

An Academic Critique of the Doctoral Dissertation

***“The Second Conversion”: From Swedish Mission to
African Denominations on Örebro Mission’s Field
of Operation in Central Africa 1914-1962***

***The critique by the Appointed Faculty Examiner
Professor Torstein Jørgensen for
Göran Janzon’s Doctoral Dissertation***

Libris, Studia Missionalia Svecana CVII, Örebro 2008

Presentation of the thesis

The candidate Göran Janzon has submitted a doctoral thesis titled *”Den andra omvändelsen”: Från svensk mission till afrikanska samfund på Örebromissionens arbetsfält i Centralafrika 1914-1962* for public defence. The thesis is written in Swedish, but in an English summary the author has called his opus *”The Second Conversion”: From Swedish Mission to African Denominations on Örebro Mission’s Field of Operation in Central Africa 1914-1962*. In accordance with the procedure of The University of Uppsala it falls under my obligation as opponent to open the viva by giving a brief presentation of the thesis.

Janzon’s dissertation is a relatively wide ranging study of a specified piece of mission history. The method employed is in agreement with the general principles for historical research, in his case with a main focus on documentary material from a wide range of sources which, in the opinion of the candidate, can contribute to and are sufficient for a scholarly investigation of his topic; while the content contains the necessary bulk for a doctoral thesis. The main aim of the thesis is to render an analysis on the process of change from an activity governed by a European missionary agency, *in casu* the Örebro Mission, into independent African churches in the lands that have eventually become the countries of The Central African Republic and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The topic has not previously

been the object of particular attention, at least not on the scale that comes to expression in Janzon's study. On the other hand, the thesis lines thematically up with a number of parallel studies from other parts of Africa where Western missions at some point initiated work and where independent African churches today dominate the ground.

With its tally of 519 pages plus bibliography, registers and English summary, Janzon's thesis must be characterised as quite voluminous. It starts with an introductory chapter of more than 100 pages discussing the basic methodological principles and a quite lengthy presentation on the missionary circles in Örebro, making special reference to their leading figure, John Ongman.

The corpus of the thesis is divided into three main parts subdivided in twelve subchapters (on p. 54 the author says that the number is nine, but on p. 57 the number is stated as twelve which is in agreement with the table of contents). The first main section (pp. 115-284) covers the period 1914-1945 and has been titled "Pioneer Work led by Missionaries" (*Missionästyrd Pionjäverksamhet*). The chapter gives an account of the period of preparation and the first two decades of missionary work in Central Africa. The decisive, and in many respects epoch-making, years of World War II are included in this chapter.

Part II follows the same track as the first in assessing the next period, 1946-1959. This was a period of radical shake-ups on the African continent, not least in the political field where the preparative ground for liberation of colonies was laid and in which a new set of preconditions for Western activities was established. Development of these trends had immediate effects on mission and church, and the missionary field of the Örebro Mission was no exception.

Part III covers the short but intensive phase from 1960-1962, when the long period of missionary dominance in focus in Janzon's study culminated by the founding of two independent Baptist church unions, one in each of the two independent African states which appeared as a result of the political liberation process. In this section the candidate, to a greater extent than in previous chapters, draws up perspectives of a more analytical and conclusive nature.

Critique

Introductory remarks

With his comprehensive thesis Göran Janzon invites the reader on quite long journey and by the way he has structured his study the travel is on foot. It stretches over a timespan of well over 40 years. The walk goes from archive to archive, from document to document, from person to person and from event to event. But the journey is not random in its course. It has a compass that points to the main topic which is to describe and analyse the transition from a work governed by the mission to independent churches in the field of the Örebro Mission in Central Africa. And it has a map, consisting of the three self principles, which searches to understand the route of travel by reference to Henry Venn and Rufus Andersson’s three famous perspectives.

Generally assessed, the theme must be characterised as well chosen; it seems relatively well documented as far as written sources are concerned; the theoretical and analytical perspective is accounted for; the topic has several parallels from corresponding courses of events in other places in Africa during the same period of time; and finally, the actual field in Göran Janzon’s focus is a virginal ground as far as research is concerned. So far, so good!

General approach

But, as already mentioned, the journey is one on foot, and it proceeds very slowly. The direction of the compass is indeed there, and the map also reappears now and then. But through its long passages the text is more shaped by the complex landscape than by the overarching theoretical grasp. In many long portions the account seems to be directed by a wish to encompass the historical events in their totality as they appear in the vast collection of sources that have been used by the candidate. The different persons are followed closely and their biographies are accounted for in minute detail on a number of points, which in itself might be interesting enough, but very often they are of minor relevance to the overall theme of the thesis. The same applies to the different Swedish groups that founded and stood behind the Swedish mission to Central Africa – The Örebro Missionary Union (Örebro Missionsförening), The Philadelphia Congregation (Filadelfiaförsamlingen)

and The Swedish Baptist Society (Svenska Baptistsamfundet). Finally, this approach applies also to the course of events, which is presented step by step and in which the main perspective disappears among innumerable more or less irrelevant details.

