THE MISSIONARY-ISLANDER ENCOUNTER IN HAWAII AS AN ETHICAL RESOURCE FOR CROSS-CULTURAL MINISTRY TODAY

Given the growing interest in globalization in theological education and the media focus on 1993 as the International Year of Indigenous Peoples, it is surprising that very little recent scholarship has been devoted to the constructive dimensions of the early encounters between missionaries and indigenous peoples. Regarding the Pacific islands, for example, there is a wealth of literature which characterizes the early missionaries as patronizing, aggressive and imperialistic agents, or which rationalizes the complicity of missionaries in unjust colonial systems. On the other hand, a few recent studies have sought to uncover “inner worlds of religious action” in ways that do not deny the oppressive dynamics of the missionary enterprise but provide a deeper understanding of the interests and motivations, positive and negative, of both missionaries and indigenous peoples. Unfortunately, even these studies tend to presuppose somewhat parochial, ethnocentric concepts of religious action. Although there is not space here to delineate an interpretative perspective in detail, it is important to begin by describing religious action in a clear and relatively non-reductionistic way.

If we are to take the subjective orientation of missionaries seriously, we will have to take account of the sense in which they believed that their religious activity represented something which transcended all other types of activity in human experience. That is, we must attempt to view missionary-islander interaction in a way that does not abrogate the missionary’s claim to be acting in relation to a sense of transcendence which was more fundamental and far-reaching than other loci of ultimacy in human experience. When viewed from his vantage point, the partial character of everyday life, as well as of all non-religious ways of attending to the world, becomes increasingly apparent. It is easier to appreciate how the early missionaries’ distinctive religious consciousness necessarily entailed an implicit critique of the limitations of all the social and political arrangements which they encountered.

At the same time, if we are to view missionary-islander interaction in relation to social structures, we must not neglect the this-worldly dimensions of religious action. This is simply to emphasize the point that while religious action is pursued as if from a vantage point which transcends human experience, it is performed by human actors in human experience. Paradoxically,
the religious actor is simultaneously beyond the world, yet radically in the world. This prior understanding of the this-worldly dimension of religious action enables us to appreciate how a religious actor’s concern for acting in altruistic ways can issue in concrete activity, but often with unintended consequences.

The religious action of missionaries can be construed as a particular form of ministerial activity. In general, “ministry” may be understood as service which attends to the new realities which are apprehended when one is “converted” - that is, when one is turned around, so to speak, by an enlarged vision or an altered experience. Missionary action, or the ministerial activity of those who have an explicit aim of facilitating conversion in the first place, may be characterized as service which seeks to bring about an enlarged vision and an altered experience. As Winquist observes, ministry can even sanction a “radical questioning of the depth and density of ideological and cultural institutions because they cannot appear as ultimate.” When it functions in this way, such ministry is prophetic.

One way to investigate the nature of missionary-islander encounter is therefore to ask the questions, “How did missionaries view the indigenous cultural institutions they encountered, and to what extent did their actions imply a critique of those institutions?” In other words, given the prophetic dimension which is at least implicit in missionary activity, how did the missionaries consciously or unconsciously challenge the indigenous authority structure? For the sake of rigorous analysis, it is useful to focus on a particular case of missionary action. The inquiry will be restricted to the initial encounters between Congregational missionaries and Hawaiian islanders in the 1820s.

It should be noted that the choice of this slice of mission history is particularly timely because the appraisal of the early missionaries has become a contentious issue in Hawaiian church circles, especially in the context of recent commemorations surrounding the centennial anniversary of the overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy. On January 17, 1993 the President of the United Church of Christ, Paul Sherry, offered a formal apology to the Hawaiian islander community for the denomination’s role in the overthrow of Queen Liliuokalani in 1893. However, the apology was not formally supported by the Hawaii Conference of the United Church of Christ. Whether for better or for worse, the first missionaries played a role decidedly out of proportion to their small size in the population and, judging from the number of schools they established in the first decade, they were phenomenally successful. Yet this success was not an unqualified blessing, and many now view the early