

THE PRESENTATION OF CHRISTIANITY TO PRIMITIVE PEOPLES

THE TORADJA TRIBES OF CENTRAL CELEBES

THE THOUGHT WORLD OF THE TORADJA

BEFORE the arrival of the Dutch, the Toradja of Central Celebes had scarcely been in touch with other nations. Their dwelling-places in the mountains were seldom visited by strangers, and when they themselves wandered to the coast in order to sell the produce of their forests to the Mohammedans settled there, little intercourse was held between them. By this isolation the Toradja's mind has been extremely narrowed. Central Celebes is the centre of the world. Here the great God, the Creator, made the first man and woman, whom He carved out of stone. He wished to give these people eternal breath so that they should never die. But while He had gone to fetch this breath, a wicked spirit came and put the stone images where they caught their first breath from the wind. Hence as the wind is laid from time to time, so the breath of man must cease in death. All inhabitants of the earth descend from the first couple. As their original dwelling they indicate a place called Pamona, north of the Fosso lake. When the people spread over the earth, each tribe set a stone in that place. As long as the Toradja only knew people in their vicinity, these stones were attributed to them alone. Later on when they came across the Gorontalese from the other side of the sea, they thought that one of the stones must have been set by them. And when they learnt to know the Dutch, they concluded that they too must have placed a stone at Pamona.

The Toradja is unable to project his thoughts beyond his own circle, and all that is new and strange to him he tries to bring back within it. The fact that the Dutch e.g. have no priestesses¹ whose soul, while the solemn rite is being performed, mounts to heaven to present their petitions to the Lord of heaven, could only be explained by supposing that the Netherlands are situated in that part where heaven and earth meet, so that the people can go to heaven themselves to set forth their own pleas and are not in want of mediators.

As an animistic people the Toradja suppose that even during lifetime the soul is not inseparable from the body. But a too long separation can cause death. The soul can separate from the body of its own accord, because it has a strong longing for somebody or something. But the soul can also be stolen, either by the souls of the dead who want it, or by evil spirits. And even to the living, power is ascribed to entice souls by secret arts, and to keep them imprisoned. When the Toradja fancies that his soul has left him childish means are applied to persuade it to return; the soul is called by its name, it is promised all manner of good and nice things, or it is wooed back by strewing rice. If it is supposed that a spirit has captured it, a sacrifice is offered and the people beg for the soul's release. In certain cases, however, the only thing to be done is to apply for the intervention of a priestess, who intones a number of litanies which raise her soul up to the spirits and to the Lord of heaven; by his aid she recovers the lost soul, or he may send her back to earth comfortless.

This anxiety for his earthly soul has made the Toradja invent all manner of means whereby to strengthen its life. Wars, for example, although they find their origin in outbursts of human passion, are a way by which to increase this soul-life, for the victor is constantly trying to appro-

¹ In Central Celebes the priesthood is exclusively in the hands of women. If as an exceptional thing a man feels any vocation for this office, he usually dresses and behaves as a woman.

appropriate the measure of unspent soul-fluid left behind by the slain enemy. The Toradja even suppose there are people who live entirely on the soul-fluid of others; these are a great danger to the community as they invariably choose the souls of their own tribe.

Besides the God who created man, the Toradja have a number of gods, personified forces of nature, named according to their supposed capacities. But these gods do not form part of their life, and for the most part they know very little about them. The priestesses are really acquainted with these gods, and their names constantly recur in prayers and litanies. It is only when the gods show their displeasure by provoking an earthquake or some great national calamity that the people think of bringing them sacrifices. Popular religion consists in revering the dead, chief among whom are the souls of the slain.

The Toradja has great reverence for his ancestors. These continue to influence the lives of their descendants: they punish by illness or a bad harvest all who sin against the old institutions. They lend their aid in war, in lawsuits, in hunts and other occupations of daily life. At each meal part of the food is put aside for the souls of the ancestors. But all this cultus only aims at temporal advantage.

As the stress is so entirely laid on temporal happiness and prosperity one cannot expect the Toradja to pay much attention to a future life. He believes in the continued existence of his soul, but it is a doleful existence, dark, dreamy and devoid of all joy. The soul continues to live in the same conditions and appearance as it had while here on earth. An old Toradja when telling the parable of Lazarus and Dives, made Abraham answer Dives on his request to send Lazarus to his five brethren: 'How can you ask anything of the kind? You know Lazarus cannot walk as he is so constantly ailing.'