The thesis, as it is designed, appears as some kind of a full historical account of the work that was performed by the Örebro Mission in Central Africa, which, like in most other places within the same period, resulted in the founding of independent African churches. It is the general impression of this examiner that the dissertation includes an inherent double-ness. Although the writer expressly states that his study is an analysis given by a rather precisely defined overarching question, when reading the greater part of the text this main question plays a most secondary role. One is left with the impression that it is something that has been added to the study during the course of the candidate's work in order to tighten it up for the purpose of transforming a more general historical monograph into a scholarly thesis.

A critical question of a more general character is the extent to which the selected source material of the study and its main theoretical perspective correspond with one another.

On p. 36 the writer presents an informative and useful synopsis of the methodological application of the three self principles in this thesis. More indirectly, the progress of the study somehow follows this pattern. But generally it is left to the reader to keep in touch with this scheme when going through the text, and one asks oneself why the writer has not used this interpretational model more actively and explicitly throughout the thesis, for instance by concluding each of the twelve subchapters with a summative discussion. Such an approach would have increased the stringency of the study and demonstrated a writer with a firm grip of his material, not only in general terms, but by the application of a more precisely defined problem. This leaves one with the impression that the theoretical scheme is something that has been construed, not as part of the shaping of the study, but added at a later stage of the working process when the greater part of the text was already on paper.

On some more specific issues the need for a better overview would have eased the reading, such as when the candidate deals with the handbook rules and organisational matters of the missionary activity in section 9.1. At this

late stage of the missionary process a number of threads have been pulled together, different instructions and new arrangements have been made, and new African staff with new tasks and a missionary staff numbering as many as 69 persons have been put into place. As the text goes along it is very difficult for the reader to achieve a full and integrated overview of the course of events without some sort of schematic tables.

Length and clarity

As should appear from my comments so far, the general opinion of this examiner is that the thesis is too indistinct in its outline and too long. Several detailed and lengthy passages would have gained substantially if they had been shortened down. Here are some examples. In chapter 2 (pp. 59-114) the author uses 55 pages on purely background information, mostly concentrated on the person John Ongman. There is no doubt that Ongman was an important figure and initiator, but as far as the main focus on the activity in Africa and the emergence of an independent church there is concerned, one must ask what kind of utilitarian value the detailed story of Ongman's upbringing, travels and general course of life can have for this study. This chapter could have been tightened up radically by an account limiting itself to very briefly singling out the elements of Ongman's background that had a bearing on the profile of his missionary organisation. Some ten pages would have been sufficient.

Another example can be taken from section 9.2 (pp. 404-12). On these pages the candidate pays a visit to the neighbouring SMF-field in Mid-Congo with a detailed description of the work taking place there. It is surely of interest to note that the SMF activity on certain points was a model for the Örebro missionaries, but this does not necessitate a general description of their work. A determined identification of the established contact and particular features of the SMF activity that shaped the work of the Örebro missionaries would fully have served the author's purpose and contributed to increased clarity.

A third example: in section 4.4 (pp. 196-209) the candidate uses 15 pages to describe the Kongo-war revolt and the missionary opinion of it. In itself an interesting passage, but in the context of the study this unit lives its own life and no reflection is presented whatsoever on what relevance this material contains for the main theme.

These examples, and I could have added some more, leave a general impression that the wide spectrum of material – in themselves good sources – has had a directing grip on the candidate and not vice versa.

Images of one another

One issue, also of a more general kind, which normally plays a role in studies like the one on the table today, deals with the image missionaries and African counterparts had of one another. To be sure, the topic is touched upon in several places throughout the thesis, but not as the subject of a more fundamental discourse and not in great detail. It must be noted as a positive that the candidate, especially towards the end of the study, focuses on the different attitudes of individuals missionary personnel towards their African colleagues and different aspects of the indigenous African culture, a theme that also brought up earlier in the study. In section 3.2 (pp. 132f) we find, on the basis of the writing of the missionary Sixten Edhegard, an interesting presentation of the missionary understanding of the gospel as an agent of change and of the missionary attitudes towards Africans and their way of life. Normally these matters are taken into account as a background for the understanding of the actual development of the missionary process and they are highly relevant for a study of this kind. At this point of the study, the author allows a golden opportunity for a more principled, theoretical and comparative discussion of missionary attitudes to slip through of his hands. To what extent were the missionaries ordinary ethnocentrically oriented Europeans? What was their opinion of race, culture and customs if compared to other European opinion groups? I.J.S. Mbaekwe's PhD thesis (Lund 1979) on *The Images of Africa in Sweden before 1914: A Study of six Types of Persuasive Ideas* could have been a good tool for the candidate in such an analysis in order to range the Örebro missionaries into an already established and used interpretational context. The author mentions that the Örebro missionaries in their writings made use of the so-called 'child analogy' when describing Africans, just as Europeans often did at the time. But I would suppose that they hardly made use of the 'beast analogy', and in this way acted as fundamental racists. This racist term, which Mbaekwe finds widespread among all Swedish opinion groups except the missionary movement, was an important element not only to single them out as a counter-cultural group in a general European setting, but also important for the missionaries' positive estimation of the African potential for the realisation of the three self principles. Without having read the particular

sources of this author, I would be surprised if statements throwing light on this issue do not exist. A discourse along the lines suggested here would have contributed to give the study a stronger theoretical substance and to locate it in a wider scholarly context.

