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**MISSIOLOGICAL EDUCATION  
FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY**

*The Book, the Circle, and the Sandals*

**Essays in Honor of Paul E. Pierson**

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## *The Training of Missiologists for an African Context*

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The formulation of suggestions or especially the development of a program for the training of missiologists for an African context depends on the answers one gives to the following questions: Are the missiologists to be trained Africans or non-Africans? What is Africa, particularly in relationship to Christian mission in the continent in the twenty-first century?

The preceding questions are, of course, interrelated, for the personal identity of the missiologist determines, to a large extent, the characteristics *he or she* ascribes to Africa. This, in turn, raises questions such as: What should be the ancillary disciplines of missiology for an African context? Should we expect Africans to be consumers of mission or producers of mission and full participants in it?

With the foregoing in mind, I will explore issues related to the training of missiologists for an African context by endeavoring to answer the following two questions: What is Africa? What missiology is necessary for twenty-first century Africa?

### WHAT IS AFRICA?

What is Africa to me? So asked Countee Cullen in his poem "Heritage." *One need not be an African American, one or three centuries removed from the African continent, to seek an answer to the question, What is Africa? The peculiar and strange way in which the continent is perceived in the*

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world today and its marginalization by the West result from answers given to the question raised here. What Africa is to most non-Africans is what they are told about the continent or what they read about it. This is usually limited to the superficial, the sensational, and the exotic. It is no secret that the Western press, for instance, focuses its interest in Africa on "the coups, the starving refugees, the monumentally mismanaged governments, the ugly dictatorships" (White 1992, 52). For example, *Time* "honored" the continent by devoting much of the September 7, 1992, issue to "The Agony of Africa." One sentence seems to sum it all up: "Nowhere is there a continent more miserable" (Morrow 1992, 40). Misery and despair, we are led to believe, are the chief characteristics of Africa. Is it any wonder that the continent's inhabitants are perceived as helpless children or junior members of the human race and in constant need of benevolent care?

In the last one hundred years or more, Africans have seen a plethora of adventurers and philanthropists, religious or otherwise, come and go. Some have risen to the status of hero in the West because of their African experiences. Yet all their efforts seem to have availed little for the continent. Africans are still poor and languishing. Indeed, Africans have been aware of their own vulnerability for some time (see N'Diaye 1979). One wonders: Is Africa only good for promoting outsiders to hero status?

Christian mission agencies have for a long time recruited workers for Africa on the basis of the continent being "the land of deepest, darkest, heathen night."<sup>1</sup> The belief that Africa is the target par excellence of mission could be the religious expression of the phenomenon mentioned above. How could it be otherwise when so many people easily associate material deprivation, technological simplicity, color of skin, and spiritual need? Since Africans are the poorest of the poor, since Africa is inhabited by dark-skinned backward people, it must follow that Africans are most in need of missionizing. This kind of missiology has been with us for a long time, is still too much with us, and is not about to disappear. Witness one of the current missiological slogans: The poor are the unreached and the unreached are the poor. Such a slogan is supported by research (or what is presented as research) summarized in this statement: "There is a remarkable overlap between the fifty poorest countries of the world and the least evangelized countries of the world" (Bush 1990, 7). And, as we all know, since Africa has the highest number of the world's poorest countries, would Africa not logically be a place where the unreached are found? When both trainers and trainees in missiology are convinced of this, an inevitable link between mission and charity develops. Missiological training and training for charitable work become synonymous. I contend that this has been an important aspect of missiological training for Africa and it comes out of definitions of Africa.

