



Contemporary ethical challenges in missionary literature: faith, power, and globalization

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Abstract: This article discusses the ethical concerns arising from missionary texts today, particularly the relationships between faith, power, and globalization. Through a critical analysis of key texts, including the works of Edward Said, Gustavo Gutiérrez, Leonardo Boff, and Mercy Amba Oduyoye, the study shows the way the historical legacies of colonialism and cultural hegemony still influence the missionary engagements from the past to the present. The role of globalization in the reconstruction of missionary narratives is the subject of consideration. It is especially so with respect to how it redefines the concepts of faith and identity in the context of a globalized world. Besides, the paper reviews the current ethical debates, like environmental issues, human rights, and gender justice, that are very important to the modern faith-based missions. The methodology utilized includes interdisciplinary approaches, which are post-colonial theory, liberation theology, and feminist critique as well as to highlight how missionary literature deals with these global ethical issues in detail. Finally, this paper provides a subtle comment on the changing role of missionaries in the 21st century, emphasizing a more ethically aware and culturally sensitive approach to missions as the world changes rapidly.

Keywords: missionary ethics, globalization, power dynamics, faith-based missions, cultural hegemony, identity transformation.

1. INTRODUCTION:

In the reshaping battlefield of the global discourse, the faith, power, and ethics standing in the missionary literature is a very interesting topic for academic inquiry. This paper plans to analyse the present-day writers' viewpoint on the ethical issues that are connected to the missionary work especially in relation to the globalization. We shall see through the lens of writers such as Philip Jenkins in *The Next Christendom* and Lamin Sanneh's *Whose Religion is Christianity?* how the ancient missionaries condemned or justified the power shift between missionary organizations and the communities they served through the literary works. These texts stress the still-disputed problem of cultural imperialism and religious outreach and the question of the moral limits of missionary work in a society that has been increasingly pluralistic. (1)

Moreover, the fact that globalization accelerates the process by which traditions and ideologies intermingle makes it more complicated with respect to the ethical framework of faith-based missions. Works such as *Christianity, Globalization, and Social Change* by John Witte Jr. and Frank Alexander reflect on the missionaries' predicaments in convincing themselves to maintain their religious beliefs and to respect the indigenous people's beliefs. The ethical implications of these interactions, whether through environmental concerns or human rights arguments, make missionary literature a very important medium of communication for the discussion of contemporary moral issues. By the comparison of the authors' depictions of these dilemmas, this paper will present a broader perspective on the morality of missionary work in the contemporary era. (2)

2. LITERATURE REVIEW:

The analysis of ethical dilemmas in missionary literature cannot be done without first creatively having an engagement with a heterogeneous range of scholarly works that deal mainly with faith, practice, and power in their relationship to globalization. One of the major prerequisites to this is Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism*, which is a postcolonial critique of the way missionary and colonial enterprises were intertwined. Said's work is important in the discussion of the relationship of colonialism with missionary literature, as he emphasizes the impact of Western cultural dominance on the making of the stories of religious missions. The *Civilising Subjects* of Catherine Hall develops this



idea further by showing the way missionaries were the agents of empire as well as the moral reformers, thus, the contradictions in their roles are brought to the fore.

Similarly, liberation theology which is the topic of the discussions regarding the ethics of missionary work is one of the major points and the book *A Theology of Liberation* by Gustavo Gutiérrez serves here as the main reference point to the faith and social justice intersection. Gutiérrez advocates a theology that is on the side of the oppressed instead of the traditional missionary models which used to justify the oppression. In the same way, Boff's *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor* which emphasizes the importance of the ecological ethic in the mission work is linked with the exploitation of the weak and thus, missionary ethics is extended to include the corrective of creation.

The works of Lamin Sanneh *Translating the Message* have brought to light the contributions of African theologians to the discussions on the cultural dynamics of missionary work. Sanneh criticizes the imposition of Western religious practices and promotes a mission model that sees the indigenous cultures as the equal partners in the engagement of theological translation that will enable Christianity to be rooted in non-Western contexts. This paradigm is crucial to the current debates on the power relations in missionary engagements, where the issues of cultural hegemony remain the central topic.

