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Historically Compared

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Christ and Buddha

Historically Compared.

IT is an undoubted fact that Jesus Christ lived at a certain time and in a certain country. What we know of His earthly life is contained in the New Testament, especially in the Gospels. All the writings concerning Him were written after His death. How long after His death were they written? or, in other words, How near to Him do these writings take us? Can we be quite sure that we are in possession of His actual words and of an accurate record of His deeds?

In answering these questions several comparisons of Christianity with Buddhism may be profitably made.

To begin with, Christianity is exceptionally well-off in the possession of very ancient manuscripts of the New Testament. The oldest of those in existence date back

to within three or four hundred years of the Apostles. But we can go much further back than this for there are much earlier versions (translations) of the New Testament and writers about it: even if there were no manuscripts in existence the books of the New Testament could be entirely made from the writers of the first three centuries who quoted freely from them. It is very different with Buddhism. There is no Buddhist manuscript older than 1300 years after Buddha, and there are no very early Buddhist writings in existence to show us what the ancient texts (MSS.) were like.† The existence of very old manuscripts and versions is an assurance to us that our present New Testament text is essentially the same as that of the earliest times; and in being able to say exactly what was early teaching, Christianity has a great advantage over Buddhism.

Again, it is important to notice that the names of writers of the Christian Gospels, and of most other books of the New Testa-

† Max Muller says, "All Indian Manuscripts are comparatively modern, and one who has handled probably more Indian MSS. than any one else, Mr. A. Burnell, has lately expressed his conviction that no Manuscript written one thousand years ago is now existent in India, and that it is almost impossible to find one written five hundred years ago."

ment, are well-known, whilst the authors of the book comprising the Buddhist canon are unknown. The fact that the names of those who wrote the Christian Scriptures are known inspires belief in those who read them that they are moving amidst certainties.

Again, there is the question of how far the Gospel narratives are supported by contemporaneous history. And once more we find how strong Christianity is historically. The *Annals* of Tacitus, the *Biographies* of Suetonius, the *Letters* of Pliny—all Roman writers of the first century—show that in the reign of the Emperor Tiberius there lived one called Christ; that He lived and taught in Judæa; that He was put to death by Pontius Pilate; that His teaching spread rapidly; and that the converts made worshipped Christ and suffered great persecution. So that if the New Testament had never been written we should still have known these things. Jesus lived in one of the best known parts of the world, and in an age of great writers, some of whom were historians, and so it has come about that there is confirmatory evidence by writers belonging to the age in which Jesus lived that He lived at that time and did a particular work. The story of Jesus

comes to us out of the light of history, out of an age when men read and kept historical records. And comparing once more Buddhism and Christianity we find a very great difference. We have no history of India in the age when Buddha lived; what we know of that age is the result of inference and conjecture. The true, the known, history of India begins later. There is no historian of Buddha's own time; there is no external history written in the very generation in which Buddha himself lived, to confirm the account of his life.

And yet once more. Out of an historical age in which men were accustomed to write history have come *four* biographies of Jesus Christ. Three of these undoubtedly belong to the generation of Jesus Christ himself. But there is no biography of Buddha belonging to the age of Buddha, and none belonging even to the time of the oldest Buddhist writings. The fullest account of Buddha is given in the '*Lalita Vistára*'* written hundreds of years after Buddha's death. As Professor

* The *Lalita Vistára* does not belong to the Pali canon, but is a Sanscrit work "probably composed in Nepal by some Buddhist poet who lived between six hundred and a thousand years after the death of Buddha" (Rhys Davids).

Oldenberg says : " A biography of Buddha out of antiquity—out of the time of the sacred Pali texts --has not reached us, and, as we may say with confidence, has never existed." The oldest Buddhist writings, then, the oldest portions of the Pali texts, contain no life, no connected account, of Buddha himself. They contain an account of the system rather than of the person. The main divisions are : "discourses, rules of discipline and metaphysics." The original Pali writings " contain neither a Biography of Buddha nor even the slightest trace of the former existence of such a work." Christianity, it will be seen, is particularly rich in the possession of so many detailed and connected narratives of the sayings and doings of Jesus written by contemporaries, some of whom were ear-witnesses and eye-witnesses. Christianity possesses a definite biography of Christ.

