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A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

Primitive Missions: A Double Comparison.

BY THE REV. W. S. HOOTON, B.A.

THERE is less disposition than there formerly was to underrate either the progress of modern missions or the benefits they confer upon the race. But occasionally the note of despondency is still heard ; and especially at a time like this, when the Church of Christ stands face to face with unparalleled opportunities in every part of the world, when we are told that many of these open doors are likely to be closed if not soon entered, and when, above all, the order of the day is too often for retreat instead of advance, it may be helpful to gather up, along the two lines mentioned in the opening words above, evidence which has accumulated from many sides. "History," Bishop Lightfoot once said, "is an excellent cordial for the drooping courage."

It so happens that these two lines are suggested in a single sentence of a well-known volume on the History of the Christian Church. This gives a most convenient starting-point. It will be necessary to quote the context in order to explain the bearing of the complaint contained in the closing words: "In the first three centuries it is undeniable that many of the most enlightened and cultivated men were led after serious consideration to embrace the new faith. Considering that mankind is always most conservative in the matter of religious prejudices, Christianity appears to have advanced with giant strides between the accession of Marcus Aurelius and the death of Julian. In A.D. 161, when Hellenic philosophy mounted to the throne of the world in the person of the former Emperor, Christianity had made comparatively little progress. Two centuries later, when Julian, who in character was not altogether unlike Marcus Aurelius, tried to restore the ancient religion, the Empire was so completely Christianized, that the votaries of Hellenism, nay, the very philosophers and the priests, shewed

no great zeal to recover their lost influence. At the end of two years Julian was compelled to acknowledge that Christ had conquered. This is the more remarkable, when we contrast the slow progress of Christian ideas in the ancient civilisations of India and China. We are consequently led to consider whether Hellenism and Christianity had not much in common ; whether, in short, Greek philosophy was not, like Judaism, a road which led men to the Gospel."¹

This passage contains a statement and a suggestion, corresponding roughly to the two lines of thought already mentioned, and providing the double comparison named in the title of this paper. The statement is that Christianity has made much slower progress in India and China than it did in the ancient Roman Empire. The suggestion is that Hellenism was a kind of preparatory school for the Gospel in a way that cannot be affirmed of either of the great ethnic religions of the East in our day. It will not be possible in this paper to go deeply into both these questions, and it is proposed to deal chiefly with the former. The other, however, bears indirectly upon one of the two lines of inquiry proposed—viz., the benefits conferred by Christianity upon the race—and it will be best to clear the way by reversing the order and taking this more briefly first.

I. Dr. Foakes-Jackson suggests that Hellenism was a preparation for Christianity in some such sense as Judaism was ; and the context implies that the same cannot be said of Hinduism, Buddhism, or Confucianism. For the latter thought it may not be out of place to express much gratitude. One is getting more than a little tired of dissertations which appear to lay stress upon the excellencies of ethnic religions to the extent of undervaluing the benefits which Christ has to bestow upon the world. It is common nowadays to find as much as possible made of the "gleams of light" in systems which are after all essentially idolatrous, and as little as possible of the

¹ "The History of the Christian Church," by the Rev. Dr. Foakes-Jackson, pp. 180, 181.

gross darkness which covers the peoples. Many contributions to current missionary discussion are so much taken up with what we shall have to learn from the nations that one begins to wonder whether we are supposed to have anything to teach them. Dr. Griffith Thomas, answering a correspondent in his "In Conference" column of the *Record*, expressed the opinion that the non-Christian systems and nations, when they come into Christianity, will contribute largely to the sum total of Christian experience, but nothing at all to Christian truth. Along these lines, no doubt, right judgment in the matter lies. National characteristics will reveal unknown treasures which have nevertheless been eternally contained in the everlasting Gospel; but nothing remains to be added to the revelation once for all completed in Christ. The benefits which He confers upon the race are both unique and exclusive.¹

