

A Question of Indigenous Mission : the Jamaican Baptist Missionary Society

WHEN the Jamaican Baptists declared their independence from the Baptist Missionary Society of London in 1842, after twenty-eight years of association, the first organisation formed was the Jamaica Baptist Missionary Society. The declaration was most amicable since the British had been invited by the local Baptists¹ to organise and develop the work.² In fact, had it not been for the connection between the two Baptist groups, the Plantocracy might have been successful in suppressing the Jamaican Baptists by the numerous laws enacted with them partly in mind between 1801 and 1831.³

The formation of the J.B.M.S. and the declaration of independence by the Association have been interpreted in several ways. Some Baptist historians have interpreted them as a generous gesture to release the B.M.S. from its financial commitments in Jamaica in order that an African Mission might be promoted. And indeed there exists some evidence that there was a compromise on this point between the two groups.⁴ On the other hand, there also exists evidence that there was hesitancy in the minds of Dendy⁵ and Phillippo,⁶ and when subsequent events are assessed in the light of the financial hardships which the Association in Jamaica had to face, historians like Tucker, in his centennial review of the Mission, suggest that the step was premature.⁷

It is difficult to determine also, how far the decision was "helped" by the B.M.S. using Knibb as its spokesman and how far it sprang spontaneously in an attempt to lay the foundations of an indigenous church. Whatever the motives and the methods, by 1842 the Jamaican Baptists declared their independence, founded a missionary society and, in the following year, built a theological college.

It must not be assumed that the idea of a theological college was new to the church, in fact it had been proposed by Phillippo as early as 1834 in a letter to the B.M.S. secretary. The B.M.S. General Committee were also aware of plans for such a college being prepared in the late '30s and had rejected a gift of land because of the conditions attached.⁸ Nor was the idea of a "native agency" strange, because Carey had proposed and adopted it in India.⁹ *But the combination of mission, independence and college was indeed new in B.M.S. experience.*

Jamaican independence may have been encouraged for many reasons. The B.M.S., influenced by and sensitive to the bias of the commercial interests in British society, had become increasingly aware of India and Africa and shared some of the disenchantment with the West Indies. The pressure built up for Abolition was now on the wane, and Pilgrim's thesis that "the abolitionists increasingly lost

voice" after 1840¹⁰ seems to be borne out by the decline in giving to the Missionary budget.¹¹ But this did not prevent an influential minority from looking towards the West Indies in order to develop "a model" of the Christianised African and by implication to suggest that the West Indian was an African but one step removed.

The rest followed naturally since the black West Indian had never repudiated his kinship with Africa, although there were attempts to suppress it. Indeed the Baptists both in the U.S.A. as well as in Jamaica, had referred to themselves as "poor Ethiopians", and the missionary leaders had accepted this, giving it a moral and religious force with Biblical texts like "Ethiopia shall stretch forth her hands".¹² So the idea of mission to Africa had the element of *repatriation* and *migration* for the black West Indian Christian.

On the other hand, the Missionary societies were easily persuaded to use a West Indian Mission as a test-case. They had become increasingly dependant on this "model" having been convinced that it was right in itself, and due also to the inability of the white man to combat tropical diseases, as well as being influenced very much by an idealized picture of the "noble savage".¹³ But the model was to be broken by two things: (a) the discovery that the West Indian was as susceptible to the maladies of Africa as the white man, and (b) a series of uprisings in the West Indies in the '60s of which the most important was the Morant Bay Rebellion of 1865, of which Bolt remarks, "The Jamaican Revolt was important to most Victorians as a crisis for British liberalism".¹⁴

In spite of the disenchantment of a large body of Christian opinion in Britain another type of mission had been a limited success. In 1843, a group of West Indians under Moravian auspices had settled in Akropong (Ghana) and made a great contribution there.¹⁵ Similarly, there existed stories of West Indians who had returned on *their own initiative*. William Knibb had used Keith, as an illustration in his Exeter Hall oration in May 1840,¹⁶ to stir interest in an organised mission to Africa. There also exist scanty accounts of others motivated by Christianity, as well as for other reasons, to return or to migrate to Africa. Thus mission was conceived in two ways, (a) by the Europeans as a "model", and (b) by the Afro-West Indians as migration or repatriation, an attitude by no means dead in modern Afro-West Indian Society.¹⁷

