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FIXED IDEAS

ICG E-Newsletter Commentary 2
December 2009

Did you ever wonder why people in the early church allowed themselves to be martyred when all they had to do to avoid execution was to renounce their faith and worship pagan god(s)? Today the primary producers of martyrs are Islam and Hinduism. This has been especially true in Nigeria, Sudan and other Islamic countries as well as in India. I pondered the question of why this is so, when I visited third world countries where I was doing research on syncretism.

My interest in this subject developed when I was an intern and still a pagan. Two of my colleagues and I drove down to the southern terminus of the Pan American Highway in Panama. It was a little town called Chepo with a small Catholic church, a cockpit and a couple of little shops, and the usual collection of thatched or metal-roofed houses. It was Sunday, and church was over when we got there.

The cockfights had just begun, and an enthusiastic crowd gathered, cheering and making bets. We watched the fights for a while and then walked around the square to view the buildings more closely. When we got to the church, we noticed that there were some little piles of charcoal with the remains of chickens scattered around on the steps of the church. When we asked about them, we were told some of the natives sacrificed to their native gods before celebrating mass. This observation was made at the time I did not know what the Bible said about worshipping idols, but the acts seemed to me to be out of keeping with Christian beliefs.

After I started going to the third world and ministering to the people there, I was impressed with the sincerity with which they held their orthodox Christian beliefs. My memories of third world Catholicism made me wonder if those protestant converts from animism and paganism in the third world still held on to any of their former beliefs. I decided to find out just what beliefs, if any, they might have retained. To answer the question, I devised a research project in which we interviewed born again Christians in Madagascar, Zimbabwe, Nepal, Ethiopia, and Ghana. In each country, we planned to examine 40 people with a structured interview. We achieved these numbers in all countries except Nepal, where we had time to interview only 30 people.

The findings were remarkable. We found that **all** of the people we interviewed had rejected **all** of their former pagan beliefs. It did not matter if they had been ancestor worshipers, animists, practiced witchcraft, or worshiped the gods of Hinduism; they rejected their previous pagan beliefs, for those beliefs were in conflict with the Gospel. The religious beliefs they held after their conversion were orthodox. My observations in Nepal, where we attended church with 200 Nepalese Christians who were Hindus some two years before, saw a demonstrated change manifested in their orthodox beliefs and the sincerity of their worship. They really loved the Lord!

Our research raised the question as to why they underwent such a profound change in their belief system. As I meditated on the subject, I realized the changes seen are effectuated by the Holy Spirit, or in pagan religions by some other spirits. One of the things that William James wrote about came to mind. He said when a person is converted to Christianity they perceive truths that they have not perceived before. These truths, then, become fixed ideas.

Now, fixed ideas are part of our psychic machinery. Ideas about religion, politics, sex, food, art, environmentalism, and many other subjects are tenaciously held, and for the most part are not subject to argumentation. You cannot persuade one of my grandchildren to eat green beans, or me to become a Catholic. My grandchild does not accept any argumentation that the green beans are good for him, and do not taste bad.

In the same way, I cannot accept the Catholic beliefs about Mary, nor can I accept their sacerdotalism. If you inspect yourself, you will find you have relatively fixed ideas about all kinds of things. If most of these ideas are challenged, the challenge will elicit strong emotions – even if the ideas you hold are unreasonable. Giles St. Aubyn, in his little book *The Art of Argument*, makes this point in his opening statement. I have to say that I agree with him even when he convicts me of my own tendency to hold unreasonable opinions. When I frequently do, I have to confess the error and repent to keep them from recurring whenever they come to mind by external events.

Fixed ideas, when attached to strong emotions, can give rise to fanaticism. One of my patients was an animal rights fanatic. She believed so strongly, that she got really angry with me if I spoke of killing animals for any reason, including for food. Another person came to my house to solicit my help in cleaning up the pollution in the Pamlico River. When I pointed out that I had “more important fish to fry,” she got visibly upset. I know about the pollution from phosphate mines there, and I felt it should be cleaned up, but I told her that her lost soul was more important to me. She was, admittedly, not a believer in Jesus as Lord.

In a different light, one of my students was a believer in homeopathy. This practice of medicine does not make any sense to the scientific mind, yet many with scientific minds cling tenaciously to its practice. Their belief is that infinitely

small doses are better than standard doses of medicine. Samuel Hahnemann, the founder of homeopathy believed his approach treated the spiritual causes of an illness. The spirits causing the illness were evil. He believed his super dilute medications would get rid of the evil spirits. In spite of many reports negating the effectiveness of homeopathy there are those who still practice it. I could not convince my student of the folly of believing in its effectiveness.

New age religion is also characterized by fixed ideas. They believe crystals can absorb cosmic power. These will ward off evil and bring the body into harmony with "mother earth." Different gemstones have different powers for special diseases. New age includes animism and bits of other belief systems. These people cling tenaciously to these beliefs.

Now all of these erroneous beliefs are of the world, and Satan propagates them. Since they are forms of idolatry, they are an abomination to God. Idolatry is decried 11 times, and idols mentioned negatively 172 times. God recognized man's propensity to worship idols, and ordered his followers not even to think about worshipping them. Still, they did because Satan could influence them. He was their god and they followed him. The ancient Hebrews did not have the power to resist. The only available pervasively present spirit in the world at that time was that of Satan and his minions.

It is obvious from our studies in various countries that the only thing that will always radically change the fixed ideas of pagan belief systems is conversion. When the Holy Spirit comes, he does, as Jesus promised, reveal the central truth that "God is" to the person being regenerated (John 16:13). He supernaturally illuminates this truth so it is installed as a fixed idea that is unshakeable. This is why authentic Christians will go to their deaths rather than deny God.