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Buddha and Christ

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Graduation Thesis.

Buddha and Christ.

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Among the many views held respecting the non-Christian religions three especially deserve our attention.

First the view that they are wholly false, that they are degrading in influence, that they thrive through the ignorance and superstition of their devotees, in short, that they are wholly evil from whatever standpoint they may be examined. This is the earlier view and is doubtless due in no small measure to ignorance and to national exclusiveness. The Jew believing that Israel was the chosen people of God, considered all other nations as outcast and was very slow to recognize the fact that Jehovah was also the God of the Gentiles. The true idea was grasped by Stephen and Paul in all its length and breadth. This notion of exclusiveness was common to all the great nations of antiquity. To the

Egyptians, Assyrians, the Greek, and the Roman the outlying peoples were barbarians. This idea has come down almost to the present time. Very intelligent people in Christian lands, who had however studied very little if at all the heathen religions, on reading of the immorality, idolatry and bloody sacrifices of certain tribes, have received the impression that these religions were altogether the work of the Evil One. But a little careful study quickly reveals the fact that other of the great world's religions besides Christianity have real merit. The moral codes of Confucius and Buddha are found to be comparable in many respects to the moral code of Christ. Moreover the devotees of nearly every religion are found to have a more or less clear idea of God. Ideas not unlike the Christian are clearly brought out in one religion

which may be wholly lacking or appear in only a confused form in another religion. In every heathen system of faith are found points of high merit which surprise and delight the student of religions. Of late there has been a tendency among a certain class of people in Christian lands to rank the faiths of the heathen alongside the faith of the Christian. They regard only the merits and overlook the glaring defects of those systems. They do not believe that Christ is the Light of the world but they believe that there are other lights beside Christ. Especially do those who have made a superficial study of Buddhism exalt Buddha to the same rank as Christ. Edwin Arnold's Light of Asia has made a great stir in certain circles of American society. These false notions have been ably answered by Prof. Monier Williams in a

late number of Our Day and more at length by S. H. Kellog in his book "The Light of the World and the Light of Asia."

Now neither of the above views is correct. The ripest and most devout of Christian scholars, especially those who have made a critical study of a given heathen religion, hold a third view which is that there are many noble characteristics of heathen teachers and of the religions they founded and that their moral codes sparkle with many gems of truth.

These scholars can see the hand of God in these great systems of faith and worship. But they do not fail to note the contrasts as well as likenesses between the heathen religions and Christianity. Not one of these teachers had a true idea of sin, not one was sinless, not one could save from sin. There were great and startling defects in the best of their moral codes and the worship of

more than one heathen religion was very far from being pure and undefiled. Men like Monier Williams and S. H. Kellogg who have spent years in India, in contact with the people and in the study of their sacred books, are quite as capable of judging of the real merits of Buddhism as some superficial student who has never stepped foot on the shore of a heathen land.

Buddhism has perhaps as high merit and as few defects as any one of the great non-Christian religions. As Christ was the embodiment of the religion he taught so Buddha was the embodiment of Buddhism in its earliest and purest form. We say in its purest form because like other heathen religions history seems to show that its earlier form was the purer and its later more degraded. Authorities differ widely as to the number of adherents of Buddhism but the

majority would set it at not less than three hundred millions. S. H. Kellog inclines to four hundred millions. Buddhism holds sway over one fourth to one third of the globe, which cannot be said of any other religion, possibly not excepting Christianity. To be sure this is Buddhism in its later form but it received its impetus from Buddha himself. One has well said that the merit of a religion cannot be determined by the number of its adherents yet we may be sure a faith has some merit which has swayed the destinies of so many millions for so many ages. "A false man found a religion" says Carlyle "a false man cannot build a house". Such men as Zoroaster, Confucius and Buddha were the noblest representatives of the heathen peoples. I am opposed to the rigid caste system of Brahminism

Buddha taught the equality of all. He also possessed great missionary zeal. Prof. Williams says at Buddha's death at the age of eighty he had preached forty five years and won many thousands of converts. His followers caught his spirit and pressed the work over to foreign lands. Woman's condition was much improved. We are assured by one author that "It is now universally admitted that woman is better treated by Buddhism than by any other Oriental religion."

First let us examine a few points of difference between Buddhism and the foregoing religion, Brahminism. Buddhism was a reactionary system. Starting probably like the Egyptian, Foenician and other religions with the worship of one God Brahminism gradually became polytheistic formal lifeless. It was not unlike the religion of

the Greeks, when Paul saw the streets lined with idols or that of the Romans, when the more intelligent had lost all faith in the gods, but thought worship must be kept up for the sake of the common people. The more intelligent and thoughtful minds of India must also have seen that the hungry soul of man could not be satisfied with the cold and formal worship of Brahminism. The wood and stone to which the people bowed in adoration fitly symbolized the lifelessness and indifference of the gods. Hence we can see why Buddhism was atheistic as Oldenburg, Williams and Kellogg agree in declaring to be the case. Since the worship of the gods had proved worthless man set himself to work to discover a better way. In this regard Buddhism was different from nearly all other heathen religions. Nor does this fact militate against the theory that man

naturally worships God in some form. The idea may be driven out but it will return. Prof. Monier Williams, says of the religion of the modern Hindoos, "At the root their religion is monotheistic," and he quotes their sacred books as saying, "There is but one Being; no second."

