

The Vital Energies of the Gospel.

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JOH. WARNECK has enriched the multifarious literature of Foreign Missions by a contribution of genuine scientific value.¹ His theme is of profound interest, both theoretical and practical; and his conclusions are based on a mass of carefully tested facts. His object is, not to prove that Christianity is overpowering heathenism—that can be taken for granted,—but to explain its success. In other words, he tries to define the elements of the gospel which make it a penetrating and prevailing force. The gain which he promises from the inquiry is that it will assist the missionary to concentrate upon those aspects of the Christian message which have a convincing and converting energy, while it may also enable the home-churches to view the doctrinal and ethical content of Christianity in a juster perspective. It may be added that he compels the apologist to reconsider the benevolent and optimistic views now popular as to the relation of other faiths to Christianity.

The first division of the book gives an account of the nature and effects of the animistic type of heathenism. In narrowing the investigation to the field of Animism, Warneck is able to draw on his own missionary experience in Sumatra, while there is the further advantage that flourishing native churches have arisen within its sphere of influence in many parts of the world. He confirms the report that animistic tribes have usually a belief in higher gods, and even in a supreme deity who is the Creator and Preserver of the world; but this belief is shown to be quite inoperative—the powers which seriously engage the attention of the worshippers being the spirits of the departed, and other spirits of a somewhat base and malignant sort. The second characteristic tenet is a doctrine of the soul which is shown to be more complicated and subtle than it appears in some popular expositions. There is a self; and in addition there is a soul which, while its presence is essential to life, is very loosely and unreliably related to the self. This soul requires to be carefully conciliated by gifts and other attentions, feels no keen interest in

preserving the human life to which it is linked, and promptly deserts the body when it has reason to be offended. Many deep-rooted customs have their explanation in this peculiar psychology of the savage.

The illuminating exposition of the animistic creed is followed by a gloomy picture of the spiritual condition of the animistic world. The salient features are summed up under the following heads. The heathen lives in a state of utter uncertainty about divine things. He has no personal assurance in regard to the great problems of life, and when pressed can only say that thus his fathers believed, and such are the customs which were handed down. He lives under a system of lies, and while half-suspecting them to be lies, he is content to be deceived. He has no communion with the living God, but wastes his religious instincts on fictions of his imagination, or possibly on actual diabolic powers. He lives in a state of constant terror because of the caprice and malignity of the spirit-world, and through fear of them he is all his days subject to bondage. On the practical side the genius of the system is a selfishness which takes compensation for its dread of the spirits in cruelty towards man. It is essentially immoral. Custom takes the place of morality, and custom allows, and on occasion fosters, the most licentious practices. Finally, the goods which the heathen covets are purely worldly and materialistic. Warneck admits that some will think that he paints the picture too black. But he insists that these are the facts, and that they are the direct product of heathenism. Its powers are of the earth earthy, and they can only drag men down into ever deeper moral degradation.

What now is the attitude of this type of heathen mind on making acquaintance with Christianity? In the first instance it is strongly hostile, and for these reasons. Savage religion is a tribal affair, and the individual does not allow himself to think independently on the subject. Moreover, Christianity approaches him as the religion of a foreign race. Yet again, his materialistic bent of mind leads him to despise, even if he could understand, the spiritual blessings which it offers. Still

¹ Joh. Warneck, *Die Lebenskräfte des Evangeliums*.² Berlin, 1908.

more is he repelled by the demands of the Christian moral code. It condemns institutions and customs which he finds profitable or enjoyable, and even when it touches his conscience it can hardly move him from his fatalistic lethargy.

On the other hand, a number of factors conspire to break down the initial antagonism. For one thing the misery which heathenism fails to relieve, which it rather aggravates, suggests that there may be a remedy in a new message. The missionary acquires respect as the representative of a race and a civilization which are manifestly of a higher order. Confidence is further inspired by the moral qualities of the missionary—his veracity and his unselfish devotion. The colonial administration of a Christian power, moreover, by maintaining peace and order, creates the conditions which are favourable to missionary activity. It has also often been observed that a great effect has been produced by a providential leading, which may take the form of an ancient prophecy touching the appearance in later days of heaven-sent messengers, or which may work through dreams and visions vouchsafed to some man in authority. In these phenomena Warneck sees interpositions of the hand of God in which He condescends to the childish thoughts of the savage. Finally, there is God's chiefest gift to the missionary—the seeking souls, dispersed through heathenism, who have broken in their hearts with its errors and delusions, and who are waiting with a soul-hunger for the truth and the consolations of the gospel.

Under these influences animistic heathenism begins to weaken within a few years of the first assault. Warneck allows some thirty years longer for the triumph of Christianity under normal conditions over the animistic form of religion. Such was the experience in the field with which he was familiar, and the same process may be traced in other islands of the region, as well as on the Niger, in Uganda and in South Africa. All that is needed is that Christianity should unfold and bring into play its vitalizing and conquering energies. In the enumeration and illustration of these energies Dr. Warneck has not only written a chapter of history, but advanced the theory of missions. In seven ways, he says, the gospel is seen to do its work.

1. The gospel prevails by reason of the assurance of its messengers. The savage is oppressed by a sense of his ignorance and insecurity, and his

mental constitution makes him unable to resist the message of the preacher who, speaking with a note of absolute certainty, declares to him in the name of God the nature of this God, together with His promises and commandments. A missionary whose message is indefinite and halting need look for no results even though he could put an open Bible into every hand.

