

VESTIGES OF HEATHENISM WITHIN THE CHURCH IN THE MISSION FIELD

It is a fatal mistake to think that a heathen or Moham-
medan, when he is converted to Christianity, can at
once abandon all his heathenish practices. Even when
the convert takes this step in full consciousness and with
holy zeal, when he eagerly throws away or burns his idols,
destroys his books of magic and his amulets and enters upon
a life of prayer and of Christian conduct, the ancestral
religion clings to his thinking and living far beyond his
own consciousness. I am speaking here of those who
have experienced sincere conversion of heart ; the state-
ment will obviously apply much more to those whose
acceptance of Christianity has been superficial, and who,
as is so often the case in mass movements, have come only
in the wake of their relations and friends. Nor do I deal
here with what is commonly termed superstition. In the
life of the young Christians there remains, it is true, much
superstition, the effect of the old heathen religion as
expressed in the manners and customs of daily life ; but
as these superstitious practices have long lost their religious
meaning for the people and have simply become manners
and customs their religious value cannot be rated very
highly. One example may be given : According to anim-
istic ideas the act of sneezing liberates something of the
soul of man from the body ; hence the custom of a soothing
or deprecatory word from a companion (just as we Germans
on such occasions call out 'Your health !'), but to-day
nobody recalls the religious meaning of the exclamation.
It would, therefore, be a mistake to attribute too much

religious value to such practices. The missionary will seek to abolish them, but he will not enter upon a campaign against these unintelligible heritages from old times.

What is much more serious is this: The young Christians carry about with them a legacy of heathenish thought and feeling, religious ideas which profoundly influence not only their intellect but also their piety and consistency of conduct. We may take it as a fundamental trait of all non-Christian piety (with the exception of a few sects within Buddhism and Hinduism) that religion is looked upon in the light of an offering to the Godhead. The general idea in Africa, as in Asia, is that in order to win and preserve the good-will of the Godhead something has to be offered as a gift, either in the material form of sacrifices and presents, or in the more refined form of moral acts or ascetic performances. In the lowest grade of moral acts the main stress is laid upon ceremonial observances, the point being that man by his merits acquires a claim upon the good-will and help of the gods. Consequently the whole of piety is a matter of commands, a statement which applies to China as well as to the large number of animistic religions which hem in the life of the individual by thousands of ordinances and prohibitions. This inherently false idea of the attitude of the pious man towards God may be carried over from heathenism and Mohammedanism by the native Christian in spite of his experience of the grace of God. The Christian Church has always had to contend against this heathen falsehood and has often been defeated, even within our own days. Among the young churches of the mission field there is acute danger of treating Christianity as a new law and once more making the relationship to God dependent on the observance of commandments and prohibitions.

Another disfiguring feature common to all non-Christian religions is the excessive value attached to form and rule. In their religious life everything depends upon the proper form in intercourse with gods and spirits; hence the undue

value placed upon rites and their correct observance. The prayer of the Mohammedan as of the Hindu has to be performed within very definite, often very complicated forms, if it is to be efficacious. If some detail in the ceremonial is omitted the whole prayer loses its value. The same rule applies to sacrifices. It requires the education of centuries to extirpate this deeply rooted error. The young converts are quite ready to observe new forms of piety, such as the observance of Sunday, or attendance at church and the Holy Communion, and they are apt to think that by such compliance they have fulfilled their religious obligations. In contrast to this Paul emphasizes (Rom. vii. 6) service in newness of the spirit and not in oldness of the letter.¹

Fatalistic ideas present another difficulty. Not only Mohammedans but Hindus, Chinese and animists believe in a fate which rules man in such a way as to make it impossible for him to interfere with his lot or to change in any way his character. What he does he must do of necessity in accordance with fore-ordained fate. Hence the absence of the sense of responsibility and of the sense of sin, for it is obvious that this fatalistic idea is incompatible with the conception of personal sin. It is likewise clear that these inherited ideas cannot possibly be put aside by a candidate, even of earnest conviction, during the short period of instruction before baptism or in a few months after it. It is often the case that the convert is not even conscious of this legacy. He who studies with an open mind the spiritual condition of the churches in the mission field is surprised to find among them a strong tendency to legalism, which seems to be quite incompatible with the overwhelming experience of grace through which they passed when God cancelled their heathen past. In the same way we find among them an ineradicable attachment to forms, a preference for rites, which missionaries