The Doctrine of Suffering.

The sacred books teach us that Buddha considered suffering to be the great evil, indeed the sum of all evils. He saw that suffering was inseparably connected with all human existence. The mother travails in pain at the birth of the child, the sick one languishes upon a bed of pain, the aged are bowed under many infirmities, death snatches away our loved ones and leaves empty homes and aching hearts. Poverty of course brings its sorrows but so does prosperity. "Whoever seeks to acquire world

by goods, the merchant, the farmer, the shepherd, the soldier, the civil servant of the crown, must expose himself to the inconveniences of heat and cold, the bite of serpents, to hunger and thirst. If he attains them he has only anxiety and trouble." "Man gathers flowers his heart is set on pleasure. Death comes upon him like floods of water on a village and sweeps him away." There were other reasons for Buddha's holding with such intensity to the idea of suffering at least if many of the evils of modern India were prevalent in that early time. The suffering from the burning heat of the torrid zone must always have been intense. But Dr. Thoburn assured us that the suffering from cold and poverty is very great. He said that the Americans were the palace dwellers of the world, that in India the clothing for a whole family would often not cost more than twenty five cents a year,

that there are two hundred millions of families on earth who receive only twenty-five dollars per family per year. He said there was more suffering from cold in Calcutta than in Massachusetts, for one hundred millions lie down to sleep at night under the open sky. We know that the suffering among the poor and degraded ^{of our large cities} is often very great what must it have been among the densely crowded population of India under the blazing heat of the Tropics? It has been observed that the passions are more easily excited in the torrid than in the temperate zone, and that the vice of unchastity has been prevalent in all warm countries. If then, as is probably this awful vice was added to the other vices prevalent in ancient India, what wonder if the sum total of suffering should be very great? In his view with respect to suffering, Buddha was not unlike the

more earnest and thoughtful minds in all ages. Shakspeare in Hamlet raises the question whether, in view of the thous- and ills that flesh is heir to, it is bet- ter to be or not to be. Men like Socrates and Marcus Aurelius and many others might not be wholly free from the evils of their time, and might be powerless to provide a remedy for them, but they wrestled with the problem. Buddha was of too serious a mind to go with the giddy crowd who lived for passing show forgetful of the sorrow to come.

This leads us to speak of the great error of his system. The fundamental evil which afflicts humanity is not suf- fering but sin. To be sure the idea of sin is not wholly wanting, as great scholars assure us that there is not a tribe or people on earth where the con- ception is not found. But, as in every land where Christianity is not taught, the idea

is not clear but confused. Their view of sin was due to the Atheism of the system. Whenever the idea of a holy God has faded out of the human consciousness, the idea of a holy law and the heinousness of its transgression, has also faded out. Desire is the cause of suffering, hence extinction of desire is the goal to be attained. But some desires are right and some are wrong and Buddhism makes no distinction between them.

The doctrine of deliverance from suffering. "As the vast ocean, O disciples, is impregnated with one taste, the taste of salt so also my disciples this Law and Doctrine is impregnated with one taste, the taste of deliverance." This doctrine had many points of merit though much of it is mystical and difficult to understand. Buddha taught neither stoicism nor resignation. The stoic dwarfed and stunted the sympathetic side

of his nature and, by mere will power, endured whatever was in store for him. The Christian may pass through the keenest suffering, with bowed head and aching heart, yet continually saying, "Thy will be done." Such was the attitude of Christ and such, we may believe, was the attitude of Mary his Mother as she stood at the cross. The Buddhist doctrine of deliverance was not unlike in some respects the Christian doctrine of resignation. Yet Buddha taught his disciples rather to rise above the ills of life than to bear them. They were to live in a higher and purer atmosphere, where they would be undisturbed by either the blessings or the evils of this world. As the cool shades of the trees of India gave the people rest from the burning heat so the doctrine of deliverance was to give the followers of Buddha rest from the strife and tumult of life. Of

course it could not give them such peace as Christ referred to when he said, "My peace give I unto you" yet it brought comfort to a multitude of troubled hearts. There has been much discussion respecting the meaning of Nirvana. Oldenburg says that Buddha left that question open and showed that matters pertaining to another life are not to be expressed in terms applied to affairs in this life. Oldenburg says that Buddha in response to the question of Nirvana brought to him by a monk, replied in substance, Why has Buddha not taught his disciples, whether the world is infinite or finite, whether the saint lives on beyond death or not? Because the knowledge of these things does not conduce to progress in holiness, because it does not contribute to peace and enlightenment. What contributes to peace and enlightenment Buddha has taught his own: the truth of suffering, the truth

