

Reflections upon the Church and Colonialism

Archbishop Desmond Tutu's death on Boxing Day has caused us all to become aware of his role as a leader of the Anglican Church in the struggle against Apartheid in South Africa, especially from 1975. His death possibly served to distract us temporarily from our own concerns about the association of the Church in Canada with colonialism, specifically through the residential schools' system. Clearly, the Church world wide has played two roles: it has been an instrument both of liberation and of oppression.

Why?

There is no simple answer. However, a partial one emerges if we look at an event in Tutu's rise within the Church in South Africa against an appropriate political background.

In 1974, after a decade of counterinsurgency warfare, Portugal announced that it would withdraw from its colonies in 1975. One of those colonies, Mozambique, shared a boarder with South Africa. In January 1975, in downtown Cape Town, when I was obviously a tourist because of my winter clothing, an African working on a building site looked me over and volunteered the statement "Mozambique 1975." After a pause, he then posed a question "South Africa...?" Later in the year, Desmond Tutu became Dean of Johannesburg, breaking a glass ceiling. In August 1975, again in Cape Town, I found the only place I came into physical contact with Non-Whites was in the Cathedral while sharing the Peace.

These examples suggest that change occurs in the Church, and the Church becomes a manifest agent for change, when the society in which it operates is itself changing.

Superficial confirmation of this statement is provided when attention is paid to 19th Century missionaries. However unusual Krapf in Kenya or Livingstone in East and Central Africa may have been, those who followed them were men of their times. When examining the correspondence of missionaries belonging to the Church Missionary Society who were active around Lake Victoria for twenty-five years after the foundation of the Anglican Church in Uganda in 1877, I found only one who allowed himself to become empathically involved with Africans. The early missionaries were people of their times - and so were later ones. Thus, it was possible for Trevor Huddleston to become Anglican Bishop of Masasi in 1960, barely a year before what is now Tanzania became an independent state.

That missionaries were people of their times did not prevent the Church from the very inception of an African mission seeking to become an agent for change. To convert Africans in any numbers, a mission required other Africans. For Protestants in Eastern Africa, it was essential for converts to be able to read the Bible in the local language, generally starting with the Gospel according to Mark. For converts to be able to read, teachers were necessary. To ensure that there might be pupils for teachers to teach in circumstances where children were supposed to be the product of one man and one wife, not many wives, medical facilities were necessary to combat maternal and infant deaths. To prevent these deaths, Africans had to be encouraged to accept modern medical practices to treat all medical conditions , not just

introduced complaints like filariasis/elephantitis. To take root and grow, the missionary Church had no choice but to be an agent of change.

Once the missionary Church began to become an agent of change, it began to undermine the roots of indigenous societies. Church law governing who might marry whom upset rules requiring exogamy. The commitment to one man/one wife upset the practice of a brother becoming responsible for a deceased brother's wife. It could also undermine indigenous religious belief by interfering with the structure of the group required to perform indigenous planting and First Fruits ceremonies.

The Church's role as an agent of change was accentuated because of the extent to which the Church's needs mirrored those of the Colonial State. The State as it expanded needed healthy taxpayers and veterinary and agricultural assistants, as well as vehicle mechanics, railway and police personnel, and health workers. In the East African territories, the British could only meet their needs initially by importing personnel from Britain or India. Thus the Colonial State, to expand economically, needed the Church to enable it to recruit locally, just as the Church, in all of its manifestations, needed the Colonial State to contribute to the support of its educational and medical facilities. In many respects, therefore, the Church was effectively a Colonial State agency.

What redeems the Church, despite the damage it has done, is the belief that strikes at the very root of colonialism: WE ARE ALL EQUAL BEFORE GOD.

Colonialism required a subordinate Colonial State, not a free

and independent equal one.

The qualification needs to be borne in mind as we seek to repair the damage colonialism has caused in Canada. We must recognize that 19th and 20th Century, alias 'modern', education was an agent of social change that was bound to disrupt and cause damage to indigenous societies. What has generated unnecessary damage to such indigenous societies is the means the State adopted, which the Church in Canada accepted, to bring such 'modern' education to Indigenes.