¹ I have fully developed these thoughts in my book, *Paulus im Lichte der heutigen Heidenmission*, pp. 287-339. Here I must content myself with merely indicating them.

have to oppose most earnestly. Belief in fate has by no means disappeared as yet from our churches; but the name of God is substituted for fate, and since God has fore-ordained everything, man is powerless, and need not disquiet or torment himself. The idea that man's lot is predestined and incapable of change, unless a higher power mechanically intervenes, cannot but have a poisonous effect upon the moral life of the converts, by robbing them of all energy in furthering their own growth and by hindering the rise of true repentance and longing for forgiveness. It will be seen how necessary it is to discover these old heathen roots in order to comprehend the defects springing from them.

This burden of heathenism manifests itself in different ways according to the varieties of national character. A Hindu does not understand the conception of personality; to him the impersonal is greater than the personal. But Christianity demands the highest appreciation of personality, both divine and human. It is not at all probable that the young Hindu convert could within a few months recast his conceptions on this head. Another point is the pantheistic character of Hindu thought. It would be worth while to investigate to what extent the young convert has really put aside pantheism. One is easily misled by a fluent appropriation of a Christian terminology on the part of young Christians which in no sense reflects their own inner life. We must face the strong probability that they have not done with pantheism, but are always liable to the temptation of secretly carrying forward into Christianity their pantheistic mode of thinking. The Hindu conception of life presents another point of divergence. Christianity stands for the development of life to its fullest completion, while Hinduism sees in the destruction and dissolution of life the highest consummation. Christianity represents the affirmation of life, Hinduism its negation. It is simply impossible for a Hindu Christian to bring his inner life at once into harmony with the Christian conception; the

Hindu, in fact, finds it just as difficult to enter into Christian thought as it is for us to comprehend the world of Hindu thought. Any one who has attempted it knows the enormous labour of the process. For the Hindu, the highest form of religion consists in knowing and apprehending, but Christianity, while valuing knowledge, is above all a religion of life, and places faith and holy living far above mere knowledge. To love and obey God is more than to apprehend Him. On this subject conflict is inevitable, and the Hindu will ever be disposed to think more of philosophizing, speculating, meditating, than of a life of plain, strenuous duty and of humble trust in God.

These are a few illustrations to show how the young convert has necessarily to bear the burden of his heathen inheritance. Added to these, there is the handicap of a defective morality in the matter of untruthfulness which is common to all non-Christian religions. This lying propensity, wherever it holds sway, proves an evil inheritance whose working is not confined to nominal Christians, and its reform will cost a struggle lasting through generations. The same may be said about immorality, which is so largely intertwined with many heathen religions. The destructive effect of ages cannot be obliterated by Christianity in a few years. New seedlings have to be planted which require centuries for their completed growth. The missionary has to gird himself for a strenuous and persistent attack upon heathen vices in the church under his care even when in their grosser form those vices may have been overcome. He must not allow himself to become embittered or discouraged on discovering grave moral lapses even among those whom he had hoped were beyond the reach of such temptations and on receiving fresh evidence of the gulf between the professed faith and the moral defects of his people.

We have finally to consider the social burden. When the convert from animism joins the church, he remains all the time attached to his tribal traditions and to the communistic forms of thought which he shares with his fellows.