of the origin of suffering, the truths of the path to the cessation of suffering. "Therefore, Malunkyaputta, whatsoever has not been revealed by me, let that remain unrevealed, and what has been revealed, let it be revealed." Still Buddhism was very far from being a religion of despair. It is falsely represented when stated to be a religion of sorrow. While it had not the deep joy of Christianity, which has inspired the deepest and highest poetry and the richest and sweetest-song, it yet possessed a real joy higher perhaps than that of any other heathen religion. Still the Buddhist doctrine of salvation is fundamentally erroneous. Certainly we could expect nothing better of a man-made system. Buddha was man-sent; Christ was God-sent. Buddha advised; Christ commanded. "Buddha" says Oldenburg "taught man to deliver himself"; Christ shed his blood to wash away the sins of

all the world. No one of the prophets ever dared to speak merely in ~~their~~^{his} own name. Moses was called at the burning bush and pleaded his stammering of speech and stammering tongue. Elijah, Elisha and the rest were God sent and delivered God's message. Their proclamations were prefaced again and again with a, "Thus saith the Lord." The prophets never hesitated to utter commands as from God and declare the penalty in case of disobedience. This was a still more marked peculiarity of the teaching of Christ. The people who listened to him noticed that he spoke with authority and not as the scribes. Moreover Buddha had no way of removing the stains of sin. A rigid asceticism could reduce the amount of suffering but that was the most for which one could hope. The Christian on the other hand, is taught to believe that sin must be removed through faith

in a crucified saviour, but that there is suffering which is not due to the sin of the sufferer and must be calmly and patiently endured. Christianity teaches very explicitly that sin, not desire, nor ignorance, nor suffering, is the great foe of the human race. Satan entered the garden of Eden and won his first victory over man. The promise was given that the seed of the woman should bruise the serpent's head, but men waited in the darkness of sin and ignorance, age after age for the deliverer. He came. Moses was a great leader but he spoke of the Prophet whom God should raise up like unto him. Isaiah wrote of him who "cometh from Edom, with dyed garments from Bozrah." Satan held sway over the heathen nations and at times had a strong hold on the hearts of the chosen people. At length the Deliverer came, the mighty struggle ended in victory on Calvary.

redemption was purchased for the human race. Buddha had some idea of sin, but no conception of the exceeding sinfulness of sin, of the fact of man's bondage to Satan. Whatever then we may say of Buddhisss, Christianity is infinitely superior.

The future of Christianity.

As one has said "The golden age of all other nations was in the past, the golden age of ~~Christianity~~ ^{the Jews} was in the future. Every heathen nation and every heathen religion had its rise, summit of power, decline and fall. Kellog says the Buddhists believed that Buddha must accomplish a general reform but sooner or later the race would sink back again; that another Buddha would come only in turn to fail in his mission. Dr. Thoburn says the people of India today say that they have degenerated. Compare the Jewish prophets who amid the darkness

of the present looked for brighter days in the future. Even the people who expected the Messiah to be a temporal king firmly believed that he would establish the kingdom in greater power and glory than was ever seen in the days of David and Solomon. When Christ came he spoke of better days to come and told his disciples that they should do greater works than he had done. We do not believe that Christianity has seen its best days but that it is destined in God's time to become the religion of the world.

The future of the individual.

As the future according to Christianity is bright with hope for the race as a whole, so it is for the individual. We have said that Buddha left all questions regarding the future life unsettled, but these are precisely the questions which are of most interest to every thoughtful person. If this life is so brief and so full of

sorrow, is there a future life of bliss or misery and ~~how~~ may I win the one and shun the other? To be sure the doctrine of retribution was held with the strictest tenacity. "Not in the heavens" says the Dhammapada, "not in the midst of the sea; not if thou hidest thyself in the clefts of the mountains, wilt thou find a place where thou canst escape the force of thy own evil actions." After death man became a bird or animal of some sort, the kind depending on the character he has sustained in this life. On the contrary the Bible teaches us that there is a state of endless happiness in store for the saint, of woe in store for the sinner. By acceptance of salvation through Christ and a life of faithfulness to him, one may ^{be} certain in a few years, to be in a state of bliss which beggars description. St. John uses

language which men apply to all that is most precious and costly, in his description of Jerusalem. Better still he says that there shall be no sin, nor sorrow, nor pain, nor death. The servants of Christ shall have his name in their foreheads and behold his face forever and ever. Buddhism is a religion for this life only. Indeed Prof. Williams claims that being atheistic it is not a religion at all but only a code of morals. St. Paul says that if this life only we have hope we are of all men, most miserable. In enduring suffering, it gives Christians great consolation to feel that it is only for a little time and then they will be at rest forever. We must conclude then that Jesus Christ, as he himself declared, is the Light of the world.