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GREY AND VENN

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C. HENRY VENN ON NATIONALITY AND NATIVE CHURCHES

From Instructions of the Committee, 30 June 1868: 'On Nationality'. Reverend William Knight, *The Missionary Secretariat of Henry Venn* (1880)

... 1. The Committee would enjoin upon you, First,
Study the national character of the people among whom you labour, and show the utmost respect for national peculiarities.

In this way you will win the heart and confidence of the people. They will understand that you come out for their sakes, not according to an all-prevailing conception that you come to earn a living.

But beyond this you will then best discover the way to their hearts and understandings; you will learn their modes of thought; you will sympathize with their difficulties; and you will discover any common standing-ground from whence you may start together in the search of truth.

With Englishmen in general it is the most difficult thing to show respect to national peculiarities which differ from our own. Even throughout the continent of Europe this is with us a national besetting sin, and a national reproach and bye-word against us. But how much more mischievous is this national characteristic when it is exhibited in a Christian missionary towards down-trodden or half-civilised nations. Old missionaries have often lamented its spell upon them. It is best counteracted by a determination, from your first arrival in the country, to study and to *respect* the national habits and conventionalities, till it becomes a habit with you to do so, and a second nature.

This study of national distinctions will also moderate your judgment of the Christian attainments of infant native churches. We are too apt to judge native converts by the standard which prevails in the mother Church, which has enjoyed Christian privileges for a thousand years – a favoured vineyard sheltered and cultivated by the great Vine-dresser above others. We do not make allowances for national disadvantages, nor for the national

peculiarities which will show themselves even in the best Christians. Inasmuch as all native churches grow up into the fulness of the stature of Christ, distinctions and defects will vanish. But it is far different in infant Christian churches. The general standard of the apostolic churches was far below that of the present day, though many glorious exceptions shone as stars of the first magnitude. But it may be doubted whether, to the last, the Church of Christ will not exhibit marked national characteristics which, in the overruling grace of God, will tend to its perfection and glory.

2. As a second remark, the Committee warn you, *that these race distinctions will probably rise in intensity with the progress of the Mission*. The distinctions may be softened down by grace; they may be hid from view in a season of the first love, and of the sense of unity in Christ Jesus; but they are part of our nature, and, as the Saviour says, 'You may expel nature for a time by force, but it will surely return.' So distinctions of race are irrepressible. They are comparatively weak in the early stage of a mission, because all the superiority is on one side; but as the native race advances in intelligence, as their power of arguing strengthens, as they excel in writing sensational statements, as they become our rivals in the pulpit and on the platform, long cherished but dormant prejudices, and even passions, will occasionally burst forth. At a conference, when least expected, such painful exposures have occurred in more than one of our missions! Now when such a crisis occurs, the European missionary, who is ever mindful of the existence of this root of bitterness, will be prepared to meet it — not by charging the natives with presumption and ingratitude, not by standing upon his British prestige, but in the spirit of the Apostle, who had learned to bear all things for the elect's sake; who, in such a trial as we have described, exclaimed, 'Now ye have reigned as kings without us, and I would to God ye did reign, that we also might reign with you.' 'We are fools for Christ's sake, but ye are wise in Christ: we are weak, but ye are strong; ye are honourable, but we are despised.' Study the whole of that fourth chapter of the First Epistle to the Corinthians,

and parallel passages that you may see how these trials beset the primitive Church, and how the Apostles behaved under them.

3. As a third practical hint, the Committee enjoin upon you, as soon as converts can be gathered into a Christian congregation, *let a native church be organized as a national institution*; avail yourself of national habits, of Christian headmen, of a church council similar to the Indian Panchayat; let every member feel himself doubly bound to his country by this social as well as religious society. Train up the native church to self-dependence and to self-government from the very first stage of a Christian movement. These principles have been so fully stated in late papers issued by the Committee on native church organisation, that we need only refer you to those documents.