Thus far religion has been regarded by him as the business of the tribe, by whose authority was decided what was lawful or forbidden, what was to be revered and what to be avoided. Under this tribal consciousness his conscience had been educated or mis-educated, and in his acceptance of Christianity this collectivism, this sense of tribal solidarity, which takes away responsibility and will from the individual, has to give way. The step involves nothing less than that the individual, hitherto bereft of will, should come to the consciousness of his own value and of his personal rights; in other words, should awake to his full manhood with its power of will, its joy of life, its sense of responsibility. It is obvious that this process cannot be fully accomplished in one generation. In India the caste system, which ranks among the hardest problems of Indian missions, is pre-eminent in its challenge to the Church. Further, woman's position has to undergo a complete change; this cannot be effected by isolated effort; it has to be met by a gradual response to the ideal of womanhood; by a change in woman herself as well as in her partner; by her winning for herself, in society and in the family, the legitimate position which Christianity assigns to her. Turning to family life, we find here again a heavy handicap remaining from heathenism. The training of children is little understood and the marriage vow little respected among many peoples. Where a woman has been treated simply as a working machine she cannot on accepting Christianity be expected to prove herself forthwith on an equality with her partner.

These again are but indications to show what a variety of anti-Christian elements are of necessity met with in the social life of the native churches. I say 'of necessity,' for it is impossible that all that has been marred throughout the age-long decay of family and home life should by its transfer to the Christian Church miraculously and suddenly change into gold and glory.

For many years to come I consider it of primary im-

portance that missionary agencies should weigh these points in order that the churches should be trained to meet them. This struggle with the root ideas of a subtle heathenism which ramify into the life of the Christian churches is unquestionably much harder than the work of pioneer evangelization. Though we entertain the highest respect for the brave, self-sacrificing labours of the first generation of missionaries, the task of later generations is a much more responsible one and demands a watchful eye to discern what should abide and what must perish.

The missionary of our time has to set before himself, to an extent unknown to his predecessors, the indispensable task of a thorough and many-sided study of the people composing his church—their religion, their social condition, their views on right and wrong, their customs, etc. From such knowledge he must learn to understand the mental attitude, the dispositions and habits which will naturally characterize these young Christians even after God has entered their life. We have to study the religion of non-Christian peoples not only in order to preach the Gospel to them, but still more that in our office of training and guiding the growing churches we may guard them from erroneous ways and lead them into paths of right development. For this purpose a superficial study of their religion is wholly inadequate: it is necessary to discover its inner ruling power, the great thoughts which are its life, the influence it exercises upon its followers, its psychological effects, and the relation between the religion of the people and their character. The outward signs and forms, the gross manifestations of heathen religiousness and of the immorality incidental thereto are speedily put aside, either at the time of baptism or soon after, but it is not so with the world of thought which has been indicated. Here those who have the cure of souls must have intimate knowledge.

Another subject of careful study should be the process of conversion in its psychological aspect, in order to gain

understanding of the convert's growth or its hindrances. If missionaries neglect to do this they cannot fully comprehend a man's spiritual condition. They lament so readily what they see to be defective in him, without realizing precisely why these defects are there. Their judgment of a convert rests solely upon a few superficial, casual utterances about his Christianity, but they do not apprehend the adverse forces he has had to fight against; they do not know that in spite of grave sins new forces are at work in him, though as yet wrestling for a firm hold; they have not penetrated far enough into the soul of the people to perceive what are the special dangers which threaten converts from among them. Hence they are prone to overestimate good traits which they notice and which have their roots in part in the popular character (e.g. Christians who were fatalists give the impression of humble submission to the will of God), and to exaggerate the defects which they come across, instead of recognizing that in the nature of things these defects could not but come to the surface at first. Missionaries will hardly form a correct judgment about the true state of their flocks unless they have clearly traced the path by which the converts have travelled from heathenism into Christianity, with all its difficulties and dangers, and the influence of the secret forces behind them. Without a careful study of this kind there will always be a deep gulf between the leader and his church; the missionary will have little understanding of the real pulsation of life among his people, even though he may be uttering their shibboleths.

It is imperative that the traditions, problems and defects carried over from heathenism should be dealt with by the missionary in his preaching. He is apt to preach on the lines which would suit an average congregation in the homeland, where he finds his material for pulpit instruction in his own personal experience. But in the mission field he must in his preaching take into account the defects and needs transmitted from the heathen past of his people.

