

1899

The light of Asia and the light of the world

<https://hdl.handle.net/2144/47740>

Downloaded from DSpace Repository, DSpace Institution's institutional repository

---o:o:o---

"THE LIGHT OF ASIA"
and
"THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD".

By

J. F. Chenoweth.

---o:o:o---

"THE LIGHT OF ASIA" and "THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD".

(A comparative study of the two books)

---o---

In his teaching concerning his character and office, Jesus declared himself to be the "Light of the World". By this expression he meant, of course, that he was in life and word a revealer of truth that was of universal importance to the human race.

This bold metaphor used by Christ as descriptive of himself and of his mission, has suggested to Sir Edwin Arnold a title to his exposition of the life and teachings of Santama Buddha. He, in his poem, styled Buddha the "Light of Asia" and thereby challenges Christ's words, declaring himself to be of universal authority as the Great Teacher. Arnold would have it that Buddha, in his time and for his part of the world, proclaimed a gospel that is in character and significance to men, worthy to be classed with the Gospel of Christ. Indeed we are led to understand this much in the introduction to his book. The author speaks of Buddhism as having in it the "eternity of a universal hope, the immortality of a boundless love; an indestructible faith in final good, and the proudest assertion ever made of human freedom." He goes on to say that "the power and sublimity

of Gautama's original doctrines should be estimated by their influence." This latter remark is prepared for by a previous declaration that "at this day (Buddhism) surpasses in the number of its followers, and in the area of its prevalence any other form of creed. Four hundred and Seventy Millions (one third) of our race live and die in the tenets of Gautama".

This challenge on the part of Arnold, of Christ's claim to absolute authority in things, spiritual, has moved Dr. Abraham Coles to give as the title of his metrical version of the Lord's ministry and teaching "The Light of the World" in contradistinction, as he says, to that of the somewhat invidious title, "The Light of Asia", adopted by Mr. Arnold for his work.

Hence we have the two poetical works, "The Light of Asia" and "The Light of the World", and they invite comparison.

In proceeding to a comparison, the first thing to be considered, is the veracity of the respective literary creations, considered as expositions of facts which they claim to consider. Upon their fidelity to the subject matter in each case, depends, of course, all other items of the comparison, aside from those of a mere literary character.

Dr. Coles' "Light of the World" is a metrical version of the harmonized Gospel narrative of Christ's words and works. Notice that I say metrical and not a poetical ver-

sion. Poetical the work surely is, but it derives that characteristic almost wholly from the matter, style and diction of the gospel account. According to the editor's own words, Dr. Coles made no attempt to add to, or to take from, the sacred narrative, except what was necessary for elucidation. "He saw no occasion for profane inventions."

Sir Edwin Arnold's poem, "The Light of Asia" is, on the other hand, confessedly a poetical exposition of the life and teachings of Buddha. The author has felt free to take advantage of literary and poetic license, in picking his facts and in interpreting the ones chosen, according to the demands of his art.

On this matter Mr. Arnold himself speaks in the preface to his book: "The exposition here offered of so antique a system, is of necessity incomplete, and--in obedience to the laws of poetic art--passes rapidly by many matters philosophically most important."

From these considerations it follows, of course, that of the two literary works, "The Light of Asia" is much superior in poetic power and originality. Mr. Arnold is a true poet and his verse rises at times to lofty strains of poetic thought and diction.

Bearing the above considerations in mind, we can make a juster comparison of the two religious systems constituting

the subject matter of the two poems respectively. In the "Light of the World" we have really the whole teaching of Christ unchanged. In the "Light of Asia" we have Buddhism set forth in its most attractive guise. To be just, therefore, in the comparison, we are at liberty when desirable, to square Mr. Arnold's accounts with the original records.

First, then, let us compare the Christ and the Buddha as set forth in the respective accounts. Three periods are distinguishable in the existence of Buddha, as in the existence of Christ. A preëxistence is taught, of some five hundred and thirty deaths and births, passing through various forms of animal life. This period corresponds to the preëxistence of the Son with the Father. To Buddha there is, also, an earthly life, initiated by a birth into the world, and continuing until the attainment of Buddhahood under the Bow-tree. This period corresponds to Christ's birth at Bethlehem and his life up to his baptism and his temptation in the wilderness.

A third period in the existence of Buddha extended from the time of the Great Enlightenment, unto his attainment of Nirvana. Loosely this period corresponds to the existence of Christ, beginning with his formal entrance upon his ministry and continuing till his ascension again unto the Father.

This similarity, however, is very superficial. The

preexistence of Buddha is not a metaphysical preexistence. This Mr. Arnold is not at the trouble to note. It consists only in a continuity in moral entailment of successive beings. "Nothing endures", Buddha is represented as saying, "only its laws endure."

The other periods in the existence of the two Law-Givers have no more exact correspondence. Christ's period of humiliation terminated only at his death; Buddha's terminated long before his death--under the Bow-tree. Buddha's period of glorification ended with the extinction of his existence in Nirvana; Christ's is now and ever shall be, at the right hand of God the Father, in glory.