The Committee will, however, single out one particular under this head, which has only been lately discovered, namely, that it is a great mistake for the missionary to assume the position of a native pastor. Many of our old missionaries have fallen into this mistake. They have ministered to a large native congregation for thirty or forty years, and acknowledged at last that it was impossible to acquire that full confidence of their people, and knowledge of what is passing in their minds, which a native pastor would soon obtain. This is the experience of other Missionary Societies besides our own. In a paper lately issued by the London Missionary Society, and signed by that accomplished missionary, Dr. Mullens, it is thus stated: — 'The system of giving English pastors to native churches has answered nowhere. Coming from a much higher civilisation, the missionary has proved too strong for the people: the strength of the people, their resources, have been kept back, a spirit of childlike dependence has been fostered, and the native ministry has been indefinitely postponed.'

4. A fourth suggestion is, *that as the native church assumes a national character it will ultimately supersede the denominational distinctions which are now introduced by Foreign Missionary Societies*.

We of the Church of England are bound by our fundamental rules to train up every congregation gathered from the heathen

according to the discipline and worship of the Church of England. But our own Prayer-book has laid down the principle that every national church is at liberty to change its ceremonies, and adapt itself to the national taste; and therefore we look forward to the time when the native church of India shall have attained that magnitude and maturity which will entitle them to modify and perfect themselves according to the standard of God's holy word. Then missionary efforts will cease; but inasmuch as we have infused Gospel truth, and supplied well-trained witnesses for the truth, our work will be found to praise and honour and glory through Jesus Christ.

Let this consideration influence your relations with the missions of other denominations of Christians, and even with the irregular efforts of unattached evangelists, and with all the vast agency for good by individual example and effort, by education, by Christian literature, which, thank God, abounds more and more in every heathen dependency of the British Empire. Regard with sympathy and joy this glorious amount of agency at work for Christianising the nations!

5. A fifth practical conclusion which the Committee would draw from the foregoing considerations is, that *the proper position of a missionary is one external to the native church*, and that the most important duty he has to discharge towards that church is the education and training of native pastors and evangelists, especially in the knowledge and use of the Bible, that wonderful book which alone is suited to every race of mankind, and which comes home to every individual of our race when received in faith, as the well-known voice of a parent speaking to children; to teach the converts how to search for the hidden treasures of the volume, to bring them forth for the edification of others, to urge upon their countrymen its warnings, promises, and threatenings, as God's word written, to present in their own spirit and behaviour a living epistle of Christ, known and read of all men.

This is not meant to preclude any missionary from carrying on evangelistic labours among those who have not yet become disciples. If called to that work, he will take the lead of a body of

native evangelists, who are agents like himself of a Foreign Missionary Society. But in respect of an organised native community, the missionary should no longer take the lead, but exercise his influence *ab extra*, prompting and guiding the native pastors to lead their flocks, and making provision for the supply for the native church of men suited for the office of the ministry, whether catechists, pastors, or evangelists; and in this position, which will be readily ceded to him, of a counsellor of the native church, to strive to elevate its Christian life and its aggressive energy upon surrounding heathenism.

The missionary who stands in this position, and who confers these benefits upon the native church, will be far removed from the region of jealousy or conflict, and will have the happiness of seeing that native church develop itself according to its national and natural tendencies for the establishing, strengthening, and settling itself in the faith once delivered to the saints.

D. HENRY VENN ON THE NATIVE PASTORATE AND THE ORGANISATION OF NATIVE CHURCHES

From Reverend William Knight, *The Missionary Secretariat of Henry Venn* (1880) pp. 303-21

1851. *Minutes Upon the Employment and Ordination of Native Teachers*
General Principles

The advanced state of missions having rendered it desirable to record the views of the Society upon the employment and ordination of native teachers, the following particulars are given for the information of its missionaries: -

1. In all questions relating to the settlement of a native Church in any mission field, it is important to keep in view the distinction between the office of a *Missionary*, who preaches to the heathen and instructs inquirers or recent converts - and the office of a *Pastor*, who ministers in holy things to a congregation of native Christians.