Feminist theologians like Mercy Amba Oduyoye, who mostly concern themselves with the issues of gender-related ethical problems in the missionary activities, in her work *Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy*, raise this issue. Oduyoye condemns not only the patriarchal structures within missionary organizations but also the cultures in which they operate, calling for missionaries to tackle the issues of gender justice. Her work has been an important factor in reshaping the ethical conversations about gender by emphasizing the necessity for a more inclusive and egalitarian approach to missions.

The literature also represents the influence of globalization on the current missionary practices. Philip Jenkins' *The Next Christendom* and Jehu Hanciles' *Beyond Christendom* study the ways of how the Christian global movement has transformed the centre of faith from the West to the Global South along with the geographical changes.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

The strategy used in this article is based on the critical evaluation of both primary and secondary sources that explore the issue of religion, ethics, and globalization in missionary literature. By using (postcolonial theory, liberation theology, and feminist scholarship) I took an interdisciplinary approach to analyse missionary ethics from different perspectives. Using the primary texts such as Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism* and Gustavo Gutiérrez's *A Theology of Liberation*, we were able to comprehend the historical and theological contexts in which power dynamics and ethical dilemmas arise in missionary work. The work of contemporary thinkers such as Leonardo Boff and Mercy Amba Oduyoye also allowed for a thorough examination of how ecological, human rights, and gender issues have influenced the ethical landscape of current missions.

The methodology also consisted of a comparative literary analysis of missionary narratives from different cultural contexts, examining the way these texts have shown the changes in power and cultural exchange around the world. So, the article proposes an integrative viewpoint that just does not criticize the model of historical mission but also offers ethical frameworks for contemporary practice. This all-encompassing method, which involves both textual analysis and ethical critique, made it possible to understand the changing role of missions in the 21st century in a complete manner.

4. FAITH AND MISSIONARY ETHICS IN A GLOBALIZED WORLD :

Missionary work in the past has earned its status of having close centuries-long affiliation with the growth of religious faith as well as the rise of political, economic, and cultural power, thus it is historical to be called so. The early Christian missionaries who courageously went into pagan territories with accompanying more organized missionary work during the colonial period were the ones who delivered the culture across. Authors like David Bosch in *Transforming Mission* have provided the historical picture of the changing model of mission, and illustrated how it has been relevant in diverse socio-political situations. (3)

Bosch notes that starting missionary work was under a strong divine order, which sought not only to change people but also to change the whole societies. It was this way of thinking that sometimes-misinterpreted missionary endeavours as a one-way transfer of knowledge and faith, which, although primarily motivated by religion. The publication of Andrew F. Walls in *The Missionary Movement in Christian History* also contributes to this dynamic relationship between faith and culture, when he points out that missionaries were not only carriers of the religious but also agents of cultural change. (4)

In the midst of globalization and the exchanging of cultures, the missionaries' moral stances have become more and more crucial, especially when all cultures and belief systems seem to have peacefully coexisted. The missionaries



often functioned under the false assumption that their religious beliefs were better than their counterparts, leading the missionaries to adopt the same stance. Nevertheless, the world that is more inclined to cultural diversity and pluralism can no longer subscribe to this assumption and it has been questioned. Moral dilemmas in faith-based missions have been detailed by Paul G. Hiebert in *The Gospel in Human Contexts*, where he argues that the conflict between the desire to share one's faith and the need to respect the independence and cultural identity of the people being evangelized creates ethical dilemmas. Hiebert asserts that missionaries ought to tackle the dilemma of how to evangelize without imposing their worldview which has become a more serious issue in this era when cultural sensitivity is crucial. (5)

The ethical challenges of today's missionaries have considerably widened, as they encompass not only the problems of cultural imposition but also the issues of justice, human rights, and environmental protection. On the one hand, liberation theologians such as Gustavo Gutiérrez who in the book *A Theology of Liberation* have for a long time been calling that the missionary work be in line with the struggles of the oppressed and marginalized have the view that the missionary work is to be with the oppressed as well. This outlook imposes a lot of ethical queries regarding the missionaries' role in the situations where faith-based initiatives may be in conflict with the local traditions or the economic interest of the people. Besides, the ecological issues brought up in the book by Leonardo Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, the missionaries are also challenged to look peacefully at the environmental cost of their work. (6)

