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From Heart to Mind. The Basel Protestant Mission and «Lower-Caste» Billavas

Mukesh Kumar

This article explores the attitudes of the 19th-century Basel Mission (BM) towards individuals considered «lower caste» in South India. It analyses discourses related to the regulation and administration of the body and mind, with the aim of producing social categories and shaping a society that adhered to Protestant norms. Using missionary photographs, narratives, annual reports, and booklets, the dominant conception of religious conversion is problematized, generally defined as a change in one's «spiritual self». This article argues that conversion in non-European settings was entangled with multiple meanings of self-transformation centred around the complex duality of body and mind. In Protestant thinking, the mind was prioritised because it dealt with the «Word of God», while the heart, which represented bodily passions, emotions, and desires, needed to be individually tamed.

Protestant discourse on the body was marked by its opposition to Catholic attitudes, prioritising cognitive experience over a more sensuous form of religiosity. In «re-forming» the body, Protestants scorned human flesh, considering it to be trapped by superstition, sin, and immoral sacred values. They instead emphasised the mind's ability to receive «The Word of God». ¹ Therefore, a complex duality between body and mind, rituals and words, the visual and the aural, and emotion and spirit emerged after the 16th century, which typically characterised Protestant movements. However, despite Protestantism's emphasis on the Word, scholars have demonstrated that the question of the body and material concerns were at the centre of evangelical missionary activities.²

In general, Protestantism advocated a radical separation between body and mind, subjugating the former to the latter. In the early modern period, Catholics believed that the body and mind constituted «the whole» of an individual and of a community. For them, Christ was present in the Eucharist bread and wine as flesh and blood, while Protestantism opposed this kind of bodily and sensual

¹ Philip A. Mellor, Chris Shilling, *Re-forming the Body. Religion, Community and Modernity*, London 1997, p. 10.

² See, for instance, Tony Ballantyne, *Entanglements of Empire. Missionaries, Māori and the Question of the Body*, Durham 2014; Dick Houtman, Birgit Meyer (eds.), *Things. Religion and the Question of Materiality*, New York 2012; Birgit Meyer, *Christian Mind and Worldly Matters. Religion and Materiality in Nineteenth-Century Gold Coast*, in: *Journal of Material Culture* 3/2 (1997), pp. 311–337; Kenneth Scott, Gareth Griffiths (eds.), *Mixed Messages. Materiality, Textuality, Missions*, New York 2005; Timothy Burke, *Lifebuoy Men, Lux Women. Commodification, Consumption and Cleanliness in Modern Zimbabwe*, Durham 1996; Linda Ratschiller, *Material Matters. The Basel Mission in West Africa and Commodity Culture around 1900*, in: id., Karolin Wetjen (eds.), *Verflochtene Mission. Perspektiven auf eine neue Missionsgeschichte*, Köln 2018, pp. 117–139.

experience of Christ.³ This article analyses the spread of the European Protestant discourse by the Basel Mission to «lower-caste» individuals in South India from the missionaries' perspectives on social marginality, bodily impurity, and community formation that intended to produce «docile» Christian bodies out of natives. Since its establishment in 1834 in Mangalore in the South Canara province of colonial Madras, the Basel Mission attracted a large number of Billavas («low-caste» toddy tappers), who constituted the majority of its converts by the end of the 19th century.⁴ The low socio-economic status of the Billavas in Canarese society reinforced European Protestant missionary ideas about the «sinful state of the body», since most Billavas were engaged in the production of palm-wine or toddy and worshipped ancestors (*bhutas/ghosts*). Although these socio-religious and economic factors contributed to the missionaries' belief in the Billavas' need for «spiritual care», the Protestant duality of body and mind often led to frustration on both sides, due to the unbridgeable differences that existed between these religious cultures, respectively linked with writing and orality, industrial and subsistence economies, and prioritising the individual over the community.⁵ Many of these Protestant ideas formed the basis of European modernity, which marked the birth of individualism in «modern man» and which were expected to be universally spread by the missionaries in their respective colonial settings.⁶ Scholars such as Peter van der Veer have argued that «both Catholic and Protestant missions» carried a «new conception of the self [...] to the rest of the world».⁷ Moreover, other scholars have claimed that Pietists can be credited with inspiring both evangelicalism and modern individualism.⁸ In recent years, however, there has been growing scepticism among historians about the longstanding assumption that missionaries acted as agents of individualisation.⁹ The concept of individualism, with its close ties to the ideas of the European Enlight-

³ Eleanor Barnett, Reforming Food and Eating in Protestant England, c. 1560–c. 1640, in: *The Historical Journal* 63/3 (2020), pp. 507–527; Simon Coleman, Words as Things. Language, Aesthetics and the Objectification of Protestant Evangelicalism, in: *Journal of Material Culture* 1/1 (1996), pp. 107–128.

⁴ Statistically, the total number of converts remained around 15,000 even in 1900, see *Annual Report of the Basel Mission*, 1901, p. 7.

⁵ Jean Comaroff, John L. Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution. Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness in South Africa*, vol. 1, Chicago 1991; Keane Webb, Sincerity, Modernity, and the Protestants, in: *Cultural Anthropology* 17/1, 2002, pp. 65–92.

⁶ Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion. Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*, Baltimore 1993.

⁷ Peter van der Veer, Introduction, in: *id. (ed.)*, *Conversion to Modernities. The Globalization of Christianity*, New York 1996, p. 9.

⁸ See, for instance, Douglas H. Shantz, *An Introduction to German Pietism. Protestant Renewal at the Dawn of Modern Europe*, Baltimore 2013.

⁹ For a critical take on missionaries as agents of individualisation, see Rebekka Habermas, *Mission und Individualisierung. Togo um 1900. Über ein überraschendes Verhältnis, das religion making der Missionare und die Ursprünge der microstoria*, in: Martin Fuchs, Antje Linkenbach, Wolfgang Reinhard (eds.), *Individualisierung durch christliche Mission?*, Wiesbaden 2015, pp. 536–554.



Figure 1: (Billava) Men from the caste of palm-farmers [sic]. Source: BMA C-30.65.013.

enment and modernity, is certainly not without its analytical pitfalls.¹⁰ More importantly, the possibility of assisting in the birth of a «modern man», baptised by a hygienic substance such as holy water, of purifying the convert's «soul», and of equipping him or her with an individual commitment to «the Word of God» inspired many Protestant mission societies. They hoped to free the «mind» of the «lowly man» from «darkness», his «heart» from the clutches of the devil, and his «body» from subjugation so that he or she could walk upright as a Christian.¹¹ This combination of modernity and Protestant values was seamlessly applied to Billava individuals (figure 1), in order to heal their «broken self».

The Billava «Mind»

As mentioned earlier, Protestant purification impulses created an understanding of the body and the mind as distinct from one another, which influenced the thinking of many missionaries in the field.¹² The Protestant Reformation exhorted people to view and experience the mind as separate and superior to the limiting qualities of the body. This contested the high value assigned to the experiences of the somatic senses by the Catholic Church.¹³ Consequently, as Mellor and Shilling have argued that «knowledge became an increasingly mental phenomenon in which the mind, experienced as divorced from the prejudices of the body's passions and senses, provided valid knowledge».¹⁴ For Pietists specifically, moral and religious consciousness originated in the heart, which is why they emphasised the need to educate or train the heart through close reading of Scripture and through individual piety. Therefore, Protestantism encouraged believers to fully convert individually and to reorder their lives through intellectual engagement with the Word of God. Emotions and sentiments were thought to be sinful, based on the assumed connection between physicality and sin. In this way, Protestantism made «religion» more abstract and cognitive via a clear prioritisation of mind over body.¹⁵

¹⁰ For a critical view of missionaries as agents of modernisation, see Richard Hözl, *Aus der Zeit gefallen? Katholische Mission zwischen Modernitätsanspruch und Zivilisationskritik*, in: Christoph Bultmann, Jörg Rüpke, Sabine Schmolinsky (eds.), *Religionen in Nachbarschaft. Pluralismus als Markenzeichen der europäischen Religionsgeschichte*, Münster 2012, pp. 143–164.

