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Review

Kwiyani, Harvey C., *Decolonizing Mission*. London: SCM Press, 2025, ISBN 978033406319, 240pp.

Reviewed by Dr Ryan Faber[1]

In *Decolonizing Mission*, Harvey C. Kwiyani makes a compelling argument that Christian mission has long been attached to empire: the Roman Empire, the Byzantine Empire, and Western Empires, including the British Empire and the contemporary US empire. He describes the attachment as 'unnecessary'[2], though one wonders if that word is too weak. Not only can mission happen without an empire, Kwiyani contends that 'mission *ought* to happen without the help of emperors, governments and their armies' (emphasis added): 'One can only preach the gospel of the kingdom of God or that of the empires of the word but not both'. The church needs is a decolonising mission. As Kwiyani explains, the word 'decolonizing' in his title is not only a verb (he wants to decolonize missions); it is also an adjective. The church needs a decolonising mission, or, perhaps put better, a non-colonising mission, a mission that does not colonise.

Kwiyani claims that his book is 'not an attempt to convince [the reader] that every Christian missionary from the West was a colonialist'. He acknowledges that 'history proves that many missionaries were good people'. But the claim and acknowledgement are quickly overshadowed by the book's main narrative: Missions and colonialism grew, often together, from the same roots of cultural, racial, and religious superiority. The complex, perhaps inseparable, relationship between missions and colonialism is evident in the story of Magomero, which Kwiyani retells in chapter 1. Magomero, a mission station

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[2] The review copy provided by the publisher via Glassboxx did not include pagination. Direct quotations from *Decolonizing Mission* are marked, but page references are not given.

inspired by David Livingstone and connected to his descendants, became a colonial estate. The painful story, which effected Kwiyani's own family and village, is 'the backdrop against which this book makes its argument':'What happened at Magomero was not a coincidence. It was rather an outcome of what missions was expected to do at the time'—expectations rooted in fifteen century papal bulls.

Decolonizing Mission is essentially a history of missions. Kwiyani is critical of other history of missions because they are often written 'according to empire', from a missionary (or colonialist?) perspective. They do not 'do justice to the stories of local … Christians in the same way those local people would tell it'. Kwiyani, appealing to his Malawian identity, presents his book as 'without doubt, an *African* reading of the story', 'a mission history according to the colonized' (emphasis added). Curiously, however, when referring to Western Christians, Kwiyani also claims to 'write as one of them, having lived and been educated in the West for many years'. One wonders: Which is it? Does Kwiyani writes as an African or does he write as a Western Christian? Is it possible for him to write as both?

For Kwiyani, the history of missions begins with Jesus. He argues that one cannot 'think of Jesus without attending to the pervasive dominance of the Roman Empire in his world and day'. As Kwiyani rightly notes, Jesus did not align himself with empire. Instead, 'the entire ministry of Jesus took place that margins of the Roman Empire, without ever needing to befriend the empire to use its power to his advantage'. Herein lies the central argument of Kwiyani's book: Missions does not need empire! Jesus' strategy was 'to make disciples among the colonized … [and] trust them to continue to make disciples who would continue to make disciples until the whole earth would be filled with his followers'.

Implicit in Kwiyani's history is a critique of the Apostle Paul's missionary strategy. Paul had 'a fixation to get to Rome', which caused him to ignore prophetic warnings and take matters into his own hands. The Apostle's story, as Kwiyani tells it, is markedly different from the story of Jesus. Kwiyani also contrasts the Apostle Paul's story with the story of Paul of Thebes (227-341), an important desert father. The Apostle Paul went to the heart of the empire; Paul of Thebes went to the margins. Though Kwiyani acknowledges that 'God

used both', he suggests that 'the movement that Paul of Thebes started served the wider Christian community beyond the empire better'.

Such comments raise intriguing questions: Should the Apostle Paul not have gone to Rome? Kwiyani presents Paul's fixation with Rome, not as an act of obedience to the Spirit's leading, but as defiance to prophetic warnings and an act of human initiative. What if the Apostle Paul had adopted a decolonising mission strategy? What would have have looked like? What might its effects have been? Similarly, acknowledging that the African church has grown fastest since political independence, largely through the work of African evangelists, Kwiyani asks how the gospel might have spread in Africa had it not come yoked to colonialism. This reader was disappointed the Kwiyani does not suggest any answers to these important questions.

Despite Kwiyani's claim the missions has been wed to empire since the time of Constantine, his history of missions says little about the Christianisation of Europe. Instead, he moves quickly to the fifteenth century and the papal bulls that asserted European supremacy over the world, established the doctrine of discovery, and clearly united missions and colonialism. The historical case is well-researched and well-argued. The common roots of missions and colonialism in ideas of cultural, racial, and religious superiority are evident.

Kwiyani's perceptive analysis of the philosophical bases for colonialism and missions explain some of our contemporary challenges in missions. It explains why Western churches struggle to do spread the gospel in their own contexts—missions is something done elsewhere with non-white populations—and why Western churches struggle to accept brown and black missionaries. But that is the future of the church and of Christianity. Missions must be decolonized: We must 'decentre whiteness to make space for all followers of Christ—the whole body of Christ—to engage in the whole of God's mission in the whole of God's world'.

Kwiyani seems optimistic about the possibility of missions after colonialism. Not only is a decolonising mission possible, it was the mission model of Jesus himself when he sent out colonised Galileans to make disciples of all nations. Kwiyani concludes with an assessment of mission language that needs to be decolonised, a description of mission according to the colonised, and a plea for

a new missiology. The greatest strength of Kwiyani's book is its compelling plea for decolonising missions. Its cogent argument about the regrettable coupling of missions and colonialism will challenge Western missionaries. Its optimism about missions after colonialism will inspire the non-Western church. But the volume is primarily deconstructive of colonising missions. Though highly recommended, one hopes that Kwiyani will produce a second volume that is more constructive, articulating more fully a decolonising (or non-colonising) mission and missiology.