In connection to the historical and ethical plight, it appears that missionary work is a multifaceted matter religiously aside. Rather, the issues are very much linked to the temporal ethical, cultural, and political dynamics. The diverse case studies of Bosch, Walls, Hiebert, Gutiérrez, and Boff make clear that missionary practice is changing with the broader societal changes, and its ethical aspects have become more sophisticated. Now, faith-centered missions find themselves in a worldwide environment where cultural interchange is ever-present and the demand for moral introspection is more often. The challenge to missionaries is to find methods to communicate their faiths that respect the spiritual and material circumstances of the people they are trying to save and will not be mimicking the colonialist attitudes of the past. (7)

5. POWER DYNAMICS IN MISSIONARY ENGAGEMENTS :

Mission work alongside the colonies, and it is one of the central topics in the history of this process, which reveals the underlying power that is established in the course of the religious and cultural encounters. Missionaries often first of all set foot on foreign lands with colonial forces around the globe, acting not only as religious emissaries but also as the empire's agents whether purposely or not. This conjunction of spiritual and imperial motives is very clearly depicted in Edward Said's works, whose *Culture and Imperialism* argues that missionary accounts were part of the colonial project. (8)

The interpretation of Said reminds that the mission field wasn't merely the place for their conversion to a certain religion but also a place where the Western progressive and civilizational ideas were imposed on the indigenous populations. In addition, the work of Catherine Hall *Civilising Subjects* highlights how British missionaries in the 1900s were behind both the teaching of the Christian faith and the promotion of European culture, which often was the reinforcement of the colonial structures they were supposed to rise above. The colonial past of missionary work, thus, cannot be treated as an isolated phenomenon but is rather indissolubly linked to the asymmetrical power relations that characterized these encounters and have left a mark on both the colonized and the colonizers reminiscent of a ghostly imprint. (9)

This colonial legacy becomes even more complicated with the meeting of religion and cultural hegemony that is, the spreading of Christian faith along with the erasure or marginalization of local traditions. Actually, missionaries who deigned to take their faith to other peoples were typically imbued with a paternalistic attitude and this was their blind conviction. In *Missionary Encounters*, Patrick Harries emphasizes that in Africa missionaries wanted to reshape the cultural practices of the people to be in line with the European norms if they did not want to be converted. The reason for this cultural hegemony was not an incident nor a mere outcome but it was a conscious strategy intended to create communities that would be similar to the Western Christian ideals. The imposition of Western cultural values was not only a matter of language and dress but also of social organization which was justified on religious grounds since the missionaries believed that the adoption of these practices would bring moral and spiritual development. Nevertheless, this duality of the religious and the cultural hegemony was a major cause of the deep-rooted opposition because the local people believed it to be a threat to their cultural identity. Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is a very apt example of the negative results of missionary intrusion and how it causes a division between the spiritual beliefs of the people and the community's life. (10)



Power imbalances ethics are definitely one of the key issues that the scholars and practitioners associated with faith missions are dealing with currently. The question of missionaries relating to other cultures without the dynamics of domination is a steady dilemma for the whole world. In *Christian Mission and Modern Culture*, Stanley Hauerwas stresses the importance of humility and respect in missionary activities, which in them, faithful obedience order to the learning first and experimentation later rather than imposition and imposing. This needs to be a critical inquiry on whether or not missionary efforts can be instruments for the preservation of the colonial patterns of power, sometimes even though in a subtle way or without any intention. The need of the missionaries to recognize the freedom and the independence of those who they desire to evangelize is, first of all, pointed out by Kwame Bediako's *Theology and Identity*, thus, a model of mission that is based on dialogue should be used instead of conquest. The ethical obligation of confronting power imbalances is not only about being free from harm but also is to build up true relations where faith can be shared without any coercion or exploitation. (11)

Being aware of and familiar with the moon's topic, the issue of power between missionaries and missionaries is still a difficult and disputed one. The colonial legacy, the intersection of religion and cultural dominance, and ethical issues related to the power of these imbalances are not only historical topics but also, they are still the part that the practice and the perception of the missionary works are nowadays. Since the missionaries are facing a globalized world which is nowadays more aware of its colonial heritage than ever, the need for confronting and redressing these power dynamics becomes more pronounced. The writers like Said, Hall, Harries, Hauerwas, and Bediako are the ones who are primarily providing the most critical perspectives on the alternative ways of understanding and solving the mentioned problems. They also propose ways of ethical and equitable missionary engagement that preserve the dignity and autonomy of all people. (12)

