

Afterword

The Top Shelf in the Bible College Library: More on MTTE after reading Richard Gehman's Afterword in AJET 29.2

by Jim Harries

I attended a Bible college. There were books on the top shelf in the library. When I say 'top shelf', I mean really 'top'. You had to use steps to reach them. No one ever seemed to use them. I asked a librarian about them. "Nowadays no one ever reads those books," I was told. "We don't use those books. They are from last (i.e. the 19th) Century." I started to think; 'You mean, all those people put all that effort into writing all those books about the Bible and about the church in the 19th Century, and nowadays we are told, "no one ever reads them"!' I thought about it. I was a little sad for those enthusiastic authors of a bygone era whose work was later condemned, for a reason that I did not at the time grasp. Once I gingerly climbed a ladder and picked one of those dusty books. The English used was somehow old, but it seemed OK. The book was about the Bible. That seemed good.

How could all the scholars of the 19th Century later be considered 'wrong', I asked myself? Someone told me to read a certain book. On the front of the book was a picture of three White men with their arms around African women. It seems they were their girlfriends. The book was about *desire*. It seemed the wrong kind of book for a Christian to read. I read it anyway. It blew my mind!¹

"It is arguable that race became the common principle of academic knowledge in the nineteenth century" I read.² Later I read another book; "[all] is race ... there is no other truth", it said, quoting someone writing over 120 years ago.³ Wow. Imagine, as recently as the 19th Century people in the UK and America thought that race, i.e. people's skin colour, was the basis for their intelligence. I discovered that even Theodore Roosevelt, one-time US president, said that "superior races" had a right to exterminate "inferior races".⁴

My mind was reeling. The only people standing up for the 'inferior' races were, apparently, the church and the crown.⁵ Great scholars of the time thought that you could only be intelligent and important if you were White and British or American. Everyone else was like a savage. This kind of thinking

¹ Robert, C. Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*, London: Routledge, 1995.

² Young, *Colonial Desire*, p. 93.

³ Domenico Losurdo, *Liberalism: A Counter History*, Translated by Gregory Elliot, London: Verso, 2011, p. 270.

⁴ Losurdo, *Liberalism*, pp. 330-331.

⁵ Losurdo, *Liberalism*, pp. 34.

was one of the “organizing axioms of knowledge in general”.⁶ I was astounded. No wonder people no longer read the books written in the 19th Century. Many of those books were RACIST. That kind of racism was affecting even some books written about the Bible!

‘How could so many great men be so wrong’, I asked myself again and again. Today we say they were wrong. But in that time, they were the heroes, the brainy ones, the academics, the professors, the lecturers, the people writing the books. They got one thing wrong. They thought that people were different because of their blood and not because of their culture. That ‘wrong thing’ means that everything they wrote is now gathering dust on the top shelf!

I realised that very intelligent men and women can write about things, but if they have got one important thing wrong, then all that they have written can be wrong as a result. I still often think about that. I think about it especially when I think about people writing about Africa.

Lots of people are writing about Africa, about the church in Africa, and how to help the church in Africa. Lots of those people who are writing are not born in Africa and do not live in Africa. They do not know Africans very well. But they write anyway, because they want to help. But I am worried; what if these people have got something wrong? I don’t mean about race. Thankfully those days are past. I mean, what if there is something else that they don’t know about? Maybe that thing they might have wrong could mean that in a few years we will have to put their books onto the top shelf and stop reading them? What if in the meantime all of us in Africa who are Africans or who know Africa well are writing in the same way that they are writing, because we just assume that they are right, but no-one actually knows?

English is the mother tongue of UK, America and a few other countries. Those people who use English as mother tongue came from England a few hundred years ago to the USA, Canada, Australia, etc. When we write in English we in Africa have to write in the way that they write. We have to, because we are using their language, so they are telling us how to use it. In fact, when we use their language, it is hard to know what we are actually referring to in our own communities because in our communities we have different ‘categories’ for things. Because of the language we use, British and American people are leading, and Africans are following.

It is good to follow people. Often we can learn a lot from them. But I wonder whether we should be following them in everything? If we spend all our time thinking in their language and saying things in the way that they say them; could it be that we will be putting much less effort into thinking about our own lives, people, and contexts? While we are reading all the books in English to help us pass our exams, are we forgetting to learn how to help people in our

⁶ Young, *Colonial Desire*, p. 93.

own communities solve the problems that they have in the way that they understand them? Can we actually help people in our communities to solve their problems better using a language that comes from thousands of miles away from a foreign people whose culture is so different from ours?

The Bible is uniquely God's word, yes. English is uniquely God's language, no. Yes, we must follow the Bible, and it is important to translate it correctly. Yes, English-speaking people can help us. But, they can also be wrong – especially when they are trying to explain what they do not know about how things work in Africa. Will we just follow them, or are we going to do some of our own thinking in our own languages?

In summary I would like to respond to Gehman by saying; the adoption of African languages in formal theological education on the African continent is really essential for the future health of the church. What we as foreign missionaries can best do is to take African languages very seriously in our own ministries. (Please see many more much more detailed articles about this issue here: <http://www.jim-mission.org.uk/articles/index.html> and elsewhere.)

Bibliography

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[Editor's Note: Speaking with his feet solidly rooted in African soil, Jim Harries repeats his passionately held conviction that teaching theology in Africa in English or any other European language can be unhelpful. And he believes that this unhelpfulness will become obvious to everyone sooner or later, just as white European racial superiority is so obviously wrong to all right-thinking Christians today. We may think we are stuck with colonial languages in theological education for various reasons, but that doesn't make it the right direction! Have we ever seriously considered the possible outcomes of ignoring mother tongue theological education?]