¹¹ As it is shown later in the article, bodily impurities were generally assigned to the heart, which was considered to be possessed by Satan.

¹² Webb Keane, *Christian Moderns. Freedom and Fetish in the Mission Encounter*, Berkeley 2007.

¹³ Mellor, Shilling, *Re-forming the Body*, pp. 23–24.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 100–103.

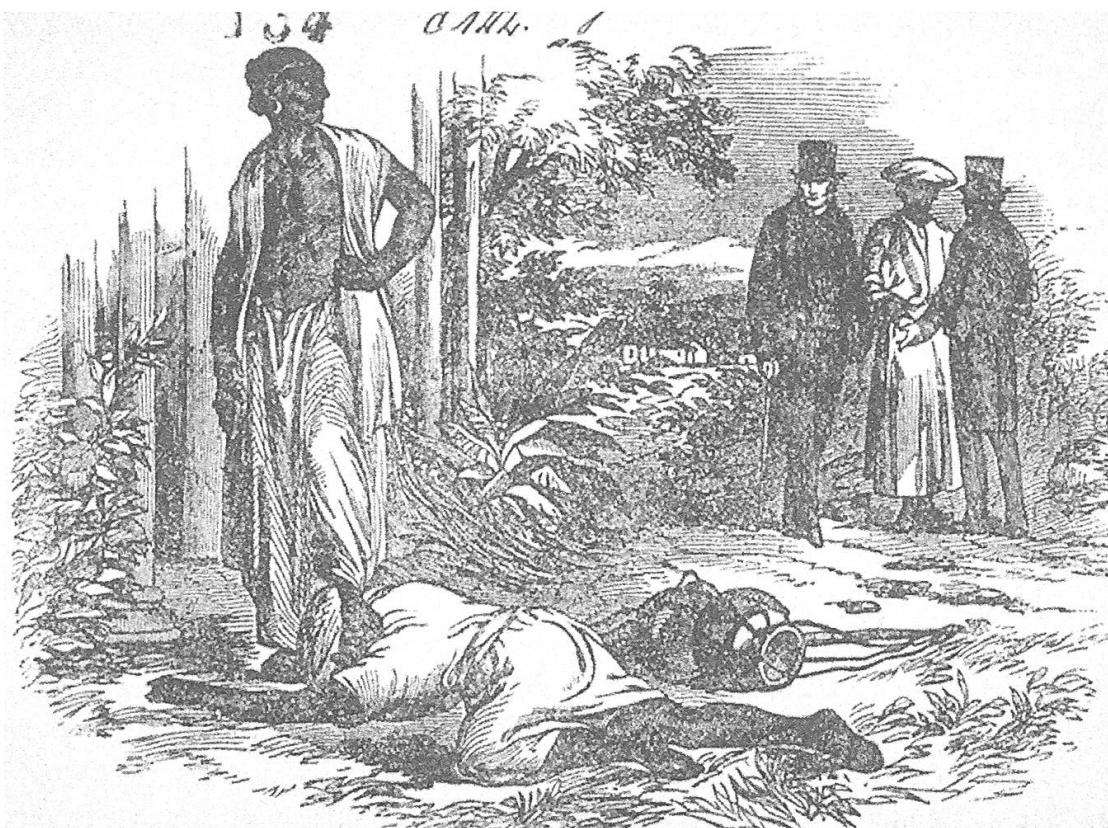


Figure 2: A lithographic image from the 1840s depicting the mental enslavement of lower-caste Hindus. Source: BMA QC-30.001.0154.

In line with the Protestant idea of duality, during the early years of the missionary work, from the 1830s to the 1850s, the Billavas' mind was considered to be enslaved by the «false» theological and scriptural knowledge of the Brahmins.¹⁶ Brahmins were not only at the top of the caste hierarchy, but also exercised an immense socio-religious influence over the rest of the Indian population. The missionaries soon realised that without criticising the religious influence of the Brahmins, they could not «prove» the theological superiority of Protestantism. Therefore, they depicted Brahmins as «religious tyrants», who had «mentally» enslaved the lower castes. In the image above (figure 2), a Brahmin is depicted with his left foot on the head of a Billava (symbolising mental subjugation) while looking arrogantly at the missionaries standing in the corner of the picture, who seem to be discussing this situation with a native informant.

Since Protestantism was a religion of the «Word», meant to be read and interpreted individually, the need to end the «mental» enslavement of the Billavas was a focus of the mission from the onset of evangelical work. The Mission quickly began to engage in «spiritual warfare» with the Brahmins. In the process of undermining the authority of the Brahmin priests, the missionaries promoted Christian doctrines of sin, salvation, and true and false worship of God, and

¹⁶ This tendency more or less continued throughout the 19th century.

mounted an attack on Hindu scriptures and idol worship as heathenism and blasphemy against God. In missionary thinking, the mind was the key organ required to understand the gospel, assuming without freedom of the mind, free thinking and rationality could not prevail. Therefore, the «mind» of «lower castes» not only required freeing, but also training in reading Christian Scriptures. The elevation of the cognitive and its reflective power over all other sensory knowledge meant that the mind reigned supreme in the missionary discourse, through which the «Word of God» was to be read, understood, interpreted, internalised, and communicated to other bodily organs such as the heart. Only this could make individuals «fit» for the heavenly kingdom.

The missionaries often complained that it was particularly difficult to make people of the «lower castes» comprehend the truths of the gospel, stating that «their mental capacities and powers of reasoning are so deficient, that long and repeated teaching and catechizing are necessary». ¹⁷ Conversely, they considered Brahmins highly suitable converts, since their scriptural knowledge and literary abilities were ideal characteristics for learning Protestant theology. They believed that Brahmin converts would better understand the gospel, because they already possessed the skills needed to read and interpret Sanskrit scriptures. Complaining about the mental state of the «lower castes», one missionary reported that:

among the higher castes pride and self-complacency present themselves on all occasions, and often when I desire in a friendly way to argue with them about the truth, they either bring forward some unmeaning assertions, or leave me with a disdainful air, as if to say what have you to do with our concerns? Those of the common castes we find exceedingly dull, scarcely capable of comprehending one idea of a spiritual nature. Their answer generally is, you must talk to our superiors about these matters, we cannot judge of their correctness, and if they think it right, it must be so, and we will then follow it.¹⁸

«Lower-caste» individuals' lives were further described as mired in «body-fetishism» via statements that «there was a general unwillingness among Billavas to rise above worldly temptation and that they cared more for the body than for the soul». ¹⁹ Since the mind was envisaged as connected with the rational thinking that principally influenced one's personality, the human heart was considered the Devil's throne due to its links to bodily passions and emotions that could only be purged by replacing temptations, ego, lust, and desire with the «Spirit» of Christ.

¹⁷ Annual Report of the Basel Mission, 1847, p. 8.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 20.

¹⁹ Ibid.

The Condition of the Body as Represented by the Heart

In reports, the missionaries often spoke about the nature of conversions, doubting if «conversion» was even the proper term for it. They often claimed that the conversion of the Billavas was scarcely the result of a «thorough change of heart» and an understanding of sin and righteousness, but instead stemmed from a hope for improved material welfare.²⁰ Quite frequently, worldly desires were entangled with conversions. Therefore, the missionaries argued that «considering the condition of these downtrodden Billavas, one cannot begrudge them the desire to elevate themselves to a truly human condition».²¹ In the missionary discourse, signs of weaknesses were generally assigned to the heart. Therefore, before leaving a congregation to manage itself, missionaries believed that the «true religion» had to first be planted «deeper in the hearts» of converts, so that they could become pious «men» in Christ.