Meanwhile in Jamaica, independence demanded of the church a development of its own resources and it is interesting that the development was within a synthesis. For most of the twenty-eight years of the Jamaican Baptist Association of the B.M.S., it had to defend its acceptance of the Methodist Class system. But this division of the membership had allowed the missionary to be spread thinly over many congregations and was a means of developing local leadership. The congregational emphasis which might have been good for Britain and its smaller congregations was of little use in dealing with the thousands who filled the Jamaican church centres. Congregational

emphasis would rather have aided the collection of funds from a population not versed in that sort of corporate financing, nor in the dissemination of policy decisions among an illiterate mass. The Class system, on the other hand gave assurance to members in small groups, which was difficult for members lost in the vast congregations, and also in a depersonalised Slave society. Further it allowed on the part of the members maximum participation in church affairs. The Independence of the Jamaican Baptists gave to this structure a new possibility of local participation since the "leaders" of the classes assumed a new status and were their own authority, necessitating that the missionary now refer to them, rather than vice versa. It was this aspect that caused alarm in the State and in the Established Churches. It meant Power to the People!¹⁸

This was not lost on the Baptist missionaries *who committed themselves* to it and thus unconsciously contributed a sense of international interdependence, which may be theologically interpreted as a cosmopolitan Christianity in one place. The curriculum of the theological college illustrates this inter-dependence, or cosmopolitan Christianity.

Joshua Tinson (appt. 1822-1850), the first president of the college, was requested by his missionary colleagues in Jamaica to assume the post. He was appointed and paid by the B.M.S. who entered into a Covenant to continue consultation on the matter until the Jamaican Church considered it unnecessary. Tinson, who had been a local pastor, was committed to a native ministry and said as much, then outlined the studies for such a ministry. In *The Missionary Herald*, February 1848, he reported that at a one-day examination the students had been examined, presumably orally, by Joseph Angus, later to become Principal of Stepney College,¹⁹ in English Grammar, Ancient and Modern History, Theology and Biblical Exposition, and a paper was read on Regeneration.²⁰

Tinson was succeeded by David East (appt. 1850-1903) soon afterwards²¹ and in 1851 the syllabus read:—

First year:

- (a) Valpy's Greek *Delectus*, and the first chapter of John's Gospel.
- (b) Scripture Exegesis.
- (c) Geography—Historical, Physical more especially connected with missionary operations.
- (d) English History.
- (e) The rudiments of Algebra.

In the other three years, the students were expected to attempt a combination of:—

- (a) the first 25 Psalms in Hebrew and the 2nd Chapter of Daniel; Chaldee Grammar.
- (b) 18 chapters of Acts in Greek and all of Romans.
- (c) Horace Odes, Satires and Epistles (Latin); half of *Ars Poetica*.

All students were given a course on the Atonement and Justification by Faith and essays were prepared and handed in on subjects determined by the President. Each student gave in weekly a written sermon for criticism and a weekly sermon class was held in which students preached on "set" texts.²²

When it is remembered that this was thirteen years after Emancipation and that these students were either born as slaves themselves or of freed coloureds, the syllabus creates amazement and the tutors deserve the highest praise for their ideals. Praiseworthy as their faith might have been, encomia ought not to obscure two important motives at work in the church at this time. Tinson, who is an example of one aspect of the church's thinking, was determined to demonstrate that the "liberated black" was as good as his "white" counterpart in academic prowess. This is understandable when we appreciate that Tinson was standing in the tradition of Knibb, who had demonstrated the same thing and convinced the Anti-Slavery Movement that their trust in the African had not been misplaced. Education also provided a method of mobility in Jamaican Society.

Phillippo, who had always maintained that education had a pragmatic and relevant end, suggested a University on the lines of London but unfortunately was overruled.²³ For him the "interdependence" which had created his policy had only one logical conclusion—the universality of a University. He was more typical of the leading spirit of the time than Tinson. But the fortunate thing was that what Phillippo wished to do by organisation, Tinson did in a curriculum.