6. GLOBALIZATION AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF MISSIONARY LITERATURE :

The effects of globalization on missionary literature of today have been notable such that the faith stories told today have been reformed in different ways over many cultures. Interconnectedness and the exchange of cultures through globalization are the reasons why the conventional missionary paradigms have been changed. So, authors now present the relationship between faith, culture, and identity in a different way. Writers like Jehu Hanciles in the *Beyond Christendom: Globalization, African Migration, and the Transformation of the West* book discuss the idea that the movement of people and ideas across borders has resulted in new forms of missionary engagement. Hanciles states that global migration has changed the definition of missionary work, where missionaries are no longer only Western, but rather, come from the Global South. The old colonial models of mission are thus disrupted by this transformation and new narratives come in that show a more complicated, multi-directional exchange of faith. In this regard, contemporary missionary literature is frequently confronted with the problem of the preservation of religious identity and the adaptation to the realities of a globalized world. (13)

The tales that arise from this globalization are not only about the activity of evangelism but also about the apparent effects of the faith in a world where cultural borders are becoming less and less important. *In God is Red*, a theologian from China, namely Wang Yi, discusses the difficulties of Christian missionaries in China where the link of faith and political identity becomes more complicated in a global context. Wang's work demonstrates that the win of China on the global arena has added new demands on missionaries who are torn between state control and the desire for religious freedom. The latter, on the other hand, places new demands on missionaries who are torn between state control and the desire for religious freedom. (14)

The *New Faces of Christianity* by Philip Jenkins, on the other hand, is concerned with the fact that Christianity is growing in places like Africa and Asia, thereby, missionary literature is being changed to include the voices and experiences of non-Western Christians. Jenkins points out that the faith stories that are arising from these places are often in discord with the two pressures of sticking to the old religious tradition and facing the globalization forces, which are both the cause of the opportunities and the challenges for the faith practice. (15)

Faith and a sense of belongingness are the two sides of a coin in a globalized world where multiculturalism has made religious belief flexible. Peter Beyer analyses within *Christianity in the Modern World*, how the global connection has redefined the religious identity of individuals and communities who are now dealing with a plurality of the influences. Beyer argues that through the process of globalization believers are caught up in a never-ending activity of redefining their religious identity as the cultural and social environments around them keep changing. (16)

This dynamic is witnessed in the texts of authors like Kwok Pui-Lan, her *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* for example deals with how missionary literature relates to faith, gender, and postcolonial identity. Pui-Lan's writings demonstrate that the global context makes both the missionaries and the people they are sent to evangelize face issues of identity that are very much connected to the history of colonialism and the realities of globalization. (17)



Therefore, the conversion of the missionary literature in a globalized world should not be taken as only the spread of the Christianity but rather as the interaction of the faith with the multifaceted identities of the people who are involved in the mission. Globalization has paved a space in the world where the religious stories are required to be able to face the complexities of identity in a world where cultures are always coming together. Hanciles, Wang Yi, Jenkins, Beyer, and Pui-lan are writers who touch on this transformation in their pieces. They provide a world in which faith is not bound to specific cultural boundaries but is a flexible force that morphs to fit the realities of a globalized world. The missionary literature's current task is to portray the nuance of this global interplay in which faith and identity are constantly reshaped by the larger forces of globalization. (18)

7. CONTEMPORARY ETHICAL DEBATES IN MISSIONARY LITERATURE:

Throughout the years, missionary work in literature has been getting more complicated in terms of ethical variability, just like the moral dilemmas of environmental degradation, the respect for human rights, and gender equality which are almost the same in faith-based missions have been getting more complicated over time. Spirituality and environmental concerns were first married but have now become the hottest subject among the people as the ecological crises become more and more serious. *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor* is a work of art by Leonardo Boff that illustrates the Christian mission in ecology in which, according to that ecologist, the preservation of the earth is a matter of the Holy Church's exclusively spiritual mission. Boff argues that environmental degradation is a crime not only against the creation but also, it is an ethical issue for the disadvantaged who are the ones most affected by climate change. (19)

Thus, this viewpoint pushes the missionary literature to be eco-focused, as a consequence, a wider rethinking of the current mission practices that, in the past, were too close to harmful development projects should be applied. The correlation of environmental concerns with spirituality allows for missionaries to not only deal with the theological issues but also deal with the wider social and environmental conditions which, therefore, leads to the development of a mission ethic that includes the care for creation as the most important part of the spiritual responsibility. (20)