It was generally believed that the heart was the domain of Satan (the Devil), ensnared by bodily passions, emotions, and lusts, and that before its impurities could be driven out by the light of the Spirit, baptisms were useless. Many scholars have suggested that Protestantism generally described Satan as a spiritual force with great power over human affairs, and depicted the Devil as a monstrous animal.²² Therefore, great emphasis was placed on explaining how Satan ruled the heart. To explain this issue, the Basel Mission published, translated, and widely circulated the «Heart-book».²³ This book was translated from German into English and several South Indian languages.²⁴ In Canarese, its title was «Hrdaya-Darpana», literally «the mirror of the heart».²⁵ It represented the human heart in a series of pictorial illustrations (figure 3), showing the different bodily «passions» as various beasts living in the heart.

This book not only aroused the curiosity of many people, but also encouraged some individuals to seek the «truth». For instance, missionary Grossmann told the story of a young person in Guledgud named Bhima, who found the book lying in the roadside sand and, after seeing the pictures, described the condition of his heart to the missionary with the following words:

²⁰ Annual Report of the Basel Mission, 1874, p. 13.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Darren Oldridge, Protestant Conceptions of the Devil in Early Stuart England, in: History 85/278 (2000), pp. 232–246; Nathan Johnstone, The Protestant Devil. The Experience of Temptation in Early Modern England, in: Journal of British studies 43/2 (2004), pp. 173–205; Judd Stitzel, God, the Devil, Medicine, and the Word. A Controversy over Ecstatic Women in Protestant Middle Germany, 1691–1693, in: Central European History 29/3 (1996), pp. 309–337; Michelle D. Brock, Satan and the Scots. The Devil in post-Reformation Scotland, c. 1560–1700, Oxon 2016.

²³ Basel Mission Archives (BMA), C.II.f.09.

²⁴ For copies of the Heart-book in various languages, see, BMA C.II.f.10; BMA C.II.f.11a; BMA C.II.f.11c; BMA C.II.f.12a; BMA C.II.f.12b.

²⁵ BMA C.177.

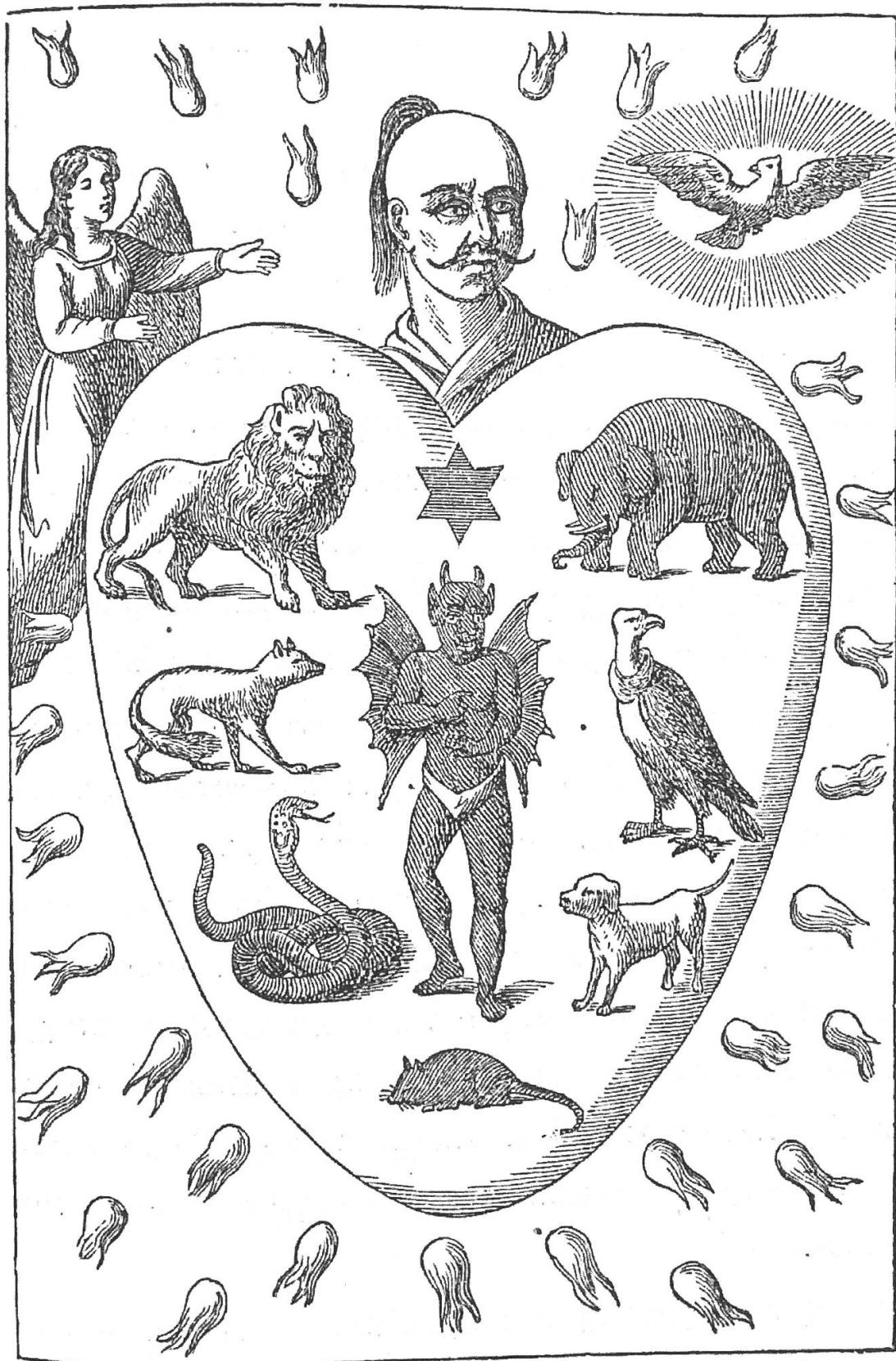


Figure 3: The Heart of the Sinner. Source: The Heart Book, BMA C.II.f.09.

When I read it, I found that the pictures and the words described the condition of my heart as it was. I became troubled about the fearful condition of my heart and was convinced that I must become another man. Coming to my aunt's house I confessed my theft and gave her the six Rupees. During six months I read the book again and again and became very much afraid on account of my condition. «What a wicked sinner thou art! And what will become of thee if thou does not get rid of thy sins and of Satan? If thy heart does not become pure, thou must certainly go to hell.» These and similar words I told myself and asked: «How can I know God and His shastra? How can I be saved and reach eternal life?» I could not speak with anybody about these questions, doubts and fears, because nobody understood me. Before I had found that little book, I had never thought about salvation, and had always thought: «If I serve the idols and wear the linga, that is enough for me to go to heaven.» But now I knew that all that was wrong, resolved not to adore the idols anymore, and threw away my linga. But I did not know the Saviour and the way to salvation.²⁶

The heart's connection with the body was conceived as the influence of «wrong» thinking and was linked with the arousing of worldly emotions and desires through Satan's influence. Protestantism in general discouraged anything that inflamed bodily passion; therefore, desires and emotions had to be curbed by «the Word of God». In the above image, each animal signified a particular idiosyncrasy of the human personality: the lion: ego and pride resulting in anger and jealousy; the fox: deception; the snake: venom and hatred; the mouse: laziness, or one who eats the rice of others; the dog: barking in spiritual ignorance; the vulture: greed; the elephant: lust. Generally, these impurities were thought to be generated by the Liar (the Devil), who seemed to function with «a sense of moral justice»,²⁷ as those whom he killed or dragged to hell were guilty of immoral behaviour by indulging in their bodily passions.²⁸ It was further depicted and explained in the Heart-Book that since the heart of a sinner was ruled by the Devil, until the Holy Spirit, represented by the dove, entered it, all its bodily impurities (desires/sin) could not be fully removed. The ensnarement of the heart by the Devil could presumably only be driven out by Christ, whereupon the cross and the Holy Spirit would take possession of the human heart (figure 4).²⁹

The Basel Mission thus had a body discourse that clearly differed from other Protestant body-mind narratives. Missionary representations of Indian bodies were not only rooted in European ideas about the people in the colonies – and about themselves – but also transformed the knowledge disseminated to a broad

²⁶ Annual Report of the Basel Mission, 1876, p. 19.

