

Christian faith does not automatically promote equal rights and justice

The Hamitic curse

History tells story. It recounts the “who”, “what”, “when”, “where” and most importantly, the “why” of the past. Christianity and all its reformations were more about the indestructible book called “the Bible”. Kings and emperors could not stop it. War and revolution could not destroy it. Still, the Biblical truth of man having been created into the image of God was often being neglected¹ (Genesis 1:27). From this fundamental doctrine, Christian thought derived the claim that all humankind are equal in the sight of God, and that they therefore owe one another respect and goodwill. The western religious leaders have always theoretically subscribed to this; yet until at least well into the present century, they, with rare exceptions, affirmed the inferiority of the African race and the traditional pattern of white supremacy.² The fact that the Christian leaders of the colonialist period had been unable to teach their members to have respect for the dignity of human beings whether black or white, is a phenomenon worthy of theological and ultimately, social analysis. Even popes like Martin V (1369- 1431) and Eugene IV (1383- 1447) promoted the enslavement of unconverted people. Bartholomo de las Casas³ (1484- 1566) wrote encyclical in the name of the papacy that “these people (the Africans) were without souls and suitable for the torturous work in the Americas”. This thinking came from the ancient traditional church, which claimed: “God cursed Ham and made him black”. Church preachers invested too much into the lies of the Hamitic curse. The result was that the western church justified and sanctioned prejudice and so, slavery, in the carte blanche exploitation. This marked the very beginning of a worldwide colour prejudice, which resulted in the barbarity of Black Slavery.⁴ There is subjection in sociology, which is called “institutional threats”. This includes cultural symbols or codes of behaviour and ideologies that are associated with certain social and religious institutions. Flags symbolize nations; the crucifix is a symbol for Christians, and the wedding ring for marriage. Through the high dimension of slavery organised by the colonists, the colour of people’s skin became a symbol of superiority or inferiority. The ethical failure of many Christian leaders during that time was that they often achieved apparent success by ignoring the precepts of Jesus Christ. In dealing with social evils as war, slavery, and inequality, they were interested in self-preservation and in the gain of power. Even more shocking to the Christian conscience is the insight of David Frederick Strauss at a time when slavery had only recently become illegal. He wrote that the abolition of slavery was not a result of humanitarian or religious efforts on the part of the Christian church, but rather the result of intellectual analysis done by the much-maligned “Enlightenment”. Human rights, he claimed, was a philosophical

¹ Bennet, John. C.: *The Radical Imperative*; p.119

² Hening, William W.: *Statutes at Large- Being a Collection of all the Laws of Virginia*, Vol. I; p.146

³ Figgis, John Neville: *The Divine Right of Kings*, 2nd Ed.; pp. 45- 65

⁴ Hurd, John C.: *The Law of freedom and bondage in the United States*, Vol. I; pp. 210- 215

rather than Christian concept.⁵ My question is: What was the environmental press that caused the Church to not only start but also continue supporting and defending such extension of evil throughout centuries?

Problems of Christianity in Europe before reformation and exploration

If I were to define the Middle Ages of Europe religiously, I would have to start with the conversion of Constantine and end with the publication of the Greek New Testament by Erasmus (c. 1466-1536). If I were to define it politically, I would have to start with the fall of the Roman Empire to the discovering of America in 1492. No matter how I will like to define the Middle Ages of Europe, I have to make a distinction between the differences of the Dark Ages and the Renaissances. The early roots of the Renaissance started before Charles the Great became emperor in Rome in 800 AD. The decline of the Roman Empire in the West and the development of new nations from the sixth to the eighth centuries had led to a practical independence from Rome. The Merovingian, West Gothic, and Anglo-Saxons had developed their own churches, even with their own Bible translations. Had it not been for the return of a “Caesar” in the person of Charles the Great, the reestablishment of a united Roman Catholicism would scarcely have been possible. He founded schools for the training of priests and monks. This way, the church was strengthened to be the guidance of education, which flourished from the 11th to the 14th century. As a countermovement to it, people started to focus on human achievements like new scientific insights. They created new rational philosophical ways of life out of which later raised humanism that continued to the 16th century. At the same time, there was renewal in other areas. Increased trade and banking brought economic change. It was a time of growing nationalism as many European countries experienced a centralizing of political power in the person of a king. Several factors contributed to spiritual decline in the organized Catholic Church: the immorality of the clergy, inefficient organization, and overemphasis on the outward demonstration of religion. The Great Schism, which lasted until 1417, split the Western church. Some countries supported the papal claims of Urban VI (c. 1318-1389), while others obeyed Clement VII⁶ (1478-1534). In an effort to resolve matters, the Council of Pisa elected yet another pope. For most people, the concept of the church as the universal body of Christ was equated with the visible institution. When someone spoke of “the church”, he meant the clergy, impressive buildings, hierarchy, and property. Within the church structures, the laity was separated from the clergy. Not all this presented a “mankind created by God into his own image”. Furthermore, the lay people were expected to pay for the services dispensed by the clergy.⁷ People gave the church much money and vast sections of land in the hope that God would be pleased with them. So the

⁵ Strauss, David Frederick: *Der alte und der neue Glaube*; p. 53

⁶ Wycliffe, John: *John Wycliffe and the 600th Anniversary of Translation of the Bible into English* in *Christian History Magazine* 2, Issue 3; p.18

⁷ Tracy, James: *Europe's Reformations 1450- 1650*; pp.132- 137

church became rich.⁸ We might even say in modern words that at this time, the Catholic Church was the largest landowner, the richest corporation, and the most powerful organization in all Europe. Spiritual matters, including one's eternal destiny, were considered by the exclusive concern of the professional clergy. Lay people were expected to give their obedience to the church leadership and observe the sacraments, for these were the means of obtaining God's grace. Because the church leadership had become corruptive, religious education, even in form of an edifying sermon, was almost unknown. Many priests were untrained and ill prepared, both intellectually and theologically, to lead the people in spiritual matters. Often, they had never seen a Bible. Many men, especially those whose elder brothers had inherited the family land, wealth, and titles, became priests because it was the way to power. They were required to recite the mass in Latin even if they did not understand anything they said. The majority of the congregation did not understand a word, either. Though forbidden to marry, some priests openly lived with women, and many frequented prostitutes. Nevertheless, the church members were required to believe that these men, by virtue of their priesthood, stood between them and God. These generalizations, of course, only tell part of the story. There were many who recognized the evils and tried to reform the church. Some argued that the key to reform was a General Council, which would have had authority even over the pope. Several forces for reform began to emerge during this period. They included the Mystics, the "Brethren of the Common Life" and the Christian humanists.

⁸ MacGregor, Geddes: *Gnosis- A Renaissance in Christian Thought*; p. 21