

L6_20251020_Mission_Stegeman

Listening Session 6 - Janneke Stegeman

The young people said in their statement: we are grieving, we are hurting, we tired; why are we not all crying? They said: ‘We have made suffering so normal that now do not even recognise it anymore. We carry on day-to-day but are we living? We want to dance with God, laugh with God—we need to dance, sing and laugh with God to live.’ They said: ‘We cannot go on like this.’

Their words resonate with me. I am thankful to be part of this communion, with this opportunity to meet and gather around what matters to us. Also, I am struggling to be a protestant, in this time of a multiplicity of crisis – climate crisis, the rise of white Christian nationalism, of Judeo-Christian supremacy. Coming from a protestant tradition deeply involved in and entangled with colonialism, I am suspicious about how we talk about mission in terms of wounds and solidarity. If we say that the call to mission is the call to justice, do we acknowledge a history in which mission is entangled with protestant and white supremacy, and, especially, the afterlives of these histories, that are still very present? We may say, for instance, that the genocide in Gaza made clear that rule-based order is breaking down, but do we see that those rules always mainly functioned to protect the interests of protestant and white supremacy?

‘Mission’ as an ideal and a racialized ideology played an important role in the construction of protestant and white supremacy. When we talk about mission, we need to grapple with the roots of the reformed tradition in European history, the forming of the nation state, its connections with antisemitism and supersessionism, nationalism, with the long roots of ideas of protestant and white supremacy, and how they are intertwined, and continue to shape our world.

The church wants to see the world through the eyes of those who suffer, we say, and I believe we mean it too. But church structures are not outside of the structures of oppression; they are part of them. And unless we pay attention to what we do and how we do it and where we do it, we risk reproducing injustice and inequality. Churches are often complicit with those in power, serving their interests. The Dutch protestant church, my own church, also uses the language of wounds. Our relationship to ‘the Jewish people’ is part of our ‘identity’ and ‘DNA’, while a connection with Palestinians is situated in our diaconal responsibility. The (my) church fails to offer clarity on the intolerable theology of Christian Zionism, as well as on racism within our church (as recently pointed out by a former colleague).

Today I want to discuss this from the perspective of supersessionism in relation to protestant supremacy and whiteness, including its current disguise: Judeo-Christian supremacy. Even though not all European states were colonial states, colonialism is based on the idea of Europe as Christian. Colonialism was Christian colonialism, nevertheless, catholic colonialism and protestant colonialism, although having a lot in common, were not the same. For me as a protestant from a country shaped by protestant colonialism, it is important to understand those

L6_20251020_Mission_Stegeman

differences. It is important if we want to understand how racialization functioned and what it looked like in protestant contexts, it is also important if we want to understand the ongoing silence around and support for the genocidal state of Israel.

If I center Gaza and Palestine, I do this because Palestine is a magnifying lense for what is going on, as Mitri Raheb said. I do this also because Palestine and Palestinians have been and are so crucial in my own journey of decolonization. What is also true: I know much more about Palestine than I do about Sudan, or Syria, or Maluku. And I recognize this is true for many people and this is also a problem.

A racialized hierarchy positioned white Christian Europe as superior, and within Europe the white Christian heterosexual cisgender male, who was moderate, rational and civilized and able to categorize the whole world. This was not a temporary corruption that disappeared when the colonial era ended. Not only is (neo)colonialism continuing in many shapes and forms, but Protestantism and the Western Christian self-understanding continue to be shaped by colonialism. Indeed, colonialism shaped the world, it was a global event, that left no place on earth untouched – even space that were nor colonizer nor colonized are affected, because the power structure and ideology that carried colonialism carried through the world, and infected everyone and everything with its racialized hierarchies and ideas about the civilized and the uncivilized. Colonialism is “a structure rather than an event”, and that also means it never ended.

Mission was very important to the self-understanding of the orthodox protestants that governed the Dutch state. They were called – chosen!- to spread the true faith, and Dutch colonialism was the tool to do that. It is important to see that the idea of the true faith was always connected to notions of cultural and physical superiority. As Katherine Gerbner pointed out in her book *Christian Slavery* white supremacy developed out of protestant supremacy.

This sense of superiority is rooted in supersessionism, the idea (also present outside of the Reformed tradition) that Christians had taken over the position of Jews as a chosen people. Jews were categorized as lower, they were ‘of the flesh’, while Christians were ‘of the spirit’. Again, notions of beliefs, bodies and being civilized came together. The work of the Reformed preacher and physician Johan Picardt (1600-1670) offers an example of a strongly racialized interpretation of Genesis 9. Jews had killed God's own son and were therefore no longer God's people. Picardt interprets this as a fulfillment of Genesis 9:26: Jews were cast out 'from the tent'. According to Picardt, this is why they had become 'exiles and vagabonds'. The Christians had taken Shem's place as descendants of Japheth. Picardt also writes about Africans (in this interpretation the descendants of Ham) in language that is very explicitly racist: they cannot cope with freedom, are unable to 'govern' themselves, in slavery they would find well-being. Europe, on the other hand, as 'Japheth's patrimony and heritage', from which so many 'subtle minds' and 'learned men' come, is gifted with the Christian faith and 'is governed by wholesome and well-founded laws'.

L6_20251020_Mission_Stegeman

In short: Europe is 'a queen over Asia, Africa and America'. Colonial protestantism centers itself as normal, neutral, universal, and capable of writing good laws, while all others are limited and 'ethnic'. This is connected to the idea of a 'middle ground', as the space that white Christians believe themselves to inhabit. They are *moderate*, others are extreme.

These are dangerous memories, with violent afterlives. And secondly, I think it is important aware of the connections between supersessionism and other forms of racialisation in order to understand current (protestant) attitudes towards the state of Israel. Notably, during the decades after the Shoah, Jews became part of our 'Jewish Christian' civilization, but the State of Israel was needed to accomplish that. As was the case already in 17th century christian Zionist notions: support for the 'return of the Jews' was also supported by the antisemitic idea that they did not belong in Europe.

We may say that the genocide in Gaza made clear that rule-based order is breaking down, but we have to see that those rules always mainly functioned to protect the interests of white supremacy.

Lastly, we proclaim that mission is disruption. My question is: does that also mean we disrupt ourselves, our own structures, even this very Communion?