Hence it is necessary, even as Paul did in his epistles, to deal thoroughly with moral questions, certain vices—such as lying and immorality—being evil legacies of terrible power in the churches. The converts are often in uncertainty as to what is allowed them as children of God and what is disallowed. If it is frequently observed in the native services that the interest of the hearers during the preaching is not very keen and some even fall into slumber, or if the books written or translated meet with indifferent response, missionaries would do well to ask themselves whether their imperfect understanding of the peculiar mental attitude of their flock may not be partly to blame.

It is not only in the preparation for baptism that the intellectual, moral and religious difficulties of the candidates have to be considered, but also in teaching in the schools, both secondary and elementary, in meetings with the elders in Bible classes and indeed in the whole pastoral oversight. This should be distinctly kept in mind. Our converts are in danger of appropriating Christian terminology, the 'language of Canaan,' and availing themselves of it in phrases which seem very pious and yet are for them but forms of speech and not the natural expression of their own spiritual life. The literature supplied by us should powerfully aid in this contest with those heathen traditions peculiar to each people and which are so subtly operative in their effects. According to my experience the devotional literature supplied by the missionaries is in many cases too European, occupying itself too little with those things which of necessity trouble the young converts and calling insufficient attention to the peculiar dangers in their path. For this reason it is in my judgment not well for us simply to translate good American or European literature. We ought to give the converts more than translations, namely, books which are written in recognition of their special needs and with sympathetic understanding of the questions which trouble their souls and the difficulties which obstruct their path. It stands to reason that a Chinese convert needs

different devotional books from an Englishman, and the best which Germany or America offer in this respect will not speak to the converted negro of what his soul requires after its deliverance from the lowest idol worship. He who writes devotional literature in the mission field must be in intimate contact with the inner life of those for whom he writes.

These points of view must govern us equally in the training of native helpers, catechists, teachers, evangelists, pastors. True, these youths have as a rule advanced far beyond the manifestations of raw heathenism. The pupils in our seminaries in Sumatra hardly know anything about the cannibalism and coarse idolatry of their ancestors. Most of them have never been present at a heathen sacrifice and laugh at witchcraft. These low forms of heathenism were abolished in the third or fourth generation. But this is not the case with the root ideas and conceptions I have dealt with. He who keeps his eyes open discovers even among the native pastors many traits (such as fatalism and legalism) which go to prove that heathen ways of thinking have still their hold even upon the best of our people. I have observed that many pastors prefer law to gospel in their preaching and that they lay undue emphasis upon Sunday observance and Christian rites. Forms and commandments rank with many of them higher than the gift of God and of the Spirit. It should by no means be permitted for the native pastors to copy our method of preaching, as they are so ready to do. We must stir up and cultivate their original powers, and that can be done only—to repeat it once more—by carefully studying and entering into their own modes of thought, their own dispositions and conceptions, as well as into their defects and needs, these being the products of heathenism and of their antecedents. We must assist them to recognize the dangerous remnants of heathen inheritance surviving in their own hearts and in the heart of their people. And when they respond we must teach them to give such errors

no quarter. I have often proved that they accept these views when they are properly pointed out to them.

We live to-day in the most fruitful period of missionary development, a period in which we see the rise of Christian churches. It is obviously of the very greatest importance that during this period we should succeed, not only in originating forms of church life, but in bringing to bear upon inner growth such understanding as shall lead the infant Church into right paths. If this is not done, we are apt to form communities which, in spite of the presence of Christian forms, retain under this outwardly fair aspect much that is essentially heathenish and have as yet penetrated very imperfectly into the core of evangelical truth. It is infinitely more important to seek to produce a deeper and more spiritual Christian life than to spend our strength upon the work of organization, a reality and depth of Christian life such as shall expel from within as a matter of natural necessity every vestige of the heathen leaven. This is the most important question for missions during the coming decades and centuries.

JOH. WARNECK