It is indeed difficult to assess who read the future correctly. The West Indies waited a century for a University but interdependence has marked Baptist and Jamaican life all through the nineteenth century. It may yet be another example of the Johannine tension between the Spirit and the Letter.

The actual result has been that theological education in Jamaica has been rescued from narrow denominationalism and that the Baptist College over the years has been able to nurture and train the candidates of other denominations.

It might now be asked what lay behind this intricate relationship of mission, college and church. It seems that it was overwhelmingly the desire to build a mature church. But in the attempt the interdependence inherent in the very creation of the complex came into conflict with the accepted symbols of independence. Tinson argued for instance, that there was no place for the European on the mission-field since he was unaware of a missionfield which had been successful under European culture or control. He maintained that "the religion of the Bible, like all the productions of the Deity, has its seed in itself"²⁴ therefore the diffusion of the gospel must be through national converts. He shrewdly observed that personal and national morality demand a self-respect, which can come only when men and nations stand on their own feet, unencumbered by foreign support, which must involve foreign control. Up to this point his argument has a

modern ring about it and there is truth which no one can deny. He also suggested that if the church was to be relevant then it had to employ nationals in every mission field, a view which accords with Christianity and commonsense. But it is also important to note that Tinson was a European addressing the B.M.S. in London from the missionfield of Jamaica, where he lived and died. His words then can only be truly understood when they are appreciated in the personal context of the concrete situation. His plea is that indigenisation does not mean a national church *or* a church staffed by nationals only, but derives from an independence rooted in interdependence.

The work of the Jamaica Baptist Missionary Society in the 1870s tests this thesis admirably. During these years the West Indian Churches suffered economically from a legacy of unfavourable trade policies in Britain, natural disasters and a confusion in church policy. Dr. Kilpatrick in his thesis on Jamaican Church life has demonstrated that during this period grave uncertainty spread through all the established churches²⁵ and indeed many of the charismatic groups originating in the United States of America date their entry into the West Indies from this period.

But there was another side to the 1870s. Almost overnight Jamaica²⁶ became a mission field as it played host to Chinese and Indian immigrants.

The J.B.M.S. aroused itself, voted a sum of money to be spent exclusively on the newcomers, requested aid abroad which in fact got little response, except from the British & Foreign Bible Society, which sent bibles, tracts and other literature in Chinese and Hindustani which the Jamaican Baptists did not understand. In fact what was needed was a person, who was neither requested by the Jamaicans nor offered by the British.

At the same time massive migration was occurring from Barbados and Jamaica. The lure of Panama and Costa Rica was hard to resist and many Baptists from Jamaica went. This created a crisis for the J.B.M.S. which, conscious of the need on its doorstep, was also conscious of the need next door. The crisis was resolved in diverting missionary resources from the immigrants to the emigrants. The international aspects of mission had displaced the national but it stopped short of being "cosmopolitan".

Looking back at these events, and it is easy to be wise *post eventum*, the greater need was for Jamaican Baptists to draw upon their resources of interdependence and be truly "cosmopolitan". Had they done this Jamaican Baptist witness would have escaped the legacy of being a mono-ethnic group and, on the other hand, the church in Panama would have developed its own independence sooner. The decisions taken in the 1870s were not so much seen to be theological decisions as socio-economic decisions dictated by the Baptist treasury and by ties of kinship and easier communication processes. But theologically, mission had not ceased to be immigration and repatriation. The question can legitimately be asked therefore how

