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Brother Amory Lemon: The Makeshift Merchant of Souls

In Margaret Laurence's short story, "The Merchant of Heaven," there are several criticisms regarding the protagonist's approach to missionary work. Brother Amory Lemon's fixation with personally delivering Ghanaians to salvation reveals his insensitive nature and causes resentment toward Christianity. Laurence is using Lemon to demonstrate the importance of acknowledging contextualized Christianity, and the difficulty of introducing a religion to a nation that is unwilling to accept it. She does this to suggest how missionaries should conduct themselves to successfully integrate a foreign religion into an indigenous culture.

The way Lemon conducts himself displays an insensitivity towards the specific challenges Ghanaians experience, and this reveals the misguided intentions behind his work. To begin, Lemon disregards the people's physical needs because he is only interested in the salvation of their souls. He considers salvation "the greatest kindness [he] can do these people" and goes on to say that he "let these things [the poor quality of life] distract [him] from [his] true work" (Laurence 222). This demonstrates that Lemon's only intention is the salvation of souls; to invest energy and attention into improving the state of their current lives would interfere with his progress. However, Lemon's actions and statements can at times contradict one another. For

example, Lemon finds the degree of poverty shocking and states that “it’s a crime that people should have to live like this” (Laurence 222). Nonetheless, his intentions do not shift because “life on earth doesn’t matter” (Laurence 227), and people will be compensated in the afterlife. Lemon’s misguided intentions are also evident in his apprehension of contextualized Christianity.

Lemon is very particular about the denomination of Christianity he wants Ghanaians to embrace. For instance, the portrayal of an African Jesus is “a threat he had never anticipated” (Laurence 233). This variant of Christianity draws attention away from the Americanized version he is coaxing Ghanaians to accept. Lemon fails to recognize that Christianity must be presented in a way that is culturally acceptable. Opuni-Frimpong states, “Christianity . . . must not present itself as an alien institution to the people” (27). Instead, religion must be understandable through the values, culture, and practices of the Akan people, so that it “proves to be the denominational Christianity of the West” (Williamson qtd. in Opuni-Frimpong 27). It is important for a missionary to be mindful of their approach as ideologies that are foreign and forced upon a group are not well received.

Even when a missionary displays empathy and the intention to help both physically and spiritually, it can be difficult to spread Christianity in a setting that rejects this religion. For example, Danso resents the spread of Christianity and dislikes Lemon for his character and methods. Danso is “increasingly conscious of [his culture’s] own worth and resentful of denationalizing” (Butler 1), because “the Akan church was simpler” (Laurence 224). He is bitter about how Christianity disturbed the development of the indigenous religion, and how Lemon’s presence continues to threaten the growth of his culture by preying on desperate Ghanaians. Similarly, Lemon is “unfavourable to Akan customary ways and traditional life” (Williamson

qtd. in Opuni-Frimpong 23), which offends Danso. Lemon does not respect the Akan church and views it as idolatrous, filled with people in need of salvation. Although Danso is completely opposed to Lemon's presence, the other Ghanaians have a different outlook. Given the quality of their current lives, they easily accept a religion which promises a better reality. These people are "the ones who go because they've tried everywhere else" (Laurence 229), and merely see Christianity as "a new kind of ju ju" (Laurence 229). This desperation is based on the extent of their suffering; they do not care what religion they conform to, so long as it leads to a better standard of living. Additionally, Danso creates a painting designed to insult Lemon's methods by illustrating his obsession with salvation and disregard for mortal life. Lemon observes this painting and is "frightened and repelled by the outrageous pain and need" (Laurence 220); however, he fails to see that this portrait is identical to his behaviour: the painted Jesus is ignoring the beggars just as Lemon has been witnessing the Ghanaians suffer and has displayed no intent to improve their situations. His choice to prize immortal over mortal life, portrays Lemon as someone who is not touched by the pain around him. Furthermore, Lemon makes the error of equating himself with Jesus. He appropriates the book of Revelation by assuming responsibility for the salvation of souls, a quality associated with Jesus. However, Jesus' approach is loving and forgiving, whereas Lemon "tear[s] the soul out of a living body, and throw[s] the inconvenient flesh away like fruit rind" (Laurence 232). The flaws of Lemon's approach are suggestions for missionaries, describing the tactics they should avoid.

The faults Laurence embeds in Lemon's character are directed towards Christians in hopes that they will recognize the issues to this approach and make appropriate changes to their work. In Christianity, one's relationship with God is personal, and as a missionary, Lemon should have helped Ghanaians establish this relationship and taught them about the goodness of

God. Instead, Lemon is described as “the pedlar who bought souls cheap” (Laurence 234), and “a kind of soul-purifier, sucking in the septic souls and spewing them back one hundred percent pure” (Laurence 218). His system was factory-like; merely saving *en masse* and pumping out as many souls as possible, without getting to know the stories and the lives of the people he was serving. In addition to this, missionaries should acknowledge and appeal to a country's needs while providing lessons in faith. Berman notes that “Africans were most successfully converted when along with conversion came benefits, most notably Western education, but also health care and other forms of training” (Berman qtd. in Nunn 5). Similarly, “Christianity can meet the spiritual needs of the people when it is interpreted in the cultural categories of the people that it seeks to serve” (Opuni-Frimpong 23). Demonstrating compassion, empathy, and an intent to create change are all vital to cultivating a healthy relationship between the church and people. Additionally, Christianity must be presented in a form that can be understood through a society's culture and values. If missionaries are working to spread Christianity, they must acknowledge that it is a universal religion and will be interpreted differently (Opuni-Frimpong 23). However, even if one makes these changes, it is important to be patient as it takes time to see progress. Laurence's metaphor that Lemon “looked for dragons to slay and found cockroaches in his store-cupboard” (221), represents the unexpected challenges missionaries will inevitably encounter. Ultimately, missionaries should set reasonable expectations for what they hope to accomplish in a new culture. Laurence brings these criticisms to the attention of Christian missionaries so that they will identify the flaws in Lemon's methods and avoid making similar mistakes in their own work.

Laurence demonstrates multiple issues with the protagonist's approach to missionary work. Lemon's “coarse ethics [and] misguided evangelism” (Birbalsingh 2) alienates characters

and provokes a dislike for him and his work. Ironically, however, his character is intended to enlighten Christian readers. Ultimately, missionaries must avoid religious coercion, anticipate resentment, and acknowledge that religion can adapt because “Christianity must be considered as a universal faith that is capable of surviving in all cultural environments” (Bediako qtd. in Opuni- Frimpong 23).

Works Cited

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