

## RELIGIOUS AND MORAL CONDITIONS IN ARGENTINA.

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I want to speak out of my own experience and observations of our work in Argentina. I shall not speak of any theories of missions nor shall I tell of things I have read in books, but as I said, will speak out of my own experience. I want to tell something about the people among whom we work, something of their religious and moral conditions, what we are doing to better these conditions and lastly a word about our most urgent needs.

First, then, the people. Argentina is a cosmopolitan country. The ends of the earth meet there. There are representatives of all the European countries and many of the Asiatic countries, but the most numerous are the Italians, Spaniards and the native Argentines. Prior to 1870 few immigrants went to Argentina and that country with such fertile soil was buying its flour in the United States, But no sooner did the industrious Italian arrive than he turned to the plow and converted the land into one of the most aggressive agricultural countries of the world. About ninety per cent of the Argentina farmers are Italians from North Italy, from Pia Monte. The southern Italians, as in our country, take to the cities and occupy themselves in selling fruits, candies and vegetables.

To work among the Italians it is necessary to understand something of their characteristics and their language, for in Argentina they are first, last and always Italians. To give you some idea of that fact, when Italy declared war on Austria, all of twenty-five thousand men from eighteen to twenty-five years of age sailed from Argentina and offered their lives for service in their native land.

The Spaniard. Here it is necessary to know from what part of Spain one comes, for there is about as much differ-

ence between a Gallego and an Andaluz as there is between an Englishman and a Frenchman. The Andaluz is a polite, worthless kind of fellow who loves to play the guitar and dance and is absolutely lazy. When I arrived in Argentina, a Methodist missionary who had been working there for years said: "Hart, you can believe something of what nearly all the people tell you except the Andaluz." According to my experience he was speaking the truth. The Gallego is a rough, ignorant fellow, a kind of diamond in the rough, but when converted makes a fine type of Christian. All of our native helpers except two are Gallegos.

And then again one must distinguish between the Catalan and the Basque. I once asked a Catalan if he was a Spaniard. He said, "No, I am from Cataluna." The Spaniards are proud of their native land and to do efficient work among them one must know something of Spanish history and a good deal of the characteristics of the people from the different sections of Spain.

The native Argentine. The early Spanish settlers freely mingled with the Indians and a majority of the native Argentines have Indian blood in their veins. The Argentine is very proud of his country and thinks the immigrant has only come there to save himself from starvation. No one can successfully work with the Argentine without knowing his national history.

On one occasion a woman who was converted told me she wanted me to speak to her husband. I went to see him and was almost insulted. I afterward found that he belonged to a class of Argentines called the Gauchos, something like our American cowboys. I read everything on that subject I could find and a little book describing a certain band of Gauchos to which he belonged fell into my hands and I read it with a good deal of pleasure. I then went back to see him, and when I mentioned the word Gauchos, I saw at once that a conversation with him was possible. He invited me in and I began to tell him what

I had read about the Gauchos. He opened up and began to tell me a great deal more than I had read and we had a pleasant conversation, which led on until I was able to speak to him about his Saviour and afterward had the joy of seeing him converted and baptized into the fellowship of our church.

The Italian hates the Spaniard, the Spaniard thinks he is of the best blood in the world and the Argentine despises them both. One of Argentina's great problems is how to get these people together. It might be interesting to know that there are over twenty thousand Syrians in Argentina and about one hundred thousand Russians, a good many Japanese and Indian coolies.

And now a word about the religious and moral condition of these people. My observation is that the majority of the people are irreligious. They have left Romanism disgusted with its teachings, and have gone to the other extreme. They deny the existence of God and even of the soul, scoff at religion and say it is all a fraud. It makes my heart ache as I have seen how this class has grown. It was formerly confined to the educated classes, but has now made great inroads on the laboring classes. Their unbelief goes with them even to the grave. One of the saddest things in the world to me is an Argentine burial, no religious service, no mention of God, the body interred according to their belief, just as an animal.