²⁷ Olderidge, Protestant Conceptions, p. 233.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Interestingly, the animals in the heart were all different in the German version of the Heart-book. They were changed to convey the same meaning by using images of local animals that had a particular symbolism in the local traditions.

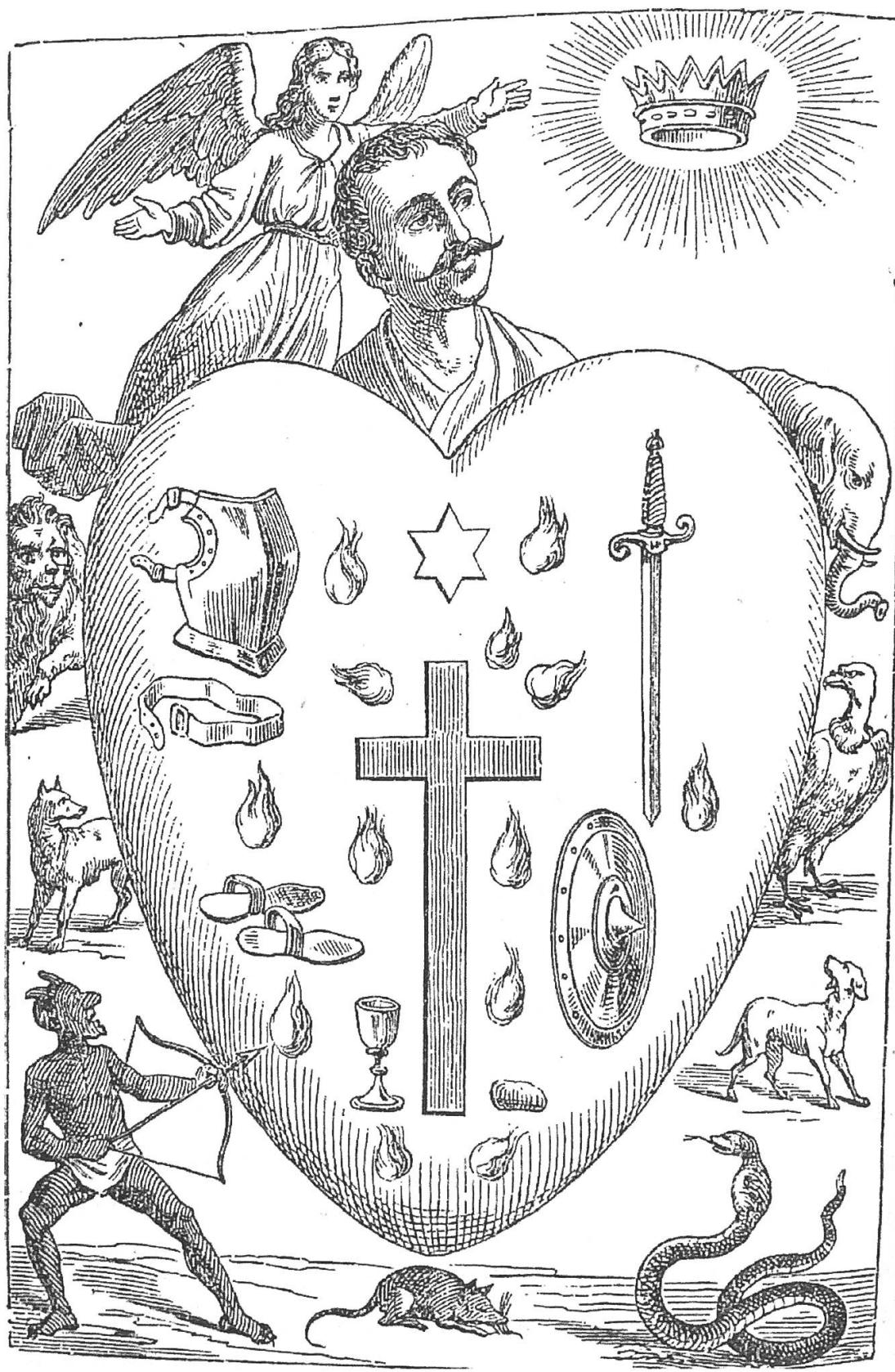


Figure 4: The Heart after the Spirit of God entered it.

European public through a wide range of publications. The Basel missionaries in India found and developed a striking synergy between the Protestant conceptions of the Devil, immoral behaviour, sin, and bodily temptations, and the socio-religious life of the Billavas. Their sinful state was characterised vis-à-vis their profession of toddy-tapping, drinking, *bhuta* (ancestor) and idol worship, and desire for material advancement.

The Sinful State of the Billavas

The life of the Billavas seemed to the Protestants to be a perfect model of a sinful state. They were involved professionally in toddy-tapping and religiously in *bhuta* (literally ghost or spirit) ancestor worship, both of which made them ideal subjects for Protestant proselytising. Apart from improving their literary abilities, the missionaries also sought to decrease their professional dependency on toddy-tapping and its consumption. It is important to consider that the Basel Mission was a Pietist organisation that differed from other Protestant denominations, which is apparent for example in their stance on alcohol and their ideal of rural village communities.³⁰ For the missionaries, consuming toddy became a marker of converts' religious insincerity, continual ties with customary habits of heathenism, and unwillingness to rise above worldly temptation. Alcohol and moral values thus became irreversibly connected. Missionary reports show that several Billavas of the Christian congregations were excommunicated on account of drunkenness and for not following temperance rules.

Furthermore, Protestantism sought to alienate Billavas from their everyday lived experiences by eliminating the faith and sacrality of *bhuta* rituals experienced through sensuous bodily possession (much like Reformers' opposition to Catholic rituals) and tried to replace ritualism with cognitive ideals. Religiously, the mind of the Billavas was portrayed as obsessed with *bhuta* (ghost/spirit) worship. The belief in *bhutas* (ancestral spirits) was deeply rooted in the local religious cosmology and transcended the Christian understanding of «Satan/demon». According to Canarese folk stories, if *bhutas* were offered food (including rice, fowl, pork, toddy, and water), they would aid their worshippers. They would bless their homes and businesses, cure diseases, and offer protection from danger and from the influence of evil spirits and malevolent individuals. Addi-

³⁰ Francesco Spöring, *Mission und Sozialhygiene. Schweizer Anti-Alkohol-Aktivismus im Kontext von Internationalismus und Kolonialismus, 1886–1939*, Doctoral Thesis, ETH Zurich 2014; Itohan Osayimwese, Pietism, Colonialism, and the Search for Utopia. Pietist Space in Germany and the Gold Coast, in: *Thresholds* 30 (2005), pp. 74–79; Paul Jenkins, The Basel Mission in West Africa and the Idea of the Christian Village Community, in: Godwin Shiri (ed.), *Wholeness in Christ. The Legacy of the Basel Mission in India*, Mangalore 1985, pp. 13–25.



Figure 5: The embodiment of *bhutas*, Source: BMA C-30.90.001.

tionally, they were believed to punish or eliminate those who harmed their worshippers.

Thus, the *bhutas* were at the same time both benevolent and destructive, godly and ghostly, and objects of reverence and of fear, revealing the complex religious system of the Billavas.³¹ If *bhutas* did not receive offerings, it was believed that they would afflict humans and cattle with disease and would possibly even cause death. Consequently, nearly every misfortune or illness was attributed to them. During such occurrences, the services of «*bhuta* priests» were sought, and sacrifices were promptly offered to appease the offended spirit. These rituals were conducted either in secret or in the presence of a larger audience. If a *bhuta* was identified as the source of the misfortune, promises of money and feasts for the priests were made. The multifaceted, functional role of *bhutas* added depth to the cultural practices of the community.

