

HINA'S THREE GREAT RELIGIONS AND THEIR TEACHERS

Part 1

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The three great religions of China are Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism, and the three teachers of these were Buddha, Confucius and Lao-tse. These three teachers lived close to the same time. Buddha, whose real name was Siddhartha Gautama, was born in India some time between 560 and 480 B.C. Confucius was born in China about 550 B.C., and Lao-tse was born in the same country about 604 B.C.

Confucius and the old philosopher Lao-tse were contemporaries for about twenty-eight years, and apparently met personally several times. It is reported that Confucius could not understand the teachings of this older Chinese philosopher and was very frank in saying so, using the following words: "I know how birds fly, how fishes swim, how animals run. The bird may be shot, the fish hooked, and the beast snared. But there is the dragon. I cannot tell how he mounts in the air and soars to heaven. Today I have seen the dragon (meaning Lao-tse)."

It is true that the teachings of Buddha did not spread over China from India until about 60 A.D., but it is a very significant fact that the spans of life of Buddha, Confucius and Lao-tse were something like only fifty years apart, and that the teachings of each of these three great men have persisted for something like the square of fifty years, or a total of 2,500 years, and have influenced the lives of countless millions of people during that time.

At this juncture, as a devoted Scottish Rite Mason it seems appropriate to me to mention what our great leader, Albert Pike, has said in his *Morals and Dogma* (page 277) about Buddha and Confucius. According to him, Buddha was "the first Masonic Legislator whose memory is preserved to us by history," and he "called to the

Priesthood all men, without distinction of caste, who felt themselves inspired by God to instruct men." He declared (pages 277 and 278) that this Buddhist Priesthood "recognized the existence of a single uncreated God, in whose bosom everything grows, is developed and transformed," and the "worship of this God reposed upon the obedience of all the beings He created."

According to Albert Pike (page 616), Confucius "forbade making images or representations of the Deity. He attached no idea of personality to Him; but considered Him as a Power or Principle, pervading all Nature." The doctrine of Confucius, according to Pike (page 169), was stated in the Chinese Ethics as being "simple, and easy to be understood," consisting "solely in being upright of heart, and loving our neighbour as we love ourself."

The theory of the four sublime verities, or truths, lies at the foundation of Buddhism. They are: (1) That pain is inseparable from existence, inasmuch as existence brings old age, sickness and death. (2) That pain is the offspring of desire and of faults that desire has made us commit in previous states of existence or in the present state of existence. This verity comprehends the belief in the transmigration of souls; that is, that a soul migrates from one body to another in a whirlpool of rebirths. (3) That existence, and therefore the accompanying pain from which it is inseparable, can only cease through Nirvana, which is the arrival of the soul at that state of blissful oblivion, a condition of eternally unconscious repose or the complete annihilation of the thinking principle, or a complete mental blowout. (4) That in order to attain Nirvana our desires and passions must be suppressed.

Buddhism differs from Christianity in that the Christian is taught that he alone owns his own soul; that his soul is immortal and the trials and tribulations of the soul after death are affected by the conduct of the individual during human existence. The Buddhist conception of the soul is predicated on gratitude to the possessors of the same soul in the past for their struggles from birth to death, respectively, in trying to suppress and overcome passions which have caused pain, and his aim to serve the successive possessors of the same soul by himself struggling to overcome passions.

From the study which I have made, it appears that Buddhism is like Protestantism in that they both save the soul by teaching moral precepts, in contrast to the Roman Catholic Church, which places the essence of religion on formal and devout sacrificial and sacramental services - the daily sacrifice of the mass being a very vital feature of the latter religion. In both Protestantism and Buddhism, the sermons are the main instruments by which souls are saved, whereas the Church of Rome places more emphasis on the mass than on the sermon. In Romanism, the Priesthood is a very powerful factor, whereas, in both Buddhism and Protestantism, the members of the church who do not belong to the Priesthood are given much greater importance.

It is true, however, that externally there is a resemblance of the Buddhist rites and ceremonies to those of the Roman Catholic Church, in that they both have the monastery, the celibacy or unmarried status of the priests, the similarity in the dress and caps of the priests, the incense, the bells, the rosary of beads, the lighted candles at the altar, the same intonations and services, the same idea of purgatory, the Praying in the unknown tongue, and the offerings to departed spirits in the Temple.

Buddhism, like Protestantism, is a revolt of the rights of nature against the domination of the spirit, of humanity against caste, of individual freedom against the domination of a clerical order, and of salvation by faith against salvation by sacraments.