Dr. Foakes-Jackson's suggestion that Hellenism was a school to bring men to Christ seems partly open to the same objections.² It was the view apparently adopted more or less by Commission IV. of the World Missionary Conference, on "The Missionary Message in Relation to Non-Christian Religions." This Commission, however, was careful to disclaim any comparison with Judaism, if it be right to suppose that, in Dr. Foakes-Jackson's mind, that term included Old Testament revelation.³ But it went further in one respect, for it applied the same theory to non-Christian religions to-day. At any rate it insisted on the parallel between Hellenism and Vedantism.⁴ The whole application was cautious and tentative, and efforts were made to safeguard the uniqueness of the Christian revelation. Whether it is possible to do so while taking such a standpoint must be decided after much fuller study of the great issues involved than is possible within present limits. At all events the line taken caused some protests, and

¹ See Professor MacEwen's speech at Edinburgh in the "World Missionary Conference Report," iv. 323, also quoted by Dr. Griffith Thomas in the above context.

² It is right to add that, later in the chapter, he emphasises the essential differences between Greek and Christian ideals.

³ *Report*, iv. 276.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 217.

those who desire to pursue the matter further will find these, with the Commission's reply, in a supplementary note to their volume of the Report.¹ The comparison with Hellenism seems to be based largely upon the transformation of Hellenic categories of thought by St. John and others for Christian use. Dr. St. Clair Tisdall quotes the late Principal Cairns as showing that, at any rate, neither the Logos doctrine nor any other part of Christian teaching was borrowed from any ethnic religion or philosophy.² The mere transformation of terms of thought seems a slight foundation for a doctrine so far-reaching as that Hellenism was *designed* as a preparation for Christianity; yet such a doctrine would seem to be implied at least by the comparison with Judaism, taken in the above sense. Much more likely is it that such a transformed usage of current terms merely represents the kind of attempt made by St. Paul at Athens to reach the heathen at a vulnerable point. That the gropings of heathen philosophers may have been *overruled*, as points of vantage from which to introduce Christian truth, is credible enough. That Christ supplied all the human needs represented by such gropings is certain. That before His coming men may have been especially stirred, as *individuals*, to seek for more light is likely. But that a heathen *system* such as Hellenism, which had "its . . . poisonous mythology, its corrupt sexual morality, its cruel system of slavery as well as its noble philosophy,"³ could in itself be part of the Divine plan of preparation for the Gospel is surely incredible—whatever efforts may be made to distinguish philosophy from practice and from idolatrous worship. Indeed, as already stated, the Report of the Commission does not seem to go as far as Dr. Foakes-Jackson in this respect, for it expressly excludes the Old Testament from its comparison; and in this place, at all events, it almost suggests that there is legitimate doubt as to the bearing of the theory on Hindu thought.⁴ Is it not enough

¹ "World Missionary Conference Report," iv. 275-280.

² See "Comparative Religion" (Anglican Church Handbook Series), by Dr. St. Clair Tisdall, p. 130.

³ "World Missionary Conference Report," iv. 276.

⁴ *Ibid.*

gladly to recognize any stray "gleams of light" as relics of primeval revelation, or as the heritage of universal religious consciousness, and to welcome any individual efforts to rise above degrading associations as a proof that everywhere there are some earnest seekers like Cornelius, striving to reach the highest that is attainable and eagerly longing for more light? Christ comes as the answer to all such gropings and needs; but systems which in themselves must be a hindrance rather than a help to seekers can in no sense be part of a Divinely-planned *præparatio evangelica*.

Anticipating for a moment what immediately follows, it is plain that, if it can be shown that Dr. Foakes-Jackson's assertion of the more rapid spread of Christianity in primitive times is not supported by the facts, any conclusion which he draws on these grounds as to its supposed affinity with Hellenism will fall at the same time. It will then look as if Hellenism had no more than the ethnic religions of the East in common with the pure and spotless revelation of God in Christ.

2. This brings us to our main inquiry. Referring back to the extract already quoted, we find that the statement of contrast between progress in the Roman Empire and in Eastern nations respectively is heightened by a reference to the number of cultivated men who embraced Christianity in the first three centuries. It will be best to examine the general statement first, and the other reference later.

