

Transforming Christian Mission: Towards a Liberating Proclamation of the Good News

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1. Introduction

In commemoration of the events of 9/11, we are convinced that humanitarian situations are often coloured by violence based on religious beliefs. The activity of spreading religion which ideally is the proclamation of the good news for the good of mankind, but often there is ambivalence in it: proclaiming the good news but with and producing unwholesomeness. This reminds us of the activities of Christian missions, especially those carried out by Western nations from the 15/16th century to the present day for people who are in the so-called third world countries, or especially the Global South.

In this article, I will argue that based on the inspiration of the mission of Jesus Christ that focuses on proclaiming the Kingdom of God, the Christian mission carried out especially by mission agencies from Western countries, that are European nations, is very urgent to undergo transformation from missions that contain contradictions in itself, namely the proclamation of the good news but is based on and produces oppression and discrimination as well as racism, towards a consistent and liberating mission which contains the proclamation of the good news that liberates humanity, anti-oppression, anti-discrimination and anti-racism.

2. Mission and Colonialism

By not closing the possibility of the true motivation of the missionaries in the evangelism to convey the good news of Jesus Christ to the areas that would later be referred to as the third world countries, basically the missionary activities of the Western (European) nations in the 16th to 20th centuries is those that are closely related to colonialism. The close relationship between mission and colonialism is reflected explicitly in the motto of "God, Gold and Glory," or also, "Merchant, Military and Missionary." A statement in the article of The Dutch East India Company (VOC) stated that the spread of Christianity is one of the objectives to be pursued. The Governor General Jean Pieterzon Coen asserted that the Dutch Company "should supply the necessary means for spreading the Christian religion." When the areas that later became known as Indonesia became colonies, not only trade shall be a vehicle for mission, but at the same time mission activities always go hand in hand with colonialism.

Both colonialism and Christian mission comprised of activities that were centered on the conquest of Western nations against colonized territories. Colonialism is not just placing people from Western (European) nations to inhabit and dominate the colonies, but also an effort to extract natural resources and wealth from the colonies in third world countries for the benefit and prosperity of the colonial countries. Colonialism also carried out the cultural conquest of colonized territories with the principle that Western countries were

culturally superior to colonial countries. People in colonized countries need to be educated to be more civilized according to the perspective of Western countries.

In line with this cultural mastery, the colonizing nations reconstructed the identity of the colonized people in an asymmetrical binary scheme. Western nations are superior to the colonized nations in the scheme of things: strong/weak, clever/stupid, rational/emotional, and domineering/ruled. In Indonesia, the Dutch East Indies colonial government gave the identity of Indonesians as *inlanders*, natives, namely people who were at a low level. When this identity construction continues to be carried out to the stage of labeling, the colonized people are forced to the extent that they accept such labeling. Because this labeling is deeply rooted, it becomes a mentality that when these nations experienced independence, the mentality of being a colonized nation continued.

Christian mission of the Western countries adds to the two elements of the conquest carried out by colonialism mentioned above, namely spiritual conquest. Historical facts show that before the Western nations came to the regions of the third world countries, including that of Indonesia, the people in these regions had made tremendous progress in terms of cultural and spiritual religion. All the major religions of the world including Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism were born on the soil of Asia. The philosophy and practice of spirituality had been so developed in Asia long before the Europeans had progressed in civilization and in military power. The Christian mission of the Western nations, however, made Europe a reference for world civilization. In other words, mission activity was in line with colonial conquests which were European-centric.

In Indonesia, when Western nations carried out Christian missions, most of the population had experienced Islamization after centuries of Hinduism and Buddhism becoming the religion embraced by the majority of the Indonesian population. Besides that, there have been tribal religions that have become an inseparable part of the cultural life of the tribes in Indonesia. The Christian missions carried out in these areas tried to conquer the region spiritually by claiming that the message of the Christian faith was superior to the previously held religions. In many cases, new converts have been asked to break away from the culture they have been living in. For example, missionaries from Western nations forbade Christians in Java to see and engage in traditional ceremonies and cultural performances. The reason is that the culture and traditional ceremonies are considered as pagan and contrary to the Christian faith.

The close relationship between Christian missions and colonialism is not only in a way that Christian missions using colonial power, but also Christian missions supporting colonialism. This is in line with the fact that the mission institutions that were those that were subject to the laws and regulations of the colonial state. In historical records, Christian missions from Western nations consider that the colonized area is a field of evangelism. Because the Western nations have introduced the gift of salvation in Jesus to the people in the colonized countries, then in return the Western nations are entitled to their natural wealth.

The symbiotic relationship between colonialism and Christian missions makes Christianity considered a colonial religion. This continued as the colonial government increasingly gripped its colonies. When colonizing Indonesian territory, while extracting natural resources for its own sake, the Dutch East Indies colonial government treated Christians in special ways in various aspects: religion, education, health, and law. Christian institutions and churches get the support and convenience that is in the form of financial assistance. Even the ministers who served in the churches generated from the evangelism were paid from the colonial government's budget allocation.