Bhutas were thought to take residence in houses and were summoned every evening by the beat of a drum, as they might have departed from the house entrusted to their care during the day. Some *bhutas* were considered guardians not only of individual houses and families, but of entire villages. For these guardian

³¹ C. S. Vijayashree, «Why Can't Our Bhuta Have a Mask?» Caste Contestations and Ritual Practice in Tulunadu, in: *South Asia. Journal of South Asian Studies* 46/2 (2023), pp. 388–406; Miho Ishii, Modernity and Spirit Worship in India, Oxon 2020.

bhutas, a grand feast was organized at least once a year, during which all the village inhabitants made offerings. People from distant places also participated, presenting gifts they had promised to a *bhuta* in times of danger. This mode of religiosity – of relying on miraculous powers for everyday care and well-being – was to be replaced by the missionary industrial structure and the material advantages of Protestant modernity.³² For example, the Basel Mission operated weaving establishments in Calicut, Cannanoor (with a branch establishment in Tellicherry), and Mangalore.³³ Additionally, there was a carpenter shop in Calicut and a tiling establishment in Mangalore. The oversight of these industries fell under the purview of an Industrial Committee based in Basel. In a parallel effort, the Mission initiated commercial enterprises in Mangalore, Mercara, and Calicut. The financial backing for these ventures was provided by a Mercantile Committee located at the mission's headquarters.³⁴ Apart from generating resources, one of the objectives of these establishments was to instruct converts in honest labour and trade. These aims included offering them the opportunity to earn a livelihood, sustaining Christian influence, and assessing the sincerity of those converts about whom doubts lingered regarding their commitment to the faith.³⁵ The managers of these establishments also exercised particular supervision over the moral conduct of those they employed and tried to instruct them in religion. They were thus assistants in the evangelical work.³⁶ These material advantages proved a critical factor in the missionaries' perception of their own religious superiority, combined with the Protestant notion of Christianity as concerned with the salvation of the soul. By not relying on «demons/angels» for material welfare, unlike the Billavas, the Protestant missionaries positioned themselves as people more concerned with «spiritual goals».

For missionaries, the Billavas' complex set of religious practices were markers of paganism and demonology. They often argued that Satan pretended to have God's creative power by curing the sick, possessing human bodies, and departing at will after propitiation, thus believing Satan to be corporeal but formless. The Billavas were further thought to be kept in constant fear and religious slavery by this religious system and to be deluded by their beliefs in ancestral spirits. Regarding one Billava convert, the missionaries wrote that:

³² Basel Mission industries were crucial for converting and sustaining the converts. See, Rudolf Fischer, *Die Basler Missionsindustrie in Indien, 1850–1913. Rekrutierung und Disziplinierung der Arbeiterschaft*, Zürich 1978.

³³ Jaiprakash Raghavaiah, *Faith and Industrial Reformation. Basel Mission in Malabar and South Canara*, Delhi 2018.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ William J. Danker, *Profit for the Lord. Economic Activities in Moravian Missions and the Basel Mission Trading company*, Eugene 2002.

³⁶ Annual Report of the Basel Mission, 1871, pp. 18–19.

The fear of demons had such a hold on him that he would now and then for a time sit with his eyes closed, unable to speak. His memory was so weakened, in consequence of his drinking habits, that he found it difficult to retain anything about Christianity. He therefore began to read out aloud the Bible stories for hours together. He complained much about his condition and the difficulty he had in concentrating his thoughts and controlling his imaginations. By and by he found more peace, but a full joy he showed only on the day of his baptism. Since then he has always been happy, and we hope, the Lord will keep him in His grace. How difficult is it for such a servant of the demons and of drink, to become a true follower of Christ!³⁷

It was difficult for the BMs to eradicate this practice, since even after conversion, many Christian Billavas who gave up their worship lived in constant fear of *bhutas*. The missionaries assumed that this fear was deeply rooted in their hearts. It was believed that nothing short of the grace of Christ could loosen the bonds between *bhuta* worship and their converts. Therefore, they often preached intensely in the form of prayers so that the Spirit of God would be aroused by His Words.³⁸ Sands has argued that in the Protestant view, Satan's ability to possess a human body was a function of both his invisible corporeality and his mimetic ability to parody Christ's incarnation, which posed a threat to both single bodies and the community to which these bodies belonged.³⁹ *Bhuta* possessions among the Billavas were thus seen as a collapse of the Godly order. Only the dispossession of such bodies could lead to the salvation of an individual, which would contribute to the expansion of God's kingdom and the diminution of Satan's. Billava «demons» were a signifier of Satan's influence as well as an affirmation of Protestant doctrines about the sinful nature of bodies ensnared by their enchantment with material concerns.

Discipline and Punishment

The moral and spiritual condition of the Billavas was the utmost concern of the missionaries. The «improvement» of this condition and the «renewal of heart», both needed for a clear and full conversion, became their main objective. Thus, they focused on encouraging the Billavas' earnestness in learning and obeying the Word of God in order to lead new lives. Their knowledge – their religious knowledge in particular – was thought to be of a very low standard, meaning that they first had to learn about the basics of Christianity. Thus, great stress was laid on careful religious training of the mind before baptism. This, however, did not aim at any deep study of Scripture, but rather at introducing the Billavas to

³⁷ Ibid., p. 16.

³⁸ Annual Report of the Basel Mission, 1849, pp. 16–18.

³⁹ Kathleen R. Sands, The Doctrine of Transubstantiation and the English Protestant Dispossession of demons, in: History 85/279 (2000), pp. 446–462.

