

THE BUDDHISM OF CHINA.

AFTER REGINALD FLEMING JOHNSTON.

REGINALD Fleming Johnston, who has apparently lived for many years in the Celestial Empire and has acquired an intimate knowledge of the soul of China, has published a book entitled *Buddhist China*¹ which will prove both interesting and instructive to all who wish reliable information on the religious life of this most interesting and strangest of all civilized nations. He says:

“A Christian theologian of our own day has recently observed that Buddhism is the only religion in the world that can be regarded as ‘a serious rival to Christianity.’² If this be so, then for that reason if for no other it is incumbent upon the peoples of the West to form some correct notions about the history and present condition of Buddhism in that country which, in spite of the attractions of rival faiths, contains a greater number of Buddhists than any other country in the world.

“An attempt will be made in these pages to introduce the western reader to some of those aspects of Chinese Buddhism with which he is least likely to be familiar, and to conduct him on imaginary pilgrimage to some of those great monasteries which long have been, and still are, the strongholds of Buddhist influence among the Chinese people.”

The present situation in China is characterized by Johnston as follows:

“Within the grounds of one of the most famous Buddhist monasteries in China—Shaolin in Honan—may be seen two stone tablets inscribed with pictorial statements of a doctrine that is familiar to all students of Chinese religion and philosophy—the triunity of the *San-chiao*, or Three Doctrinal Systems of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism. On one of these tablets, the

¹ E. P. Dutton & Co., New York, 1913. Price \$5.00 net.

² Rev. J. A. Selbie in the *Expository Times*, April 1912.

date of which corresponds to the year 1565 of our era, there is the incised outline of a venerable man holding an open scroll on which a number of wavy lines like tongues of flame converge and blend. The old man's draperies are symmetrically arranged, and his crouching figure is skilfully made to assume the appearance of a circle, the center of which is occupied by the open scroll. The whole drawing is surrounded by a larger circle, which signifies ideal unity and completeness, or represents the spherical monad of Chinese cosmological philosophy. The other tablet, which is more than seven hundred years old, is of a less symbolical or mystical character. It shows us the figures of the representatives of the three systems standing side by side. Sakyamuni Buddha occupies the place of honor in the center. His head is surrounded by an aureole, from which issues an upward-pointing stream of fire, and beneath his feet sacred lotus-flowers are bursting into bloom. On the left of the central figure stands Lao-chün, the legendary founder of Taoism, and on the right stands China's "most holy sage"—Confucius.

"The words which are ordinarily used to sum up the theory of the triunity of the three ethico-religious systems of China are *San chiao i t'i*—the Three Cults incorporated in one organism or embodying one doctrine. The idea has found fanciful expression in the comparison of the culture and civilization of China with a bronze sacrificial bowl, of which the three "religions" are the three legs, all equally indispensable to the tripod's stability.

"Such teachings as these are abhorrent to the strictly orthodox Confucian, who holds that the social and moral teachings of Confucius are all that humanity requires for its proper guidance; but they meet with ungrudging acceptance from vast numbers of Buddhists and Taoists, who, while giving precedence to their own cults, are always tolerant enough to recognize that Confucianism, if somewhat weak on the religious side, is strong and rich on the ethical side. They find an echo, indeed, in the hearts of the great majority of the Chinese people, who show by their beliefs and practices that they can be Buddhists, Taoists, and Confucians all at the same time.

"A vivid and picturesque statement of this truth is contained in a quaint little story which is told of a certain sixth-century scholar named Fu Hsi. This learned man was in the habit of going about dressed in a whimsical garb which included a Taoist cap, a Buddhist scarf, and Confucian shoes. His strange attire aroused the curiosity of the Chinese emperor of those days, who asked him

if he were a Buddhist. Fu Hsi replied by pointing to his Taoist cap. 'Then you are a Taoist?' said the emperor. Fu Hsi again made no verbal answer, but pointed to his Confucian shoes. 'Then you are a Confucian?' said the emperor. But the sage merely pointed to his Buddhist scarf.

"It is a far cry from the sixth century to the twentieth. The China of to-day has crossed, for weal or woe, the threshold of a new era. What has been true of the Chinese in past ages will not necessarily continue to be true in future. Will the three cults continue to form 'one body,' or will they fall apart? If they fall apart, will each maintain a separate existence of its own, or are they one and all destined to suffer eclipse and death? Who will be the Fu Hsi of the centuries to come? What are the symbols that will replace the cap and the shoes and the scarf that Fu Hsi was proud to wear? And who—let us ask with bated breath—is to take the place of Fu Hsi's imperial master?

