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Mission and Missionaries

I

The opinion which the civilised world entertains of missionary enterprise deserves to be carefully considered. Educated people have not perhaps on the whole even yet given the work of foreign missions, that attention which it deserves, both from the greatness of its organisation, and from its value as a factor in modern life.

It would indeed be impossible to the historian of our times to overlook an agency which tends more than any other to widen the zone of civilisation; and from this point of view chiefly the work of modern missions has been hitherto regarded.

Missionaries appear frequently as the pioneers, or even the agents of trade, commerce, education and culture. When the South Sea Islanders exchange the leaf and bark of their native palm-tree for linen garments or leather shoes, when the negroes of Sierra Leone take to knives and forks, or the aborigines of Australia adopt the use of blankets, then the great manufacturers at home value the changes that have come over these savage tribes. The world at large reaps solid advantages from every fresh plot of virgin soil which is brought under the plough. The whole human family is benefited whenever one of its members, a race or a tribe, is reclaimed from original barbarism, and introduced to its kindred through trade and commerce. Missionaries have thus figured before the world in the first instance as geographical discoverers in Africa and elsewhere and the public has not withheld the .applause due to their courage and enterprise.

Intimately connected with these discoveries are the contributions to the science of religion, society, and especially of languages, which the agents of the various missions have been able to offer from their close acquaintance with many different nationalities, and which have been readily acknowledged by scholars at home. Indeed, comparative philology could not have nearly attained the completeness which it now

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possesses, had it not been for the materials, the grammars, dictionaries, reading-books, translations, collected from among the strangest dialects and languages by messengers of the Gospel.

Again the philanthropic labours of missionaries, carried on by the means of schools, printing-presses and hospitals, have in various countries obtained so prominent a position that their importance has been again and again emphatically recognised, whether by the resolutions of the Government of India, or of Canada, or in the descriptions of travellers.

These are the works of missionaries which present themselves first to our view. And yet, if we spoke of them to the promoters of missions, we should probably find that they regarded them as *parerga*, as lying on the circumference of their activity, and not forming the centre of gravity.

When we look through the reports issued by the various societies, we are struck by the tendency they show to regard their own work as their immediate concern. There is also another point of view from which we must regard mission reports. Those who draw them up are in the first

instance responsible for the money and the lives placed under their care. They have to render an annual account of their stewardship, and such an account as will maintain the confidence, increase the interest, and quicken the zeal of their supporters. Missions have thus come to be bound up with religious communities, and mission reports have often had in part the character of annual accounts.

But surely there is a higher and historically truer stand-point from which the progress of Christian missions should be watched. If, as has been truly said, the history of mankind is the history of its religions—if the era in which we are living dates from the beginning, and the epochs from the changes, whether they are called a Reformation or a Revolution, affecting a certain religious belief which has laid hold on the mind of mankind—then surely the question whether that belief has become stationary or is still spreading, whether its waters are stagnant or rolling onward like the tide, is one of superlative importance.

To obtain a clear idea whether Christianity is really advancing, at what rate and through what means it is spreading, is not at all an easy task. For, in the beginning, the young religion, which was born in Judaea, visited the people that dwelt on the shores of the Mediterranean; and only occasionally Christian apostles and prophets made journeys towards the far north or west. But now its messengers "follow the sun in its flight," they have travelled where the polar star and the southern cross lead the way. The "orient, on which the morning-sun first shone," now lies to the west of Christian Churches, and the pillars of Hercules, the limits of the ancient occident, stand to their east. The thirteen or fourteen languages of Parthians, Modes, Elamites, of the dwellers in Mesopotamia, Judaea and Cappadocia, in which Christianity was first preached, would form but a small fraction of the three hundred tongues in which it is now taught. The difference that might have existed between "sojourners from Rome" and "Arabians" is as nothing when compared with the scale of races and nations over which the gospel has since then passed. The living fire of Islam, the dead weight of Hindu caste, the old-world civilisation of China were unknown to the apostles of old. Because the area over which Christianity is now doing battle has expanded, because the conflict is carried on in so many places, under such varying conditions, therefore an adequate description of its progress within a narrow compass becomes exceedingly difficult. If an epoch of church history could not be described in a book, I hold that the world—if it could contain them—would certainly not read the volumes which would have to be written to do justice to mission work.

And when we go through, to obtain such information, the authentic records, the annual reports of the various societies, we meet with statistical surveys, with a long array of figures, with descriptions of stations and districts, interspersed with anecdotes and cuttings from the diaries of single missionaries. No comprehensive view seems possible.