The other side of this coin deals with the African attitude to and opinion of the missionaries, especially their view of them in comparison with other Europeans. Naturally, the lack of contemporary sources produced by Africans is a problem here. Yet my experience with missionary reports, in particular from the early stages of their enterprises, is that these often contain quite substantial information on this issue which, of course, needs some kind of interpretation, especially since this information has passed through missionary hands. I would have wished quite a lot more of this material in the thesis, not least for the reason that such information would have contributed to explain what kind of room for their own initiatives and independent actions Africans meant to have in their work with the Örebro missionaries. Towards the end of the thesis Africans become more visible both generally and when it comes to the expression of their own opinions. The question remains: is the lack of focus on this issue through the main parts of the study based on a corresponding lack of such information in the sources used or is it the result of the author not finding this relevant for the main discourse of the thesis?

The second conversion

The title of the thesis, *The Second Conversion*, is also a basic perspective on the text. This is a well-chosen formulation which, as explained in section 7.5, is put on the agenda as a result of the missionary couple Ellen and John Hilbert's stay in Douala, Cameroun in 1949. During their engagement by the American Presbyterian Mission in the setting up its well run activity there, Mrs. and Mr. Hilbert could watch closely a mission unit that had reached a more advanced stage of African independence than what was the case in the fields of the Örebro mission. In fact, they were so impressed by what they observed that they simply changed their view as if it was a new conversion. In the following years the Hilberts took a position among their Örebro missionary colleagues as advocates for pushing the process of independence in line with the three self principles. In the course of the following chapters, the candidate gives a balanced analysis of how the Hilbert's opinions were met by other central figures of the missionary staff, among whom Yngve

Johansson (who later took the surname Ydreborg) and Lennart Huss especially took a more reluctant stance against what they considered to be too hasty a liberation process.

At the same time, especially in the course of the last chapters of the thesis, it appears that the question of self government and self support, and to a less extent self propagation, were elements that seem to have emerged more or less naturally by themselves from their own ground. One influencing factor that played a role here was the contemporary and very strong running process of political liberation, sometimes referred to as 'the scramble for freedom' (as a parallel to the so-called 'scramble for Africa' of the 1880s). Other factors were, at least periodically, the lack of missionaries, increased education among African colleagues and the transfer of responsibility for the evangelists' work to the African congregations. A basic question that the thesis does not answer precisely enough is whether the process towards independence was the result of an expressed missionary programme, initiatives pushed on some part by the missionaries, or general traits of development caused by more overarching external or internal matters.

Part III of the thesis

In the opinion of this examiner Part III of the thesis is definitely the best as far as its yield in relation to its main thematic focus is concerned. Throughout this section a number of good analytical elements with direct relevance for the overarching topic of the thesis are to be found. In particular this applies to section 10.2, in which the candidate discusses basic ecclesiological matters, and the subsequent section 10.3, in which the main focus is on the three different models: 1) the transfer model, 2) the parallel model and 3) the integration model. The practice that was realised by the Örebro Mission in Central Africa was a gradual application of model three, or as the author puts it, a gradual integration model. The figure of the models presented on p. 450 is most instructive and functions well as a key to the text, which at this point is concentrated on the main question of the thesis.

The analysis of this part seems all in all well grounded. But since the term 'model' is used, one may raise the question whether this was a model that the participants of the process had in front of them like a map to be guided by, or whether it is a reconstruction that in retrospective appears as a relevant term for a historic course of events.

Some details

When it comes to disposition and order the overall impression of this study is that it is tidy and logical. As far as this examiner has been able to observe, the data is meticulous and credible, and the registers adequate. But, as already indicated, the thesis would have gained from having more summary chapters along the way, also in the form of figures and sketches, with clear allusions to the main theoretical issue of the study. One or more good maps would also have been an asset. The only map given (p. 16) is unclear and not very informative.

Conclusion

After these critical observations, remonstrances and hopefully relevant suggestions for improvement it is time to wind up my examination with some concluding words. The first thing to be said is that all in all Göran Janzon's dissertation appears to be a reliable piece of scholarly work. The candidate demonstrates that he is fully able to handle historical sources – which in his case consisted of a large and complex collection – in a professional way. He treats the sources critically and in a balanced manner; they are explored with a solid portion of perseverance and analysed by the necessary impartiality. Nowhere in the text does the work appear to be directed by already accepted assumptions or prejudices.

What in particular makes this study meritable is the extensive study of sources on which it is based. The author has visited a number of archives in different places in the world. He has made known, and to some extent available, to the scholarly world historical material hitherto more or less unknown, but of great value to the research of mission history and African history. My chief critical objection against the study is that the text is too broad, too detailed and through long passages too vaguely linked to the main topic. But on no point have I observed that the candidate has maintained opinions or drawn conclusions without a foothold in the source material. And by the opportunity I have had to read this study by being commissioned to act as its examiner, I have also learnt a great deal.