Why, you say, do I go out on a limb to make you uncomfortable? I do so because missiological education, like any education, begins with language learning. As Lesslie Newbigin reminds us, "We have to learn a language in

which to express what we think we have learned, and the language is itself the form of our knowing" (1991, 32). The language of missiology, in spite of adjustments here and there, has remained substantially the same since William Carey. We remember that, for Carey, the inhabitants of "the greatest part of Africa, the island of Madagascar, and many places besides" were "in general poor, barbarous, naked, pagan, as destitute of civilization, as . . . of true religion" (1891, 63). Since Carey's book was first published in 1792, we have been using the same language in missiological descriptions and training for two hundred years. The time has come, it has more than come, to change this language, the first tool of missiological training. This is particularly crucial for the training of missiologists for an African context.

The language of our missiology has prevented us from taking seriously the significant Christianization of Africa that resulted from more than one hundred years of missionary and other Christian witness. We know, thanks to the work of Barrett and others, that Africa is Christianity's most fertile soil. Yet we find it difficult to train missiologists for the African context in any other way than viewing the continent primarily as an object of mission. We do not take the time to reflect on the contradiction inherent in viewing the African continent simultaneously as a place with vital Christianity and as the continent most in need of missionizing. That may be the reason why significant African participation in global mission is usually greeted with skepticism or condescension: how can the recipients of charity provide charity to those who do not need it?

The linkage of mission and charity has turned our attention away from the essential focus of Christian mission, namely, the passionate call to all peoples to turn to the true and living God, the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ—regardless of whether they are poor, rich, ignorant, learned, dark-skinned, or light-skinned. What is urgently needed in Africa is missiological training that will liberate African Christians from perceiving themselves solely as recipients of mission. For it is increasingly difficult to hold these two convictions simultaneously: Africa should be a primary target of mission; African Christianity has remarkable vitality. For this raises the inevitable question: why do we not expect this vitality to result in major African involvement in mission? Surely Christian mission will continue in Africa as in other continents. Missiological training for Africa must nonetheless prepare African Christians to be responsible and full participants in global mission.

What then is Africa? For missiologists in the twenty-first century the answer will have to be that it is a continent just like any other continent of this planet. Missiologists will have to heed the words of Chinua Achebe and "see Africa as a continent of people—just people, not some strange beings that demand a special kind of treatment. [Because] if you accept Africans as people, then you listen to them" (1989, 335). In my judgment, listening before speaking is the first act of sound missiology; it must therefore be

incorporated into missiological training. Listening enhances the possibility of reflection. Missiological training which includes serious reflection will *prevent the practice of mission from being mere activism*. Christian mission in Africa in the twenty-first century will need to be more than Christian activism if it is to contribute to making qualitative and permanent impact on African Christianity.

### WHAT IS MISSIOLOGY FOR TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY AFRICA?

Missiological education for Africa in the twenty-first century will depend on what kind of missiology one envisions for the continent in the coming century. In general, missiology will have to be done in a perspective of taking Africa and Africans seriously. Taking Africans seriously means that missiologists consciously will have to rid themselves and other Christians of the sequels of the theology of curse which has informed much of the evangelization of Africa in the past (Mbembe 1988, 41-42). Those who are charged with training missiologists for the Africa of the twenty-first century will have the grave responsibility of preparing them to deal with the multiple challenges of Christian life and ministry in the continent. Some of the challenges missiology will face in Africa in the twenty-first century are intellectual probity, theological grounding and responsibility, spiritual fervor and credibility, rethinking the ancillary disciplines of missiology, and making Christianity count in the moral, political, and economic rehabilitation of the continent.

*Missiologists trained for twenty-first century Africa will need to develop and sustain intellectual probity.* According to Achille Mbembe, the mediocrity of the intellectual formation of African clergy is undeniable (1988, 175-76). A similar observation can be made about African missiologists in general. This is so despite the increase of advanced credentials in missiology granted to Africans and other missiologists working in the continent. The fact is that credentials alone do not create intellectual probity. They may, in fact, *produce the opposite result. Intellectual probity is manifested through characteristics such as competence, courage, creativity, and patient discipline.* These characteristics can be acquired by all missiologists regardless of the level of training.