To begin with, it is fair to ask why the historian fixes a limit of time within which no comparison with modern missions is possible at all. "In the first three centuries," he says. When Christian effort is three hundred years old in India or in China, it will be time to begin to draw contrasts. As a matter of fact, the writer provides the answer himself from this point of view. He tells us that prior to A.D. 161 "Christianity had made comparatively little progress." In other words, the time of greatest growth does not begin till, roughly speaking, a hundred and fifteen years after Barnabas and Paul left Antioch on their first

missionary journey. But modern missionary effort is not yet a hundred years old in either India or China!¹

It is possible, however, as will appear more clearly later, even to take his statement much as it stands, and to compare, roughly speaking, one century of modern missions with two of primitive evangelization. Bishop Lightfoot as long ago as 1873 instituted a minute comparison on these lines, and gave the benefit of his investigations to an annual meeting of the S.P.G. That address, already twice quoted in this paper, still exists in pamphlet form, entitled "Comparative Progress of Ancient and Modern Missions."² It obtains some startling results by going back to first-hand authorities; and it is important to note that it always takes the most favourable view possible of the advance of the Gospel before the middle of the third century. Only a few of its main conclusions can be noticed here. The Bishop found that at this period (*circa* A.D. 250) "we may feel tolerably confident that we are overstating the proportion if we reckon the Christians at one-twentieth of the subjects of the Empire." As a matter of fact, it is plain that he was here following to the utmost degree his plan of not overstating his case; even in Rome itself one-twentieth was held to be somewhat above the mark, and he considered that "in the capital . . . the Christians . . . bore as large a proportion to the heathen population as in any part of the Empire, except possibly some districts of Africa, and some exceptional cities elsewhere, such as Antioch." Moreover, it is pointed out that the very word "pagan" is enough to show the condition of the rural districts. Evidently the Bishop felt he could afford to be generous. Do the facts really suggest a higher proportion

¹ It may be objected that this takes no account of Xavier and a few other missionaries, notably the Germans in South India. But these spasmodic attempts cannot really be considered any more than the still earlier work of the Syrians in Travancore or the Nestorians in China. Bishop Lightfoot follows Lord Lawrence in fixing the era of "general missionary effort in India" as dating from 1813 (evidently as the year of the renewed East Indian charter which opened the country), and China was still closed long after that. Similarly it will be noted that our comparison is not with the Christian Church after Pentecost, but after Antioch.

² It can be obtained from the office of the S.P.G. for 1d. Those who will follow its clear and convincing argument will be well repaid.

of Christians throughout the Empire than one-thirtieth, or even less?¹

Of course, even this is much greater than in either India or China to-day. But who shall say what will be the case a century hence, when the fair limit of comparison will be almost exactly reached? One or two facts about India may be brought in evidence very appropriately after the recent Census; and there is no reason to doubt that prospects are equally secure in China, if only the Church of Christ will awake to its opportunity. One example comes from the north, the other from the south. Several periodicals have lately noted the remarkable growth in the Punjab since 1901. The figures seem to show an increase from 37,000 to 165,000—or considerably over 400 per cent. in ten years. This so greatly exceeds the estimates of the missionary societies that Dr. Weitbrecht thinks many of the depressed classes must have described themselves as Christians, though nowhere formally enrolled, and takes it as proof of a wide “mass movement.”² Once again, the South India Missionary Association, embracing twenty-eight societies, with a total of 757,235 adherents, reports an increase of 22,437 on the *single year* lately concluded.³

Bishop Lightfoot's paper contains a statement which is perhaps even more striking than any yet quoted for the purpose of our immediate comparison. Gaul is taken as an illustration, and, being an outlying part of the Empire, it should compare very fairly, *e.g.*, with India under the same aspect. Yet he said: “In the middle of the third century we may reasonably infer that native Gaul was not more Christian than native India is at the present time.”⁴ “The present time,” as we have seen, was 1873, after sixty years of Christian work in India, contrasted thus favourably with two hundred years of primitive missions! Adding the remarkable progress of the nearly forty years since he spoke, what may we not claim now, with the period of just comparison even yet only half over? As a fact, the Census

¹ For references in the above paragraph, see pp. 5, 6, 7, of the pamphlet named. For the two earlier references in this paper see pp. 3, 9 (note 1).

