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Buddhism and Christianity.

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II.

For the proper understanding of Buddhism, it is necessary first to attempt to answer the question, 'Who was Sākyamuni?' The view current among Western scholars—that he was an early rationalist—has lately been challenged by Dr. Berriedale Keith. Dr. Keith, from his wide knowledge of Sanskrit as well as of Pali Buddhism, has come to the conclusion that Sākyamuni was rather one whose claims were such as to imply divinity. 'Given the psychological conditions of the times,' he says, 'it would have been a miracle, had the Buddha been capable of the rationalism attributed to him. . . . It was the age of the great gods Çiva and Viṣṇu, in their various forms, and the Buddha's success was due to the fact that he either had claims to divinity, or his followers attributed it to him, and won general acceptance for the view. *It is conceivable that divinity was thrust upon him against his will, but every ground of probability supports the plain evidence of the texts, that he himself had claims which necessarily conferred upon him a place as high as the rank of the greatest of gods.*'[1]

There is thus strong support on the part of critical Western scholars, both for the rationalism of the scholastic writers of Pali Buddhism, and for the more devotional cultus of the Mahāyāna. British and German scholars, beginning the study of Buddhism for the most part in Ceylon and Burma, have, in fact, over-emphasized the rationalistic schools. The scholars of Japan and China, on the other hand, knowing best the works of the Mahāyāna type, have found in the Buddhism of the South a cold and austere asceticism and a scholasticism remote from the geniality and warmth of the early movement. In it, they argue, the Person of the Buddha was central, and it was the contagion of this devotion which won powerful kings, wealthy merchants, and a whole host of lay people, and made Buddhism the great missionary religion of the East, and the great mother of Eastern civilizations. Dr. Anesaki, for instance, rejects the statement of Professor Oldenberg, that Sākyamuni has no place in his religion, and almost claims for him that he *is* his religion.[2]

It is, I think, possible, and indeed necessary, to find a bridge between these two positions, and we may find it best by a further and more critical study of the person of the Founder.

After two centuries of such study of the Founder of Christianity, we may in a sense say, with Weinel, 'Jesus we know full well.' Of Sākyamuni we cannot at present say this. For he comes to us reflected in minds less naïve, and much further removed from their subject than those of the first century of the Christian era. The Sutta literature is, in fact, stilted, and stereotyped, and in the form in which we have it, belongs to at least four centuries after the events recorded. Scholastic theory in it overlays religious experience. What would have happened to the Jesus of history, if His story had been told first by monks of the Egyptian desert, some five centuries after His death, or by schoolmen of a still later age?

In the Pali canon we find several views, therefore, of the Founder of Buddhism, struggling for expression. Four centuries of Buddhology are here enshrined—at times entombed. There is first the view of austere monks, the final editors, who have lost much of the enthusiasm of the great days of the faith. For them Sākyamuni is the great Elder Brother, who was the first to see the world as a causal nexus, and to conquer *tanhā*, and who is thus entitled to the loyal obedience of his followers. Supernormal, yet not supernatural, he is the Great Teacher or Great Physician. Yet even so he makes huge demands upon faith.

'A disciple,' says Professor Keith, 'who seeks to become a Buddhist cannot attain his end, unless he has the necessary faith as an indispensable preliminary. He must believe that the Buddha is indeed fully enlightened, the teacher of gods and men, the exalted and awakened one. . . . Faith is the root of correct knowledge . . . the means by which a man may cross the depths of the river of existence to the safety of Nirvāna. The teaching of the Buddha saves him who has faith, but destroys the faithless. . . .'[3]

This emphasis on faith is strong in the Pali texts,

[1] *Buddhist Philosophy*, p. 29. Oxford Press, 1923.

[2] See, *e.g.*, his *Nichiren*: Introduction.

[3] *Buddhist Philosophy*, p. 35.

and strong in the practice of the lay-Buddhism of Ceylon and Burma, as it is in the great Mahāyāna sects of Japan and China. They agree with Asoka's tribute in the Bhābrū edict that, 'Whatever has been said by the Blessed One is well said,' and they 'take refuge' in him, his Order and his Teaching, committing themselves, like Asoka, for time and eternity to this Triple Gem, which indeed they often personify. 'By the grace of the Triple Gem' is a common expression in Ceylon; and a Trinity of figures representing them is common in the Far East.

A European Buddhist leader has, in fact, been for many years urging the Buddhists of the South to brave the arid scholasticism of many of their native leaders, and return to this rock from which they are hewn—the historic Lord and His saving grace.

This view is supported by texts and incidents recorded even in the Pali Canon, which is the work of the most rationalistic of Buddhist monks, who, against their own teachings, are either honest enough or confused enough to record a Buddhist tendency towards theism. It is perhaps the ordinary view of the laity which here intrudes upon that of the agnostic monk. This view regards the historic Founder as god of gods; and sees in the long line of births which culminated in him a bank of merit available for the faithful. Sākyamuni is, in other words, a Saviour, making great sacrifices for the faithful, and offering them rebirth in a Paradise. Faith, for the first group, is a calm and clear-minded acceptance of the teachings of the Founder; it is, for the second group, 'the hand of the heart,' a passionate devotion to his Person.

In other words, the India which produced the Bhakti schools of Hinduism and their great central figures, the Blessed Ones, was the same India which produced Buddhism as their most serious rival. All through the history of Buddhism, these two views and attitudes have persisted, and its long evolution in the Far East culminates in the very evangelical sect of Shinran. This sect gets rid of the idea of merit altogether: 'Even the righteous may be saved,' it says, 'how much more the sinning soul.' In place of the austere and far-off goal of Nirvāna, it offers men, or at any rate the great masses of men, Paradise. In place of the dim figure of the historic Founder it puts in the foreground the gracious Amitābha, surrounded by heavenly hosts—a sun-god of the West incorporated as the expression of saving grace.

