

## Some Reflections on the Development of Younger Churches

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A moment's consideration of the varied fortunes of the missionary enterprise suggests that almost anything can happen. In some cases the message makes no impact at all; in others people flock to the font. In some cases missionaries meet a sticky end; in others they are simply ignored. Today I would like to consider briefly some of the variables involved, using as examples three cases where the mission was statistically successful, Ireland, Spanish America and Nigeria.

The Irish venture seems to have paid a very handsome return on a relatively small investment. By the early fifth century Christianity had percolated into the south with sufficient success that Coelestine sent one Paladius, in 431, to be bishop among "the Irish believing in Christ." (1) But Paladius did not last. The overwhelming weight of the tradition is with Patrick.

Even so Patrick is a very shadowy figure. The only two manuscripts which can be handled with confidence are the Confessions and the Letter to Coroticus. Neither of them really answers the questions we would like to ask. Who authorized this mission? To whom was Patrick accountable? Who financed the operation? What sort of staff did Patrick have? Answers to modern questions like these can be no more than tentative. Unfortunately Patrick did not write with our problems in mind.

However it can be said with reasonable certainty that Patrick was British, that he went to Ireland first as a slave and subsequently as bishop and that he behaved as one would expect a bishop to behave, travelling, preaching, baptizing, confirming and ordaining. (2) This much seems clear from his own writing. But other points remain obscure. He says for instance that he spent on his work at least the price of fifteen men, a sum which he regarded as considerable. Was he being supported by the British church, which was at that time in reasonable shape? Or was he operating under royal patronage, living off gifts from friendly potentates? Equally obscure is the question of his staff. Seventh century tradition mentions Gauls like Iseninus, Auxilius and Secundinus, but it is not clear whether these people were independent missionaries, colleagues or subordinates of Patrick.

But even if we assume the best, that Patrick was adequately financed by the British church, and that he had with him or was working with a sizeable number of other missionaries, the missionary presence did not last long. Patrick's dates, like everything else about him, are debatable, but he was probably most active in the middle of the fifth

century or a little later. At roughly the same time the English settlement of Britain began and the British church soon had more pressing things to think about. Gaul, in the process of absorbing the Franks, was not much better off. After the first generation the Irish church was left to its own devices.

But it not only survived, it went from strength to strength. As is well known the Irish monks were among the more creative elements in the chaotic years that followed the barbarian invasions.

The Irish church prospered because Christianity was accepted by significant numbers of the aristocracy and because Irish society at the time was flourishing. In the absence of a strong missionary presence with preconceived ideas about what churches should be like, the Irish were able to adapt Christianity to their own purposes. Thus in the course of the fifth century monasticism, a relatively minor feature of Patrick's work became the central institution of the Irish church. The esteem given to the bards was also given to the masters of the sacred page, the deeds of derring-do characteristic of warriors and cattle rustlers were carried forward in the heroic ascetism of the saints. Because this kind of adaptation was successfully made, the Irish church was able to conquer all of Ireland and become a significant in the conversion of Scotland and England as well as a bright light in the otherwise dreary annals of Merovingian church history.

In this case the acceptance of Christianity by a vigorous society in the absence of a strong missionary presence led to a particularly vigorous church.

The Spanish American case is almost the exact opposite. Christianity was established in Ireland by a handful of free lance missionaries and settlers. Spanish America was visited by thousands of regular clergy, waves of them, for almost three hundred years. While Ireland remained an independent country until long after Christianity was established, South America was conquered and settled. In those places where the Indians had established an elaborate agricultural civilization the Spanish seem to have lopped off the top, replacing one set of aristocrats with another. The rest of the population, accustomed to doing what they were told, simply followed their new leaders into Christianity. In those places where the Indians were hunters and food gatherers the Spanish attempted, on the whole successfully, to persuade them to take up farming instead, living in nucleated villages under the tutelage of the priests. It was a pattern followed all the way from the southern United States to southern Chile. The Jesuit mission in Paraguay was simply the most elaborate and famous of the genre.

