CHRISTIANITY AND COLONIAL PROTEST

Perceptions of W. E. Owen, Archdeacon of Kavirondo

BY

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A perennial debating point among those concerned with Christianity in colonial Africa has been the nature or absence of sensitivity among European missionaries (and, later, African church leaders) toward questions of justice. Scholars concerned with church and society in Africa from the nationalist historiographical period onward have sought evidence concerning a Christian appreciation of the contradictions of colonialism and a commitment to rectification of injustices that by its nature colonialism tended to produce. In eastern African studies especial attention has been directed toward W. E. Owen, the Anglican archdeacon of Kavirondo throughout the interwar period. His broad range of interests, his outspokenness, and his general responsiveness to African initiatives have combined to render him a controversial figure in colonial affairs and a perplexing and oft-times frustrating figure among mission leaders of the time. It remains useful to continue to re-examine Owen’s perspectives and actions, for they speak directly to the challenge of Christian responsibility in a culturally-diverse and frequently unjust world, and to the way in which individuals responded to that challenge. This article reflects an effort at such understanding in a colonial environment.

Owen’s political involvements throughout his mission career centred upon four major themes: forced labour, the administration of justice, African political participation, and variations upon cultural practices that seemed to violate individual freedom. His concerns regarding labour ran the gamut from unpaid labor for public works to labour for “essential undertakings” during the second world war. Regarding the administration of justice they related particularly to abuses in local tribunals and to the problems of interpretation, and regarding African political participation, they
reflected both broad concerns for effective political organization and a one-man campaign for the translation of laws into a language Africans could understand. On the matter of African cultural practices, Owen was not inclined toward attacks upon African societies, and his energies were directed almost exclusively to the forced marriage of young women. Productive efforts have been made to examine some of these themes (though much more deserves to be done), but what may prove equally useful is to consider a single event and then to reflect upon its implications both for an understanding of Owen and for concepts of Christian responsibility.

The appointment of a chief in Asembo location in western Kenya in 1931 is very satisfactory for this purpose. It is conveniently obscure; no momentous development in colonial policy hinged upon the outcome, nor did any complex array of forces complicate the picture. And yet it raised issues for Owen that demanded a response, and characteristically his response was persistent and vigorous. The Asembo case permits a consideration of the problems of initiative; of the focus of attack, upon systems vs. individual behaviour; of the necessity for an outcome; of political vs. moral action. It permits a continuing examination of tactics, and hence of the problem of tactics as they relate to issues of principle. And it permits us, not altogether peripherally, to appreciate why some of Owen’s critics preferred to call him the “archdemon.”

By 1931 Daniel Odindo had been chief of Asembo location for some twelve years. The colonial administration had considered him to have a propensity for corruption, and in June of that year, facing the accusation that he misappropriated public funds, Odindo resigned. It appeared to be his hope that his resignation would discourage government from further action (it did not), and crucial to that aspiration was the appointment of a new chief who would be willing to let the evidence rest. Complicating the picture was the fact that Odindo had been one of the “advanced” political figures, popular among the younger educated Africans, including mission school teachers and evangelists. The government leaned toward the appointment of Ismail Owuor, a more conservative figure who doubtless would give elders more and the young educated less voice