Missions and Politics

in Malawi

1875-1900

The Theory and Reality of Motivation

It may appear superfluous to say that the sole object and purpose of a missionary is to convert the natives of a foreign country to a recognition of the superior value of the particular article handled by the individual missionary and to lead the native to adopt the same. (1) This definition is very important if we are to understand the crucial role played by Christian missions in Malawi. It also makes it clear that the Christian missions were not the only European agency with presumed superior articles and values they felt the natives should adopt. Here at home, the definition helps us answer the liberal standpoint that nobody should assume that his values are best for all men. With reference to the Christian missions, it has been argued that if the Christian religion was found suitable for European civilization, that was not sufficient cause for Christian missions to assume that it would be equally suitable for African or Asian natives. The argument goes on to say that since these natives had religions of their own and did not invite Christian missions, it must be assumed that they were reasonably satisfied. There are two false assumptions in this view. The first is that the Christian missionary was the only European with articles to sell to the natives. There were in fact other missionaries, who though not of the Christian faith, nevertheless, were as stubborn in their faith as the Christians were.

For instance, using an example from Asia, we know that almost all the major European powers had trade missions in Peking, and that when they failed to convert the natives to an awareness of the superiority of their goods they precipitated the Opium Wars. Another Asian example sounds very much like an exploit from a Christian mission textbook. A representative (or missionary) of the American Flour Milling Companies in Hong Kong was dismayed to find that the natives were satisfied with the taste of rice and did not care for the taste of flour. He immediately ordered thousands of dollars worth of flour and baked little cakes which he gave away for several years. When he felt that the natives had grown used to the taste of flour, he withdrew the free cakes and in 1903 $2,000,000 worth of American flour was sold in China.

The criticism referred to above assumes that the Christian missionary alone was aggressive enough to believe that his style of life was better than that of the natives, and that the natives must be persuaded to adopt his style of life and belief. There were other European agencies who did not have the patience.
of the Christian missionaries. For the sake of profits they were determined to change the style and beliefs of the natives. We are quite certain that there were some people in the West who would have the natives adopt the locomotive, have them gossip round a kerosene lamp rather than by moonlight as their fathers had done before them, and measure their time with a cockoo clock as if there were no more live cocks in the villages. Worse still, the opium wars and the Boxer rebellion show that they were prepared to go beyond the art of peaceful persuasion. (2)

To argue that other agents of European civilization were committing a similar wrong does not justify Christian missions at all. But there is yet another fallacy in the liberal assumption; it is that natives in Africa could have been left alone. The voluntary nature of European governments did not endow them with sufficient power to declare Africa a no-go area. It was widely acknowledged that in view of the desire of Europe to extract the natural resources of Africa, the problem would be to prevent the use of 'the native as a mere beast of burden, to be exploited for the lowest possible wage, or for no wage at all if that were possible'. (3) The Scots missions for their part, had realized that European inroads were inevitable and had determined to meet 'the incoming tide of civilization with a well-instructed army' of Christianized Africans. (4)

Looking at the problem of Christian endeavour, the question first posed is irrelevant. With the full realization that there were other agents already in the field who could not be barred by any power on earth, the question was whether to leave the field entirely to the first group or to encourage a counter-balancing influence.

Unfortunately, the theory behind missionary motivation was not as selfless as might appear at first sight. The Scottish missions to Malawi were largely guided by their Indian experience partly because India had been their earliest field of endeavour and also partly because at the time the mission was proposed (1874) Dr. Alexander Duff of India was the Secretary of the Free Church Foreign Mission Committee. The social and political thinking of the Indian missionaries dominated the mission to Malawi. The first missionary to India to have made a systematic appeal for native evangelization was Dr. Claudius Buchanan in his Christian Researches (1815), a pamphlet widely circulated and published by an inter-denominational organization.

