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THE CONDITION OF THE GERMAN PROVINCES AS ILLUSTRATING THE METHODS OF ST BONIFACE.

THE character of Saint Boniface's activity in the German provinces was determined by their political and religious condition. The Chatti, who from the third or fourth century before the Christian era dwelt in Hesse, the country to the west of Thuringia, lying about the rivers Fulda and Lahn, had not been moved by the wave of barbarian invasion. But the old free kingdom of the Thuringians, stretching from the Harz mountains to the Danube, from the Weser on the west to the Elbe-Saale rivers on the east, was the creation of later barbarian races. Both countries fell under Frank influence. Under King Hermanfrid Thuringia was subdued by the Frank Theuderich I in 531, only to regain practical independence under its own dukes who were set up by the Frank Dagobert I (628–638). But towards the end of the seventh century a family ruling in the Frank interest replaced the older line[1].

Though the political bond might not always be strong, yet it implied the partial entrance into these eastern provinces of Frank civilization and institutions. German life had changed its character since the war-times. War and hunting were already replaced by agriculture as the primary occupation of man. Of course it is difficult to determine when Tacitus's description ceased to hold good of the Germans[2]. Yet certainly Roman methods of cultivation must have greatly influenced the Franks,

[1] Willibald *Vita Bonifacii* p. 453 gives Theobald and Hedenus as dukes of the new family; they were possibly set up by Pippin. References are made, unless indication is otherwise given, to Jaffé's edition of the Lives and Letters of Saint Boniface in his *Bibliotheca Rerum Germanicarum* iii.

[2] Tacitus *Germ.* 26: nec enim cum ubertate et amplitudine soli labore contendunt ut pomaria conserant et prata separent et hortos rigent; sola terrae seges imperatur. Roman methods of making butter and cheese probably also influenced the Teutonic settlers.

and probably a decided improvement in the manner of developing the soil had also been effected beyond the Rhine by the eighth century. Already the German villages, with their common meadow, pasture and woodland, and with the homes of their inhabitants surrounded by gardens growing the apple and the pear, were giving evidence of more peaceful times[1]. By this period the large owner would be acquiring land at the expense of the small free proprietor. Local dignitaries would be required by the administrative system, as in the Frankish state, to serve as heads of gaus, and these would often be attached to the Frank interest. It can scarcely be wrong to see influential leaders of the official class in the brothers Dettic and Deorwulf who were ruling at Amoeneburg when Boniface first went to Hesse, and gave him the land for his first monastery[2]. There were indeed many channels for outside influences; trade opened its routes and markets; Frank immigrants made a permanent settlement on the Main; already the travellers, beggars, jugglers, and performers had begun the wayfaring which was so marked a feature of mediaeval life[3].

General progress, however, had not reached any high level in the north-eastern provinces by Boniface's time. The vast forests, the lack of roads, the distances between the communities, made his task almost impossible. The people were poor and exposed to the marauding raids of the Saxons. When labouring in farther Hesse in 722 Boniface had to share the poverty and dangers of the people, and by so doing he won their hearts[4]. In Thuringia conditions were but little better. The Saxons were constant foes whose advance on the north, together with that of the Franks on the south, had confined the Thuringians to the country between the Werra and Saale rivers, the Thuringian forest and the Harz Mountains. On entering Thuringia in 725 Boniface found that part of the population

[1] *Monographien zur deutschen Kulturgeschichte* 6, Bartels *Der Bauer*. In the fifth century there was in Auxerre a pear-tree on the branches of which hung heads of wild beasts.

[2] Willibald, cap. 6 p. 449. Amoeneburg, a fortified place, would be at least the centre of a villa and as such would have a curtis regia. v. Rübel *Die Franken, ihr Eroberungs- und Siedelungs-System im deutschen Volkslande* p. 32.

[3] *Monographien zur deutschen Kulturgeschichte* 10, Hampe *Fahrende Leute*.

[4] Willibald, cap. 6 p. 449; Liudger *Vita Greg.* 2 (*M. G. H. Scrip.* xv p. 69 f). Saxon wars in 722 are mentioned by *Annal. Lauresh.* 722.

had gone over to the Saxons as a result of the tyranny which the new ducal family was forced to exercise in order to assert Frank authority over a people attached to their former line of rulers[1]. The Slavs also broke over the eastern border, and probably often remained as settlers to retard progress and Christianity.