"These are gravely important questions for China, and their interest for Western nations is far from being merely academic. The forces that mould the character and shape the aspirations of one of the greatest sections of mankind cannot be a matter of indifference to the rest of the human race, whose future history will be profoundly affected, for better or for worse, by the nature of the ideals and ambitions that inspire the constructive energies of the makers of the new China.

"If the ultimate fate of the three religions were dependent on the degree of respect now paid to them by some of the more zealous spirits among China's foreign-educated reformers, we should be obliged to prophesy a gloomy ending for all three. Taoism is treated as a medley of contemptible superstitions, and multitudes of its temples, with their unquestionably ugly clay images and tinsel ornaments, are falling into unlamented decay. Buddhism meets with scant courtesy, and is threatened with the confiscation of its endowments and the closing of some, at least, of those beautiful monasteries which during the happiest centuries of China's history were the peaceful refuge of countless poets and artists and contemplative philosophers. The moral sovereignty of the 'uncrowned king'—Confucius—totters on the edge of an abyss which has already engulfed a throne more ancient, if not more illustrious, than even his—the imperial throne of China."

It may not be wrong to say that the people of China have indeed adopted the three religions, Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism, and representations similar to those Mr. Johnston here refers to

can be found elsewhere, in China, Korea and Japan. Two of them have appeared in *The Open Court* (XXII, pp. 365 and 367) and we repeat them here. The former, reproduced from Professor Giles's *Introduction to the History of Chinese Pictorial Art*, is curiously enough regarded by him as representing a figure of Christ with a Nestorian priest kneeling at his feet and another standing behind him. Professor Giles thinks it must date from about the same time as the famous Nestorian tablet of Si 'ngan Fu. He takes the inscription "Three in One" as an indication of Christian doctrines. The inscription on the left of the medallion says "not to be rubbed



THREE IN ONE.

out," or in other words: This picture is sacred and must not be destroyed. The other picture represents the three sages Buddha, Lao-tze and Confucius, tasting the liquid in a barrel of vinegar, each one indicating by expression and gesture his opinion of reality itself and characterizing his religion as a definite attitude. None of them is false, while the reality itself remains the same. They do not contradict but rather complement one another.

Mr. Johnston first explains Buddhism under Ashoka and Kanishka, describes its philosophy and the difference of the two schools, the Mahayana and the Hinayana, observing rightly that



THE THREE SAGES TASTING VINEGAR.

the latter would better have been called Theravada, or the "doctrine of the elders." Quotations both from the translated books of Pali originals and from Chinese versions help to illustrate the character of Buddhism in its successive phases and show how the Mahayana, the school of the Great Vehicle, came by that name.

One of the questions which King Milinda puts to the monk Nagasena, as quoted on page 61, is as follows:

"You people say, Nagasena, that though a man should have lived a hundred years an evil life, yet if, at the moment of death, thoughts of the Buddha should enter his mind, he will be reborn among the gods. This I do not believe. And thus do they also say: By one case of destruction of life a man may be born in purgatory. That, too, I cannot believe."

"But tell me, O king, would even a tiny stone float on the water without a boat?"

"Certainly not."

"Very well; but would not a hundred cart-loads of stones float on the water if they were loaded in a boat?"

"Yes, they would float right enough."

"Well, good deeds are like the boat."

Mr. Johnston explains appropriately that Buddha would not have accepted this view because according to the older sterner Buddhism no one can escape the consequences of his deeds by any means, either by prayer, faith or conversion, but that he can change his attitude by entering on the path and making progress toward salvation in Nirvana. The great Chinese Buddhist Bodhidharma, commonly called by the Chinese P'u-t'i-ta-mo, shortened simply to Tamo, arrived in China from his Indian home and lived in Shao-lin, at the base of the Shao-shih mountain near Loyang in the province of Honan (p. 83). He preached a doctrine which demanded a purification of the heart:

"It is this Indian sage, this searcher of hearts and scorner of books, who is regarded as the founder, in China, of the Ch'an or Contemplative school of Buddhism. 'You will not find Buddha in images or books,' was the teaching of the venerable Tamo. 'Look into your own heart: that is where you will find Buddha.' . . .