The Toradja believes in retribution after death for social vices. Social virtues consist in generosity to the people of his own tribe (a result of their communistic conceptions),

and courage and fruitfulness as the means whereby the tribe is kept up, externally and internally. On the way to the kingdom of spirits a smith stops each soul to inquire whether it has been married, and how many enemies it has slain when on earth. The greater number it can boast of, the better chance the soul will have of passing by its judge. To any soul who has not married or has never slain an enemy, the smith applies a blow on the knees which prevents it for ever from walking on, and a still more miserable existence than in the kingdom of spirits must be lived in the smithy.

DIFFICULTIES AND HINDRANCES WHICH THE MESSAGE HAD TO MEET

The first difficulties and hindrances we experienced were the result of our ignorance of the language. The Toradja considered their language the only true one. Because we at first spoke it deficiently, they considered us partly demented and spoke to us in baby language. Then again, their accomplishments, such as wood-carving with a chopping-knife and the making of all manner of implements for daily use, were beyond us, so they looked down on us as very stupid people indeed.

Another reason why the Toradja felt very little interest in us and in the gospel message we brought, was the fact that we stood outside their social pale. In the community of the Toradja all belong to the same family, a stranger can only be admitted into it by marriage. The different members of this community are not allowed to have a separate opinion; there only exists an opinion of the whole tribe or clan, which is respected by all. What one does, all do. If we insisted on the necessity of conversion they appealed to their chiefs; when these adopted Christianity the others would follow. The chiefs have no absolute power; they are chosen amongst the oldest, wisest, bravest and most cunning, and for this reason the others bend to

their authority. It is, however, expected of the chief that he will follow the customs of the forefathers. Should he venture to introduce new habits, his followers would soon turn their backs upon him and leave him alone. So whereas the subjects appealed to their chief, he in his turn leant on his followers.

But a further reason why this communistic institution of the Toradja was a chief hindrance to the acceptance of the Gospel lay in the fact that not only the living members of the tribe form part of the whole, but even the dead still belong to it. Though the gods honoured by the priestesses are the forces of nature, for the common people their ancestors are their gods. The chief is the representative of these ancestors; the revenge of the gods would descend on him in the first place were he to abandon the old paths. Fear of the revenge of these gods was a great hindrance. They often said to us: 'If we were to become Christians, we should die out, or else we should be visited by some disease, or probably our crops would fail.' And when at last some of them turned to Christianity, the others watched in fear and expectation to see what would become of such degenerates. When no disease struck them, and everything went on as usual, others gained courage to take the great step.

If the general condition of the Toradja community formed a hindrance to Christianity, some features did so in particular. In the first place, the Toradja instinctively felt polygamy and slavery, although we never spoke against these evils, to be incompatible with Christianity. The giving up of polygamy was especially hard to them, and later on, when conversions had taken place, a malevolent chief tried to keep others back by reminding them that as Christians they would not be allowed to take a second wife, and persuading them that they would never be able to stick to such a rule. The women on the contrary were much attracted by this feature of Christianity, and another chief remarked mockingly: 'Go and proclaim on all sides

that the men may only have one wife, and all women will immediately become Christians.'

The Toradja's animistic creed had produced a misconception of justice entirely opposed to the preaching of the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Our strong disapproval of the annual raids against tribes whom they considered arch-enemies made not the slightest impression on them. These raids were based on the tradition that some ancestor of the Toradja had been cruelly murdered by a certain tribe. When dying he had sworn an oath that to all eternity there would be no more peace between his descendants and these people. The village spirits (or deceased grandparents) also seemed to insist on these raids. When we tried to urge that the descendants of the original murderers had no part in the crime they would answer: 'What will you? Do you care less about us than about these far away strangers whom you do not even know? Is it not better that a few of them should die than we? For if we do not obey the voice of our gods who command us to hold these raids, they will turn against us, and kill us. Would you prefer this?' This same logic was applied in Central Celebes to the many executions of people supposed to be witches and werewolves, when we pleaded on their behalf in terms based on humanity and justice, and tried to deliver them from death.

Thus the proclamation of the Gospel continually rebounded against the mass of Toradja heathenism, and it was only very gradually that by the working of God's Spirit, and by regulations and prohibitions of the European Government, some breaches were made in this stronghold.