Spanish colonialism was thoroughly paternalistic. In theory even the priests who managed the affairs of New Mexican villages were royal

appointments. Even though it is very unlikely that the most energetic of Spanish monarchs was that concerned with detail, it is certainly true that authority flowed from the top down. The crown appointed the bishops, the bishops controlled the priests and the priests controlled the Indians. Add to this hierarchical system a distinct aversion to the training and ordination of mestizos, let alone Indians, and it is clear that the native Christians of the Americas, apart from the Spanish settlers, had little opportunity to show their mettle.

But paternalism is not a sufficient explanation for the torpidity of Spanish American Christianity. Not only did Indian or mestizo Christians have little opportunity to show their mettle, they don't seem to have tried. From time to time, as in the case of Miguel Hildago y Costilla, a priest who was prominent in the Mexican revolution, we find departures from the general conformity of the South American church. But Hildago was more of a philosopher than a prophet; his inspiration seems to have come largely from the Enlightenment.

Institutional explanations are not enough; one must go further and examine the kind of Christianity the Spanish brought. Spanish society was one which had welded the altar and sword into a peculiar unity. As already noted, the crown held all ecclesiastical appointments in his own gift. This fusion of church and state is characteristic of ontocratic or archaic societies. The society the Spanish established in the new world had many similarities to the one they replaced. Further, the vernacular Bible, that independent standard of criticism that so often makes the church dynamic, was conspicuous by its absence. In Ireland the leaders of the church were steeped in the Latin Bible, a fact which gives the Irish church a somewhat elitist flavour. But in Spanish America the people who knew the Bible were not drawn from the Indian or mestizo population. Hence there could be none of the fruitful dialogue between Bible and culture that produced the vigorous Irish church. In a sense Christianity was never established in Spanish America.

The dilemma of Christianity in the colony was not simply that it failed to indoctrinate the mass of its communicants with its fullest meaning, but that the Indian acceptances were strongly coloured by residual and antithetical values. In general, the Indians did not abandon their polytheistic views. . . . (3)

The popular religion of an Indian village, described with such charm in William Masden's The Virgin's Children is a classic illustration of the point. Here we find simple polytheism with Christian names and a Christian ritual. The title of the book is significant; the Virgin of Guadeloupe has become the mother of Mexicans, the female principle in an ontocratic system. Christ has almost disappeared, God runs a poor second to the Virgin and the saints have become the tutelary deities of the village.

In other words paternalism is only a partial explanation for the torpidity of the Spanish American church. Because Spanish Christianity had not itself broken free from ontocratic thinking it was unable to make a significant impact on Indian culture. Because it did not bring with it a vernacular Bible, the church was without an independent standard of judgement. It is worth noting that only after the appearance in Latin America of Protestant missionaries and American capitalists, neither of whom can be accused of holding to an ontocratic world view that the Latin American church has become sufficiently creative to produce a respectable heresy.

Heresy is a sign of vigour. Heresy and schism appear because people are thinking seriously about the faith, and care about it enough to argue and divide. Perhaps at no time in Christian history have heresy and schism been so rampant as in modern Africa.

For most Africans Christianity is a phenomenon of the twentieth century. Within twenty years of the church's establishment people were beginning to split off from the institutions managed by missionaries and found their own. Although the growth of independency slowed during the forties it began to gather momentum again after 1950, and by the seventies had probably gained something like seven million adherants.

Not all tribes are affected. Independent churches tend to occur in tribes with a strong and complex culture, a successful missionary enterprise which was strongly critical of traditional society, and experienced widespread circulation of a vernacular Bible. (4)

It is important to distinguish between a successful missionary enterprise and a strong missionary presence. A successful missionary enterprise means simply that Christianity was widely accepted in the tribe. It does not mean that the tribe received many missionaries, or that they were there very long. If we can imagine a spectrum of missionary presence, with Patrick at one end and Spanish America at the other, Africa falls rather closer to Ireland than Mexico. When I went to Nigeria in the late fifties, the senior missionaries had been junior colleagues of one Alexander Cruickshank, who in turn had been a junior colleague of the pioneers. But a more typical experience is that of Ohafia. One of my best sources for the church in Ohafia, a strong community with entirely indigenous leadership was a man who had been a small boy when the pioneer missionary first came to his village and who took his first job as a pupil teacher from that same missionary. In Ohafia the church went from founding to independence in a single lifetime.