In regard to the similarity of the details in the accounts of the birth and earthly experience of Buddha and of Christ, it is sufficient to say that, so far as they are not entirely superficial or imaginary, they are facts of mere coincidence, or only similar effects and outcomes of similar or identical causes. This statement is the more justifiable when we come to see that many of the similarities are arranged or produced outright by the language which Mr. Arnold adopts. We must continually bear in mind in reading the "Light of Asia" that, although the narrative is put into the mouth of a pious Buddhist, it is, nevertheless, really an exposition of Buddhism by a mind imbued with Christian modes of thought and associations. Many expressions and episodes in Mr.

Arnold's account remind one forcibly of corresponding expressions and incidents in the Gospels. For example: Asita in blessing the infant Buddha, is made to say to the mother

"A sword must pierce

Thy bowels for this boy".

Again, at the great Renunciation, Buddha is represented as saying:

I will depart x x x x the hour is come x
 x x x x x x x x unto this came I, and unto
 this all nights and days have led."

The corresponding passages in the Gospel record are too familiar to need mentioning. One is led to suspect that they were too familiar to Mr. Arnold, also, for an uncorrupted narration of the Buddha tradition.

A further contrast is manifest in the comparison of the motives that move the two Saviours to their ministries and sacrifice; and that are expected to inform the spirits of their respective disciples. The Christ is filled with uncalculating love for men, and a self-forgetful interest in the glory of God and in the salvation of his children. In the very nature of the case Gautama could not be represented as being moved by such motives. For such interests imply beliefs concerning the world and humanity which Buddha's system does not include.

There is no place in Buddhism for a belief in God or in the continued existence of finite spirits. There is no eternal conscious existence. This atheism and nihilism affects of course the idea of what is the highest good, and so, determines the motives that have weight in Buddhism. In the Eighth book of his work Mr. Arnold represents Buddha as setting forth the principles of his Gospel. There, existence is said to be full of pain and woe. The highest good consists in being rid of all existence--the attainment of Nirvana. Such doctrines determine the supreme interests and end of life. The chief motive in every case is the escape from the bonds of conscious existence. To further this end, all concern in the higher aspects of the personal life as well as that of others is deprecated; Self-cultivation is the all important object of every act, of all conduct. The entire moral life is shot through and through with an insinuating selfishness. Even that which is done apparently through disinterested love, has for its real motive the extinguishing of the kharma in the doer.

From the foregoing it appears that there is a wide contrast between the ideas of sin in the two religious systems. Sin in the Christian sense is any contravention of God's will, however expressed; while sin in a Buddhistic sense, is essentially a desire for future existence. To Christian

thought there is absolutely no moral quality in a Buddhist's idea of sin. However, the ethics of the two systems, have in some degree a common province. It is quite evident that many things immoral to Christian thought, tend to cultivate and confirm the desire for existence, and so are immoral to Buddhistic thought also. But in many instances Buddhism consecrates the most immoral as well as the most trivial acts.

The messages of hope and salvation which the two Saviours proclaimed vary as much as their systems. Listen to Buddha's message: "Within yourselves deliverance must be sought." "Each man his prison makes." This is regarded by Mr. Arnold to be the "glorification of human freedom". The practical results of such teaching as seen among the Buddhist's themselves, as well as any thoroughgoing reflection, show that, left to himself, man is anything but free to work out his salvation. The salvation offered by the Gospel is a positive recreation, and uplifting of the moral powers. In the language of John Wordsworth "Buddhism in one aspect is Pelagianism run mad, tempered with the proviso, that directly a man reflects on his own merit, he entirely loses the benefit which it was earning for him." (Bampton Lectures, '81)

The contrast here with Christianity is most marked. Christ, the "Light of the World", illuminates the heart of

every man, showing him his hopeless condition, and then revealing himself as the mighty Saviour.

In the eschatologies also, of the two systems, there is a wide divergence. We get an intimation of the Buddhistic doctrine of the last things in Arnold's opening verses.

The Decas in heaven are represented as saying: "Buddha will go again to help the world,

This last of many times."

This reference to the future of the earth and of the race is not enlarged upon by Arnold. Indeed he could not have dwelt upon it, and at the same time been consistent with his remark in the preface of his work. There he observed that Buddhism contained the "immortality of a boundless hope" while the eschatology, hinted at in the first lines of his poem, suggests the thought that it is rather the immortality of a boundless despair. Buddhism is thoroughly pessimistic in its representation of the innumerable series of world degenerations and destructions after repeated renovations through the ministries of a Buddha.

Such is the outlook for the future of the world. The future is absolutely without a ray of light and hope from the Buddha whom Mr. Arnold is pleased to call the "Light of Asia".

On the other hand the outlook which Christ presents is full of light and hope.

The Christian's view of humanity and of humanity's goal is supremely optimistic. He is taught to expect a time to come when the good seed sown, will spring up and become a great tree filling the whole earth, in whose branches all the fowls of heaven may find refuge. The language of the Revelator, John, was entirely justifiable from the general hopefulness of the Master's teaching, when, after describing the last Judgment, he declared:

"I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away. The tabernacle of God is with men; and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people, and God himself shall be with them and be their God. x x x x x x And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow nor crying; neither shall there be any more pain, for the former things are passed away."