POINTS OF CONTACT AND METHODS OF APPROACH

In order to enter into closer contact with the people, and to influence them, we tried to get acquainted with their daily and religious life. When visiting in their villages

we managed to stay in their houses. At first they were shy and frightened, but by taking part in the general conversation at night, when the members of some large family were seated round the smoking torch, we gradually gained their confidence. We also attended their sacrificial festivals, not only in order to study their religious beliefs but to show respect for their institutions and habits. Of course we always made it quite plain that we did not come for these sacrifices, but only out of friendship for themselves. And this satisfied them entirely. As a result of our actions the Toradja are willing to come to our Sunday gatherings and to our Christmas celebrations, which at first they only considered our way of honouring our ancestors. During the first years these gatherings were held in the dwellings of the missionaries or of their native helpers, for we wished them to be as much as possible like a visit. The addresses were more like conversations.

Medical treatment was another way of coming into contact with the people. Paying calls without a distinct purpose is unknown by the Toradja. But when we were asked for medicine, we were wont to say we would bring it to their houses, and when there was such a reason for the call the conversation as a rule got on much better. We never saw the sick themselves brought nearer to the Gospel as a result of the distribution of medicine. On the contrary, many of those who were healed have remained at a greater distance. But a good many have been drawn both to the missionary and to his message as a result of talks held at the time when one of their sick relatives was being treated.

We very soon made attempts to open schools but at first the people would have nothing to do with them. Their ancestors had not been to school, surely the gods would revenge themselves on those who adopted such new ways for their children. By constant intercourse, however, a very few were persuaded to entrust us with their children, in order to please the missionary. Gradually more followed, and when the elder ones amongst the school children asked

to be baptized many of the older people, who had meanwhile been prepared by the constant preaching of the Gospel, were induced likewise to take the great step.

It is always a difficult question to know how to enter into conversation, for the people are inattentive and indifferent when spoken to on spiritual matters. So we often begin by inquiring after their own religious customs, and this rouses an interest which lasts even when we gradually make the transition from the Toradja's world of thought to the Christian way of thinking. Another way to rouse their attention is to repeat a conversation we have had with one of themselves, especially someone whom they consider important. For example we say: 'Some time ago I called on your chief, we talked about the sad state of your rice fields, and how they suffer from this drought. Your chief asked me if I did not know of some means by which we might get rain. I answered that I only knew of one, namely, that we should ask God for it unanimously.' This immediately evokes the question: 'And what did our chief answer?' So we resume: 'The chief said: "Do you suppose this would be of any avail? After all there is a great resemblance between our gods and yours. We pray to our gods, sometimes they give us what we ask, at other times they do not. You pray to your God, sometimes He gives you what you ask, at other times He does not."' This being the very difficulty the person to whom we are speaking has felt, he will listen with interest to what we have to tell him about God's love and providence.

Or inasmuch as the Toradja always give their children names that have a meaning, and that are generally borrowed from circumstances which occurred at the time of birth, we ask with much interest why a child is called 'Coming to aid,' or 'Sword' or 'Separation' and so forth. When the father or some other member of the family has lengthily explained, they are inclined to hear why we have named our child John, or why in the olden time one mother called

her child Samuel, another Solomon, or another Moses. And by telling them about these names we can impart some biblical thoughts about God.

One thing which always inspires them with interest is an explanation of the meaning of one of their own religious customs. We tell them, for example, that their habit of blackening each other with charcoal when watching a corpse originated in the fear that the deceased might come and call for one of them to accompany him to Hades. This causes them such astonishment that they are ready to listen to what we have to add as preachers of the resurrection and of life everlasting.

When telling them Bible stories, we try to avoid need for further explanation. Pharisees, publicans and sinners we represent to the Toradja as noblemen and slaves, for their noblemen are as sure of a good place in the kingdom of the dead, simply because they are noblemen, as were the Pharisees of old because of their self-righteousness; the disdain with which the noblemen look down on their slaves equals that of the Pharisees towards publicans and sinners. The school children, of course, are told about these different classes of people among the Jews. The parable of the sower is made applicable to the way their own fields are cultivated. The parable of the faithful and slothful servant is told them in Toradja style: a master sent out one of his slaves to the rice fields and the other to the salt furnace; suddenly the master comes and looks after the work, and finds the one slave has taken good care of the fields, whereas the other has neglected the furnace, and so on. Arrived at the application of our address, we try to realize what the animistic mind of the Toradja will find to oppose to our teaching. As we express these objections, often rendering the inmost thoughts of our hearers, we gain the reputation of being able to read their souls. Controversy we avoid as much as possible. If it should be necessary to correct some untrue heathen notion, we always excuse ourselves by explaining that such a notion

or habit is contrary to God's Word, the highest authority, to which all people are bound to submit.