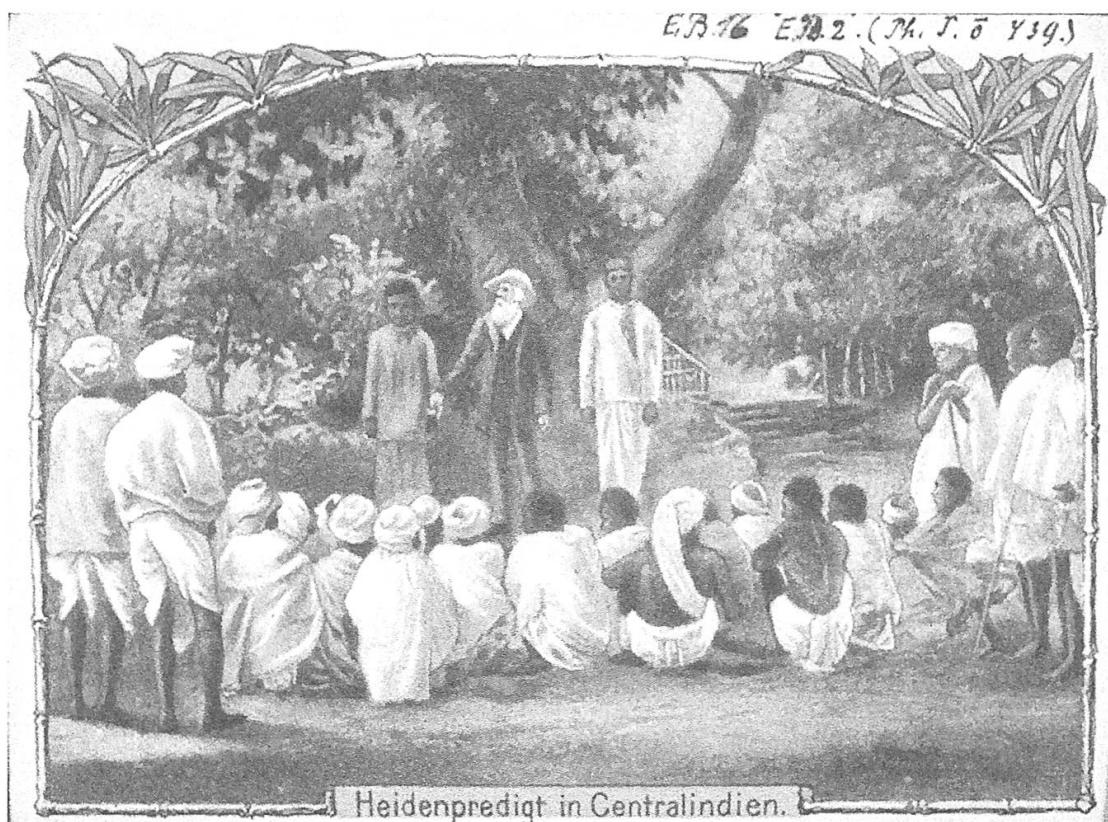


Figure 6: Preaching to non-Christians in Central India. Source: BMA QQ-30.027.0122. (Image description: A white missionary, dressed in black attire with a hat and beard, stands outdoors under a tree. He is accompanied by local assistants wearing blue and red/yellow clothing. The missionary is engaged in conversation with men, who are mostly seated and predominantly dressed in white attire, often adorned with turbans and dhotis.)

the chief elements of Scripture History – Creation, the First Sin, the Deluge, the lives of Abraham, Moses, and Joshua, and the Birth, Life, and Death of the Saviour – and giving them a brief explanation of the Ten Commandments, the «Lord's Prayer», and the Apostolic Creed, which usually had to be learnt by heart.⁴⁰ This course of instruction was meant to reach their hearts and kindle the flame of Divine love within. A catechist usually gave the first part of the instruction, and subsequently a missionary continued the teaching. After these initial phases of training, candidates for baptism were usually brought before the Presbytery of the congregation, who judged their fitness for baptism.⁴¹ Those under instruction for baptism were to learn willingly, and as stated in the Annual Report of 1870: «the Word of God begins to operate in their hearts, and some may truly be called converted men».⁴²

⁴⁰ Annual Report, 1876, p. 12.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Annual Report of the Basel Mission, 1870, p. 33.

However, the missionaries witnessed the persistence of the previous religious practices of the converts in their religious congregations, even after baptism. In 1851, even after living as Christians for several years, one family confessed to committing sins of witchcraft (*bhuta* worship) to cure sickness.⁴³ When the case was investigated, others came forward and admitted their own misdeeds. It was discovered that many had occasionally resorted to very «questionable remedies». As so many had resorted to these practices, the missionaries felt some hesitation in condemning them all.⁴⁴ The healing art as practised among natives, particularly of the lower classes, remained a frequent theme of missionary criticism. Private diaries and letters demonstrate that the Basel missionaries frequently resorted to Indian and African remedies and practitioners,⁴⁵ particularly before the 1880s. This was due to a lack of medical provisions, but also due to their acknowledged efficacy.⁴⁶ However, these accounts are generally missing from official reports and publications. A number of studies have deepened our understanding of the ways in which missionaries adopted scientific practices and technologies in order to advance their religious agenda, but ultimately saw themselves confronted by a persistent medical pluralism that called the exclusivity of their healing and belief systems into question. Thus, a picture of medical missions has emerged that is more complex than narratives of either colonial complicity or self-sacrificial benevolence.⁴⁷

The missionaries commonly lamented that the «true» faith was replaced by local religious practices. Reports indicated that numerous individuals approached the stations asking for missionaries or Catechists to visit their homes, offer prayers, and eliminate various objects associated with «devil» worship. There were instances when one or two houses converted daily, and at times, as many as 100 people joined within a week (although this same group often rever-

⁴³ Annual Report of the Basel Mission, 1852, p. 8.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ The BM did not offer health care until 1886, when the missionary Eugen Liebendorfer (1852–1902) joined the mission with a medical education. For Indians and missionaries alike, religious practices such as praying were the preferred remedies. Eugen Liebendorfer was the first German missionary doctor dispatched to India as part of the Basel Mission.

⁴⁶ Adam Mohr, Missionary Medicine and Akan Therapeutics. Illness, Health and Healing in Southern Ghana's Basel Mission, 1828–1918, in: *Journal of Religion in Africa* 39/4 (2009), pp. 429–461.

⁴⁷ David Hardiman (ed.), *Healing Bodies, Saving Souls. Medical Missions in Asia and Africa*, Amsterdam 2006; Patrick Harries, Marcel Dreier, *Medizin und Magie in Afrika. Eine Sozialgeschichte des Wissens*, in: *Nach Feierabend. Zürcher Jahrbuch für Wissenschaftsgeschichte* 8, Zürich 2012, pp. 85–104; Walima T. Kalusa, *Christian Medical Discourse and Praxis on the Imperial Frontier. Explaining the Popularity of Missionary Medicine in Mwinilunga District, Zambia, 1906–1935*, in: Patrick Harries, David Maxwell (eds.), *The Spiritual in the Secular. Missionaries and Knowledge about Africa*, Grand Rapids 2012, pp. 245–266; Hines Mabika, *Shaping Swiss Medical Practice in South Africa Before Apartheid (1873–1948)*, in: *Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Geschichte* 67/3 (2017), pp. 381–404.

ted later). Primarily, these converts came from the Billava caste (toddy-drawers).⁴⁸

Excommunication was a common method of dealing with anything that violated the moral foundation of the community. For instance, Thomas, an opium addict, was subjected to an uncommonly long trial before baptism. It was only discovered after his baptism that he had long been addicted to drinking and opium-eating, besides having been in jail for years for an unrecorded crime.⁴⁹ At one point, the missionaries thought that he had overcome his «vices», only to one day discover him lying in the street, excessively intoxicated, resulting in police intervention. Such «degradation» was among the missionaries' greatest horrors since it threatened the reputation of the BMs. Such individuals and their bodies were considered incapable of representing the moral symbolism and virtues of Protestantism, dishonouring everything that the missionaries yearned to inculcate. To punish such defiling acts, Thomas was simply excommunicated and placed under special supervision.⁵⁰

In 1858, in Hubli near Mangalore, a number of Christians refused to allow the missionaries to preach against drunkenness and revolted against the presbytery, resulting in their expulsion from the congregation.⁵¹ Drunkenness in general was reported to be on the rise. In 1869, when the missionary Deuber preached against it, a number of people in Hubli complained that he had preached against them. Summoned before the presbytery, they refused to acknowledge the authority of the mission unless a member they disliked was excluded. Eventually, 12 people were expelled from the congregation, as they were neither willing to give up their drinking habits nor to submit to the authority of the presbyters or missionaries. In such cases, the missionaries accepted that there was not only much weakness in their congregations, leading to undeveloped or unchristian principles and even to a want of principles and spirituality, but also sins, including strife, envy, dishonesty, drunkenness, and adultery, this chief sin in «heathenish India». One report commented on this issue: «with the greater mass of Indian Christians, moral tone and moral feeling are decidedly lower than in Europe, and it will most likely take some decades or some generations till a decided improvement will have taken place».⁵² It was stated further that «[o]nly when Christianity has penetrated the nation more thoroughly and masses have entered the kingdom of God can we hope to reach this point».⁵³

⁴⁸ Annual Report, 1870, p. 31.

⁴⁹ Annual Report, 1858, p. 75.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Annual Report, 1870, p. 38.

⁵² Ibid., pp. 29–30.

⁵³ Ibid.

Constructing the Protestant «Mind» and «Body»

The pastoral care of the congregations typically commenced with the provision of «spiritual nurturing» through «the Word of God». This involved overseeing, admonishing, and, when necessary, applying church discipline. Additionally, efforts were made to address converts' practical needs to the extent that circumstances permitted and in alignment with their «true» interests.

