

BOOK REVIEW

Kwiyani, Harvey. 2025. *Decolonizing Mission*

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The Malawian theologian Harvey Kwiyani has worked for 20 years in mission in the West (Germany, Switzerland, Austria, and the UK), and from his perspective between countries that used to colonialize others and countries that used to be colonized by others, he states the need to decolonize mission. He writes in the introduction to his book: “The global context of the twenty-first century requires us to think afresh about God’s mission in the world – what it is and how to participate in it. We cannot continue to depend on twentieth-century thinking to shape our twenty-first-century missiology, [because] that missiology falls short in the current postcolonial post-Christendom world of the twenty-first century” (27–28). But there is also a theological need for a decolonized approach to mission: “In a generation or two, it will be black and brown Christians taking the gospel to the ends of the earth. In other words, God’s mission decolonizes” (36).

Kwiyani shows the tight, complex, and highly ambivalent interdependencies between mission and colonization by means of the history of Malawi and its colonization by the British (chapter 1). He introduces a wide range of people with various perspectives on colonialism and slave trade, like David, Agnes, and William J. Livingstone, John Chilembwe, and Joseph Booth. He resumes: “That David Livingstone’s mission station became his daughter’s colonial estate whose managers persecuted local Christians, burning their houses and schools, and forcing them to work on the estate for free, shows the challenges of attaching the mission of God to the mission of empires” (63).

Kwiyani then (chapter 2) takes a close look at the historical and geopolitical situation of Jesus’ life and states: “We cannot effectively begin to understand Jesus or appreciate the movement that he started without paying attention to the overbearing image of the Roman Empire that was the backdrop to everything he did” (81). Kwiyani shows how omnipresent the Roman rule was in the life of Jesus, his disciples, his country, and his time, and how rarely Jesus referred to Rome and the emperor. Kwiyani interprets the whole ministry of Jesus as an attempt to subvert the colonial

and suppressing power of the Roman empire. This is true for Jesus' ministry as well as for the ministry of the disciples he sent out into the world.

After describing Jesus' dealing with the empire, Kwiyanani sketches the Pauline eagerness and desire to preach the gospel in Rome, which he finally did (chapter 3). The author is astonished by the fact that Paul pursued his plan in a radical way, ignoring several prophetic warnings. Next to Paul of Tarsus, Kwiyanani introduces Paul of Thebes (227–341), who went in a different direction from the apostle. Paul of Thebes "is generally considered to be one of the earliest Christian Desert Fathers and thus a pioneer of Christian monasticism" (112). The two Pauls are introduced to show the very different approaches Christian mission can take, and "God used them both, but to some extent the movement that Paul of Thebes started served the wider Christian communities beyond the empire better" (115).

The fourth chapter of the book traces the European expansion to find a sea route to India. The author shows the central role of the Spanish and the Portuguese kingdoms and the papal influence and order to dominate, christianize, and cultivate the people in those newly discovered and conquered worlds. This endeavour includes the American as well as the African continent and shows how deeply interwoven European colonial history, racism, slave trade, and civilizing mission were. This heritage can still be observed: "In the mission communities in the West, there is an obsession with evangelizing people in other parts of the world while ignoring those very people when they find their way to the West. This is a testament to their commitment to mission as civilization" (152).

Since then, the modern term "mission" (and "missionary") can be traced back to Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556); a detailed look at the history and the context of the emergence of the Jesuit order shows how deeply the modern idea of mission is rooted in a militant theological language and ecclesial mindset (chapter 5). The success of the Jesuit mission, Kwiyanani assumes, lies also within power structures: "It was 'mission' because it was done from a position of power. Yes, God sends people, but Jesuits, in addition to being sent by God, were sent by the popes on the popes' missions" (183).

Kwiyanani follows the historical trail of European mission into the nineteenth and twentieth century (chapter 6) and shows how close the missionary endeavours were linked to colonialism and by it with the great migration of Europeans into the world. As a result, thinking and talking about mission as well as doing mission is a matter of trust: "A theology that struggled to critique this unholy union between mission and the European destruction of humankind – for example, Africans, Native Americans, Indians – ought not to be trusted in the twenty-first century" (194).

After exploring the history of mission, Kwiyanani deals with the language of mission (chapter 7) and demands to decolonize the way people talk and write about mission. He states: "Most of our mission language is still shaped not only by Western thinking

but also whiteness" (211-12). One way to do this is to listen to each other and for Western theologians "to realize that there is some good missiology out there that can enhance their own understanding of what God is doing in the world" (213). This proves to be a great challenge, because Western discourses on mission fail "to sufficiently engage voices outside its own white and Western echo chambers" (213). Part of this attempt is to

- a) appreciate non-Western missionary work in every part of the world – even in the West, and
- b) to acknowledge that mission and evangelism happen not only in the South but in the West as well.

The mission initiatives in the West are often undertaken by people from other parts of the world who came as migrants to Europe and the USA. They come from places where, in many cases, many more Christians live than in the West (e.g. Africa). It seems likely that a new era of an African missionary movement is on its way. Kwiyani suggests to decolonize many more terms, like "unreached people groups", "Evangelical mission", and "missional church", because "Western missiology is too small for World Christianity" (253). To listen to World Christianity would entail learning many new perspectives on things like prayer, the Holy Spirit, and the spirits.

An emphasis on the Holy Spirit as the main actor in mission ("Mission is first and foremost a work of the Spirit. Above all else it is a pneumatological adventure", 251) draws a line to chapter 8, where Kwiyani unfolds a mission according to the colonized. By this, his intention is "to discuss some of the critical ways non-Westerners look at the missionary enterprise of the past 200 years, [but he is] not seeking to deconstruct the act of sharing the gospel itself (as some have done)" (269). For this task, he explores how mission appears in African novels in the twentieth century as well as in the theological discourse in the mid-twentieth century. One finding is that for "many Africans, most of what we call 'mission' is simply evangelism and pastoral ministry" (285) and this kind of ministry is not only done by clerical people but also by everyday Christians: "We have what could be called the evangelisthood of all believers in most African countries" (288).

In the final chapter (9), Kwiyani sketches the need for a new missiology. Kwiyani asks a question, which he immediately answers: "'Is the mission of God possible without the help of empires?' I am confident that the sharing of the good news is indeed not only possible without imperial help, but it also works out better without colonialism" (297). He draws his key arguments from the life and fate of Jesus from Nazareth and the history of the Early Church. The power of the gospel (and of the early ecclesial mission) lies in its weakness, vulnerability, and humility. And: From the very beginning at Pentecost, the missionary movement was diverse and multi-cultural: "This ought to be characteristic of mission in the twenty-first century" (300).

The missiologies of the nineteenth and twentieth century do not work for the twenty-first century, and the author suggests to revisit, correct or discard these concepts and create new ones, because a “careful reflection is necessary. We need to learn how to engage in God’s mission among God’s people in God’s world, simply as God’s co-labourers, servants and slaves – with no armies to make the way before us and no empires behind us” (301).

Kwiyani offers an important book for this time in (church) history. In his research and ministry, as well as in his person, he connects Western as well as non-Western perspectives and makes a strong case for a fresh and much-needed new attempt to mission for the twenty-first century. He does this considering God’s mission, embodied in the life, teaching, and fate of Jesus Christ, as well as against the backdrop of Christianity as a current, worldwide, diverse, and multicultural movement. By this, he points to the work for theology and missiology that has to be done in the next decades.

About the Reviewer

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