² See the *Record*, September 29, 1911.

³ See the *C.M.S. Gazette*, October, 1911, p. 310.

⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 7.

figures show that the Christian population of India has more than doubled in that interval, so that in half the time the impression made is apparently twice as great.

Interesting light is thrown upon such discoveries by the last of a series of papers on "The Story of the Evangelization of Europe," by the Rev. W. E. Evill, which have been appearing in the *C.M.S. Gazette*. He calls his concluding chapter "The Last Strongholds of Paganism," and he sums up thus, with reference to "the complaints we sometimes hear of the slow progress of Missions in the great continent of Asia"¹: "We have to do with populations there enormously greater than those to be found in early and mediæval Europe; more highly civilized, with a history of their own older than that of any European nation, and with religions of a higher type than the old European forms of paganism. We complain because a hundred years of missionary effort have only won over a fraction of those teeming populations, forgetting that it took fourteen centuries to evangelize Europe, that pagans are still to be found in the far north" (estimated at 25,000 in European Russia²), "and that Wickliffe had sown the seeds of the Reformation and passed away, and John Huss and Jerome of Prague were living before the last European State had put away its idols."

Strangely enough, Dr. Foakes-Jackson himself, a little later in the same book, grants exactly what is now argued with regard to the first three centuries. We have already seen how he provides his own answer as to the first hundred years or so. This is the second statement: "The stately fabric of the old heathenism, which in the first three centuries seemed impregnable, was fated to collapse before the end of the fourth, much in the same manner as the walls of the Canaanitish city fell down at the shout of conquering Israel."³ Give us three or four centuries—if the Lord Himself shall not return before then and break down all opposition—and let us see if heathen strongholds in the East do not collapse in similar fashion. The solid results already so soon appearing, even after such pain-

¹ The *C.M.S. Gazette*, October, 1911, p. 297.

² *Ibid.*, p. 296.

³ "The History of the Christian Church," p. 208.

fully small obedience on the part of the Church, fully warrant the belief. Bishop Lightfoot's description of those early struggles might be transferred bodily to a modern missionary report, *mutatis mutandis*. "The religion of Rome was interwoven with its history, with its literature, with its institutions, with the whole texture of its domestic and political life." (Think, for instance, of Indian caste and Chinese ancestor-worship!) "Against this mass of time-honoured custom and prestige the wave of the Gospel beat for centuries in vain. Slowly and gradually it was undermining the fabric, but no striking results were immediately visible."¹ For us "striking results" are already appearing. They are a prophecy in themselves.

But it will be remembered that there was a special reference to the "most enlightened and cultivated men" of those early centuries. And it may be objected, What are these "striking results" claimed for modern missions? Are they not all connected with the depressed and ignorant and uncouth?

It will perhaps be thought bold to challenge also this point of the contrast. But, after all, what evidence is there of any large proportion of early converts of rank? Yet again to quote Bishop Lightfoot: "The progress of Christianity was less rapid among the wealthier classes in the earlier ages than in the later." This is clearly a general reference to all parts of the Empire, and includes, for instance, Antioch as well as Rome. Moreover, "the earlier ages" are seen, by the context, to include the middle of the third century.² He thought that even "more than half a century after Constantine's conversion" (viz., considerably more than *three* centuries after the start from Antioch) it is "plain that old Latin Rome—the senate, the aristocracy, the cultivated and influential classes—was still in great part pagan, so far as it was anything."³ So that it is at any rate to the point to ask what evidence there really is of a large number of converts of high rank prior to, say, A.D. 150, which corresponds to our present stage of missions, and then to compare the evidence from the modern mission-

¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 9.