Boniface indeed was not the first to teach Christianity in southern Hesse at least and in Thuringia. Probably before the end of the Empire some Christian teaching had spread from Mainz and Trier and the border cities into Hesse. Later, though there was no definite mission from the Frank church into either province, yet the advance of Frank power meant the gradual growth of Christian influence; the Thuringian king Hermanfrid married the niece of the Frank Theuderich, and his brother was the father of Saint Radegunde. Thus Frank Christianity defeated the earlier Arian faith. The native ruling family established by Dagobert I was Christian, as was the Frankish dynasty succeeding it. Indeed the second duke of the latter line, Hedenus, wished to call in the Roman archbishop Willibrord[2]. But the orthodox faith of their rulers, associated as it was with Frank suzerainty, was rejected by the nobles and people; they became attached to the Celtic preachers who were recommended by their political neutrality, as were the early English workers in Friesland.

The restoration of orthodoxy within the Christian body was only one side of Boniface's task in Hesse and Thuringia. He had to remove heathen influences from his church. His measures were determined by the character of the popular heathenism and its relation to Christianity. The heathen faith, arising naturally from the conception of a superhuman life which dreams, nightmare, and the phenomena of death produced, manifested itself in observances relating to the souls of the dead, in belief in elves, giants, and wood- and water-spirits, in the practice of magic and divination, and in the worship of greater gods, possibly the personification of natural forces or the deified ancestors of tribes.

[1] Willibald, cap. 6 p. 453.

[2] He gave Willibrord grants of land about Armstadt and Schwarzburg; v. Hauck *K. D.* i p. 440, and Rübel *Die Franken* p. 333.

It is probable that this religion reached its highest development among the Frisians, Saxons, and Scandinavians; in the south it was more affected by the movements of the barbarian peoples and by external influences. True, in Hesse and Thuringia Boniface found well-established heathen usages, sacrifices by priests to Wodan, the offering of human lives, the eating of the flesh of horses and other animals which had been sacrificed to the gods[1]. Yet the removal of a people from their ancestral homes, groves, and springs must have greatly weakened their inherited beliefs, which were so closely bound up with their local surroundings and associations. Thus Thuringia had been much more affected by Christianity than Hesse, because the inhabitants of Hesse by their long and unbroken residence could maintain their local rites. Farther Hesse was virtually heathen when Boniface first came there in 722, and his felling of the oak sacred to Thor on his second visit was not paralleled by any such extreme step in Thuringia[2].

The Teutonic religion was not a joyous worship of nature. Its gods were stern, possibly made so by their leadership in war; as exacting deities they had their groves, temples, images, and formal sacrificial worship. They were bound up indeed with the tribal life, with its justice and its fighting, but were removed from the spheres of thought and morality. They did not set any aesthetic or moral standard. The life of deeds, which their worshippers led, allowed little intellectual activity and required, as its main virtues, courage and fidelity. There were no humaner virtues associated with religion, nor had any Teutonic piety or meditation developed. When, with the advance of civilization, society turned to more peaceful occupations[3], the want of a more intellectual religion and one appealing to the higher

[1] *Ep.* 28 p. 94. Christians sold their slaves to be sacrificed; *Epp.* 28 p. 93, 27 p. 89.

[2] The difference between Thuringia and Hesse in their relation to Christianity is made apparent by Willibald's account (cap. 6). In Thuringia Boniface has to recall the leading men and the clergy into the orthodox church, but in Hesse—Farther Hesse particularly—heathenism is the main obstacle. 'Similiter et iuxta fines Saxonum, Hessorum populum paganicis adhuc ritibus oberrantem, a daemoniorum, evangelica praedicando mandata, captivitate liberavit, multisque milibus hominum expurgata paganica vetustate baptizatis . . .'

[3] Note the opposition of the elves to agriculture, and the clearing of their forests. Grimm *Teutonic Mythology* ii p. 459.

feelings of men may have been felt. To the few better minds among the Germans Christianity offered, as it did to the noble at the court of Edwine of Northumbria, a fuller explanation of life and also a more satisfactory account of God and the universe than did the old faith. The letter of Daniel of Winchester to Boniface[1], which urged him to prove to his people the impossibility of a number of gods coming into existence, remaining of the same number, and being influenced by human offerings, can scarcely have been a mere scholastic exercise for the bishop who had the south Saxons bordering on his diocese, but probably shews that such speculation did interest some of the heathen. There had been no priestly caste among the Germans—if there had been, Boniface's task would have been more difficult—but the official priests possessed legal and religious knowledge, and possibly those Christian priests, who continued to offer heathen sacrifices[2], were converts from this class, whom the speculative side of Christianity had attracted.