The lack of intellectual probity causes African Christianity in general, and its missiology in particular, to suffer from what Mbembe calls ready-made thought (1988, 50). Missiological training institutions do, of course, *share part of the responsibility for that. All of them, whether they are within Africa or outside the continent, should be careful not to just satisfy people's need and desire for degrees and other credentials.* In this respect the ability to do critical reflection, analysis, and synthesis is more crucial for African missiologists than the mastery of the various missiological theories and strategies currently proposed. Without intellectual probity African and other

missiologists will continue to be unable to deal seriously with the specific issues of Christian mission in Africa.

A major component of the training of missiologists for an African context should be devoted to theological study, reflection, and grounding. By this I do not mean that we need to devote more time and attention to biblical and theological justification of mission. Rather, we need to train missiologists to be competent in theology and biblical teaching. I am advocating the view that missiologists in Africa must be full theologians. If missiologists were competent theologians, missiology would cease to be relegated to the practical side of the theological curriculum. This viewpoint is shared by my friend and colleague missiologist from Mali, Yiranou Traoré. In a recent letter he made this unsolicited suggestion: "In your courses in missiology, you must insist on the fact that the missionary needs to take biblical teaching seriously."

Theological grounding and responsibility in the training of missiologists for Africa mean that missiological training institutions should not dismiss hastily the so-called classical theological curriculum. Specifically, familiarity with the biblical languages, acquaintance with the history of Christian thought including systematic theology, and ability in hermeneutics will be of utmost importance.

Missiologists trained for an African context need to have spiritual fervor and credibility. It is true, of course, that spiritual fervor and credibility cannot be taught or created on demand; they must be demonstrated by example. That is why institutions of missiological training must be more than factories producing people equipped with techniques and a body of knowledge. They must be communities where spiritual fervor is valued. But the spiritual fervor must be credible. In other words, spirituality which fails to relate to the world as it is today cannot be credible. Let missiologists, in this regard, learn lessons from the renewed vitality of African "traditional" religions. As in other continents, "old" religions are resurgent because, in the eyes of the people, they seem to relate better to ordinary life and spirituality. Raymond Deniel reports these words uttered by a Catholic layman in Abidjan: "Our [Catholic] religion is made of advice for us to follow so that we can be well in heaven tomorrow" (1975, 190). We fail to prepare people to communicate "the whole counsel of God" as long as our missiological training teaches them to promote a Christianity good only "for heaven tomorrow."

Some may view the opinions expressed here as a particularly harsh and negative evaluation of African Christianity. After all, there is ample statistical evidence that all sectors of Christianity are experiencing numerical growth in Africa. But the numerical increase of a religion cannot, in and of itself, constitute proof of its spiritual vitality and relatedness to people's ordinary life. The religious scene of contemporary Africa resembles the selling and buying of insurance. Multiple religious affiliations, like buying several insurance policies for various purposes, are common. Consequently, people

may choose to identify themselves with a form of Christianity for reasons other than those envisioned by the communicator of the Christian message. Missiologists trained for Africa must therefore be equipped to communicate and deepen the Christian faith in the total religious context of the continent. Such a preparation may help them articulate ways of developing Christian spiritual fervor and credibility in keeping with the concerns of the general public.

- In the twenty-first century missiology will need to promote vigorously the study and living of Christianity in Africa in the total religious and socio-political context of the continent. This raises the question of the ancillary disciplines necessary for such a missiology. Anthropology has been the obvious ancillary discipline to missiology for a long time. The dialogue between missiology and anthropology has had positive as well as negative results. On the positive side, for instance, anthropology has helped missiologists develop techniques for the cross-cultural communication of the gospel. On the negative side, an "anthropology-based missiology . . . tends to reduce everything to 'the West and the rest'" (Bediako 1992, 6).