² *Ibid.*, p. 6, note 2.

³ *Op. cit.*, p. 9.

field. A few probable names occur in St. Paul's Epistles—*e.g.*, Erastus, the "treasurer" of Corinth (Rom. xvi. 23). "They that are of Cæsar's household" (Phil. iv. 22) might include some, but the phrase is not decisive.¹ Drs. Sanday and Headlam point out that the names of Rom. xvi. are "largely those of slaves and freedmen." Philologus "seems to point to a certain degree of culture," and justifies a belief that there were other such. A few names are added of persons of high rank who had probably "come under Christian influence," viz., Pomponia Græcina, and in the next generation Flavius Clemens and Domitilla.²

But, when at any rate the earliest converts of rank can be almost counted one by one like this, is it not all remarkably like the modern missionary report? Perhaps we ought rather to say, like the reports of the first half of the nineteenth century; for this stage is passing for us also. Dr. E. Stock said, four or five years ago, that even now Brahman converts are becoming "common enough to be no longer specially reported in missionary publications as they used to be." He gives an example from a single one of the "unfruitful large northern cities," where a missionary recalled the baptism of twenty-three adult Brahmans within sixteen years, scarcely one of whom had been mentioned individually in reports.³ And as to China, it is well known that leading men on both sides in recent stirring events have come under Christian influence. Where is the proof that there are fewer cultivated converts now than of old?

Nor must it be forgotten that we have an Apostle's authority that in those times "not many" wise, mighty, or noble, accepted the message. Curiously enough, the two commentators lately quoted seem to take these words as if they said "not any." After the very cautious conclusion that "even at this early date more than one of the Roman Christians possessed a not inconsiderable social standing and importance"

¹ See Lightfoot, "Philippians," pp. 167, 171. On p. 19 he concludes that the Church "was not generally recruited from the higher classes of society," in all likelihood.

² "International Critical Commentary," Romans, Introduction, pp. xxxiv, xxxv; *cf.* xxxvii.

³ "First Annual Review of the Foreign Missions of the Church, 1908," p. 27.

(viz., in A.D. 58), they add that if there was any Church in which this text had an exception, it was at Rome.¹ What their evidence really tends to show is that the Roman Church was an illustration of the principle, not an exception to it.

Two briefest cautions are necessary. Such a condition of things casts no slur upon the Gospel, either then or now. From the days of our Lord onward it has been its glory to appeal mainly to the outcast and depressed. In the passage just quoted, St. Paul more than hints that this is the Divinely-planned order of things.² It is not insisted that there are high-class converts in India and China from any idea of reflecting credit upon missionary efforts there, but solely in reply to what has been alleged of earlier days in Rome and elsewhere.³

Again, though history, as we have seen on high authority, is an excellent cordial, it is not meant to make us satisfied with things as they are. It is precisely because the present situation is without precedent, as we saw at the outset—because it is unparalleled in primitive or any other times—that unprecedented sacrifices and unparalleled efforts are demanded of us in our day and generation. It is for this reason, and because of the slight response hitherto, that the situation is so critical; but—discouragement in the face of results? It is not to be thought of for a moment. Possibly, however, this is only meant as a cautious alternative.

It is not to be supposed, from the earlier part of this paper, that Dr. Foakes-Jackson consciously underrates the benefits of Christianity. Indeed, he afterwards emphasises so strongly the gulf between it and Stoicism that one wonders whether, after all, he thinks it has "much in common" with Hellenism, as the first quotation seems to imply. The only question suggested is, Does not any such implication, unconsciously, but necessarily, depreciate the uniqueness of the Christian relation?

¹ "International Critical Commentary," Romans, Introduction, p. xxxv.

² See 1 Cor. i. 26-29.

³ Since this paper was prepared, the writer has found a passage in which Professor Ramsay states that the educated middle classes accepted Christianity widely. But, though he alludes to the evidence of "recent discoveries," he does not state precisely what that is in this connection. See "St. Paul the Traveller, etc.," pp. 133, 134.