

A STUDY IN COMPARATIVE RELIGION.

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The most universal and fundamental instinct of the human race is the instinct of worship. Every being who possesses that power which distinguishes man from beast, viz. the power to think and reason, as soon as he becomes aware that he possesses this power - as soon as he realizes that he has life - he knows that he is the creation of a Being superior to himself and to this being he bows in worship; but the motives which lead man to worship are varied according to his position in the ladder of human progress.

It is within the scope of this article to treat in a comparative way not only these various motives, but also the principles and teachings of several of the great religions of the world. The idea is still prevalent among Christians, though to a less extent than formerly, that all the religions of the world, excepting Judaism and Christianity, were invented and thrust upon the people by an imposing priesthood; that these two, alone, were the revealed word of God; these two contained nothing false; all others contained nothing true. With a little unprejudiced study, it is seen that, during the growth of the world, different men in different nations have felt that longing for the good and the true which lifted them so near the divine presence that they have caught and proclaimed a part of His infinite truth. It is true that ignorance, superstition and tricks of priestcraft have, in all the ethnic religions, greatly disfigured their central truth, and in many cases have substituted in the minds of the people false ideals for true ones; but it is equally true that the same elements have worked in the so called revealed religions, tending, in different ages, to produce similar results.

Confucianism is the established religion of the Chinese Empire. For its origin, it goes back to Confucius, who was born about 551 B.C. It is hard to gather from the great body of myths and traditions which have grown up around his name, much certain data, but the following is

probably a reasonably authentic outline of his life. His ancestors were statesmen and officers in what is now a Chinese province. He was a very studious youth, having read the five sacred books by the time he had reached his fifteenth year. The first part of his life was spent in trying to put into practice, by means of the offices he held, his idea of a good government, which was that it should be a relation between ruler and people similar to the relation of a father and his family. He was successful in bringing about prosperity by substituting his form of government for tyranny; but through the caprice of the monarch, the effects of his workmen uprooted and Confucius resigned his office and became a wanderer and teacher. He collected disciples around him, and, through them, diffused his principles among the common people.

The teachings of Confucius are based on affection and reverence. He taught reverence for the past, and for the great men and good ideas of former times. This system teaches nothing of a personal god, or of a supernatural world, but it is the established system of philosophy and ethics in China, the leading points in which are as follows:-

All creation is the result of the constant pulsations of the immortal Tae-keih or Grand Extreme. Man is the result of the utmost development of this pulsatory action, and, as the highest result, he is, in his inmost essential nature, perfectly good as his nature consists of the fine elements - charity, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and sincerity. As long as man follows the dictates of his nature, his actions are good, but when he comes in contact with the outer world, discord arises and evil results. The object of all government is to make the people virtuous and contented; and the spirit of the golden rule is also embodied in this philosophy.

Some extracts from his teachings will show some of the virtue, sincerity and true greatness of this old Chinese philosopher.

"Coarse rice for food, water to drink, the bended arm for a pillow—happiness may be enjoyed even with these; but without virtue both riches and honor seem to me like the passing cloud."

"Worship as though the Deity were present."

"If my mind is not engaged in my worship, it is as though I worshiped not."

In comparing Confucianism with Christianity, it appears that the great ground of difference between the two is the greater completeness of Christianity. Christ came to fulfill, not to destroy. Christianity combines with the Confucian reverence for the past, a hope for the future; with its conservation and stability of institutions, the spirit of progress; with its faith in man, a faith in God; with its teachings of peace, order, prosperity and good morals, a hope of immortality and a belief in an ever present, ever loving God—father. Christianity does not deny the truths of Confucianism, but to these it adds higher and more noble ones.

Buddhism, one of the religions of China, and the religion of the greater part of eastern Asia, is the Protestantism of the East. The protest against the oppression of caste, the doctrines of salvation by priestly sacraments, of the glory of penances and martyrdom, and of the enmity of the body and the soul, all of which belonged to Brahmanism, resulted in the establishment of Buddhism with its belief in salvation by character (hence the efficacy of teaching), and with its abolition of caste.

The supposed founder of this religion was Sakya-muni, a prince in the kingdom of Oude north of central India, who lived in about the seventh century B. C. This prince had a strong hungering for knowledge of the divine laws, so he gave up his political and social preferments and became a hermit, devoting his time to prayer, meditation and the

study of Vedas, or sacred books. He gathered disciples about him to whom he taught the results of his meditations and study, and through these disciples his principles were spread over a great territory, and by them were the teachings of the prophet put into writing. Let us see what these principles were.

It is said by some that Buddhism denies God and immortality. The Brahmans hold that God is everything and man nothing, and that the aim of man should be absorption in God. The Buddhists are directly opposite. Theirs is a doctrine of human development. They magnify man so much that they forget God in this world; but they do not deny him, for they believe in the three worlds - the world of absolute being or Nirvana, the world of the gods, and the world of finite souls and natural laws. The end and aim of the Buddhist is to live in strict obedience to nature's laws, and by so doing to rise until at last he shall attain Nirvana and eternal absolute rest. He claims to know nothing of the Nirvana, except that by perfect obedience to nature's laws in the finite world, he shall reach it; also of the celestial world of God, he claims no knowledge, so he postulates no theories of these worlds, but tries to live right in the world of which he does know something.

