

Out of focus

Missionaries

Julian Pettifer and Richard Bradley
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What have missionaries in common with water weed and cockroaches? They thrive on all continents and are in no danger of extinction. If we are to believe Julian Pettifer and Richard Bradley, in this journalistic *tour de force*, they are also a pest. In their view missionaries travelled to every corner of the world on waves of colonial expansion, imposed a Western life-style on unspoiled, happy natives, collected funds under false pretences and invented a myriad tricks to ensnare unsuspecting converts — all on the strength of the incredibly arrogant claim of knowing the Truth. And the menace is not yet over.

If there was ever a report which missed its chance of rising above stereotypes, this is it. One would have hoped that the field visits required for this study might have resulted in a more accurate, balanced presentation of what is a fascinating story, both past and present. But why should an entire previous generation of missionaries be burdened with caricatures like that of an English clergyman's wife being carried into the bush on a sedan-chair? Or why should present-day missionaries be repeatedly tarred with the same brush as that undoubtedly vociferous, but unrepresentative, group, the extreme evangelicals.

I wholly concur with the criticism the authors level against bible-thumping fundamentalists. They often ride roughshod over everything they meet, be it local cultures, emerging national sensitivities, or delicate new Christian forms of life nurtured by other pioneers. They do not shun alliances with commercial enterprises and right-wing governments. But how many missionaries, whether Catholic or Protestant, are fundamentalist? I find in this book the amazing statement: "In secular circles the word 'fundamentalist' has an increasingly pejorative meaning." Why only in *secular* circles? Are the authors not aware that fundamentalism is equally abhorred in religious circles and particularly among the vast majority of Christian missionaries?

The book is best where it describes, in text as well as in colourful photographs, scenes of church life in different parts of the world; such as the Maria Legio in Uganda or the mission of Chiang Mai in northern Thailand. Occasionally, in personal interviews with missionaries, there are glimpses of empathy; but then the door is slammed tight again with damning cynicism. "Many converts are 'rice Christians' . . . everywhere and at all times." Whatever the local needs, "missionaries will inevitably find a way to justify their presence on the mission field to congregations at home". This generalising, derisive, "outsider" view makes the authors report unfairly even when they raise issues that deserve critical examination.

Education, for example. In a rare pas-

sage the book records that "the missionary contribution in education has often been positively acknowledged". But the authors pointedly refrain from acknowledging it themselves, and heap doubt and ridicule on mission schools. We are told that it was a mistake on the part of colonial governments to leave education to the missionaries, that the missionary "monopoly of education" poses a problem for the newly independent nations; and we are presented with Fr Damian Grimes, Yorkshireman and headmaster of Namasagali school in Uganda, as an example of a "little pope in the bush" who still imprints "the heavy hand of missionary authorship" on his school. His very personal style of forming his pupils is finally dismissed in these words: "Fr Grimes offers what missionary education has always offered, a means of upward mobility, a route to enhanced social status founded on the bedrock of 'Christian civilisation'."

In 1980 I visited Namasagali myself. Here, in the middle of inaccessible jungle, I found a unique school that combines high academic standards with student participation on all levels of decision-making. Any unprejudiced person can see that Fr Grimes does, indeed, come close to fulfilling his ideal of training Ugandan boys and girls to be "the citizens and leaders of tomorrow". Why then so much scorn? The authors grudgingly acknowledge that almost all top African leaders passed through mission schools, a fact they ascribe to "the missionary monopoly". Why can they not give credit where it is due? If it were not for the unstinted commitment of people like Fr Grimes, what hope would there be for Africa today? Why do they not report on how, in one continent after the other, it was the missionaries who created schools against insuperable odds, not "to civilise the natives" as the book repeatedly alleges, nor to fill baptismal registers, but because they really cared about people. And this brings me to my severest criticism.

Whatever human failings we missionaries may have — and God knows we have them! — we are motivated at least as much by human compassion and concern for people as by a desire to share the Gospel message. It is this dimension of missionary commitment, a dimension which I know to be true from first-hand experience of missionary work in all continents, that is almost entirely lacking in the authors' report. For someone like myself who knows missionaries well, the account has a curiously hollow, unreal ring to it, even though I recognise the situations described. We are talking about human beings, after all, not exotic beetles spotted in some unusual habitat. Damian Grimes, for example, and his companion Fr James Zonneveld, both Mill Hill missionaries, decided to stay on during the perilous days of Amin and Obote when quite a few missionaries were harassed, beaten up and even killed. They stay on now, even though it is clear that up to 20 per cent of their pupils are infected by AIDS. Pettifer and Bradley keep harping on "the great commission" (Mt. 28:19), as though mis-

sionaries had no other intention than to make converts; have they never read the gospel text which says: "Whatever you have done for the least of my brothers, you have done unto Me?" (Mt. 25:40)

If they had truly understood Christian motivation, they might have perceived the remarkable vitality of Christian service in all parts of the world, a vitality never fully admitted yet distinctly visible in chapter after chapter. The same driving force that motivates priests and nuns in Central America to give up their lives in defence of the poor makes others sleep on mats in the mud huts of Chittagong or dispense first aid to refugees in Ethiopia. The legitimate question of when missionary service should be withdrawn needs to be settled in consultation with local Churches. It should not be correlated with statistics of conversion, as the book suggests, but should be decided on the basis of genuine human and spiritual needs.

The authors descend to their lowest pit of cynicism when they declare that the involvement of missionaries can be ascribed to "a perpetual motion, a never-ending cycle of tasks to be done, which justifies their presence in perpetuity". In the past, we are told, missionaries seized on pretexts such as slavery, poverty or underdevelopment. Now there is AIDS. "AIDS is set to dominate the future of mission in Africa. Not since the call to end slavery have Christian missionaries been presented with a rallying cry of such potency."

Past and present missionaries are judged arrogant because they believe in the Truth. I submit to both authors that most missionaries have also proved that they believe in *people*. As far as arrogance is concerned, missionaries need to test their testimonies and examine their consciences, and there is much to make them do so. Religious intolerance is indeed arrogant. So is the feeling of Western superiority, or dogmatic and moral narrowmindedness. But can there be arrogance in believing a vision that sees God as love and life as resurrection in spite of all? Or is any belief that carries conviction arrogant? After all, the Gospel has been Good News for most people: "Happy are the feet of those who bear glad tidings. . . ."

John Wijngaards

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