Since "the West and the rest" missiology cannot adequately prepare non-Western missiologists, the ancillary disciplines of missiology must be expanded especially for Africa. The curriculum for training missiologists for an African context must be expanded to include, among other disciplines, African history, sociology, urban studies, political thought, African philosophy, Islamics, and African literature. African as well as non-African missiologists will benefit greatly from such a multidiscipline-based missiology.<sup>2</sup> In addition, such a missiology is the only responsible way to address the numerous publics of contemporary post-colonial Africa as opposed to a missiology which is only helpful in dealing with so-called traditional Africa.

Missiologists trained for the African context must be able to articulate ways of making Christianity count in the moral, political, and economic rehabilitation of the continent. In order to do so, they will need to reflect seriously on suffering in the African experience, and they will also need to rediscover dignity in poverty.

Africa, more than any other continent on earth, is in need of healing in all its dimensions. Her sons and daughters have endured untold suffering and humiliation. One wonders, with Kwame Bediako, "Why has there been so little reflection in African Christian thought so far, on the African collective experience of suffering?" (1992, 3). Could it be that a certain kind of triumphalist missiology has successfully marginalized the theology of the cross and suffering? Yet suffering has been part of the experience of God's people throughout the centuries. Indeed, pagan "people are not only persuaded by the triumphs of Christianity, but also by its trials" (A. Anderson 1990, 73). If serious reflection on suffering were part of training missiologists for the African context, African Christians would be able to show how the continent's problems can be dealt with realistically. For they would be able

to demonstrate how God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—sustains them through life's tragedies even in the absence of visible and immediate success.

- Since the suffering of the continent is related to its poverty when compared to other continents, missiologists trained for the African context will need to do more than pity Africa or be ashamed of being "poor black men." Equipped with solid biblical and theological evidence, they will have to show how poverty is no shame for the poor. They will courageously unmask the hypocrisy of those who seem to pity the people while simultaneously deriding them and doing little to change the situation. They will warn all Christians of how easy it is to seek to missionize through gold power rather than God's power.

Africa has three characteristics that can be the basis for new directions in missiological theory and practice in the twenty-first century. First, the continent is enjoying unprecedented Christian growth. Second, the Christians share with other Africans the experience of suffering. Third, Africans lack the obvious means of power, particularly that of money. The convergence of these three factors provides missiologists in Africa with the greatest challenge and opportunity: the power of the gospel does not depend on the earthen vessels which carry it. The training of African missiologists for the African context will therefore be a laboratory for elaborating a missiology from the wretched of the earth.

The training of non-African missiologists for the African context will differ slightly from the above. The ideas expressed above apply to them. But since they are outsiders to the continent, their training needs to prepare them to recognize the fact that in cross-cultural Christian service, as in any Christian service, the first priority is respect for, appreciation of, and love for people. The cross-cultural dimension of their work should not cause them to think that cultural sensitivity and learning about different customs take precedence here. After all, culture is not independent of people. One does not become a neighbor to people by studying their customs; rather, closeness comes with sharing and mutual respect. As Gérard Toffin reminds us, one does not draw near people by understanding their customs; they remain distant and closed before and after the study (1990, 210). Consequently, missiological training for Africa that succeeds only in explaining customs and cultures will remain inadequate. One thing is certain: missiologists cannot continue to be trained for Africa as they have been up to now. I have tried to sketch here major aspects of what may be involved in training missiologists for Africa in the twenty-first century.

### Notes

1. For instance R. S. Roseberry of the Christian and Missionary Alliance states that A. B. Simpson's poem "Meet Me in the Dark Soudan" "became the rally song of the pioneers" of Alliance mission efforts in West Africa (*The Niger Vision*. Har-



risburg, PA: Christian Publications, Inc., 1934, p. 6). Note especially these two lines from Simpson's poem: "Land of deepest, darkest, heathen night, Thou shalt yet be called the Land of Light."

2. In this regard, Basil Davidson's recent book, *The Black Man's Burden* (New York: Times Books, 1992) should be required reading for all missiologists interested in Africa.