Buchanan advanced two important theories of motivation. He argued that Christian missionaries were vital to the empire in two ways. The colonial civil servant was likely to become disaffected with his home government. Respect for the powers that be is nothing but the restraint of religion. He cited the English mutineers at Madras in 1812 as men who had been virtually pagan for the previous twenty years. With regard to the natives, the Christian religion would form a band between the conquerors and their subjects. He speculated that, rather than sending thousands of English soldiers to Hindustan, the Russians would be more frightened at the prospect of a complete evangelization of India. (5)

This argument is worth special attention, because from the African viewpoint, it is the weakest link in the chain of missionary motivation. It also is
so well documented in the writings of virtually all the greatest missionary thinkers that one cannot avoid getting the impression that at the back of every missionary was a secret desire to add a few souls to God's Kingdom while surreptitiously tacking a few acres to the Brittanic empire at the same time. One of the greatest Scots thinkers in the missionary field was Alexander Duff. Duff was a great champion of an English education in India and a pioneer in the scheme whereby foreign missionaries devoted their time in educating native leadership which in turn would carry on the gospel. Yet Duff preferred that rather than give an English education per se, all education should be Christian or none should be given at all. The reasons are far more revealing in that they corroborate Dr. Buchanan's theory. Duff says that:

If in that land you do give the people knowledge without religion, rest assured it is the greatest blunder, politically speaking, that ever was committed. With unrestricted access to the whole range of our English literature and science, they will despise and reject their own absurd systems of learning. And shaken out of the mechanical routine of their own religious observances...they will certainly become disenchanted, restless agitators, ambitious of power and official distinction, and possessed of the most disloyal sentiments towards that government, which, in their eyes, has usurped all the authority that rightfully belongs to them. This is not a theory, it is a statement of fact. (6)

Duff had also observed that the natives who became Christians were in a way set apart from their own people and for their own survival identified themselves with the British raj. The colonial officials, who had been strongly opposed to native education had become aware of it and so clearly and strongly did this unity of purpose appear that colonial officials looked upon the missions 'as the truest friends of the British government – the staunchest supporters of the British power.' (7)

There was a second argument forcefully put forward by Buchanan and also supported by Duff. The Christian religion, argued Buchanan, was an instrument capable of uplifting the natives from the cruel superstition and economic lethargy they had fallen into. On this, the missions were on firm ground indeed. It is true that the Indians of Gujerati province engaged their intellect in inventing ingenious methods of killing female babies in fear that they would be a burden to their parents in their adult life. Buchanan also set up a research team at Calcutta and between April and September of 1801 counted at least one hundred and fifteen widows burnt at the funeral piers of their farmer husbands. Buchanan did not advocate for abolition by force. He argued that Christian missions should be allowed to penetrate into the interior and by persuasion to attempt to educate the natives in a different fashion. That there was much that could be done by humanitarian agencies in India and Africa is hardly debatable. The fact that critics have pointed out that there were social evils in Europe of equal magnitude as William Booth's In Darkest England shows, should not detract from the genuine motivation of the missionaries to be good samaritans.
Dr. David Livingstone, a Scots missionary who had diagnosed the ills of Central Africa as largely due to the ravages of slave trade, had proposed a three-dimensional approach. Slave trade could only be permanently suppressed by an alternative economic structure based on commerce, Christianity and good government. One of Livingstone's early disciples, Dr. James Stewart, proposed in 1874 to the Free Church General Assembly what in fact became a national memorial to Livingstone:

(He) would now humbly suggest as a truest memorial of Livingstone...an institution (in Malawi) to teach the truths of the gospel and arts of civilized life to the natives of the country...in Central Africa which (which would) grow into a great centre of commerce, civilization and Christianity. And this he would call Livingstonia. (8)