In examining the spiritual and moral condition of our congregations, we must always take into consideration the depth from which they have to be raised, the many and strong fetters from which they must be freed and the filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness from which they must be cleansed when they begin to learn to know Christ. Then we shall not be surprised to hear that although we can boldly say that there is a great difference between their life and that of the heathen to whom they formerly belonged, yet downfalls do happen, and grievous sins are committed.⁵⁴

The spiritual care of the congregations was deemed to be of utmost importance and was carried out through services on both Sundays and weekdays. It involved, among other methods, engaging with individual members of the church, visiting and offering prayers during times of illness, supervising behaviour, and admonishing and disciplining transgressors. The missionaries made diligent efforts to instil piety in and elevate the moral standards of the converts.⁵⁵ In this process, prayers, speeches by Europeans, and songs performed by the congregation together with various choirs were intended to «refresh the heart», foster a sense of unity, and invigorate the missionary spirit.

Attendance at divine services by Church members was intended to be a regular practice aimed at enhancing the members' understanding of the Word of God. Family devotions and Bible reading were customary in most households. Demonstrating Christianity through an orderly and upright way of life was one of the converts' primary objectives. If anyone was found guilty of excessive indulgence in worldly temptations, the entire congregation was strongly encouraged to testify against them. Regarding marital life, females were, in theory though not always in practice, considered to be equal to their male counterparts, according to the New Testament standard. However, the missionaries often remarked that such an ideal was not achievable for the native congregations due to «the really lower state of mind of the women».⁵⁶ Therefore, in many cases it was considered acceptable that they remained in a dependent position until they were made free. The women's bodies were made Christian by removing all signs of «heathenism». In the case of one female convert, it was remarked that «[h]er relatives tried hard to win her back, and as long as she wore her ornaments they

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 27.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 34.

⁵⁶ Annual Report of the Basel Mission, 1866, pp. 43–44.

still had hope; but after she had laid these aside, they only made one last trial, which was resisted by the woman as stoutly as those before».⁵⁷ With regard to their manner of bringing up their children, it was generally opined that «there is much room for improvement»,⁵⁸ especially in the area of the development of self-will. Hindus were considered «feeble» and «incapable» when dealing with their children. It was often remarked that there was a great and unmistakable difference between the convert children's former and present states in respect to both their outward and inward life.

The Billavas' low-caste origins made the missionaries apprehensive, leading them to constantly question the sincerity of their desire to join the Protestant community. The criteria for assessing the «real intention» of a convert were more stringent for them, requiring a radical display of disassociation from *bhuta* and idol worship. Completely forsaking idol worship became a crucial way of evaluating an individual's sincerity before admitting them into a religious congregation. Missionary reports and letters often contain descriptions such as the following:

Mani, a poor but courageous and respectable man, after a long struggle with his own heart and with his relations, arose at last boldly, destroyed his demon temple and idols; and drew after him his brother-in-law Meinde, the head of a large family. When Mani cast his idols away Meinde wavered and waited to see what would happen to his brother after the bold deed. No misfortune occurring, he took courage and joined him; he is a good natured, honest, but weak man.⁵⁹

As Billavas constituted the majority of converts, the Mission seemed homogeneous along caste lines, encountering minimal issues related to caste. However, the Billavas' low caste-class status became a concern for the Mission. The primary source of the missionaries' indifference toward the cultural-religious world of the Billavas was the historical European Christian notions of paganism and primitive religions, often associated with lower castes in India. In efforts to eliminate caste differences, the Basel missionaries actively suppressed any distinctions based on caste. Converts were required to share meals together, signifying an intentional effort to confront the taboos and impurities associated with lower caste bodies in Hinduism. The physical touch by missionaries further challenged the Brahminic concept of untouchability.⁶⁰ Initially, there was hesitancy regarding marriages between Christians from a «lower caste» and an «upper caste». However, the overarching principle was that during the Lord's Supper and other

⁵⁷ Annual Report, 1876, p. 17.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Annual Report of the Basel Mission, 1851, p. 9.

⁶⁰ Chakali Chandra Sekhar, In Search of a Touchable Body. Christian Mission and Dalit Conversions, in: *Religions* 10/12 (2019), pp. 1–14; Charu Gupta, Intimate Desires. Dalit Women and Religious Conversions in Colonial India, in: *The Journal of Asian Studies* 73/3 (2014), pp. 661–687.

social interactions, no caste distinctions should be upheld. In boarding schools, individuals from all castes, ranging from Brahmins to lower castes like Billavas, freely participated in shared meals. Later on, intermarriages between Christians from different castes were common.⁶¹ Hundreds of the second and third generations of Christians sprung from this mixture of castes.⁶²

However, the situation became more complex when only husbands converted, and wives did not. When two individuals, Danappa and Satjappa, were baptized, their wives fled from them, chiding and abusing them, and took some of their children with them.⁶³ They returned after four or five months, but only under the condition that their husbands never enter the kitchen, lest it be defiled and they themselves lose their caste. The husbands had to submit to this humiliating condition, live in the veranda of their houses, and use separate drinking and eating vessels.⁶⁴ The wife of one convert left him at the time of his conversion and lived with her parents. She resisted his many attempts to prevail on her to return, and even sent him a letter of divorce. But, in the end, she joined him of her own free will; even the Hindu elders of her caste, in a council meeting with the missionaries, stated that she should be with her husband, provided that she did not eat with him.⁶⁵ Some converts who returned to Hinduism had to follow purifying rituals. Out of the 26 converts in Kattupady, only 17 remained steadfast, while all the rest went back to their previous state.⁶⁶ Upon returning to Hinduism, a ritual meal was generally eaten to restore caste status, followed by a religious pilgrimage.

Gardens and Spiritual Care

The missionaries, despite their focus on the body and mind, believed that material and spiritual upliftment were intricately linked with each other. They took pride in the cleanliness and organisation of Christian settlements, pointing to the difference between the converts' Hindu past and Christian present in order to prove the superiority of Christianity. For instance, many converts resided in Mission-owned houses in Mangalore for several years, earning their livelihood by working in the service of the missionaries or in missionary workshops and

⁶¹ However, the BM practised race discrimination by, for example, not allowing marriages between white missionaries and non-white converts, see, Catherine Stenzl, *The Basel Mission Industries in India 1834–1884. Improvisation or Policy*, Master of Arts Dissertation, London 2010. Available online: https://www.academia.edu/39797314/The_Basel_Mission_industries_in_India_1834_1884_Improvisation_or_Policy (10 June 2023).

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 40.

⁶³ Annual Report of the Basel Mission, 1868, p. 42.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 28.



Figure 7: In the garden. Source: BMA QC-30.103.0038.

factories. To extend the support of the mission to converts, a significant change was initiated by leasing out a substantial part of the Balmattha premises in small portions to church members. This led to the development of a cluster of native houses around the hill, while others were expanded and enhanced, complete with gardens in the front. Consequently, these new homes presented a markedly favourable contrast to the converts' former living conditions, signalling progress in terms of cleanliness, decency, and comfort.⁶⁷ Gardens became a key metaphor for the difference in the mode of living between the natives of Hindu and Christian backgrounds.⁶⁸ Although deeply rooted in the gendered division of labour,⁶⁹ the Protestant conception of working in a garden ideologically constructed a space that connected the spiritual with the mundane, the body with the mind, and labour with leisure.

It was believed that the appearance of «modern» housing also created an impression upon other «heathens», and many of the candidates for baptism were led to the Mission through the influence of the converts' Christian lifestyle. Similarly, it was reported by another missionary from his station that:

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ There were both individual family gardens as well as community gardens linked to schools, farms, and other missionary institutions.