But the effective appeal of Christianity to the heathen people was made by the superior strength of its Deity over their gods. The more striking portion of Daniel's letter emphasized the weakness of the heathen gods who did not hinder Christian advance, and the increasing prosperity of Christians who held the fertile parts of the earth. The latter argument may have arisen from the slightly sophistical turn of Daniel's mind, or may indicate that, however deeply Christianity affected the lives of the English, they had not yet fully grasped its spiritual character.

During the early centuries Christianity had spread among the humble and unfree, but when made the religion of the empire it gained in power and prestige, and in the north appealed at first to kings, and to all the strong and free who scorned feeble gods. The conversion of the people began from above. It was the leading men in Thuringia whom Boniface sought to win to his side[3]. In Hesse he wished by a bold stroke to convince the people that their gods could not lift a finger to help themselves.

[1] *Ep.* 15 p. 71. M. G. *H. Ep.* III p. 271. Cp. Hahn *Bonifas und Lul* p. 115 sq.
[2] *Ep.* 28 p. 93.
[3] Willibald, cap. 5 p. 446. Of course it is true that these men had been influenced by Christian teaching before and were expected to be friendly. So too much importance should not be attached to this example.

So, after deliberation with the Christian converts, he felled the sacred oak at Geismar[1]. His splendid courage and fine personality awed the heathen; who respected him, moreover, as being under the protection of Charles Martel. The practical Englishman rightly valued deeds above words. The crash of the sacred tree was the death-song of heathenism in Hesse.

Probably still another cause of Boniface's unresisted conversion of the German people was the similarity between their religion and Christianity as it was developing. The faith of Boniface and his contemporaries had a truly spiritual side, as shewn by the virtues of charity, purity, humility and piety which it fostered in these English men and women; but it was bound up with beliefs and practices which were at least analogous in their development to, if not derived from, those of the older religions. Hence, though the fundamental ideas of Christianity, such as the Atonement, might be difficult of comprehension to the heathen[2], yet there were many of its external features to which they knew some parallel. One of the deepest convictions of both Bede and Boniface was that of the intimate connexion between this world and the other, as shewn by the divine guidance of man, by the communion of man with angels and saints, and by dreams, visions, and miracles. Similarly, the lives of the heathen were filled with the presence of superhuman beings. Christian angels were to them transformed elves, and devils and demons took some of their attributes from gods and elves, many from giants. The whole Christian conception of death and the life of the soul after death resembled that of heathenism. Boniface accepted the account given to him by the Abbess of Barking of a sick man's vision of the after-world[3]; the conducting of the souls by guardian spirits, the fight of the good and the bad spirits over them, the crossing of the bridge from Heaven to Hell, and the places of eternal abode, as they were described, were quite within the range of the heathen imagination[4]. The honours given by the heathen to their dead found a counterpart in prayers for the

[1] Willibald, cap. 6 p. 452.

[2] They might find it difficult to grasp the idea of a suffering God, though their spring gods, Balder and Siegfried, were sacrificed.

[3] *Ep.* 10 p. 53. Bede recounts similar visions: *H. E.* v 12.

[4] Grimm *Teutonic Mythology* ii p. 826 sqq.; also iii Preface.

departed and in the keeping of special days in commemoration of them. Christian saints were taking the place of the older gods and borrowing their attributes, as St Michael did those of Wodan. Indeed there was no little toleration shewn by the new faith to the old. Gregory I had ordered his missionaries in England to change the heathen sanctuaries into Christian churches, so that the people might be drawn by their old associations[1]. Boniface shewed the same spirit by erecting on the spot where the sacred oak stood at Geismar, and out of its timber, a chapel of St Peter[2]. Sacred hills and fountains were christened and named after saints; Christian feasts fell on heathen holidays[3]; Christmas borrowed many characteristics of the Yule-feast; St John's day had characteristics of the old Midsummer feast; the Easter fire resembled the need-fire[4]. The Christian worship itself cannot have appeared wholly strange to the heathen. They had been accustomed in some measure to temples and images. Sacramental forms may have recalled some of their own usages[5]. Moreover, the ceremonial and especially the music[6] of the Church can scarcely have failed to appeal to the Germans.

The Christian religion could indeed afford to be somewhat tolerant of heathen beliefs and usages; its attitude toward the German faith was necessarily different from that of unbending hostility, which it had at first taken up toward Graeco-Roman worship. Yet it did not fail to condemn the German spirits, such as the giants who wished to destroy Christian churches and were terrified by bells, or the gods whom it identified with devils. In his letters and synods Boniface persistently

[1] Bede *H. E.* i. 30.