Many points of contact are found in the religious habits of the Toradja as well as in their social relationships. First of all there is the perception of the great Lord of heaven, who is above all things created, and also above all gods. Attempts made by some missionaries to use the native name for this Lord of heaven when speaking about God have proved a failure. When we tried to teach the people who God is, calling Him by their name, they generally contradicted us, saying that their god was not such as we described, and they proved this by telling stories from their own mythology. So we were obliged to find a new name for God.

Another point of contact is their perception of their own shortcomings before the Lord of heaven. Of course there is a great difference between the things they consider shortcomings (not to use a stronger expression) and those we as Christians count as such. But still this feeling of guilt is a great point gained, even if they are not able to define wherein the guilt consists. The sense expresses itself in a few practices which aim at getting rid of guilt, such as taking a forked blade of grass, which is torn asunder while calling upon God. Each part of the blade is then put in a different place; by this they mean to say that even as these two divided halves can never more form a whole, so the sin or guilt which has been removed can never more come back. In proportion to the greater or lesser sense of guilt an offering is brought consisting of a buffalo, a pig or a fowl. Another practice supposed to remove their guilt takes place at the harvest festival, or shortly before the cultivation of new fields. A small vessel is made on which they place a sacrifice of rice and buffalo liver, and on which symbolically all guilt is laid by adding a thread out of a garment, or a hair, or else by simply laying hands on the sacrifice. After one of their elders has called upon the Lord of heaven, the vessel is

made to glide down the river. Those who take part in this ceremony meanwhile sprinkle one another with water.

Their priesthood makes it easy to explain Christ as Mediator, and the litanies used by the priestesses, which are really prayers with multitudes of words, form a basis from which we easily speak about the priesthood of all God's children, and about true prayer.

ASPECTS OF THE GOSPEL WHICH APPEAL

It is by no means easy to detect what strikes the people most in the preaching of the Gospel. With regard to the deepest feelings of the heart the Toradja does not seem able or willing to express himself. He always finds some superficial reason whereby to explain his actions, but the true motive must be guessed at. He seems to feel ashamed of exposing his intimate feelings. He will for example excuse his marriage by saying: 'I required someone to boil my dinner for me'; whether it is love which binds him to his wife must be proved by his behaviour. For the same reason it is difficult to say what feelings are roused in the Toradja by the preaching of the Gospel. A fact which has without doubt made a strong and deep impression on the Toradja mind is the oneness of God. Whenever the subject of the creation was treated the missionary could be sure of an attentive audience. First of all, he would prove the oneness of the human race, showing that difference of colour in the different races was only brought about by the influence of climate, whereas the inward parts of the body are the same all over the world, and we all give vent to our feelings in the same way. Then he would try to make them understand how languages had become so many and so diverse. A comparison of their own language with those of neighbouring tribes would prove that in some parts of the country words had disappeared, whereas these same words were still used in other parts, and that some tribes had so stunted words as to make them

unrecognizable, whereas other tribes had retained the original form of those same words. When once persuaded of the oneness of the human race, the Toradja were obliged to come to the conclusion that all these people could only have one God. The principal argument for rejecting Christianity—the supposition that each people must have their own god—was hereby severely shaken.

After conversions to Christianity had taken place it became evident that the preaching of the almighty power of God had always struck the Toradja. It is not only conservatism or indifference that keeps them back from throwing off the yoke which the belief in the gods and evil spirits imposes upon them; it is equally a feeling of doubt whether the God who is preached to them is in very deed powerful enough to protect them from the revenge of the gods.

The Toradja never considers his gods unreal or non-existent. When he turns to Christianity, he sees these same gods in the aspect of demons, and expects God to protect him against their wicked practices. A heathen Toradja engaged in a religious conversation with one of his own people who has been converted to Christianity is anxious to know whether a Christian can ever become ill again, whether his crops can ever fail, or such questions. Baptism is for the Toradja Christians the seal which stamps them as children of God; they believe that when the evil spirits see this seal they no longer dare to hurt them.