Buddhism is founded on the four truths:- 1st the evil; 2nd its cause; 3rd its end, 4th the way of reaching the end, which are defined by Buddha as follows:

"1st. All existence is evil because all existence is subject to decay."

"2nd. The source of this evil is the desire for things which are to change and pass away."

"3rd. This desire, and the evil which follows it, are not inevitable; for, if we choose, we can arrive at Nirvana when both shall wholly cease."

"4th, There is a fixed and certain method to adopt by pursuing which we attain this end."

This way to the attainment of Nirvana is set forth in eight steps, viz:-

- "1. Right belief, or the correct faith.
- "2. Right judgement, or wise application of that faith to life.
3. "Right utterance, or perfect truth in all we say and do.
4. "Right motives, or proposing always a proper end and aim.
5. "Right occupation, or an outward life involving sin.
6. "Right obedience, or faithful observance of duty.
7. "Right memory, or a proper recollection of past conduct.
8. "Right meditation, or keeping the mind fixed on permanent truth."

To help in the development of life according to these steps, Buddha set forth the five general commandments viz. 1. Do not kill; 2. do not steal; 3. do not commit adultery; 4. do not lie; 5. do not become intoxicated.

This is a religion of rationalism, as it aims by teaching and preaching and appealing to human reason, to save man, not from a future hell, but from a present one. The history of Buddhism has been blotted by only one religious war, and while it has had its superstitions, it has no persecutions; on the contrary, it is very tolerant of other views, one Buddhist having said that he regarded all the religions of the world as branches of the true religion.

Prayer is natural to man, so every religion must have some being to whom prayer is addressed. To the Buddhist, the Absolute Being is unknowable and inconceivable; so they address their prayers to the Buddha, or men who have become infinite by entering Nirvana. Sakya-muni was the principle Buddha, but there were about thirty-four less important ones.

One of the principal meta-physical doctrines of this system is that

called Karma, or the law of consequences. Thru this law, every act committed in one life bears fruit in the next; and it cooperates with the law of transmigration in building up a soul until it is capable of entering Nirvana. As to Nirvana, some scholars claim that it means annihilation, others that it is absorption in God. At any rate, it is the state where all desires fade out and all passions die.

In one of its fundamental doctrines, Buddhism is at one with Christianity, viz., in the belief in the immortality of the human soul and its salvation by acts of faith and obedience. Another point wherein these two systems of religious thought agree is that of the Karma, or law of consequences, for "whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap," says Christianity. So again we see Christianity is larger and fuller than other religions. It accepts the Buddhist doctrines of charity, self-denial, equality among men and sympathy with sorrow; and besides these, it fills up the void in Buddhism with a living, personal God, who is working in each soul making a heaven here as well as giving hope for one hereafter.

Zoroastrianism. The most ancient dualistic system of religious philosophy is that which existed in Ancient Persia, but which is nearly extinct to-day. The great prophet and expounder of this religion is supposed to be a man named Zoroaster of whom but very little is definitely known. The period in which he lived and worked is variously estimated at from 500 to 1000 B. C. The sacred book of this system is the Zend-Avesta, a collection of hymns, prayers, invocations and thanksgivings, now generally supposed to be the work of Zoroaster. The prayers of this book are addressed to a number of deities but one - Ormazd - is regarded as the supreme one, and the others as his servants.

As Zoroaster arranged and organized the myths which had constituted the religion of the Persians prior to his time, the workings of the system were certainly dualistic; but as to its theory of the origin

of all things, it is probably monistic. The two powers that are at work in the world, according to the teachings of the Zend-Avesta, are Ormazd, the power of light and the source of all that is good; and Ahriman, the power of darkness and source of all evil; but, especially in the later writings, it is taught that both Ormazd and Ahriman were created by the eternal, absolute being - Zerana - Akerana.

In the Bundehesch, a work of much later origin than the Avesta, the doctrines, the germs of which are found in the Avesta, are elaborated, and a theory of the creation of the world and the subsequent struggles of the rival powers of light and darkness, is set forth. According to this theory, the world was created perfect by the Infinite Being, and its period of duration fixed at 12,000 years. The original man sprang, fully developed, from the body of the Bull which Ormazd had created, and which Ahriman had killed. Ahriman then killed Kaiomarts, the original man, and from his body there grew a tree which bore the first pair, who were innocent; but Ahriman tempted them by offering them a certain fruit, and they yielded (the woman yielding first), and through their fall their descendants were made mortal and sinful. The human race thus fallen, however, stands between the two worlds of light and darkness, and man is left to his own free will to choose which one he will aid. He should worship Ormazd, and help him in his warfare against Ahriman and, as a help to him, he is given the laws of Zoroaster, by obeying which he is enabled to resist the evil influences of Ahriman, which constantly surround him. This system also contains a theory of a judgement after death, at which Ormazd shall consign those who, in their earthly life did not aid him in his warfare, to a period of torment by the devils of Ahriman, the length of the period being fixed by Ormazd, but being shortened somewhat by the prayers of friends. The good pass into the mansions of the blessed. A messiah is also promised, who shall convert mankind just before

the world is destroyed by fire, after which will come the general resurrection, when the sinners will fall into an abyss where they shall burn for three days and three nights after which, being purified, they will be received into heaven. From the conflagration shall rise up a more beautiful earth which shall be eternal.

