

2010

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Alfred Russel Wallace, "How to Civilize Savages (1865)" (2010). *Alfred Russel Wallace Classic Writings*. Paper 10.
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How to Civilize Savages (1865)

By Alfred Russel Wallace

Transcribed and Edited by Charles H. Smith, Ph.D.

*Editor Charles H. Smith's Note: This essay appeared in the Reader issue of 17 June 1865; it was later printed in an expanded version in Wallace's Studies Scientific and Social in 1900 (it is the oldest of the more than fifty essays included in that collection). Although little known within the overall canon of Wallace writings, it is one of the most interesting for the way it reveals his thought process at this point in his life. The question is, who is he really labeling "savages" here, and how is this related to the initiation of his study of spiritualism, which began directly after this essay was published? Original pagination indicated within double brackets. See more information on Wallace at The Alfred Russel Wallace Page, at:
<http://people.wku.edu/charles.smith/index1.htm>*

[[p. 671]] Do our missionaries really produce on savages an effect proportionate to the time, money, and energy expended? Are the dogmas of our Church adapted to people in every degree of barbarism, and in all stages of mental development? Does the fact of a particular form of religion taking root, and maintaining itself among a people, depend in any way upon race—upon those deep-seated mental and moral peculiarities which distinguish the European or Aryan races from the negro or the Australian savage? Can the savage be mentally, morally, and physically improved, without the inculcation of the tenets of a dogmatic theology? These are a few of the interesting questions that were discussed, however imperfectly, at the last meeting of the Anthropological Society, when the Bishop of Natal read his paper, "On the Efforts of Missionaries among Savages;" and on some of these questions we propose to make a few observations.

If the history of mankind teaches us one thing more clearly than another, it is this—that true civilization and a true religion are alike the slow growth of ages, and both are inextricably connected with the struggles and development of the human mind. They have ever in their infancy been watered with tears and blood—they have had to suffer the rude prunings of wars and persecutions—they have withstood the wintry blasts of anarchy, of despotism, and of neglect—they have been able to survive all the vicissitudes of human affairs; and have proved their suitability to their age and country by successfully resisting every attack, and by flourishing under the most unfavourable conditions.

A form of religion which is to maintain itself and to be useful to a people, must be especially adapted to their mental constitution, and must respond in an intelligible manner to the better sentiments and the higher capacities of their nature. It would, therefore, almost appear self-

evident that those special forms of faith and doctrine which have been slowly elaborated by eighteen centuries of struggle and of mental growth, and by the action and reaction of the varied nationalities of Europe on each other, cannot be exactly adapted to the wants and capacities of every savage race alike. Our form of Christianity, wherever it has maintained itself, has done so by being in harmony with the spirit of the age, and by its adaptability to the mental and moral wants of the people among whom it has taken root. As Macaulay justly observed in the first chapter of his History, "It is a most significant circumstance that no large society of which the tongue is not Teutonic has ever turned Protestant, and that, wherever a language derived from that of ancient Rome is spoken, the religion of modern Rome to this day prevails."

In the early Christian Church, the many uncanonical gospels that were written, and the countless heresies that arose, were but the necessary results of the process of adaptation of the Christian religion to the wants and capacities of many and various peoples. This was an essential feature in the growth of Christianity. This shows that it took root in the hearts and feelings of men, and became a part of their very nature. Thenceforth it grew with their growth, and became the expression of their deepest feelings and of their highest aspirations; and required no external aid from a superior race to keep it from dying out. It was remarked by one of the speakers at the Anthropological Society's meeting, that the absence of this modifying and assimilating power among modern converts—of this absorption of the new religion into their own nature—of this colouring given by the national mind—is a bad sign for the ultimate success of our form of Christianity among savages. When once a mission has been established, a fair number of converts made, and the first generation of children educated, the missionary's work should properly have ceased. A native church, with native teachers, should by that time have been established, and should be left to work out its own national form of Christianity. In many places we have now had missions for more than the period of one generation. Have any self-supporting, free, and national Christian churches arisen among savages? If not—if the new religion can only be kept alive by fresh relays of priests sent from a far distant land—priests educated and paid by foreigners, and who are, and ever must be, widely separated from their flocks in mind and character—is it not the strongest proof of the failure of the missionary scheme? Are these new Christians to be for ever kept in tutelage, and to be for ever taught the peculiar doctrines which have, perhaps, just become fashionable among us? Are they never to become men, and to form their own opinions, and develop their own minds, under national and local influences? If, as we hold, Christianity is good for all races and for all nations alike, it is thus alone that its goodness can be tested; and they who fear the results of such a test can have but small confidence in the doctrines they preach.