2. The claim that Christianity is a revelation is readily accepted by heathen minds on the animistic plane. 'During the whole of my missionary activity,' says Warneck, 'no heathen ever asked me what proof I had that my message was true, and from God.' Nor had he ever any experience of a convert whose falling away was occasioned by the rise of sceptical doubts in his mind. The objection that this is to be set down to the credulity of the savage is disposed of by the fact that he is naturally inclined to be critical and captious, especially in regard to anything novel or disputable. The only possible explanation is that in the revealed truth there lies a power which overcomes his constitutional mistrust. 'He experiences the truth of the message in his inmost soul. There is that in him which responds to it with the certainty of an echo.' On the other hand, violent and satirical attacks on his own religion are worse than useless.

3. The Christian doctrine of God readily captures the mind of the savage. There are many testimonies to the sense of emancipation wrought by believing in the one living and true God. In the first instance faith commonly lays hold on the thought of God as the Almighty, who is stronger than the spirits, and who works marvels. In Warneck's opinion God responds to this faith by manifestations of His power in protection and healing that transcend the providential experiences of mature Christians who have learned that all things work together for their good. The apprehension of the love of God usually comes later. The heathen are deeply moved by the message that God became man in Christ, but they need to be gradually educated to the significance of the Incarnation as a revelation of the divine love. In general it is found that the Biblical narratives, and especially the story of the life of Christ, cast upon their minds a potent spell. Abstract teaching leaves them unmoved, but the embodied doctrine of the concrete history finds a joyful welcome.

4. Among animistic tribes Christianity largely makes its way as a salvation from the power of

evil spirits, and from the terrors which they inspire. 'What they first lay hold on in the gospel is that Jesus has power over the demons, and that He came to make them, who were in bondage to the devil, children of God.' As was before suggested, it is not Warneck's opinion that this is a deliverance from merely groundless superstitions. He inclines to the view, held by many of the converts, that diabolical influence is a real factor in heathenism, and that it only becomes powerless to bind or harm those who have turned to the living God, and placed themselves under the protection of Christ.

5. The appeal made by the gospel as a salvation from the guilt and power of sin is also responded to, but usually as a later result of teaching and experience. The ordinary sequence is not that the savage is drawn to Christ because he has felt the burden of sin, but that he attains to a conviction of sin because he has learned to believe in the crucified Christ. It is, in fact, the story of the sufferings and the death of Christ which is the effectual means at once of creating an assurance of the love of God, and of bringing home a sense of the humiliation and guilt of sin. 'Only those heathen who at the cross apprehend the love of God, are true Christians filled with the life and the power of God. To prove the efficacy of the preaching of the cross would be to write the whole history of Foreign Missions.'

6. The gospel effects in those who receive it a moral revolution. The new relationship to God evokes a sense of gratitude, and a recognition of the lordship of Christ, which inspire lives of lofty endeavour and of self-sacrificing devotion. It is admitted that the full ethical significance of Christianity is only gradually understood, and that moral progress is very unequal; but there is an immediate renunciation of the grosser sins of heathenism, and many exhibit an earnestness in seeking to be conformed to the likeness of Christ, and also a zeal in spreading the gospel, which may put much of our Western Christianity to the blush.

7. The gospel awakens the hope of eternal life. Of all Christian beliefs this article is the chief stumbling-block to the heathen mind, and a resurrection is absolutely incredible; while those professed Christians who have no genuine religious experience often reserve their assent. But those who have penetrated to the love of God, and who walk by faith in the Son of God, accept it easily as implied in what they already possess.

In conclusion Warneck compares his investigation to spectral analysis. The vital energies of the gospel are many and various, but they proceed from, and can be reduced to, one energy—the power of Christ. 'The course of our inquiry has shown even more clearly what is the beam of white light that we have decomposed: it comes from the person of Jesus Christ, the God-man.'

This powerful book maps out lines of investigation which are certain to be followed out by workers in other fields of heathenism. For the thoughtful supporters of Foreign Missions it is full of light and encouragement, and it is satisfactory to know that it will soon be available for wider circles in an English dress. It must, however, also be said that it maintains certain positions which challenge controversy. For one thing doubt may well be felt, in view of the nature of the providential government of the world, and of the mystery of suffering, if the writer is wise to encourage the heathen to stake their faith in God on the security which He gives them from natural evils. Again, it is with considerable misgiving that one contemplates the reintroduction into modern theology of the doctrine of demoniac agencies which played so large a part in the patristic and mediæval theology. But above all, the question arises whether the diagnosis offered of the genius and diabolic origin of Animism is sound, and if it is to be extended to other forms of heathen religion. Is the language of the missionary towards the higher ethnic faiths to be that which Warneck prescribes towards the animist heathen?—'Ye are in error, under the dominion of a lie, alienated from God, slaves of the devil, without love, impure, hopeless.' It is now generally agreed that this is not true of the great religions of India, or of Mohammedanism. They are imperfect rather than false—operative because of a soul of truth and of goodness that is in them, at least as much as because of concessions which they make to the weakness and sinfulness of human nature. And if the diabolic theory will not hold of all heathen religions, the presumption is that neither is it the complete explanation of any. Even Animism must have held germs of truth, and temporarily fulfilled a providential purpose in the religious education of the human race preparatory to the advent of the perfect and final religion in the gospel of Christ.