⁶⁹ Sebastian Mrinalini, Reading Archives from a Postcolonial Feminist Perspective. «Native» Bible Women and the Missionary Ideal, in: *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 19/1 (2003), pp. 5–25.

on the 11th of October we had the privilege of adding 21 heathens through baptism to the Church of Christ. From the old man, scarcely able to walk, down to the baby, carried on its mother's arm to Jesus to be blessed, they were gathered round the Minister to receive the holy rite. The gradual increase of the congregation, steady though slow, necessitated the beginning of a new colony. On a hill in the neighbourhood of the old Christian village 25 pieces of ground have been rented to Christians and 8 of them have made the beginning of the village by erecting so many nice comfortable houses, digging wells and planting gardens.⁷⁰

It was further remarked that they had not forgotten to consecrate their new settlement, not only through prayers offered up at the completion of each house, but also by uniting at a weekly prayer-meeting, which was valued much more.⁷¹ Such prayer-meetings in private houses were also regularly organised by the other parts of the congregation.⁷² The Christian converts were encouraged to live together in these new quarters. The missionaries took pride in the fact that «the mission-house and the «neat houses» of their people formed a regular shape».⁷³ Here, the missionaries remarked: «cleanliness and quiet prevail, contrasting most agreeably with the noise and filthiness of the town».⁷⁴ These were considered signs of the new spiritual life of the converts. If converts attended the Bible lessons and held regular private devotions and prayers, these were further signs that they were gradually becoming more earnest and steadier. If there were no cases of disobedience or other gross misconduct, the converts were thought to have been transformed into Christians.

Sometimes, idleness was blamed for ruining many and bringing them down to the level of «heathens».⁷⁵ To deal with this issue, converts were encouraged to engage in physical labour. Gardening was usually promoted to inculcate Protestant ethics in converts. For instance, a missionary reported from his station that «their daily life is so regulated that besides their studies there is also some time left for manual labour in the way of gardening etc.»⁷⁶ Similarly, Mr. and Mrs. Brigel, who ran the girls' institution Mulky, remarked that «the girls have now more to do in the garden besides their lessons (figure 8), by which means they are getting accustomed to that kind of work which they will have to perform later in life».⁷⁷

⁷⁰ Annual Report of the Basel Mission, 1869, p. 18.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Annual Report of the Basel Mission, 1859, p. 50. The BM roof tile and building material production also facilitated the «neat and regular shape» of the houses. Their home production also made them affordable, like the homegrown vegetables from the garden.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Annual Report, 1871, p. 17.

⁷⁶ Ibid., pp. 41–42.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 22.



Figure 8: Garden work. Source: BMA QC-30.103.0033.

Gardening became a method of spiritual care, bridging the gap between this world and the next, where order prevailed. Thus, sincerity and industriousness had to be learnt before the transmigration of the soul. The curriculum taught in the schools was basic, but «higher training» was typically appended for those boys and girls who displayed «good abilities» and were presumed to be potentially valuable in the service of the Mission as catechists, schoolmasters, and schoolmistresses. The primary subjects of instruction included Bible reading and stories, memorization of Scripture passages and hymns, reading, writing, grammar, elementary arithmetic, the fundamentals of geography (and in some schools history), singing, and, in the higher classes, English.⁷⁸ While the morning in these institutions was devoted to lessons, the afternoon was utilized for field and garden work in the boys' institutions (see figure 9) and for sewing, knitting, and crochet work in the girls' institutions.⁷⁹ There was a strong belief that there was a significant risk of fostering dependence in these children and of impeding their necessary development of energy. Therefore, gardening was seen as a means of imparting lessons in independence through one's own labour.

⁷⁸ The missionaries learnt the local languages and (except for the earliest years of the Mission) also taught in Tulu, Kanarese, etc.

⁷⁹ Annual Report, 1874, p. 37.



Figure 9: At work in the garden. Source: BMA C-30.88.047.

Missionaries sought a middle path between insufficient care and excessive coddling, emphasizing the value of labour through gardening.

Many converts encountered a difficult challenge by misconstruing the initial assistance provided to them as an obligation to be perpetually continued without any effort on their part. They resisted the saying attributed to the Apostle Paul that if one would not work, then neither should they eat.⁸⁰ Such individuals were compelled to leave the Mission, with the rationale that «the chaff must be separated from the wheat». The missionaries were not disappointed to see the «idlers» depart, but rather pleased to have a smaller but comparatively «purer» congregation.⁸¹ Similar to other aspects of life, such as the mental and physical training of children, the cultivation of plants in a garden was deemed essential to prevent them from growing wild, requiring a balance between neglect and excessive coddling.⁸² The missionaries used gardening not only to produce part of their food supply, but also to foster spiritual vitality. The use of the garden by religious institutions was also aimed at «grafting garden labour into everyday spiritual discipline, crafting parallels between the care of the gardens and care of

⁸⁰ This rationale was also introduced by August Bebel into socialism and was later used by Hitler and Stalin to justify the killing of sick and disabled people.

⁸¹ Annual Report of the Basel Mission, 1862, p. 21.

⁸² Annual Report of the Basel Mission, 1875, p. 24.

the self».⁸³ One convert was characterised as indulging in moral and spiritual care by working in a garden:

He earned his livelihood by cultivating the orchard behind the mission-house, a place that grew dearer and dearer to him, as there he could, without interruption, converse with his God as often as he desired. Under the shadowy trees of that garden, he prayed much and fervently for his salvation and that of his children.⁸⁴

Conclusion

The complex Protestant duality between body and mind was extended and applied beyond Europe by various missionary societies, including the Basel Mission. In the process of converting and forming a community, «lower-caste» converts of the Mission were encouraged to forsake drinking and ancestor worship, termed sins of the flesh in Protestant thinking. Much like in Catholicism, there was no sharp religious distinction between the body and the mind in Hinduism, though distinctions between various caste groups existed in terms of literacy, writing, orality, and modes of resource use. The missionaries utilised these differences to advance their own understanding of what constituted a sinful bodily state. The bodies of «lower-caste» individuals were usually seen as «corrupt forms» in need of spiritual care. Elements of bodily sin were depicted as existing in the heart in the Protestant conceptions of conversion.

Many of the Protestant ideas of the BM echoed the 19th-century German Pietist beliefs about conversion, for example that individuals could transform their «self» through subjection to proper Christian instruction. Therefore, conversion was possible through «bodily» and behavioural changes (inner and outer) and was no longer only caused by divine will. However, such changes were rooted in disciplinary power that intended to produce «docile bodies» – in other words «good Christians» – through mission schools, seminaries, training camps, gardens, factories, and workshops. Progress *en route* to salvation was viewed as the growth of one's self-recognition through the utilizing and prioritising of individual mental capacities for self-transformation. Such ideas were not solely Protestant but were also part of a common narrative of modernity, of increasing individualization, and of the creation of an ethical sphere. Therefore, modernist ideas crossed national boundaries to discipline «the heathen body and mind» by increasingly emphasising the cognitive faculty, required in Protestant theology to create the moral, religious, ethical, and disciplinary conditions for the salvation of the soul.

⁸³ James S. Bielo, Biblical Gardens and the Sensuality of Religious Pedagogy, in: *Material Religion*, 14/1 (2018), pp. 30–54.

⁸⁴ Annual Report, 1868, p. 34.

The historical processes of Protestant bodily disenchantment, therefore, cannot be understood merely in terms of the rejection of magical beliefs and their replacement with the «Word of God». They were closely interconnected with the way in which the body was used for physical labour and with ethical concerns about idleness and dependence. A gradual transition from material to spiritual concerns was the main aim of the Basel Mission, though the importance of the concept of modernity and its material aid in the imparting of the doctrines of salvation cannot be discounted. The sustained training of Christian converts in mission schools, factories, workshops, gardens, and seminaries constituted Protestant religious pedagogy, in which Protestant sincerity had to be expressed through the «Word of God» and through the discarding of bodily passions and desires. One could argue that by not taking local socio-religious concerns seriously, Protestantism became a matter of word-play in which converts participated to attain their own objectives, including material progress.

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