But we are told to look at the results of missions. We are told that the converted savages are wiser, better, and happier than they were before—that they have improved in morality and advanced in civilization—and that such results can only be shown where missionaries have been at work. No doubt, a great deal of this is true; but certain laymen and philosophers believe that a considerable portion of this effect is due to the example and precept of civilized and educated men—the example of decency, cleanliness, and comfort set by them—their teaching of the arts and customs of civilization, and the natural influence of superiority of race. And it may fairly be doubted whether some of these advantages might not be given to savages without the accompanying inculcation of particular religious tenets. True, the experiment has not been fairly

tried, and the missionaries have almost all the facts to appeal to on their own side; for it is undoubtedly the case that the wide sympathy and self-denying charity which gives up so much to benefit the savage, is almost always accompanied and often strengthened by strong religious convictions. Yet there are not wanting facts to show that something may be done without the influence of religion. It cannot be doubted, for example, that the Roman occupation laid the foundation of civilization in Britain, and produced a considerable amelioration in the condition and habits of the people, which was not in any way due to religious teaching. The Turkish and Egyptian Governments have been, in modern times, much improved, and the condition of their people ameliorated, by the influence of Western civilization, unaccompanied by any change in the national religion. In Java, where the natives are Mohammedans, and scarcely a Christian convert exists, the good order established by the Dutch Government and their pure administration of justice, together with the example of civilized Europeans widely scattered over the country, have greatly improved the physical and moral condition of the people. In all these cases, however, the personal influence of kindly, moral, and intelligent men, devoted wholly to the work of civilization, has been wanting; and this form of influence in the case of missionaries is very great. A missionary who is really earnest, and has the art (and the heart) to gain the affections of his flock, may do much in eradicating barbarous customs, and in raising the standard of morality and happiness. But he may do all this quite independently of any form of sectarian theological teaching, and it is a mistake too often made to impute all to the particular doctrines inculcated, and little or nothing to the other influences we have mentioned. We believe that the purest morality, the most perfect justice, the highest civilization, and the qualities that tend to render men good, and wise, and happy, may be inculcated quite independently of fixed forms or dogmas, and perhaps even better for the want of them. The savage may be certainly made amenable to the influence of the affections, and will probably submit the more readily to the teaching of one who does not, at the very outset, attack his rude superstitions. These will assuredly die out of themselves, when knowledge and morality and civilization have gained some influence over him; and he will then be in a condition to receive and assimilate whatever there is of goodness and truth in the religion of his teacher.

Unfortunately, the practices of European settlers are too often so diametrically opposed to the precepts of Christianity, and so deficient in humanity, justice, and charity, that the poor savage must be sorely puzzled to understand why this new faith, which is to do him so much good, should have had so little effect on his teacher's own countrymen. The white men in our Colonies are too frequently the true savages, and require to be taught and Christianized quite as much as the natives. We have heard, on good authority, that in Australia a man has been known to prove the goodness of a rifle he wanted to sell, by shooting a child from the back of a native woman who was passing at some distance; while another, when the policy of shooting all natives who came near a station was discussed, advocated his own plan of putting poisoned food in their way, as much less troublesome and more effectual. Incredible though such things seem, we can believe that they not unfrequently occur whenever the European comes in contact with the savage man, for human nature changes little with times and places; and we have ourselves heard a Brazilian friar boast, with much complacency, of having saved the Government the expense of a war with a hostile tribe of Indians, by the simple expedient of placing in their way clothing [[p. 672]] infected with the smallpox, which disease soon nearly exterminated them. Facts, perhaps less horrible, but equally indicative of lawlessness and inhumanity, may be heard of in all our

colonies; and recent events in Japan and in New Zealand show a determination to pursue our own ends, with very little regard for the rights, or desire for the improvement, of the natives. The savage may well wonder at our inconsistency in pressing upon him a religion which has so signally failed to improve our own moral character, as he too acutely feels in the treatment he receives from Christians. It seems desirable, therefore, that our Missionary Societies should endeavour to exhibit to their proposed converts some more favourable specimens of the effect of their teaching. It might be well to devote a portion of the funds of such societies to the establishment of model communities, adapted to show the benefits of the civilization we wish to introduce, and to serve as a visible illustration of the effects of Christianity on its professors. The general practice of Christian virtues by the Europeans around them would, we feel assured, be a most powerful instrument for the general improvement of savage races, and is, perhaps, the only mode of teaching that would produce a real and lasting effect.

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