It may be, however, that with Buddhism this revolt has gone too far, for, in asserting the rights of nature against the domination of the spirit, this religion has lost God - there is in it neither creation nor creator. Its tracts say: "The rising of the world is a natural cause. Its rising and

perishing are by nature itself. It is natural that the world should rise and perish." The Buddhist knows only this world and is not interested in the eternal world, his chief aim being to escape from the vicissitudes of time into the absolute rest of Nirvana, as above mentioned.

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The teaching of Confucius has had an immense influence on China for 2,500 years, though he can hardly be said to have founded either a religion or a philosophy. His doctrines were devoted to practical morality and to the duties of man in relation to his fellow men, based upon his own wisdom and that derived by him from the teachings of antiquity. He taught the great principles of morality, which were founded on family affection and duty, teaching kings that they were to treat their subjects as children and that their subjects were to treat their kings as parents. He was the exponent of the doctrine of reverence - reverence for God, for parents, for the past and its traditions and accomplishments - and, above all, he taught the Golden Rule that "one should not do to others what he does not wish to be done unto him."

Examples of his moral maxims, which have greatly influenced the Chinese people, are the following:

- A. "To conduct the government of a state there must be religious attention to business, and good faith, economy of expenditures and love of the people." It would seem that, if every executive and legislator of our federal and state governments would constantly keep this motto before them and faithfully strive to follow the same, it would be greatly conducive to the happiness and welfare of our own people.
- B. "To see what is right and not do it, is want of courage."
- C. "When you have faults, do not fear to abandon them."
- D. "Always, and in everything, let there be reverence."
- E. "What I do not wish others to do to me, that also I wish not to do to them."
- F. "Filial piety is the root of virtue. It commences with the service of parents. It proceeds to the service of the ruler. It is completed by the establishment of character."
- G. "Worship as though the Deity were present."
- H. "Grieve not that men know not you; grieve that you know not men."

Confucius was very careful to avoid certain subjects, such as the capacities and faculties of dead spirits, and he was very adroit and ingenious in side-stepping the answers to questions in relation thereto. As an example, when asked about death, he answered, "While you do not know life, how can you know about death?" When he was asked whether the dead had knowledge of the service rendered to them by the living, he replied, "If I were to say the dead have such knowledge, filial sons and dutiful grandsons would injure their substance in paying the last offices to the departed; and, if I were to say that the dead have no such knowledge, I am afraid that unfilial sons would leave their parents unburied."

The system of Confucius differs from Christianity in that the latter has greater completeness. Jesus fulfills the Confucian reverence for the past by adding hope for the future, by adding faith in God as well as faith in man, and giving to his followers a hope of immortal life, prompted by a sense of the fatherly presence of God. In short, both Confucianism and Christianity inculcate and instill in their teachings the Brotherhood of Man-one of the two great principles of Masonry-but it is really Christianity and not Confucianism which also advocates the other great principle of Masonry, to wit, the Fatherhood of God.

As a philosophy, Taoism meant the revolution of the heavens about the earth, which produced all the phenomena on earth. Tao stood for the creative force or cosmic energy. This Philosophy dealt with the age-long problem of "being and becoming." Lao-tse appears to have taught the "Philosophy of the Good Enough." This thought is, "Why forever strive after the best, which, theoretically, is never obtainable? Just accept the good enough and be contented and happy." Taoism teaches simplicity, frugality and the love of the soil (the good earth). Lao-tse did not advocate the laborious educational system of Confucius. He believed in innocence and resignation, and preferred a simple culture to wealth. The Taoists have generally been pacifists to a certain degree, and favored small political units, and have been against centralized politics, and against all forms of slavery and legal dictation.

The whole teaching of Lao-tse has been considered by many to be vague and unsatisfactory, but he made a great advance over the teachers who had preceded him by laying down the doctrine, "that ultimately good would gain the victory over evil, and by insisting that good should be returned for evil as the sure way to overcome it."

As a demonstration of these teachings, Taoism has the following rules:

1. "To those who are good to me, I am good. And to those who are not good to me, I am also good. Thus all get to be good."
2. "To those who are sincere with me, I am sincere, and to those who are not sincere, I am also sincere. Thus all get to be sincere."
3. "Recompense injury with kindness."

4. "They rejoice not, if men revere them. They are not angered, if men insult them. But only those are capable of this who have passed into the eternal harmony of God."

In conclusion, it may well be said that the striving for Nirvana in Buddhism through each successive possessor of the same soul leading a clean, wholesome life to overcome the faults prompted by desire; the Golden Rule of Confucianism, "Do not do to others what you would not like others to do to you," and the doctrine of Taoism of "returning good for evil" demonstrate that these three great religions of China are good moral ones, even though they may not, in our way of thinking, be as complete as our Christian religion, which embraces the principle of the Fatherhood of God as well as the principle of the Brotherhood of Man.