity!)

One strand or theme in the new exhibition is "World Parish" and what a lot of interesting material and research that is yielding. Thomas Coke was the main driver of early Methodist missionary activity and while he was raising money and identifying potential missionaries, John Wesley was busily trying to rein him in, telling him that there were still plenty of heathens to convert in Scotland.

Nevertheless Coke's zeal was unbounded and having sent ministers to the West Indies and America and having travelled there himself he turned his attention to other parts of the world. As early as 1778 Coke was appealing for preachers for Africa, yet his heart was really on a mission to Asia so, at his own expense, in December 1813 he set sail for Ceylon only to die on board ship four months into the voyage.

Coke exemplified a characteristic that was quite widespread at this time, namely the conviction that mission to Asia was somehow more challenging, more demanding than mission to other parts of the world. In Asia Christianity was pitted against other ancient religions with their own rituals and holy books, their own teachers and prophets. Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Taoism were intellectual challenges to Christianity. Not for nothing, therefore, were some of the most able preachers sent to Asia, once the missions became established there.

Africa on the other hand, was considered a continent of spiritual darkness and heathenism. Apart from Egypt and Ethiopia, there were no written sacred books, no priesthood, as far as European eyes could see, and if people worshipped anything it was the spirits inhabiting trees and rivers and their own human ancestors. So it was that some of the less formally educated preachers were often sent to Africa. And they were sent unprepared – there were no language courses, no weeks of preparation for immersion in another culture; a sense of call and the zeal to work overseas was considered sufficient. What those early missionaries met was beyond their normal range of assumptions and outside their conceptual framework.

These early preacher missionaries had ‘learnt their trade’ in itinerating around Britain, preaching in the open air and in chapels and calling for conversion. For those who accepted the offer of salvation the way ahead was one of self-discipline, of hard work and seriousness. For those early Methodist converts there was no dancing, no raucous drinking, and no sexual licence - just a hard, disciplined, respectable family life – a striving for perfection. The conversion they preached was individual conversion. The faith they preached was biblical and strict. Words – in preaching, in singing and in Bible reading were the means of communicating the faith.

This was the style of Christianity that most of the early generations of missionaries took with them to Africa. In their encounter with peoples of very differing cultural assumptions, with people of oral not written tradition, with people whose identity was communal not individual and whose language was, at least at the outset, unintelligible to the missionaries, they were sorely challenged. The initial interactions were often replete with misunderstanding on both sides and it is amazing, and truly an instance of God’s grace that the Gospel was preached and heard despite all these difficulties.

Two examples will suffice. Firstly let us look at the encounter of the first generation of Methodist missionaries with the African tribes inland of the South African littoral. The London Missionary Society had already blazed a trail way beyond the settled lands of the Cape and the Methodists were not to be outdone. So, to cut a very long story short, in 1823 the Wesleyan missionaries, Hodgson and Broadbent, relatively recently arrived from England set out to found a mission among the ‘Bechuana’ people. They found themselves in the midst of much fighting and bloodshed in the region with people constantly fleeing war and rumours of war. They longed to find a group of people whom they could persuade to settle down and where they could begin their work.

When they did eventually see smoke in the distance they rejoiced and camped to think out their strategy. They left their wagons and horses and went forward on foot. People came out to see them and eventually a man, dressed in a jackal skin, whom they identified as King or Chief came forward. Here is Broadbent’s own account of the encounter.

“He looked on us as we did on him; but as he did not speak any language with which we were acquainted, nor did any of our party understand his tongue we were unable to communicate with him; but, turning to our wagon chest we took out some bunches of beads, a knife and a few other articles we had brought for such purposes and offered them to him. He alternately cast his eyes on the presents and on us and shortly after receiving them withdrew. In about half an hour we saw him returning with some of his people dragging a sheep by the horns and others bearing wooden vessels containing milk, which we cheerfully accepted.”

So began the interaction of British missionaries with the Bechuana people. Inevitably at this early stage Hodgson and Broadbent were innocent of the wider political context into which they had stumbled. Only gradually did they realise that they provided both a degree of protection and fire power to the group they had encountered. The chief was not going to let them go, especially not to mission other groups! Yet the chief was also impressed by their bravery in not trying to flee when news of impending enemy attacks came.