"Tamo's system has been described as 'the Buddhist counterpart of the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola';³ but there are other Christian saints and mystics with whom he may be compared even more fittingly. Tamo would have heartily approved of that reply which St. Francis of Assisi is said to have given to

³ Lloyd, *Wheat among the Tares*, p. 53.

a monk who asked if he might be allowed to possess a psalter, 'Man can learn nothing but what he already knows. If to-day thou gettest a psalter, to-morrow thou wilt want a breviary, and thou wilt end by sitting in thy chair like any prelate and saying, Hand me my breviary.'

"No less readily would Tamo have welcomed a kindred spirit in St. Paul, who rejected 'tablets of stone' in favor of 'the fleshy tables of the heart'; or in St. Augustine, who, in words which contain the essence of Tamo's own teaching, bade men look for truth in the depths of their own being: *In te ipsum redi: in interiore homine habitat veritas.*"

With reference to Nirvana and kindred ideas, Mr. Johnston calls attention to the negative terms in which the Christian mystics describe God (p. 119):

"We shall understand the matter better, perhaps, if we compare the 'nihilism' of certain Buddhist philosophers in their treatment of the Nirvana problem with the *via negativa* of some of the Gnostic and Christian mystics in their theorizings concerning the nature of the deity. Clement of Alexandria, for example, can tell us what God is not; he cannot tell us what God is, because God transcends all that exists. The Pseudo-Dionysius, too, speaks of 'the absolute No-thing which is above all existence'; Basilides says that no assertion can be made about God, because he is nothing that can be named; and much the same doctrines are to be found in Minucius Felix, Justin Martyr, Origen, Maximus the Confessor, and John of Damascus. If Nirvana is 'nothing,' it is only so in a sense similar to that in which Duns Scotus says of God that he is 'predicateless Being, above all categories, and therefore not improperly called Nothing'; and the Buddhist would see no startling novelty in that assertion of the same Christian philosopher that 'the things which are not, are far better than those which are.' In Christian theology such views as these are traceable to neo-Platonism; and we find them affecting the thought of all who came within the range of neo-Platonic influence, not excepting St. Augustine. In Buddhism, however, they are associated with very early developments in its own dogmatic system, and need be traced to no source extraneous to Indian philosophy.

"It is hardly necessary to say that definitions by negatives were not likely to make a very strong or lasting appeal to the religious emotions. A Nirvana which admittedly transcended the possibilities of positive description might conceivably bring a certain amount of cold satisfaction to a philosophic mind, but it could not be expected

to arouse devotional exaltation or religious enthusiasm in the hearts of the lay masses. This truth was fully recognized by the Mahayanist teachers, who allowed and encouraged the more ignorant and simple-minded members of their flock to picture Nirvana to themselves in the form of a Paradise in which the individual soul is represented as continuing to exist in a state of perpetual, or at least age-long, blessedness under the loving rule of the celestial Buddha Amitabha and his bodhisats. But the enlightened Amidist (especially if he be a monk of the Ch'an, or Meditation, school) no more believes in the literal truth of the tales of Sukhavati's lotus-pond, and in the personal and separate existences of its divine lords, than the educated Christian of to-day believes in the real existence of the winged cherubim, the golden crowns and white thrones, the jewelled streets and glassy seas, that characterize the bric-a-brac rococo heaven,' as George Tyrrell called it, of hymnal and Apocalypse. 'These,' says the Christian priest, 'are symbols of divine truth.' 'Those,' says the Buddhist monk, 'are parables of Buddhahood.' "

The later chapters are devoted to pilgrimages and the description of Buddhist monasteries. The author enters into details among which we will mention some features of the Chinese worship of Kwan-yin (also called Kwan-yon). Kwan-yin is a strange deity uniting in one the features of the Christian Madonna and of the Buddha himself, and at the same time incorporating features of the pagan Magna Dea or the great mother-goddess as described by Lucian in the *Dea Syria*. Kwan-yin is probably (at least in our opinion) a pre-Buddhist deity and may have preserved the attributes of a fish-goddess from primitive times, when the fish was a common symbol of immortality. But the worship of Kwan-yin became prominent in the ninth century and it seems that in this period it was infused with Buddhist ideals so as to be conceived as a female Buddha.