The Catholics. There are a good many who are trying to follow the teachings of the Roman Catholic church. They do believe in God and they do believe in a hereafter and there is some common ground between us. I have always found it easier to talk to a true Catholic about his soul's salvation than to an atheist. The great majority of those whom we have won to Christ have come from those who were formerly devout Catholics.

Then there is another class, I hardly know what to call them. Their belief seems to be a mixture of Catholic superstition with teachings of the Indian medicine man,

only the medicine man has given way to a woman. In all the cities and towns of Argentina there are certain praying women who have a certain mysterious influence over a certain group of people, and I have found that influence very hard to break.

Now with such religious conditions, what could one expect morally? Where there is no fear of God and not even a belief in His existence, there can be no real ground for morality and hence we find men defending as legitimate and right all kinds of vices. Lottery, houses of ill fame and all kinds of gambling are licensed by the government. I was once in the company of a governor, three lawyers, two doctors and three ranchmen who defended signal immorality as right, and told with great glee of their terrible exploits of the night preceding our conversation. They further said no one could live without lying and classed as a fool and an idiot the man who did not lie.

I doubt if there could be found in all the world a more immoral country than Argentina. I shall never forget how terrible I felt when the only doctor I could get as my little daughter was dying was a man whom I had heard defend as legitimate and right sexual immorality and who was then living right across the street from me with a woman to whom he was never married.

Now just a word about what we are doing to help these conditions. In our churches we are getting the people together. I am the pastor of a church which has three deacons, one an Italian, one a Spaniard and one an Argentine. They have forgotten their national differences and are working together as brothers. Socialism has tried to break down race hatreds, but has failed and the Socialist party in Argentina has now divided into the European and Argentine branches. Nothing but the gospel will ever bring those people together and my experience is that it does. Often as I am speaking I see a troubled expression on some face. In a few days there comes a knock at my door. Those who had those troubled expressions as I

spoke come to tell me they are not married. Before hearing the gospel they had never thought of it. The government, the Socialists and others have tried to grapple with this problem and have failed. In many other provinces the government performs the marriage ceremony free and has done everything possible to get the people to marry, but without success. But as they hear the preaching of the gospel their seared consciences are quickened and they at once wish to comply with this fundamental rite of society.

Then, too, the gospel gives the people the power to overcome sin. The current immorality in Argentina is so strong that none but those who are saved by the atoning blood of our Saviour can stand. As I came through Philadelphia, the manager of a large business firm there asked me, "Mr. Hart, why is it that so many of the best traveling men who have been sent from this country to Argentina", to use his language, "go to the devil?" I told him it was easy to explain. Here there is a certain moral atmosphere created by the gospel and one has to live a respectable life, but when an unregenerated man reaches Argentina all restraints are removed and he goes down in the great whirlpool of immorality that sweeps around him.

Our most urgent need in Argentine is evangelism. We need men and women whose souls are on fire with the power of God and who love fallen man to go out and preach the unsearchable riches of the gospel of Christ. We need this year a man and his wife in the large city of Cordoba, and I pray God that He may send one.

Then we need buildings. In a country where appearance means so much it is hard to get people to come to our meetings in the small, dark and unattractive halls that we are able to rent. We are hoping soon to get a part of the Judson Fund for several buildings, which we so much need. And here let me say in speaking about appearances that I think that the national tree of Argentina well represents the character of the people. The tree is called the

*ombu*. It will not burn. Its pithy wood will not serve for lumber. It has but one thing, that is appearance, and so the people—no real character, no backbone, just appearance. What they need is the gospel of Jesus Christ to give them moral strength and to enable them to live pure lives. Whether they get it or not depends largely on our Southern Baptists. There are no other Christian denominations in our Southland working there. What will we do about it? Will we give them what God has so freely given us or will we allow our near neighbors to rot in their awful sins? God help us to see our opportunity and seize it now.