This mission was heterogenous and national in scope. The initial funds came from R. Stevenson (£1,000) and a group of Glasgow merchants while some of the propaganda was done by the arch imperialist Sir Bartle Frere as guest speaker at fund-raising meetings. The Scottish Churches, including the Established Church, either sent in some money or sent a representative. The British government sent Royal Navy Lieutenant E.D. Young to lead the mission for two years. Such a combination of interests, political, economic and Christian brings us face to face with a vexing question – whether Christian missions working under humanitarian and other motives can in the long run be free from political complications. The African and Asian view seems to be that foreign missions are willing and deliberate instruments of imperialism. A moving address by Canadian and American missionaries to China in 1932 reported to the home churches that their very ethical teaching was being challenged by Chinese nationalists, some of whom were their former students for this very reason. The Chinese nationalists suspected that the virtue of humility 'was taught to the Chinese to make (them) subservient to foreigners, so that powerful nations can ride over (them) without opposition...’ (9) Our interest is in the assertion that Christian missions deliberately became instruments of power politics. The International World Missionary Conference at Madras (1938) paid special attention to this political motivation. It reached the conclusion that political involvement was inevitable. The missionary's linguistic and geographical researches are bound to be abused by imperialists whether he chooses or not. Secondly, the circumstances in which the missionary worked had no room for neutrality. Neutrality between two groups is actually support of the stronger group. Above all, the missionary is still a son of his native land, his dress, teaching and mannerisms are often imitated by his converts and needless to say his country is associated with the good (or ill) he has done. The Madras conference concluded that 'it (was) quite impossible for the average man to disassociate himself completely from his native cultural background...’ (10)

There is yet one more theory of motivation which is vexing to the modern mind, the theory that the Christian religion is the ultimate in religion. Professor Kraemer explains the idea thus:
In other words, religions and religion have to be judged from the standpoint of Christian revelation, not the reverse, as we cannot take the reflection of the sun as the standard for the sun itself. (11)

Professor Kraemer adds that notwithstanding the various aspects of truths in world religions, from the Christian view, these religions nevertheless remained aberrations of the true religion, subject to demonic powers and antagonistic to the true God. If one accepted this view, one of the Christian missionary’s motivation is to destroy and build anew. Kraemer confesses that these are Christian prejudices, but they are prejudices which are inseparable from the Christian faith.

With these assumptions in mind, it appears that the invitation extended to the British government in 1889 by the various Scottish missions operating in Malawi could have been expected. Looking back to the period in between 1875-1890, it appeared that the Scots missions had deliberately set out to entice a very large portion of Africa into the British empire, using the Christian mission as a lever. Also, one would expect the beginning of a lasting marriage between the missions and the colonial administration. Both had a mutual interest in the empire and their own existence. But the subsequent history of Malawi from 1890 to 1900 does not show signs of any such connubio. The reality of imperial rule drove the missions into the opposition camp. This paradoxical position taken by the missions we can now trace and examine in some detail. (12) We should begin with fundamental differences of opinion between the missions and Commissioner H.H. Johnston’s administration.

Johnston believed that he had come to keep the Queen’s peace among a host of savage tribesmen. Since his very career would depend on the speed with which he could pacify the country, he could not be expected to have patience with numberless chiefs, in Malawi, every man in charge of a village, considered himself as good as any chief in the land. Coupled with his belief that savages understand only blood and iron, he set about ‘dealing’ with the petty chiefs one after the other, in an endless chain of little wars. Perhaps the third generation of Africans would be tame enough to understand the rule of law, he argued.

The missionaries, who had lived with the Africans for sixteen years before colonial rule entirely disagreed. Their very existence for so long disproved the idea of a bloodthirsty race inhabiting these regions. Nor could they agree with the insinuation that the natives would be sufficiently tamed only in the third generation of European civilization. The Blantyre Mission had found the Africans so civilized and law-abiding that an African school principal had been entrusted with two Scots ladies, far away from any European post, much to the consternation of the European community. Two young Africans Chisuse and Kunje had already been apprenticed to the great printing house of Nelson’s in Edinburgh and were in charge of the mission press at the time of Johnston’s arrival. In fact the Government gazette was printed by an African printer on loan from Livingstonia Mission. (13) As for the general tone of
African society, they had found it democratic. They could not have been more opposed to Johnston’s unconstitutional dealings with Africans. The Blantyre Mission paper stated the case thus:

We ask too for a constitutional mode of dealing with the native around us. The African, if he is anything, is constitutional – no change or step of importance is taken without first open mlandu (debate) in which the opinion of all is fully sought and expressed. We hope to see the same constitutional methods continued in all future changes. (14)

What brought the differences to a head was a triangle of problems, which are inseparable one from the other, land, labour and taxation.