Mr. Johnston says:

"There is a quaint Chinese legend which associates a sudden advance in the popularity of the cult of Kuan-yin with a miraculous incident which occurred in the second quarter of the ninth century. According to this legend, the emperor Wen Tsung, of the T'ang dynasty, who reigned from 827 to 840, was inordinately fond of oysters, and the fisher-folk were obliged by imperial decree to furnish the palace with enormous and regular supplies of this delicacy, for which, however, no payment was made from the im-

perial exchequer. One day the emperor's eye was gladdened by the sight of an oyster-shell of exceptionally large size, and his majesty anticipated an unusual treat. The shell, however, was so hard that all efforts to break it proved unavailing; and the emperor was about to put it aside when suddenly it opened of its own accord, and disclosed to the astonished gaze of the court a miniature image of the pusa Kuan-yin. The awe-stricken emperor gave orders that the treasure was to be carefully preserved in a gold-inlaid sandal-wood box, and he then sent for a noted Buddhist monk named Wei Cheng, who knew everything that was worth knowing on the subject of miracles, in order to obtain an authoritative explanation of the prodigy.

"'This matter,' explained the man of wisdom, 'is not devoid of significance. Kuan-yin is the pusa who extends love and compassion to all living beings; and the pusa has chosen this means of inclining your majesty's mind towards benevolence and clemency and filling your heart with pity for your oppressed people.'

"The emperor, concludes the chronicler, took the hint in good part, and not only abolished the forced tribute of oysters, but issued an edict to the effect that an image of Kuan-yin was to be admitted into every Buddhist temple in the empire."

Another monastery received the support of one of the greatest sovereigns that ever sat on any throne on earth, the Emperor K'ang-hsi. He was neither a Buddhist nor a Taoist but held Confucianism high as that philosophy which afforded him the best rule of conduct in life. He endowed the P'u-chi monastery and our author found in the entrance hall the following edict which we here quote from his translation:

"We [says the emperor, if we may render his own words in a slightly abbreviated form] chanced at this time to be in western Chehkiang, and despatched a special emissary to inaugurate the work of restoration and to make ceremonial offerings. We bestowed gifts of gold from the state treasury, that the temples might be restored to splendor, and that their cloisters and colonnades might be made lustrous and glorious with scarlet and jade. The stone and timber have all been provided at state expense; our subjects have not been called upon to furnish either labor or material. All this we have done in the first place from motives of filial piety, and in the second place that happiness and prosperity might be granted by the divine powers to all our people. We, since our boyhood, have been an earnest student of Confucian lore, with the constant aim of learning the proper duties of a good ruler. We

have had no leisure to become minutely acquainted with the sacred books of Buddhism; therefore we are not qualified to discuss the deeper mysteries of that faith. But we are satisfied that 'virtue' is the one word which indicates what is essential in both systems. We find, moreover, that heaven delights to give life and nourishment; the gracious and compassionate Pusa loves to bring all living creatures to salvation. The one creates, the other saves; but there is no antagonism, no divergence of aim. We, heaven's suppliant, have obtained the boon of a long reign. We have ruled the empire for over forty years. Now arms have been laid aside; the empire is at peace. We know, nevertheless, that our people are not yet free from cares and sorrows. Their sufferings come not only from the imperfections of their own natures, but also from the caprices of fortune and other circumstances for which they are in no way to blame. How to promote our people's welfare is a problem which brings us many wistful thoughts and anxious dreams. Let us pray to the compassionate Kuan-yin, that she may of her grace send down upon our people the spiritual rain and sweet dew of the Good Law; that she may grant our people bounteous harvests, seasonable winds, and the blessings of peace, harmony, and long life; and, finally, that she may lead them to the salvation which she offers to all beings in the universe. Such are the wishes of our heart. Let what our hand has written be engraved upon a lofty tablet that our decree may be transmitted to posterity."

It is well known that K'ang-hsi is the emperor who favored the Jesuits and allowed them to pursue their missionary work in China until the quarrels began between the Jesuits and the Dominicans. Mr. Johnston sums up his opinion of K'ang-hsi as follows:

"Though he became a convert neither to Buddhism nor to Christianity, he treated both Buddhist monks and Jesuit priests with a princely tolerance and magnanimity which, in addition to his other fine qualities of statesmanship, give him a strong claim to be regarded as the wisest and best ruler of his age, and as one of the finest imperial embodiments of the ideals of Chinese civilization."

It speaks well for our author that in traveling through China he was cordially and hospitably received everywhere. He speaks of his Asiatic friends as follows:

"It is true that religious pilgrims, whether Buddhist or Taoist, need have little fear of suffering from lack of food or shelter. The Chinese are a hospitable and kind-hearted people; and they will rarely allow a stranger to turn away hungry from their doors."