Instead of attempting this general survey we will select one plot out of the mission-field, of such a size as to be easily measured, and containing within its limits all that is peculiar to the whole field. That plot of ground has been thoroughly ploughed and sown over for a sufficient time, so that its produce may be regarded as representative of the whole mission-harvest. It is now nearly forty years since the Punjab has been added to the English empire, and if we except the towns to the east of the Sutlej, Delhi and Loodianah, which were taken up the former in 1818, the latter in 1834, it is nearly as long also since the Punjab has been opened up to missionary enterprise. In this case the missionaries did not precede, they followed the invading army; Lahore, the political capital of the country, beheld a year after it had received an English garrison, the first Christian

teachers in its midst. No more interesting field of labour could have opened itself to them; nor one which contained within so limited a compass all the problems that confront the apostles of Christianity in our century. Lying halfway between the great Hindu centres of the Ganges valley and the Mohammedan strongholds of Central Asia, bordering on the Rajputana and on Tibet, and enclosing within its frontiers the most different races of people, the land of the five rivers offers examples of every kind, of the highest and the lowest religions. In a population of nearly twenty-three million souls, it contains about eleven and a half million Mohammedans, nine million Hindus, over a million and a half Sikhs, and the balance consists of thins and Christians. A quarter of all, the Mohammedan, one-twentieth of all the Hindu, and eleven-twelfths of all the Sikh subjects of the Queen live within this province. Sir A. Lyall remarks truly in his "Asiatic Studies,"[1] that we see in India religions

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living side by side which, regarded as phases of human development are separated by hundreds, nay, by thousands of years.

"Whenever we cross the border of India," he says, "we may find going on before our eyes things of which we read in ancient books. After making allowance for every difference of manners, creed, and climate, and for innumerable distinctions of detail, we may still fancy that in looking over India we catch a reflection of classic polytheism. There we have the nearest surviving representative of a half civilised society's religious state, as it existed before Christianity and Mohammedanism organised and centralised the beliefs of all nations, from Ireland to the Indus. An eye-witness, to the great battle of Paniput, in 1761, describes how the Mussulman cavalry charged with the cry of 'Ya Allah, while the Maritthas came on with their shouts of 'Hur, Hur, Mahadeo.' The two armies appealed to different gods; the divinities of India were still separated into hostile camps, as in the days of the Trojan war. In India this might be still an every-day incident; but such war-cries have not been heard for many centuries in any of the battles that have been fought on the fields of Europe or Western Asia."

Amongst the Hindus of the Punjab we find a complete system of polytheism, with its conception of one supreme god enthroned amidst a court a gods and heroes, with its elaborate hierarchy, its temples, its worship and sacrifices. The centres of this religion are perhaps not so important, the temples not so numerous, the priests not so wealthy in the Punjab as in Hindustan itself, that is in the great Ganges valley. But for all that this polytheistic creed appears defined in as clear and marked a manner at its distant north-western frontier as it is in its original home. The curious stone-carvings of mythological figures with elephant-heads and tortoise-bodies, which cover the porticoes and towers, black with age, of the temples of Kangra, have no more worn away than has the enthusiasm of Hindu pilgrims, when after a long journey they behold the golden-roofed sanctuary at the foot of the Himalayas.

Here we see a certain kind of religious belief, as old as that which once found a classical expression in the Iliad and Odyssey, but which after the lapse of ages has lost none of its peculiar features. A polytheism akin to that which we associate with the names of Zeus and Herakles, of Apollo and Athene, is to this day firmly believed in by the millions of Hindus who inhabit the Punjab. As we learn from the history of Greece, that the age of reason followed that of

[1] Asiatic Studies," Chap. XI. The religious situation in India, p. 287, seq.