far was theological education at Calabar, as well as the national Baptist independence, responsible for this idea of mission. The failure to influence the real life situation at home seems to suggest that Christian mission was understood in terms of an "Exodus" and a theological abstraction rather than in terms of a people-work orientation, in the midst of all life. While indeed it would be unfair to argue that the Jamaican Baptists should not care for Jamaicans overseas, or that nationals have no part to play in the conversion of their countrymen overseas, it would be unfortunate to draw the conclusion that "the national" knows best how to communicate the Gospel in the new situation. Similarly, while it is also true that Jamaican Baptists should have cared more for the Chinese and Indian immigrants, it is just as unfortunate to argue that the Jamaican Baptists knew best how to do so or even that they should be ultimately pastorally responsible. The break-down of this indigenous, independent church would seem to call into question the meaning of both indigeneity and independence, as meaning *solely responsible* either in moral or financial or pastoral terms. And would seem to lead to the conclusion that independence and indigeneity are but the received right to *participate*, as equal in terms of a universal Christian task, in which *giving* and *receiving* are important components of the cosmopolitan nature of mission.

The problem really exists in the unquestioned assumption that a concept of indigenous and independent church is national rather than multinational. The so-called "younger churches" have been misled into accepting a concept of purity of national church life in much the same terms as nineteenth century Europeans spoke about "purity of race". Not only is this concept of purity a theological abstraction based upon very little reality in life, but it also reflects the baser prejudices of "racism". It may be interesting for research to be done on how the nature of exclusionism in holiness affects the concept of indigenous church and independent church. It may be also instructive to note the role of Exodus in exclusive racialist societies.

It would appear also from the Jamaican Baptist model that a Christian concept of indigenous church includes (a) truth and (b) authenticity, understood in terms of motivation, communication and continuous renewal. Thus an historic, national and established church may be less indigenous than one so-called which has its origins historically outside the national confines, as for example, a recent manifestation of a pentecostalist charismatic church. Similarly independence, so far as a church is concerned, is authentic only when it reflects elemental human needs within it and responds to them fully and honestly, within and without. The Christian concept of an indigenous church cannot therefore be defined ultimately in terms of geography or historical development, tempting as these concepts appear to be, but rather in terms of response and service and the mediation of truth. And truth, like freedom, is a universal concern.

It is probable that such a multinational concept could most adequately express itself in an inter-confessional theology of church and

mission. The reality of living does not admit in its most elemental form the luxury of compartmentalisation but manifests itself in a synthesis. Unfortunately, the church's liturgical practice, at least in the older churches, has long been disassociated from life as it is, and as it continues to be, so that compartmentalising within the Church has resulted. This brokenness may be traced directly to an accepted concept of indigeneity and independence. And so often, liturgically it derives from a philosophical theology of abstraction rather than inductive synthesis.

The suggestion gleaned from the Jamaican "model" is that more emphasis ought to be laid upon the *laos* as the true possessors of indigeneity rather than, as is customary, upon the clergy, as the repositories of ecclesiastical authenticity. It would also maintain that ministry in or for the Church could better be reflected by a composite, all-inclusive, lay-orientated ministry. The sacraments then become all-Life-Broken focused at all points, rather than a focus at particular points at particular times. The Church's ministry is nothing more than a reflection of its sacramental life, and where the sacraments are exclusive, exclusivism is reflected in the corporate life of the membership in the Church and in Society.²⁷

The Jamaican model suggests that the time has come for a meaningful dialogue to occur between the older and the younger churches to discover the Christian marks of independence and indigeneity; and to challenge the National Council of Churches to examine their own authenticity in the light of a growing synthesis in the givenness of *one world*.

NOTES

¹ B.M.S. *Periodical Accounts*, London 1813, Vol. V, pp. 290-3.

² *General Baptist Repository*, London (n.d.), Vol. 2, p. 192.

³ *Slave Laws of Jamaica with proceedings and Documents*, pp. 95, 108/9, 146, 231.

⁴ B.M.S. General Committee Minute Book F, Min. 338, 3 June 1840 (B.M.S. Archives, London).

⁵ Dendy to Dyer, 29 August 1843 (B.M.S. Archives, London).

⁶ Underhill, *Life of Philipppo*, London 1881, Chap. XXIII.

⁷ Tucker, *Glorious Liberty*, London 1914, p. 44.

⁸ B.M.S. Minute Book F, Min. 202, 24 October 1839 (B.M.S. Archives, London).