The same is true of the colonial presence. Traumatic though the coming of the British was for Nigeria, the British didn't stay long. The first expeditions which brought Igboland into the Empire were undertaken in

December 1901. Independence came in October 1960. While it is true that communication among churches is easier and more frequent now than in the early middle ages, the absence of an active missionary team from the daily small decisions that make up the life of the church means that the indigenous leadership is virtually on its own.

The African church thus has what the Latin American church lacked, an indigenous leadership. But indigenous leadership is not necessarily more imaginative than the missionaries were. Those who have taken over the historical churches have tended to continue the tradition they have received. The people who have done the most creative thinking are those who have split off from the historical churches and formed their own, those who are the leaders of African Independency.

The first problem in dealing with schismatic Africans is to separate the sheep from the goats, establishing which of these religious movements can be described as Christian and which cannot. Those most disputed are the category called prophet healing or aladura. It would be apart from the purpose of this paper to go into the details of that argument, but my own view is that aladura is a legitimate Christian phenomenon.

The Yoruba of south-western Nigeria are among the most enthusiastic organizers of aladura churches. Indeed, the word aladura, one who prays, is a Yoruba word. In their case the leadership of the new churches came from the junior ranks of the C.M.S. staff. They represent the Africanization of Christianity in a radical way. They have rejected the ontocratic Yoruba world view and replaced it with a form of biblical monotheism, with great stress on trusting Olodumare, the creator. They have abandoned the apparatus of traditional religion and taken up instead the rigorous practice of prayer as the means of reaching God, with visions and scriptures as God's means of reaching them. The salvation they seek is deliverance from the ills of this world, shalom in this life rather than blessedness in the next.

The principal charge against them is primitive Christology. Christ remains in their language, their hymns and their prayers, but it is hard to resist the impression that they are not quite sure what to do with him. But then, I suggest, neither was Justin Martyr. Justin starts with the Logos, which he identifies with Christ through an argument from prophecy and the resemblance between Christ's teaching and that of the philosophers. Justin is less interested in the fact that Christ broke the power of the demons than he is in the notion that those who follow Christ's example are free of their power. In the same way aladura is much less interested in knowing how Christ set us free from sin, death and the law than they are in experiencing that freedom, that spiritual power in their own lives through prayerful trust in God.

In other words a moderate missionary presence, armed with a vernacular Bible, operating in a vigorous tribal society which was receptive to the message produced a vigorous form of Christianity. But that Christianity is closer to the biblical monotheism of second century Rome than to that

of first century Antioch or Corinth. Aladura, like Justin Martyr, is the response of a polytheistic people to the biblical message. The closed cosmos of gods and men disappears and with it polytheism's reliance on ritual and magic. In its place is a form of biblical monotheism that teaches reliance on God through prayer.

I suspect the same was true of the Irish. Patrick's confession is not that God delivered him from the grip of sin, death and the law, but that, though he was an unlettered and untrained man, God used him for the conversion of the Irish. St. Columba, seeing one of his disciples in imminent danger from the Loch Ness monster frightened the beast off with the sign of the cross. On another occasion in the same district he found the gates of King Brude barred against him. They too yielded to the cross. But perhaps the classic story has to do with the family of a convert. Shortly after their baptism one of the children of this family died, to the immense delight of the Druids who could now argue that their gods were stronger than Columba's. But Columba brought the child to life with prayer and tears.

Salvation thus, is liberation from very earthy problems. These people are not transfixed by a sense of guilt before the Law. They are not concerned with salvation by faith or by works. They look for liberation in this life, from the routine problems of living in a capricious and dangerous environment. Is it not significant that in Latin America the same concern for liberation in this life appears in a demythologized form?

#### Footnotes

1. Hughes, Kathleen, The Church in Early Irish Society, page 32.
2. White, Newport J.D., A Translation of the Latin Writings of St. Patrick, The Confession, chaps. 50-53.
3. Gibson, Charles, The Aztecs under Spanish Rule, A History of the Indians of the Valley of Mexico, 1519-1810, page 100
4. Barret, David, Schism and Renewal in Africa, page 192