Little by little the missionaries began to learn some of the language. This led to some fascinating interactions. Broadbent had written out his version of the Lord's Prayer in the language of the people – Sechuana and in doing this had asked the chief and his elders some questions.

On asking them who their father above was, no one knew. So, Broadbent reports, he asked, "Who was the first?" and several answered, "Madeemo" and I answered, "Well, that is our heavenly father whom we address in these words." Broadbent was disappointed with the questions of the chief, "Where is God?", "How big is he?" "Has he hair?" and "Have you seen him?" Broadbent interpreted these questions as a lack of spirituality in the people.

Then Broadbent showed the people the Bible saying that it was what 'Madeemo' had written. One wonders how the people interpreted this information but Broadbent subsequently reports that the people paid great deference to the Bible.

One of the steep learning curves for the missionaries was in understanding the role of the chief over his people not just in political power terms but in ritual terms especially in matters of rainfall in the dry land in which they lived.

Broadbent reported that the chief tried his rain-making rituals during the dry season when water levels were low and livestock suffering and added that he and Hodgson mocked these efforts as 'vain pretensions.'

But the missionaries themselves were desperately in need of water and thus dug wells. This was amazing to the people. Finding his missionaries digging, the chief laughed saying, 'you will not find water there, and water comes from the clouds.' However finding that the well was a success, the chief is reported to have said, 'now I know that you have an acquaintance with God and he told you this or you could never have found it out.'

The people began to dig wells all over the village and the missionaries were very pleased and reported joyfully, after this people ceased to have any confidence in this pretence (to make able to make rain) of the chief.

Undermining the authority of the chief was to prove a mixed blessing.

These snippets show just how challenging it was for early missionaries to encounter people whose ideas and priorities were so different from their own.

The mission did enjoy partial success in later years and particularly when the missionaries found new land for these people and trekked with them for hundreds of miles in an Exodus like movement. Protection, food, land, water, education in the language and ways of the white man these are the things that made their message attractive and God worked in his way through these.

The second example of interaction between missionaries and African people comes from further north in the continent –from what is now Zambia – and from a later period – the end of the 19th century. This time it was Rev Arthur Baldwin, a Primitive Methodist who was a pioneer missionary to the Baila people.

If anything negative attitudes towards Africans had become even more entrenched. His fellow missionary, Chapman, wrote of the Baila, ‘they are a people whose national business is polygamy, national pastime beer-drinking and national sport, fornication.’

In his journal Arthur Baldwin writes of his preaching on the first Sunday after the arrival of the mission party among the Baila,

“There were upward of 250 people present and in spite of the fact that many of them can’t speak a word of Sekololo (a Sesuto language from the south and spoken by the missionaries’ African companions from the south) and were unable to understand me their behaviour was most commendable.”

Undaunted by this experience, Baldwin had continued to take out his sermons from his English experience and preach them to the Baila. The topics were, ‘Christ’s coming into the world to save sinners,’ ‘Seek ye the Lord,’ and ‘the Prodigal Son.’

It took some of the next generation of missionaries, people like Edwin Smith, to realise that to communicate the Gospel effectively required a great deal more empathy with the people and a good deal more understanding of their language and culture.

E.W. Smith wrote in the early 20th century, *“To preach effectively the missionary must not only know his Bible but his people; he should be saturated with native folklore and have their proverbs at the tip of his tongue. He must know their customs and above all their religious ideas. He must disentangle the true from the false and not lump all ideas together as ‘superstition. ‘The true method of preaching is to build upon the truths the people already know. It is not so easy,*

therefore, as some people think to preach effectively to the natives. One needs plenty of what is called 'psychological askesis' – the power of looking at things from another's point of view."

It took a long time for missionaries to come to the realisation that African's did have a religion and that, not only was it worth studying but it was the door through which the Gospel could enter. Smith was a sensitive and far-sighted man.

In many places the serious interaction of Christianity with traditional African religion has really only just begun.

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