⁹ Carey to Ryland and Dyer, B.M.S. *Periodical Accounts*, Vol. VII, pp. 55ff, d/d 26 June 1819 (B.M.S. Archives, London).

¹⁰ Pilgrim, "Anti-Slavery Sentiment in England, its decline and fall 1841-54" (Cambridge Ph.D., 1953, unpublished). Quoted by Asiegbu, *Slavery and the politics of Liberation 1787-1861*, London 1969, p. 1.

¹¹ Bolt, *Victorian attitudes to Race*, London and Toronto, 1971, p. 107.

¹² Knibb, Sermon preached at Eagle Street Chapel, London, 17 August 1834, entitled "The Spiritual Prospects of Africa" from Psalm 69, v. 31 (Angus Library, Regent's Park College, Oxford).

¹³ Buxton, *Memoirs of Buxton*, London 1849, p. 458. See also: *Africa Remembered*, ed. Curtin, General introduction pp. 3-9.

¹⁴ Bolt, *op. cit.*, p. 102, Baptist preoccupation with the Rebellion is well known and centred on Underhill, secretary of the B.M.S.

¹⁵ Debrunner, *A History of Christianity in Ghana*, Accra, 1967, pp. 108 ff.

¹⁶ Thomas Keith was a member of a Jamaican Baptist church who worked his way back to Africa in order to be a missionary. See Buxton, *The African Slave Trade and its Remedy*, (Reprint) London 1967, p. 495; also Hinton, *Memoirs of William Knibb*, London 1849, p. 364.

¹⁷ Barrett, *The Rastafarians—A Study in Messianic cultism in Jamaica*, Caribbean Monograph Series No. 6, Puerto Rico 1968.

¹⁸ An instructive debate on the attitudes adopted by the Churches to the "power" of the "Leader" can be followed in (a) *Baptist Mission in Jamaica, An Exposition of the system pursued by the Baptist Missionaries in Jamaica*, London 1842; (b) Waddell, *Twenty-nine years in the West Indies and Central Africa 1829-1858* (especially Appendix A), London, 1863, for the Presbyterian view; (c) *The Evangelical Magazine*, 1842, pp. 112-16, 188-92, 241, 296, 348-400 for the Congregational view. See also Parliamentary Papers, Jamaican Returns, 1818 and following. The standard biographies of Baptist missionaries to Jamaica also refer to this question.

¹⁹ *Missionary Herald*, February 1848, pp. 22-24.

²⁰ *Ibid*, loc cit.

²¹ *Missionary Herald*, November 1851, pp. 171-73.

²² *Ibid*, loc cit.

²³ Underhill, *op. cit.* (Appendix).

²⁴ *Missionary Herald*, July 1850, p. 105-8.

²⁵ Kilpatrick, "Protestant Missions in Jamaica" (Edin Ph.D., 1944), unpublished.

²⁶ See Russell, "The Jamaica Baptist Missionary Society—then and now." Paper read to the Jamaica Baptist Union Executive Policy Conference 1967 (Jamaica Baptist Union Archives).

²⁷ See *Beyond Intercommunion*—a study paper of the Commission of Faith and Order: *Worship Today*—A report on the Consultation "Worship in a Secular Age" (Geneva 8-13 September 1969).

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ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING 1973

The A.G.M. will be held on Wednesday, 2nd May. The speaker is to be Professor W. R. Ward of Durham, and his subject "Baptists and the transformation of the Church in the early nineteenth century."

SUMMER SCHOOL 1974

We plan to hold another Summer School in 1974. Provisionally we have booked Regent's Park College for the period 4-7 July. This time we are adopting an overall theme—"Baptists and the Civil Authorities". Within such a framework it will be possible to see how Baptists have determined their place in society not only in this country but overseas. Certain people are already being approached with invitations to prepare lectures. However, a feature of the 1970 Bristol Summer School was a session when three or four of our members read papers, each lasting some 15-20 minutes on some theme on which they had done some research. This was regarded as being such a valuable time that we want to repeat the experiment. Members who would be willing to make a contribution in such a session are asked to write to the Secretary as soon as possible, indicating the theme of the paper they would be willing to prepare.