From historical testimony about missionary practices in third world countries, we get a very important lesson but also a bitter one that has become a black sheet in church history, namely that the Christian mission of Western nations in spreading the Good News to third world countries contains an element of ambiguity if not contradictory: proclaiming the Gospel of the Good News, but by using oppressive colonial power and containing elements of discrimination and racism. When carried out hand in hand with the oppressive and colonial power, the mission resulted in discriminatory behavior that treated people differently based on religion and belief. Besides that, because the mission of Western nations is carried out in an atmosphere of spiritual conquest, adding regional and cultural conquests, and with the spirit of superiority of Western nations, the Christian mission contains elements of racism. Although discrimination and racism in the practice of Christian missions can be refuted for various reasons, historical records prove that nuances of discrimination and racism have undeniably occurred in Christian mission activities in third world countries.

3. The Mission of Jesus Christ: The Liberation of Humanity

The mission of Jesus Christ in the midst of the world must be comprehended in a socio-political context characterized by oppression of colonialism. The Roman Empire was a colonial government that oppressed territories in the Mediterranean basin, including Palestine, the land where Jesus worked. The economic system, which is based on slavery and unfair taxation, has put almost all the people in a situation of oppression. While most of the people of Palestine in the first century CE experienced poverty, some fell into beggars and others became slaves.

The suffering of the people caused by the occupation of the Roman Empire was further exacerbated by the religious belief-based oppression carried out by the religious ruling elite which required all people in Palestine at that time, especially in Judea and Galilee, to obey their version of the Jewish religious regulations correctly. Jewish religious leaders have long labeled the people in Samaria, which resulted in discriminatory and racist treatment of them. In sacrificial worship, for example, people who are going to offer sacrifices are forced to buy sacrificial animals as provided by religious leaders. Those who will give offerings in the form of money must have to offer a kind of money according to the applicable provisions. If they do not bring money as a condition, they must first exchange money as has also been organized by religious leaders.

The mission of Jesus carried out in that context of colonialism and oppression, which was not only carried out by foreign nations but also by their own religious leaders as recorded in the texts of the canonical Gospels, contains the proclamation of the coming of the Kingdom of God. The kingdom of God as proclaimed by Jesus is the real presence of God who rules in human society. The present government of God is in contrast to the Roman Empire that colonized and oppressed the people socio-economically and politically and was different from religious forces and Jewish religious leaders who oppressed religiously.

The presence of the Kingdom of God is marked by the message of liberation from oppressive relations that begins with liberation from oppression that is actually experienced by humans. The main symbol of the liberating presence of God's Kingdom is the presence of Jesus Himself. In Luke 4:16-30, this is marked by the proclamation of the good news that liberates and embraces all people, the poor, captives, those who suffer from disease and self-shackles (blindness, deafness, and paralysis), and the oppressed. In presenting the liberating Kingdom of God, Jesus proclaimed it by teaching and healing as two elements that were unified. What Jesus taught about deliverance was reinforced by acts of healing, exorcism, defense, and even by surrender in His death and resurrection.

Liberation from oppressive relations is based on a new value system, namely the application of love, peace, justice, equality and inclusiveness. The implementation of these values is not only seen from how Jesus carried out the proclamation of the Kingdom of God, but also appeared in the whole life of Jesus and the community he formed which is often referred to as the Jesus Movement. This consists of disciples who apply the values of the Kingdom of God against oppressive powers. Very firmly, the Jesus Movement puts forward a life that is coloured by love relationships and not power relations. Peace and justice characterize the community of Christ's followers instead of the principle of relationships determined by the power of money. In the Jesus Movement, everyone is called to be actively involved in bringing the Kingdom of God beyond gender boundaries, both men and women are called into equal fellowship of disciples. The Jesus movement as a manifestation of the presence of God's Kingdom is open to all, embracing all people beyond various backgrounds that include ethnic backgrounds, geography, social and economic status, and even religious beliefs.

In other words, the mission of Jesus Christ, which is centered on proclaiming the presence of the Kingdom of God in both teaching and action, is an anti-discrimination and anti-racism one. By looking back at the historical background of the mission carried out by Western nations to the people in third world countries that are nuanced in oppression, and which contain elements of discrimination and racism, the mission of Jesus Christ as witnessed by the New Testament texts can become a source of inspiration for the performance of mission activities today.