[2] Willibald, cap. 6 p. 452.

[3] Widukind writes: 'The feast days of heathen error have now been changed by the holy word of pious men into days of fasting and preaching, and days kept in honour of all departed Christians.'

[4] Grimm *T. M.* ii p. 616 sq. Yet cp. Boniface *Ep.* 80 'ignis pascalis'.

[5] 'The sprinkling of a new-born babe with water closely resembled Christian baptism, the sign of the hammer that of the cross,' &c. Grimm *T. M.* iii p. xxxvi. However, Grimm possibly exaggerates the resemblance in these particulars. For the heathen custom of carrying images in procession see the *Indiculus Superstitionum*, Migne *P. L.* lxxxix p. 810, and Grimm *I. M* i p. 64.

[6] Organs were known in England in Aldhelm's time. Boniface and his companions in all probability brought in the Gregorian chant. For the liturgical singing in the north see Schubinger *Die Sängerschule St. Gallens vom viii-xii Jahrhundert.*

denounced heathen survivals, which, though possibly unfairly presented by Christian writers, were bound to degenerate, as the people embraced Christianity more fully, into the mere practice of magic and divination, and the more superstitious forms of the older faith[1]. But on the whole he can scarcely have found that the people in Hesse and Thuringia experienced much difficulty in changing from their religion to a low grade of Christianity. They certainly never raised any national opposition to Christian influence.

That resistance to Christianity for patriotic and religious motives was no impossibility was shewn by the Frisians, and later by the Saxons. The character of Friesland, indeed, and of its people, had cut it off in great part from the life of the continent. Probably it was some centuries before the Christian era that a German people from the Elbe district, akin to the Saxons, occupied the marshes and sandy coast of the North Sea, between the rivers Sinkfal and Weser, and the moors inland. By settling first on the sandy soil in individual buildings, by diking back the sea, and by fishing, seafaring and piracy they won a hard livelihood, and developed an enduring and independent spirit. A later writer described them as 'living almost like fishes amid the waters which hemmed them in on all sides, so that they rarely had access to outside countries unless in ships'[2]. At peace with the Roman Empire, they were isolated by the barbarian invasions, behind the screen of which they preserved their institutions, their German local assemblies and judicial usages, and their strong national religion[3]. Their worship was as stern as themselves—the deities of the sea demanded human sacrifices; but the idols and temples, which it was death to profane, and the island Heligoland, itself, its shrines, springs and cattle sacred to the god Fosite, shewed a religious developement reached by the Saxons alone among other German peoples. It was in truth a faith worth fighting for. The people were with their kings in defending their national institutions and beliefs against Frank supremacy

[1] For a detailed account of the heathen survivals see the *Indiculus Superstitionum*, Migne *P. L.* lxxxix p. 810; also Pirmin *De Singulis Tribus Canon. Scarapsus*, Migne *P. L.* lxxxix p. 1041; Grimm *T. M.* iv.

[2] Anonymous of Utrecht, early ninth century.

[3] *Lex Frisionum* in *M. G. H.* iii Leges p. 631 sqq.

and Christianity. Christian influences might have entered gradually with the Frisian merchants returning from the markets of St Denis or by the trade route from Worms and Cologne; but they were retarded by the alliance between the Christian missionaries and the Frank kings. Legend has it that the Frisian king Radbod, with his foot in the water to be baptized, asked whether his ancestors were in Heaven or Hell. To an unsatisfactory answer he replied: 'I prefer to be with my ancestors in Hell rather than with a few beggars in Heaven', and rejected the sacrament[1]. It took long years of English effort to overcome this opposition.

Though the absence of any such vigorous national resistance made the actual conversion of the German provinces easier for Boniface, yet it scarcely rendered his whole task less arduous. If the step from the old faith to the new was easy, the step backward was no more difficult. Indifference to the one could not readily be made enthusiasm for the other. The result was a mixture of heathen and Christian practices. The people had masses offered for their heathen relatives[2]. They ate, after making the sign of the cross over it, meat which had been offered to the heathen gods[3]. It became necessary for Boniface under these circumstances to fix the standard of Christian usage definitely, and to bring his people to live up to it. Hence points of discipline always had the greatest importance in his sight. Moreover, a religion of ceremonial could only be replaced by a system also employing ceremonial. There could as yet be little grasp of spiritual meaning. So when ceremonial was so much in point it had to be insisted upon, and its peculiarities had to be clearly set forth. It has been the custom to assign undue scrupulousness as the cause of his attention to detail, and to reproach Boniface with it. But surely it is unwise to carp at the policy of a thoroughly practical Englishman who was face to face with the actual difficulties, when this care for the small points of discipline and administration was characteristic of the great missionaries of the period, and when a sufficiently valid explana-

[1] *Annales Xantenses* comes from the eleventh century, and *Chronicon Hollandiae* borrows from it. *Vita Wulframni* (bishop of Sens) is not authentic: v. Richthofen *Untersuchungen über friesische Rechtsgeschichte* ii p. 356.