This Buddhism is not merely for the masses. Men like Shinran and Honen in Japan, and others like Chi-Kai in China, who are systematic and careful thinkers, adopt it. The last-named, in fact, was the first higher critic within the Mahāyāna. He saw that there were divergent views in the canonical books, and he worked at the difficult task of reconciling them; elaborating a theory of progressive revelation, which, although it cannot be seriously defended to-day, yet anticipates in some remarkable ways attempts made in our own time to reconcile divergent doctrines of God as set forth in our own Scriptures.

These things being so, and the Buddhist Church of to-day being concerned with finding a working theory as to the person of its Founder, and an expression of its religion which will meet the need of the modern world, we as Christians will perhaps do our part best by showing a lively sympathy and interest; and may even offer our help.

Here are idealists representing a great and central movement in human history, which, as Mr. Wells has suggested, is one of its two great turning-points. Buddhism, starting in India, has swept eastward: Christianity, starting in the Near East, has swept westward. Both have undergone amazing developments, alike in doctrine and in organization. Both have developed the great doctrine of salvation by faith in a living God. Both call men to brotherhood. Yet in their victorious march, both have swept along great masses of pagans, so that the Christian Church and the Buddhist Church are both largely made up of partly pagan peoples; yet have as their living heritage the vital doctrines of the love of God and man—and great achievements in art and architecture which are perhaps the noblest heritage of the human race. To help Buddhists to return to the historic Buddha is a task which Christian scholarship may well attempt.

In the case of the historic Jesus, we are tending to work out a theory based upon the conviction that He was at least a consistent teacher. Agreeing with the Fourth Gospel, we shall reject the apocalypticism which intrudes into the Synoptic accounts: we shall hold to the term Father as His favourite name for God; and shall maintain that He was a serene believer in the Divine patience, and did not despair of the human race. In other words, we shall maintain that the Johannine Christ,

with His great and radiant faith—'I, if I be lifted up, will draw all men unto me,' is truer to the facts than the apocalyptic teacher of some parts of the Synoptics, with his warnings of the End of the World, and his confession that God has failed to win man by love.

Applying the same canon of criticism to the historic Sākyamuni, we may perhaps suggest to the Buddhist Church, torn as it is by bitter schism, that it is probable that Sākyamuni was also a great and consistent thinker: that he did not, for instance, at one moment poke fun at the gods (*devas*), and at another claim to be their chief (*devātideva*). In other words, the Buddhist records are necessarily coloured by the views of those who wrote them down. That the austere monks of Ceylon have been forced to include so many elements of the supernatural, and so many expressions of a religious faith, in their rationalistic picture of the Founder, will suggest that while he did appeal to reason, he also launched his message in terms of faith, and spoke to the heart. His was in all things a middle path. There are, moreover, many passages which suggest that he offered different ways and different goals to different groups. 'He that is devoted to me with loving faith, he shall attain to heaven.' Here is his message to the masses, and here is the germ of Asokan Buddhism and of the Paradise Mahāyāna schools. 'He that obeys my teachings shall attain Nirvāna.' Here is his message to the more austere, the germ of the Hinayāna of the monks. This Asoka does not mention in his edicts. Most men are not ready to be offered the complete victory over Tanhā or egoism; nor are they ready to say that they prefer the Unknown to what they can best describe as a rebirth in heaven. They are not capable of the mystic way. And so it is clear that the great masses of people were told to stay in the world, and yet to consider themselves good Buddhists; hoping for a heaven and trusting to the Blessed One to bring them to it.

It is they, typified in the great figures of Asoka in India, Wu Ti in China, and Shotoku in Japan, who, in fact, made Buddhism the great success that it was, and succeeded in building up a true and splendid international bond. And side by side with them were monks, more other-worldly, more philosophical, and less concerned with reconstructing a world; who yet recognized the needs of the masses, and adapted their message to them.

To build a bridge between these monks and a group of Christian mystics who are also prepared to leave the world should not be difficult; and attempts are being made at the present time to gather such a group in a temple in China,[1] where they will think and pray together over those inner things of the faith which are of most interest to them. Here Buddhists, Taoists, and eclectics are living in friendly communion with Christians—a 'Brotherhood of Religious Friends' who realize that where there is earnest search God is present: and who respect one another's beliefs. Amongst such the spirit of Christ may surely find free course and be glorified. And already in the great concepts of Logos, Tao, and Dharma they are finding common ground, as also in the central doctrine of salvation by faith.

Such attempts are surely apostolic. If St. Paul and the Fourth Evangelist sought to express the cosmic significance of their Lord in terms which Stoic and Platonist could accept, shall we not go out boldly—and like them, recognizing men's religious needs and aspirations as a proof of the Divine indwelling, claim that He fulfils the old Faiths?

It is in the language of the *Gītā* that Sundar Singh commends his Lord as the *Bhagavan*, and in the language of the *Lotus Scripture* that Toyohiko Kagawa preaches Christ as the Eternal Lord and Father of mankind.

Eastern thinkers must do their own thinking and their own preaching. Western friends are privileged if they may 'listen in,' and join in the great enterprise.

How Christian and Buddhist laymen can co-operate we shall consider in a later article.

[1] See articles in *The Chinese Recorder*, July 1920 and November 1923.