The love of God manifested in the forgiveness of sins does not fail to impress their hearts. For the thoroughly egotistical Toradja, who always thinks of himself and who can never imagine any action proceeding from other than a selfish motive, this love is perfectly incomprehensible, and for some it always continues to be an inexplicable folly. But several have been deeply impressed by it. The missionary's home life can reinforce the impression made by his teaching. When the Toradja sees his missionary act from love to God he learns to understand something of the love of God in Christ.

The celebration of the Holy Communion is an act which enters entirely within the range of the Toradja's comprehension. Just as among them anyone would forgive a wrong for the sake of friendship between the offended and the father or brother of the offender, even so God does not impute our sins unto us for Christ's sake. But then in their estimation man must become a blood relative of Jesus, for blood relationship is the only possible tie. Drinking one another's blood makes strangers into brothers. In this light the Toradja considers the celebration of the Holy Communion the sealing of blood relationship with Jesus, whose brother he has thereby become, and because of this he may now be delivered from his sins, for Jesus' sake. Starting from this material view, the spiritual meaning of the communion with Christ gradually becomes more and more comprehensible to him.

The Toradja's attention is invariably kept when one speaks about the soul. Are there souls? Has anyone ever seen a soul? What is the soul? These are questions which are often put to us. It greatly puzzles the Toradja that there can be any connexion between our moral actions and the soul. When he says, 'The hand has stolen, the mouth has offended,' he literally imputes the offence to those members. When it is made clear to him that these members stand for the heart, and that the heart is the main-spring of all actions, good and bad, and further that this soul which goes on living for ever is the same as our heart from which these actions spring forth, then he begins to understand that the soul is tainted with the same sins as the heart, if it has not been cleansed through faith in Christ.

Whereas the heathen cult aims entirely at gaining some earthly advantage, and many Toradja expect the same advantages from the adoption of Christianity, conversations with both Christians and heathen have brought to light that the teaching of a future life has made great impression on them. Even in the first years they used to come with questions like these: 'Where are the souls of

our ancestors ?' or 'When we become Christians will our souls go to the same place as those of our parents and grandparents ?' People often come to baptismal instruction because they are afraid their souls will not dwell in the same place with the souls of their baptized grown-up children. When heathen and Christians converse together, the Christian often points out the danger of a soul which does not know its way to eternity. As an instance I quote the following : 'There is an areca tree on your grounds, my friend,' said a Christian to a heathen. 'You go to it to knock off a few nuts. One is lying on the ground, fallen off by itself. You pick it up, but only to throw it away saying, "It is rotten, it is of no use." But if you should go back to that place after half a year, you would find a shoot grown out of the rotten nut. Now with your soul it is just like that. Your soul grows up to God ; still if Jesus does not help you, it will never get to heaven, but it constantly falls back to earth, just like the ripe fruit of the areca tree.'

Prayer has attracted the Toradja's attention from the very first. They know two sorts of prayer—a calling on the spirits, which may be done by anyone, but which in general only elder people venture on ; and prayers that are offered up to the Lord of heaven by priestesses alone. But to both these kinds they would never forget to add a sacrifice of some sort, even if it were only small. They are told that the Christians may pray without ceasing, and without presenting any offerings, because we may approach God freely. During the first years I was often requested to present some petition to God either for recovery from illness or for drought or rain, for they supposed that the God of the Christians might only be approached by me, His priest. But now we constantly hear both Christians and non-Christians say they pray to God.

The serious character of our marriage ceremonies and funerals, so very different from the noisy and undecorous heathen rites, never fails to impress them.

And lastly, the catholicity of Christianity strongly appeals to them. They are used to act in the same way as others do ; not one of them does anything or likes to do anything which is not done by all. The fact that millions of people dispersed over the whole world come together to worship the same God on the same day impresses them very much. When they were heathen, they wanted to be one in revering their gods ; now that many of them have become Christians, the same strong desire urges them to persuade their countrymen to come over and serve the same God, 'so that once more we may all be going one and the same way.'

Doubtless there are many other features of the Gospel that impress the hearts and minds of the Toradja. But I think I may safely say that the true love which is manifested in every gospel address most impresses these people who are so used to selfishness. The great love of God for sinners, not comprehended at first, opens their hearts to God's Word.

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