Initially, the Administration genuinely felt that by levying six shillings from every adult African, it could eventually hope to be independent from Rhodes £10,000 p.a. subsidy. But complications soon arose. European settlers argued that unless they had cheap labour in abundance at certain seasons of the year, their coffee enterprises would be ruined. The government saw that the prosperity of a coffee culture might in fact be a permanent answer to the revenue problem. For this reason, the land claimed by European settlers was registered at a penny an acre whether there were Africans resident there or not. If there were Africans resident in these areas planters would be entitled to a certain amount of free labour per annum and the government in return would give a tax rebate to those Africans who had worked for European planters. In the purely African areas, those who could not pay their taxes in cash would be registered for a labour contract with a European planter. Whichever reason one might advance for the tax, in the ultimate analysis it benefitted the planter.

Both the Blantyre and Livingstonia Missions totally disagreed with the whole principle of taxation. Livingstonia Headmaster Henderson complained that the taxes were merely absorbed by the civil service and that nothing would be left for the development of the country. ‘If only we could see some real...good coming out of our taxation, we should not demur, but we don’t.’ (15) The Blantyre Mission developed a systematic case. In the first place, if the average wage of an African was 3s8d per month, a levy of 6 shillings would require at least two months of employment, assuming that he did not spend a penny on food. The attack by the Blantyre Mission was so bitter that the matter was taken up with the Foreign Office. The levy was reduced by half. But even with this partial victory the missions were horrified by the style of law enforcement carried out by the Administration. Those who failed to pay:

...were asked by Englishmen to leave their homes at a day’s notice, provide rations, and march about 150 miles, then to work for one month for his tax...then work another two months for wages, then walk back another 150 miles for nothing and feed himself. This put him away from home for at least four months in the year. (16)
The example above describes the conditions of a labourer who was willing to cooperate. Whether or not the labourer cooperated, the missions resented a government which deliberately created conditions in which its adult male population would have to find work away from home. It also happened that the migrant workers were subjected to a style of life the very antithesis of missionary teaching. Henderson said that—'The first shock comes to these boys in seeing white men entirely ignoring God and living...in open gross sin.' (17) The Blantyre Mission Journal entirely agreed. 'Transportation of labour acts deleteriously both on the labour itself and on the soil and country which is thus deprived of it...and the effects on labour are demoralizing.' (18)

The missions on their part did not appreciate the need for the government to balance its budget at the earliest possible opportunity or that of the planters to make profits at such a speed as to ruin the foundation on which racial cooperation could be built. True to their calling, they visited on the fundamental things of life first. Their arch enemy Johnston came round to their view twenty-five years later. What the missions had put forward as a basis of development was that:

In the scheme of development of this planet it does not pay in the long run to be bad, but it does answer in the long run to be good, to practise the rules of personal and public conduct... (19)

The Blantyre mission confessed that a lasting form of empire could not be hurriedly built but should be based on learning the native languages, cultures, developing native education and the rural economy in such a way that the task of development becomes a cooperative task between the subjects and their rulers. Patience and persuasion would win lasting results. 'We have all along believed that the British government could rule and develop the whole African empire...without striking a blow. We grant that it needs endless tact and patience...' (20)

The missionaries carried their theory to its logical conclusion. Apparently the Administration's labour policy was not intended for the benefit of the Africans. This became obvious when Johnston proposed that the country would be more quickly developed with Asian skilled labour than with African labour. The Blantyre missionaries replied that if such an event were to take place the true benefactor of such a development scheme would not be the African. They then put forward a doctrine which appeared treasonable at the time.

