Pathologising Heathenism: Discourses of Sickness and the Rise of Medical Missions

Sickness and the depiction of a dangerous ‘foreign field’

In both missionary discourse, and wider imperial imagery, Africa was constructed as a ‘sick continent’, a ‘wound’ or a ‘sore’ upon the earth. As Megan Vaughan writes: ‘From Livingstone onwards, reports from Central and Eastern Africa insisted that the continent was “sick” and suffering from the evils of the slave trade, from paganism and the creeping forces of Islam’, images she suggests were important in demarcating Africans as people to be pitied. The language of sickness also shaped conceptualisations of India. Sickness became part of the ‘spectacle of heathenism’ and was represented in missionary writing by crowds of sick, emaciated or dehumanised bodies, of ‘but shadows of men’ and ‘mere skeletons, tottering along rather than walking’ in the aftermath of famine and cholera. The very real epidemics, famines and droughts that affected India and Africa in this period were discursively mobilised to position colonised peoples as vulnerable and dependent on the ‘west’. As missionaries evoked ‘new and untouched fields of vast extent teeming with millions of the perishing heathen’, they constructed ‘the tropics’ as places of bodily suffering, as well as of spiritual deprivation.

Disease, disability, disorder and danger are related through complex webs of metaphorical associations. On the one hand, disease can be experienced metaphorically – as an ‘attack’ or an ‘invasion’, for example. On the other hand, the real or imagined experience of disease is so powerful that it is often used to conceptualise negativity beyond bodily boundaries. As Susan Sontag explored, ‘the subjects of deepest dread…are identified with the disease’ so that ‘the disease becomes adjectival’. In Victorian Britain, the ‘body politic’ aided
the conceptualisation of social problems as ‘diseases’. These processes often interact. Images of ‘contagion’ shaped both the conceptualisation of disease (as in the development of germ theory) and the pathologisation of social changes (such as racial integration). ‘Disorder’ was conceptualised as disease, and disease, ‘disorder’.

In the nineteenth century, place became an important part of the metaphorical linkages forged between disease and disorder. In Britain, the industrial city was understood to be physically diseased, rife with cholera and tuberculosis, and a disease to the body politic itself. Overseas, similar thinking operated to construct Africa and India as places of sickness in their entireties. Particular climates or geographical areas became associated with particular diseases: for example, many believed that Bengal was the ‘natural home’ of cholera and was peculiarly unhealthy. Africa was more abstractly imagined as the ‘white man’s grave’. Significantly, increasing tendencies over the nineteenth century to conceptualise the tropics as places of medical danger was accompanied by a contemporaneous development of ideas about moral and social ‘degeneration’ in colonial spaces. In missionary discourse, many such fears crystallised around ‘heathenism’ and were interpreted through an overtly moral framework.

More so than most colonial thinkers, missionaries contemplated the way in which disease and disorder were suggested to interact in scriptural texts. In both the New Testament and the Hebrew Bible, disease and disability are intimately linked to sin. Some texts suggest a causal relationship between sin and disability such as blindness as punishment. Others use disability and disease to evoke sin figuratively: blindness, to continue with the same example, is often used to symbolise sin, wickedness, confusion, directionlessness and ignorance. Such metaphors play both on blindness as not-seeing, and on impaired mobility, depicting blind people as physically and spiritually lost and sinners as ‘groping like those who have no eyes’. In the New Testament, associations like this were compounded by the equation of Jesus with ‘light’.

These images were intensely powerful in missionary discourse and often acquired racial dimensions. Not only were missionaries, as Christians, ‘enlightened’ but, through the complementary metaphor of ‘darkness’, dark skins were equated with ‘dark’ spirituality and, through this, with blindness. The Brahmins were described as ‘a race of blind guides’, ‘heathenism’ was itself depicted as ‘blind’, and indigenous critics of missionaries were claimed to have minds that were ‘blindly prejudiced by their own religion’. Christianity (like ‘civilisation’) was