4. Towards the Liberating Proclamation of the Good News

In line with the various dynamics in society globally, including the phenomena that occurred in Europe after the 20th century, when Europe entered the era

known as the post-Christendom era, we witnessed a very significant change in Christian mission activities. The centuries of evangelism that were inflamed by European nations since the 15/16th century seemed to experience such drastic decline in line with the situation of religious spirit in Europe. We have also witnessed several missionary agencies and theological seminaries have been closed for various reasons, including limited financial support. Although some of them persist in carrying out their mission by continuing to support Christian communities in third world countries, some mission agencies have undergone a metamorphosis by becoming a kind of NGO and pursuing a Christian mission based on humanitarian aids and community change.

In the changes that have been happening with regards to the missionary work of Western countries towards people in the territory of third world countries -and while keeping in mind that Asian countries (mainly South Korea) are also suppliers of Christian missionaries in missionary service to around the world-, the inspiration of the mission of Jesus Christ as I stated in the previous section is important to note.

First, the Christian mission should remain in line with the mission of Jesus Christ with its essence of proclaiming the liberating presence of the Kingdom of God. This faithfulness to the mission of Jesus Christ has implications for all mission performances that should be carried out, including relations in missionary work. A liberating relationship means a relationship that is not based on the strength of financial resources that causes financial dependence, but a relationship that is filled with love, peace, justice, equality and inclusiveness. It seems that when Christian missions are no longer dependent on the colonial government, but become dependent on the agencies as funding sources, then a new style of colonialism in Christian missions is taking place.

Secondly, although the Christian mission is no longer intertwined with colonial power, the construction and labeling of people living in the territory of third world countries that has been carried out for hundreds of years does not seem to have completely disappeared today. The mission of Jesus that focuses on the presence of the Kingdom of God with the proclamation of liberation must still be fought for by Christian missions today. It seems that in the subconscious dimension there is still a label with an asymmetric binary scheme that considers Europeans to be superior and people in third world countries to be inferior. In a mission relationship based on financial strength, this asymmetric binary construction generates suspicion or distrust in the management of funds. It is very likely that the large number of documents that must be provided to obtain funding for missionary and humanitarian activities may be residue from the construction of the binaries. The large number of documents is sometimes a form of disguised oppression from those who control the funds against those who receive financial support in mission programs. It can be said, although modern mission agencies claim to carry out missions based on modern techniques, in reality suppression and asymmetric binaries remain unchanged.

Thirdly, the mission of Jesus Christ with the proclamation of the liberating Kingdom of God may inspire that Christian mission should be based on effort for

social transformation which is not only characterized by being resilient society, but also pursuing towards a level of becoming alternative community. This alternative community is one that is able to resist the domination of oppressive powers, including discrimination and racism. The application of this liberating mission becomes very relevant in the midst of the strengthening of religion-based identity politics, which has the potential to carry out acts of violence and religion-based terrorism. Even when coupled with a desire for power, identity politics can justify any means to domination and which results in discrimination and racism. So while modern missionary activity is imbued with anti-discrimination and anti-racism, the main achievement of missionary activity is the establishment of alternative anti-discrimination and anti-racism communities.

Finally, a Christian mission that is faithful to the liberating mission of Jesus Christ is a mission for a better life filled with love, peace, justice, equality and inclusiveness. When a better life is the focus of Christian missions, and because human life is always related to various elements, one of which is the environment, Christian missions must not neglect services that support environmental preservation. Christian mission is the embodiment of the presence of the Kingdom of God not only in the order of human society but also in the order of the universe, the earth and all that is in it.

5. Closing Words

In commemoration of the events of 9/11 this year, it is important to note that religion which teaches sacred things, kindness, love, justice, peace, can be used as a source for and justifies for actions that are contrary to the essence of religion itself. Ambiguity or contradiction in religious practice, however, is also found in the missionary activities of Western nations, in carrying out Christian missions in countries that are now known as third world countries. The Christian mission that is supposed to contain the proclamation of the good news has been actually carried out with and justified colonialism. Thus, the mission is in line with colonialism which carried out oppression, and which contained discrimination and racism.

In reflecting on the performance of Christian missions, it is very important to draw inspiration from the mission of Jesus Christ in this world as recorded in the Canonical Gospels. The essence of the mission of Jesus Christ is the proclamation of the liberating presence of the Kingdom of God. The presence of the Kingdom of God is represented by Jesus Christ who proclaims the Kingdom of God both through teaching and through acts of liberation. The presence of the Kingdom of God is characterized by a new value system that emphasizes love, peace, justice, equality and inclusiveness. The most obvious manifestation in the implementation of these values is the community movement of Jesus' disciples called the Jesus Movement. The Jesus movement practices the values of the liberating Kingdom of God. By implementing this inspiration from the mission of Jesus Christ, today's missionary activities should be missions that liberate humanity in a relationship of love, peace, justice, equality and inclusiveness. And thus the Christian mission becomes a mission for the formation of alternative communities to fight for humanity and fight against acts of discrimination and

racism. Without becoming a community that practices love, peace, justice, equality and inclusiveness, Christian communities will never become alternative communities that dare to fight against discrimination and racism.