Africa for the Africans has been our policy from the first, and we believe that God has given this country into our hands that we may train its people how to develop its marvellous resources for themselves. (21)

We have so far dealt with the treatment of an African population
reasonably desirous of cooperating with the colonial officials and the anxieties the missions felt on their behalf. There were some, who for one reason or other, felt they could only cooperate to a certain point and no more. One of these was Chief Chimbulanga. Chimbulanga had cooperated with the labour recruiters in the past but had become disillusioned at the treatment meted out to his people while on labour contracts. Food and bedding were not provided and the working conditions as a whole caused some deaths among his people. When, therefore, Government agent John Beswick called at his court for more labourers, he drove him away. The violence that resulted led the Kongwe Mission (Dutch) to take issue with the government. Native Magistrate W.R. Gordon wrote that it more than filled ‘him with disgust to hear such misrepresentations’ from the mission. The government felt so bitter that the Mission was indicted for conspiracy in an attempt to silence all other missions. (22) That the missions had taken upon themselves the role of freedom fighters is shown clearly by the Kendeba incident, a duplicate of the Chimbulanga case. In this case the Scots missionary Alexander Dewar wrote to the magistrate calling the incident ‘a case of pillage, incendiarism and murder, a poor man being shot down cruelly like a dog by one of your men’ sentencing the magistrate to full compensation for the dead African. The magistrate in a report to the Administrator makes clear that the likes of the Dewars were common. ‘Dewar is exactly the type of missionary who considers it his duty to poke his nose...outside his province. ...He has attempted it before (with) the British Central Africa Administration.’ (23)

In the case of Kamtumanja and Malemia, the government agent burnt their two villages and grainaries as well in the hope that the elements of nature would eventually force the Africans to see the necessity of obeying government measures. That the two chiefs went and consulted with H.E. Scott of Blantyre Mission was looked at by the government as conspiring with natives. Nevertheless the exchanges which took place between the government and the mission eventually persuaded the former to give a token trial to natives guilty of similar offences in the future.

A case which lent itself to a semblance of judicial process was that of Chief Malunga. The government accused him of highway robbery but the Blantyre Mission said his real crime had something to do with taxes. Malunga and his people were given a public trial and found guilty. The government then proceeded to burn his village. The government argued that the law had been allowed to take its course and that a judicial sentence had been carried out according to the law. The Blantyre Mission doubted whether the law had in fact been allowed to take its normal course. The mission doubted whether the law and children had also taken part in whatever crime they were found guilty of.

By 1893, Commissioner Johnston had come to the conclusion that the war with the tribal chiefs was easier to handle than the subsequent debates with the missionaries.
The plain fact is that all this trouble arises from the presence in this country of two men, the Reverend D.C. Scott and the Reverend Alexander Hetherwick. (24)

In 1894 Johnston's successor, Alfred Sharpe recalled with bitterness that if Johnston's recommendation that the leading missionaries be deported had been carried out, there would have been less trouble in the colony. He wrote to the Foreign Office:

I am sorry to say that this mission has entirely returned to its old practices...(that of champion of the natives)...the missionaries are taking a course that makes them appear in the eyes of the natives of this Protectorate as an Opposition Party to H.M. Administration. (25)

By way of conclusion, I will suggest that perhaps too much attention has been paid to the motivation of missions in theory without paying sufficient attention to the missions in action. Giving due attention to this side of the picture may give us a more comprehensive view of missionary endeavour. If I were to make a preliminary conclusion on the basis of the material I have, of which this is only part of Chapter One, I would say that the evidence seems to show that the Scottish missions in Malawi were perhaps the major single force in the preparation of African consciousness. It appears that they acted as schoolmasters to African nationalism. That they unwittingly served in this capacity seems to suggest what they themselves call the providential nature of their mission.

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FOOTNOTES

1. Barton, J., The Missionary and His Critics (1908), II.


3. J.H. Morrison, 'First Impression of the Native Question', Free Church Record, 16/1914.


7. Ibid., 18-19.
8. Glasgow Herald, 10/6/1874.
9. These Forty Years – An anonymous address to the Canadian & U.S. Churches (1932), 5.
12. I owe the genesis of my ‘paradoxical’ approach to my apprenticeship under Prof. G. Shepperson & Dr. Andrew Ross of Edinburgh 1967-71.
13. R. Laws to A. Sharpe, 30/11/1894. Also A. Sharpe to Laws 30/11/1894 (MS 7874).
14. Life and Work, November 1891.
17. Pioneers of Modern Malawi, Letter No. 35, 25/7/1897.
18. Life and Work December 1899.
20. Life and Work, December, 1894.
21. Ibid., January, 1895.