In many respects, the religion of the ancient Persians more nearly resembles Christianity than does any other. It is highly probable that the theories in the Jewish religion and from it passed on to Christianity, as to the method of creation, the fall of man, the existence of the devil, resurrection, judgement day, future life, and others, were borrowed by the Jews from their Babylonian captors, and changed so as to harmonize with the other myths of Judaism; for it was not until after the return of the Jews from captivity that these theories enter into their religious writings. It was also probably due to the effects of Zoroastrianism on the Jews that they gave up the tendency to worship idols, for this religion, like their own, worshiped the great Unseen, and after the Jewish captivity the practice of idol worship disappears.

Probably the strongest bond between these two religions, however, is the common notion of life as a battle between right and wrong waged by good men against bad men and bad principles. Whenever there is anything great to be accomplished, it is the natural tendency of the human mind to look for a leader; so the Jews and the followers of Zoroaster alike looked for a mediator, a leader in the fight against wrong. Jesus came in this capacity to the Jews, and established the kingdom of heaven here on earth and enjoined men to unite on the side of justice and righteousness and fight, as the disciples of Zoroaster were urged to do, against evil.

Greek Religion. The Greek religion is peculiar in that it had no great founder and no sacred book. It was a system which gradually

grew up with Greek development. This religion was always a decidedly polytheistic system, the history of which is divided into three periods, corresponding to the three sets of gods. The first period appears to have been a kind of nature worship as the first set of deities, called Uranids, were attributes of nature. Such were the gods, Chaos, Eros or Love, Night, Ether and Day. These impersonal gods, by intermarriage, produced others who assumed a somewhat less abstract nature and came to be more personal. Of these gods, called Titans, the principal ones were Ocean, Hyperion, Rhea, Kronos or Time and Aphrodite or Immortal Beauty. This generation of deities, by intermarriage, brought forth the gods of the third period, called the gods of Olympus. By this time, the gods had ceased to be merely great abstractions or qualities of nature, and had become immortal men with men's passions.

Thus we see that the gods whom the Greeks worshipped were not spirits, but living, concrete, human beings, who resided on Mt. Olympus, and who seldom interfered with men. The natural result of this form of religion was its great freedom. Every Greek feeling was deified and a Greek could follow the ideals of his own mind, and by feeling that by cultivating these ideals, he was glorifying some particular deity, he was inspired to growth and development. The result of such a theology was the wonderful progress and development which the Hellenes made in all lines of art, literature, philosophy and history. To the Greek, evil was the ugliness of the world and man. The way to overcome this evil was to imitate the gods, and thus to become, like them polished and perfect in mind and body.

Greece was a country which, aside from its established polytheistic religion, produced a variety of other religious doctrines, chief among which were those put forth by the Greek philosophers. The first of these philosophic doctrines was a monotheistic one, taught by a line of philosophers consisting principally of Pythagoras, Xenophanes, and

Empedocles. Next came a sceptical school led by Gorgias, Protagoras, Euripides and Anaxagoras. Although the followers of this system were persecuted as atheists the sceptical movement was not immediately stopped. At last, the doctrines of Christianity were nearly reached in the monotheistic teachings of those renowned philosophers - Socrates, Plato and Aristotle.

Even in the polytheism of the Greeks we find embodied some of the truths of Christianity, viz. the presence of God in nature and his nearness to the individual, and the capability of the human character for development and education; but in the monotheistic doctrines of the Greek philosophers, as the most similarity to Christian doctrines found. However, a philosophic theory is not a religion, so it required the addition of Christian love and faith to the philosophers' creeds to make the Christian religion now existing in the land of the Hellenes.

In this brief outline of four of the great religions of the world, which have existed in various parts of the globe and in various ages, we find that the revelation of the divine truth has not been restricted to any one nation through any one system of theology. On the contrary, we find in the works of the Ancient Chinese teacher, Confucius, in the system arranged by the Buddha, in the theories set forth to the Ancient Persians by Zoroaster, and even in the loose doctrines of enlightened Greece - in each, I say, we find some crumbs from the great loaf of truth, which have been picked up by great men of all ages and nations who have had high ideals and aspirations, and which have served to lead men in all times, to live as near in harmony with the divine nature as was possible.

As we compare these ethnic religions with the great Catholic religion, Christianity, we are struck by the higher degree of completeness of the latter. Christianity is a religion of continual growth and progress, and it assimilates all the essential ideas of the ethnic

religions, and to these it adds the higher, nobler truths which are continually being discovered as the world advances. So it is the conclusion to be looked forward to, that as Christianity has displaced the Grecian, Roman and Teutonic religions, so will it finally absorb the great ethnic systems of the east, and exist as the ever developing but universal religion.