imagination, that the philosophers took the place of poets, that two different beliefs could exist simultaneously, the one entertained by the common people, the other by the sophists—the second using the names of gods and goddesses belonging to the first as symbols of certain natural principles—so we find the thinking, the learned men, amongst the Hindus, the *Brahmins*, in our days working out a complete philosophical system on the substratum of vulgar mythology. The position which they hold with regard to the religion of their country forms an analogy to the position once taken up by Eleatic and Stoic philosophers and by the followers of Plato. For subtlety of definition, for clearness of argument, for profoundness and intense seriousness of thought, the Brahmin thinkers have hardly any rivals in the history of philosophy. The modern missionary encounters the same hostile array of forces, in Oriental garb, with which Christianity fought those early struggles whose records are contained in the writings of the Apostolic Fathers. As the Brahmins are above, so the low castes are below the great body of the Hindu people. They have sprung from the toes of Brahma. They are the feet of that social system to which they belong. They tread the earth. They perform those low and menial offices which would defile the Hindu of the middle and upper classes. They are tanners, matters, sweepers, scavengers, jugglers, in some out-of-the-way districts also graziers and tillers of the soil. To a large extent they are, as has been surmised, descendants of the aboriginal tribes, whom the Aryan immigrants conquered, and over whom they ruled. It might be difficult to fix the exact place which the lowest castes hold in the religious system of the Hindus. Some of the religious teachers, sprung from their midst, are venerated by the upper castes; their busts have been placed, so to speak, in a niche of the great Hindu Pantheon. Their nature-worship has been, and is being, amalgamated with Brahmin theology. If we descend far in the scale of castes, we come to communities of human beings whose religion—which even Hinduism has been unable to absorb—consists in a mere dread of demons and goblins, and shows itself only in certain social customs. Such a faith—if faith it can be called —is not a whit better than the most degraded fetish-worship. It must then be admitted that the mission-field which we have chosen for our discussion exhibits true samples of a polytheistic religion in every stage of development.

The teaching of the *Sikh gurus* (prophets or rather judges) need not occupy us here. For though the gurus succeeded, like the judges of Israel, in uniting and keeping together the different tribes of their kinsmen, in the midst of foreign persecution, and in establishing finally a military Theocracy, their teaching never differed essentially from that of Brahmin priests. They, formed not a new creed, but a new sect. They resemble the branch of a banyan tree, which some distance from the trunk descends to the ground, strikes root and becomes itself a tree, remaining all the while connected with the parent stem.

More numerous than Sikhs and Hindus put together are the *Mohammedans*; they display amongst themselves every shade of religious colouring, and furnish representatives of a good many of the hundred and fifty sects into which Islam is said to be divided. "The faithful" have all, as far as they are completely under

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British rule, accommodated themselves to the existing order of things; they acknowledge the supremacy of a foreign rule; they are content in a court of justice to be equals with Hindus, Jains and Christians. They have learned what all Mohammedans outside the deserts of Arabia and Africa are being taught—that is, to exchange the part of conquerors for that of the conquered. But the Mohammedanism of Mohammed, the true religion of the desert, wild, free and fierce,

has in the hillmen of the north-western frontier, in the warlike Afghan tribes, strong and faithful witnesses. When, however, we travel towards the south, we fall in with tribes whose tenets bear an entirely different stamp.

The Beluch, whose villages, encampments and pasture grounds begin in the neighbourhood of Dera Ghazi Khan and Quetta, and extend southwards to the Persian Gulf, are all followers of "the prophet." But Arabs or Afghans would call them luke-warm followers; they are liberal as to the theory and careless as to the practice of their religion. Tolerant of foreign creeds, and given on one hand to rationalistic, on the other to mystic, speculations, they exhibit clearly all the features peculiar to, and characteristic of, that portion of the Mohammedan world which lives within the dominions of Persia.

Even a rapid survey is sufficient to show us that the monotheistic religion of the Arabian desert and the polytheism of the Ganges valley have met, so to speak, half-way on that great plain which is traversed by the Indus and its tributaries.

To the far north, separated from this plain by the first high range of the Himalayas, and politically only (not ethnologically) connected with the Punjab, are the valleys of Lahoul, Ladak, Pangi and Spitti, inhabited by Buddhists. It is but a small fraction of the hundreds of millions who worship Gautama as their redeemer, and the majority of whom, though monotheists by profession, are idolaters in practice, that comes within the limits of our review. They are sufficient in number, and what is more, in quality, to serve as an example. They offer a far truer and more accurate picture of that Buddhism which has its centre on the highland of Tibet than their fellow-believers in South India, Ceylon or Eastern China. Types of Buddhist priests and bishops, of monks and nuns, examples of self-sacrifice and self-abnegation, can be found in the Himalayan valleys of Lahoul and Ladak, as well as near the sanctuary of the Great Lama in Lhasa. For there the religion of Gautama has preserved itself free from the dross of idolatry; it has remained pure and undefiled in the clear air of its mountain home. The Afghans of the Swat Valley are not truer representatives of their faith than are the poor half-frozen and half-starved inhabitants of Lahoul steadfast disciples of a master who surrendered wealth for poverty and death.