[2] *Ep.* 28 p. 93. [3] *Ep.* 27 p. 89.

tion of it can be given on other grounds. It would be as unsafe to judge from the official answers sent by the Papal court to Boniface, in which the questions are answered in orderly and business-like form[1], that he attached equal importance to all the subjects under discussion, as to infer from the record of synodical proceedings that all the enactments met equally serious difficulties. On the contrary, Boniface recognized clearly that the importance of right practice must be grasped by the heathen if they were to draw a sharp line between their old faith and the Christian worship. It was the conviction of Boniface that only upon pure observance could be built a religion of the heart. Accordingly he procured the papal order that flesh which had been offered in sacrifice must not be eaten[2]. So in his old age he was concerned about the fitness of certain animals for food, about the proper time for eating lard, and about the form of blessing used in Gaul[3]. Such great carefulness, which his years possibly increased, cannot be taken to indicate hardness and lack of sympathy in the man who had given his life to his people, and in the matter of the prohibited degrees had been desirous of relaxing in their interest the established marriage-rules[4].

The condition of the German provinces likewise explains another outstanding feature of Boniface's policy. If his people were to be prevented from relapsing into heathenism, they had gradually to be trained to an appreciation of the spiritual content of Christianity. In short, their lives had to be filled with permanent religious and educational influences. Hence the villages and hamlets were made the basis of a permanent organization. Monasteries were essential, as colonies of the faith planted to check reaction and to train the native clergy[5]. But to surround his people with such an atmosphere as he desired Boniface could look for aid only to his native land, where the Christian religion and the arts of civilization had most closely mingled.

English men and women gladly came to transplant their

[1] *Ep.* 80 p. 221. Compare the correspondence of Augustine and Gregory in its bearing on the whole subject.

[2] *Ep.* 27 p. 89.

[3] *Ep.* 80 p. 221.

[4] *Epp.* 27 p. 89; 30 pp. 96, 97; 29 p. 94; 31 p. 97.

[5] Willibald, cap. 6 p. 454.

piety and culture into Germany. Lul, Denehard, and Burchard were only typical of these trained and trusted disciples. No missionary before Boniface had relied so much upon the assistance of women. Lioba, 'the beloved', 'beautiful as the angels, fascinating in her speech, learned in the Holy Scriptures and canons', was the most charming of these[1]. She and Thecla and Chunihilt took charge of convents, and brought the spirit of Christian piety and virtue among German women and into German homes. To them girls were given to be educated. The handicrafts and fine arts in which English nuns excelled were taught. The embroidered corporal which Boniface sent to Bishop Pehthelm in 735 was certainly the work of these women[2]. So the English monks, as they penetrated the country[3], brought all the arts which England had developed. At Fritzlar the brothers under the English abbot Wigbert planted vines before their door. From such centres new methods of cultivation would spread among the people. Boniface knew well the value of such assistants when he went far to meet them[4]. It is indeed admitted that the character of his English friends furnishes the best proof of what Boniface did for Germany. They replaced immoral priests who sacrificed to Wodan and kept the popular faith mixed with heathen beliefs. Like Augustine, Theodore, and Hadrian, Boniface used education and all the civilizing arts to mould the character of his people and to raise them to a higher plane. Like the missionaries to England[5] he recognized that the whole society must be pervaded by a thoroughly Christian atmosphere if the results of the Christian teaching were to be secured.

E. J. KYLIE.

[1] *Ep.* 23 p. 83.

[2] *Ep.* 29 p. 95 'corporale pallium, albis stigmatibus variatum.' *Palla corporalis* is the form in the Ordo Romanus, but there is one case of a similar use of *pallium*, v. Ducange. It is interesting to note that Boniface pleaded his ignorance of the best Roman usage to Gregory II. Life among an uncultured people may have been taking the edge off his scholarship. For the suggestion as to the translation of this phrase and for other assistance I am indebted to the Rev. F. E. Brightman.

[3] Willibald, cap. 6 p. 454.

[4] *Ep.* 98 p. 246.

[5] Their methods must of course have influenced him. Cp. *Ep.* 30 p. 97.