

Vanilla gone wrong...

Mission and Empire: A modern twist on a historic flavour, by Jason Strange

My struggle with mission and colonialism is not abstract. It is personal, lived, and increasingly painful. I grew up believing that Jesus' commission in *Matthew 28:19* "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations," was a call to generosity, sacrifice, and hopeful engagement with the world. I believed that sincere missionary intention could overcome the failures of history. But the more I have tried to take that commission seriously, the more I have come to see its limits, its entanglement with empire, and its unintended consequences: consequences now returning to reshape, and in some ways destabilise, the very societies that once sent missionaries abroad.

I do not deny the sincerity of many missionaries. My own Christianity was shaped by people who genuinely sought to serve, not dominate. Lamin Sanneh argues that translation—the heart of mission—often empowered local cultures rather than erasing them, giving people the Scriptures in their own tongues and affirming their heritage. Yet even Sanneh acknowledges that mission never existed in a vacuum. It travelled along the same routes as trade, conquest, and political expansion. Good intentions were real, but they are never the whole story.

This is where the limits of missionary works become unavoidable. Missionaries may not have set out to build empires, but empires certainly exploited missionaries. As Andrew Walls notes, Christianity has always expanded by attaching itself to cultural and political forces larger than itself. The Gospel rode on the back of ships, flags, and armies, whether missionaries wished it or not, to pretend otherwise is to ignore the historical record.

Now we live with the long-term consequences. The nations once evangelised: often transformed, sometimes wounded, always changed - are now on the move. Migration flows from former colonies and *chancers* - to our once great, now defunct cities. These they are the aftershocks of centuries of entanglement. The irony is bitter: where we poured ourselves out in mission, believing we were offering the world the best we had, we now feel overwhelmed, criticised, or even despised by parts of that same world. The "rest of the world," as I experience it, seems eager to benefit from the stability, rights, and prosperity shaped in part by Christian moral frameworks, yet increasingly hostile to the cultural and spiritual roots that produced them.

Vanilla ice cream is a very sophisticated flavour, which is why I view Jesus' commission—is for the birds! Not because I reject it, but because I have tried to honour it and in doing so, I have watched my own country become a battleground of competing flavours, resentments, and bitterness. Mission, once imagined as a gift, has become a point of vulnerability. As Willie James Jennings argues, Christianity's missionary imagination was fused with a colonial one, producing a world where intimacy across cultures was attempted without true equality - and the fractures of that attempt are still with us. How often it is today, our young English are heckled, "You've got our Gold!"— and that's from diaspora Christians.

I remain committed to the Gospel, but I refuse to romanticise its history. Mission was sincere, but sincerity was not enough. It was entangled with empire, and that

entanglement has shaped the world we now inhabit - a world in which the senders of mission find themselves judged, crowded, and in some cases destabilised by the very global relationships they helped create. The Church of England, now no longer fit for purpose, should pay the reparations, go into voluntary C16 and for everyone else, "Quick, someone shut the floodgates!" Amen.

Bibliography

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