

MR. JOHNSTON'S VEDANTISM.

BY THE EDITOR.

MR. Charles Johnston, the translator of the *Katha-Upanishad* and author of many articles on Vedanta philosophy, is perhaps the best and most scholarly exponent of genuine Vedantism in this country. A long sojourn in India and careful study of the original scriptures has made him thoroughly conversant with ancient Brahman thought, and I agree with him that we Western people ought to be more familiar with Indian philosophy and Indian modes of thinking.

India is the classical country of man's religio-philosophical development, and no one can claim to have a thorough comprehension of the problems of life, and soul, and the world, and (let me add) even of God, without having grasped the methods of inquiry and the answers presented by the sages of the valley of the Ganges.

Mr. Johnston's article on "The Kingdom of Heaven and the Upanishads" in the December number of *The Open Court* contains a series of the most striking parallels between Christian and Brahman thought.

We owe a great deal to India's civilization which is much older than ours, but while we continued the development of science and philosophy, the Indian nation ceased to be progressive and became stagnant in quietism. And yet we dare say that the Occident has shown as rich a development as the Orient in mysticism, if we only bear in mind such names as Tauler, Jacob Böhme and Angelus Silesius.

Mr. Johnston very ingeniously caricatures certain phases of Western philosophy. He shows how certain sciences become fads and straightway influence philosophy. The truth is that the weaker minds of every age are carried away with the fashionable thought of the day, but these things ridiculous though they are, merely come and go, and are purely transient phenomena, not the deeper

characteristic features of Western culture. I am fully convinced that if we were better acquainted with the east, we would find that there too, fads and fashions govern the thought of the day, always claiming more attention than is their due.

There are several important points in which I differ radically from Mr. Johnston, and I will enumerate them briefly in the following paragraphs.

Though it is true within certain limits that a contrast exists between Eastern and Western thought, I can not help thinking that it is, to say the least, overdrawn. It is true that science did not effect philosophy in ancient India as it did in modern Europe, but for the simple reason that the ancient Brahmans did not have science in the modern sense of the word. They certainly did not display any antipathy to that sort of science which, judging from Mr. Johnston's expositions, they must have possessed. We can say of modern Europe not less than of ancient India that "there philosophy stands boldly on its own feet"; and no one can deny that Kant's philosophy, though taking into consideration all the results of the several sciences (astronomy not less than physics and mechanics) not only remains independent of every one of them, but on the other hand itself furnishes the sciences with a suitable basis.

I would take exception to Mr. Johnston's idea that science is materialistic, although all depends largely upon the definition of the term. And I would also deny that modern Western psychology "draws all its conclusions from our waking consciousness, and treats other modes of consciousness either as non-existent or as mere vagaries or reflections, almost as morbid conditions of bodily life." The sub-conscious has received almost as much attention in modern investigation as waking consciousness. At any rate in my opinion the significance of the main facts of normal soul life is almost overlooked for the consideration of abnormal states.

An important difference between Mr. Johnston's opinion and my own consists in our judgment of Vedantism. He sees in it the acme of Indian thought, while I regard it merely as a stepping-stone, inasmuch as it was the predecessor of Buddhism. The acme of Indian thought in reality is reached in that period when India was most flourishing; when Buddhism was its dominant faith, and when it sent out missionaries to all neighboring countries. This is the opinion of the most prominent Oriental scholars, such men as Benfey, Weber and Henry C. Warren.*

* For quotations see the author's *Buddhism and its Christian Critics*, p. 129.

Mr. Warren in his general introduction to his *Buddhism in Translations* describes his own experience as to the contrast between the Sanskrit literature of Vedantism, Brahmanism, and Hinduism on the one side, and Buddhism, as preserved in the Pali texts, on the other as follows:

“Sanskrit literature is a chaos; Pali, a cosmos. In Sanskrit every fresh work or author seemed a new problem; . . . and as there are many systems of philosophy, orthodox as well as unorthodox, the necessary data for the solution of the problem were usually lacking. Now the subject matter of Pali is nearly always the same, namely the definite system of religion propounded by the Buddha.”

Ancient Hindu philosophy in all its forms is comparatively crude and sufficiently diffuse to suit many purposes until it reaches Buddhism, and while the Vedanta revels in mysticism, Buddhism is characterized by method and clear thought, without however being positively hostile to mysticism. It is further noteworthy that Brahmanism, and with it Vedantism, even while they prepared the way for Buddhism, found their classical formulation in the days when Buddhism held sway over India. Shankara, the classical exponent of Vedantism lived in the twelfth century, about seven hundred years after Buddha.

It would lead me too far here to enter into a controversy with Mr. Johnston, and so I will merely state that I do not regard telepathy as firmly established, and his theory of the rôle which the ether plays in soul life is a pure hypothesis, which has very little, if any, foundation on fact. It is interesting, however, to understand Indian thought, and no one so far as I know has ever presented it better to Western readers than Mr. Johnston, whose article on Shankara, together with the editorial reply published in *The Open Court* for September, 1897, should be read, and the arguments therein critically considered by our readers.

The main problem behind all these discussions is the question whether our soul life consists of the events of our experience—our sentiments, thoughts and actions; or whether the soul is a thing-in-itself, and our real life a mere phantasmagoria in which the metaphysical beyond symbolizes some mysterious deeper truth. Vedantism takes the latter view; Buddhism, and together with Buddhism the main representations of Western science, the former.