The correlation between the human rights and the faith-based missions is yet another moral question that has been a tricky one to solve which has been the topic of the hot debates among the missionary literature. On the one hand, there is a considerable number of the missionaries who are supporting the social justice and the protection of human rights which are based on the theological basis of human dignity. The works of Gustavo Gutiérrez that were influenced by liberation theology are reflected in this respect. He is known for his *A Theology of Liberation* book that is one of a mission that is in line with the background of the poor and marginalized, coupled with the Christian duty to resist the oppressive and injustice system. Nonetheless, the human rights support is sometimes in conflict with the traditional customs and the laws. Consequently, missionary literature has the ethical dilemma of how to stand for human rights without imposing Western norms or disrupting local cultural practices in a paternalistic manner. Lamin Sanneh and other authors in *Translating the Message* discuss this dilemma, arguing that missionaries should differentiate between their commitment to universal human rights and their respect for the cultural autonomy of the communities they serve. The very thin line that separates these two issues gives rise to multifaceted questions concerning the role of faith-based missions in the promotion of justice and the complications of cross-cultural interactions. (21)

Gender-sensitive ethical dilemmas in the era of missionary writing spring to the forefront of gender-related social issues of gender equality or women's rights. The traditional male-centeredness which was the sustaining force of both religious organizations and those cultures where the missionaries worked, was the ever-increasing target of feminist theologians like Mercy Amba Oduyoye in *Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy*. Oduyoye uses her work to argue that sometimes the missionaries can be a little bit contributing to the patriarchal system especially in those societies where gender inequality is already the case. She implores the missionaries to recognize and address the gendered aspects of their work, and to break from the traditional model of evangelism that requires the rethinking of the Church's commitment to women in both the Church and society. (22)

Along with that, the gender issues in mission work should be handled with the same care as the cultural differences, since some local traditions may not be compatible with modern feminist ideals. The missionary literature is then at a crossroad, and it has to answer the question of whether to support gender justice in a culturally sensitive way or not because such a way might either reinforce the reincarnation of patriarchal oppression or western feminist imperialism. The likes of Oduyoye are proponents of practicing a mission that is rooted in women's experience which finally will lead to the creation of a caring attitude that is beyond cultural and religious differences. (22)

These arguments about environmental protection, human rights, and gender equality in missionary literature are the reflections of the global responsibility concept in our time that is getting more and more importance. The works of Boff, Gutiérrez, Sanneh, and Oduyoye are clear evidences of how the missions on religious basis may sometimes end up with complex ethical dilemmas, where spirituality, social justice, and cultural sensitivity are unbreakably intertwined. Such a transformation in ethical considerations makes the missionaries live in a situation of re-evaluation of their global



role and to move beyond the traditional models of conversion and evangelization and to adopt a more global perspective that meets both people and planet needs.

8. CONCLUSION:

Missionary literature ethical issues present a bright picture of missionaries' relation to the world today: it is about the balance between faith, power, human values, and globalization. The missions of power relations domination and resistance are the results of the complex explanations of the historical relationship of colonialism and missionary work, the work of Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism*, and the more complicated discussions of cultural hegemony in Catherine Hall's *Civilising Subjects*. The power relationships, which are still relevant today, can be traced back to the discussions by the authors such as Stanley Hauerwas in *Christian Mission and Modern Culture*, where he calls for a more ethical, dialogical, and respect-oriented missionary approach, which recognizes the agency of those who are evangelized, which is the reason why these discussions are relevant. (23)

As a corollary, the missionary literature that has been converting because of globalization can be observed particularly in the writings of Philip Jenkins and Jehu Hanciles, which portray a world where the faith must go through the mad of cultural diversity and interlinkages. The controversies on environmental ethics, human rights, and gender justice which are fronted by thinkers like Leonardo Boff and Mercy Amba Oduyoye are the reasons why the missions to conform to contemporary global problems are intensifying. Missionaries are not only given the task of sharing their faith but also, they are instructed to engage ethically with issues that are beyond religious scope, thus, the creation of an inclusive spirituality vision that will be adaptable to the diverse realities of a globalized world. Thus, the contemporary missionary literature does give room for the reflection where these ethical problems are deliberated, and it is a call for the reconsideration of the role of faith in a complexly connected and morally complicated world.

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