Further, we are quite sure when Jesus lived and died. Critics have differed about this by only six years. But there is a difference in Buddhist traditions of a thousand years as to the dates of Buddha's birth and death. This, in itself, is an indication that Buddhism does not come to us out of the full light of history, that it has but few things to fix it historically.

The best authorities differ considerably in fixing dates. * "While there is the most emphatic and exact agreement among both believing and unbelieving scholars as to the precise time when Jesus lived, the most competent specialists in Buddhist literature and archaeology differ in their opinion as to the date of the death of Buddha to the extent of almost two hundred years" (Dr. Kellogg). We know perfectly well when Jesus lived and died. He is not seen in the mist of legend but in the full light of history.

And between His death and the appearance of the writings concerning Him there was but a short interval. The utmost efforts have been made by unbelievers to give a late date to the earliest Christian writings but without avail. The only result has been to triumphantly establish an early date. The chief writers admittedly lived and composed their books at a date early enough to bring us up to the very lips and life of Christ Himself. The earliest

* The Mahawansa gives the date of Buddha's death as B. C. 543; Colonel Oleott's Buddhist Catechism, B. C. 535; Max Muller, B. C. 477; Oldenberg, B. C. 412; Rhys Davids, B. C. 410.

The chief priests of Buddhism in Mongolia believe that he died thousands of years earlier than this

Christian writings are some of Paul's Epistles, admitted by all—by critics adverse and critics favourable to Christianity—to have been written within 25 to 30 years of Christ's death. † These epistles could not have been written if Christ had not lived and taught and acted according to the account given in the Gospels. These epistles pre-suppose and imply the statements of the gospels. Three of the gospels are also of an early date. § The evidence for and against has been weighed and sifted again and again, and the latest word of those who have critically and carefully weighed the evidence is that the first three gospels were written in substantially their present form by the men whose names they bear whilst eye-witnesses of the events narrated were still alive. Matthew and John were disciples and companions of Jesus both; Mark and Luke belong to the apostolic age, the latter being a most careful historian, and doing his utmost to

† The dates usually given to these epistles are: Thessalonians (two books), 53-54 A.D. Corinthians (two books), 57 A.D; Galatians, 57 A.D; and Romans, 58 A. D.

§ The dates usually given for the gospels are: Matthew, between 50-60 A. D; Mark, between 63-70 A.D; Luke, between 58-60 A.D; John's Gospel was written later, probably 90-100 A.D.

get at the facts. He tells us that when he wrote there were similar narratives in existence written by eye-witnesses, that he had traced things "accurately," had written them "in order," and that the result was "certainty." So that at an early date, and before the contemporaries of Jesus had passed away, there were in existence two important sets of writings concerning Him: epistles implying His life, and gospels containing many narratives in detail. During the life-time of those who lived with Him, and of thousands acquainted with the facts, there were memoirs in existence, and they were written by those who had ample and first hand knowledge.

And when once more we make comparison with Buddhism we see how strong the Christian position is. A long time elapsed after Buddha's death before the Pitakas, the earliest Buddhist books, were written. The traditional story is that Buddha's discourses were collected and fixed at a Council a few months after His death; but eminent scholars agree that this story must be rejected. Rhys Davids, a scholar held in high repute amongst Ceylon Buddhists, says: "The Buddhist belief that most of their sacred books were in existence immediately after

the Buddha's death is not only not supported, but is contradicted by the evidence of those books themselves." Oldenberg says that it is "pure invention"; Hardy that "it has nothing to support it"; Copleston that it is "on a hundred grounds incredible." The Mahawansa tells us that the Pitakas were written for the first time near Matale 88 B. C.—between three and four hundred years after Buddha's death. But it is generally agreed that in the reign of Asoka, and by 250 B. C., the Pitakas had taken form, and substantially as we have them now. How much earlier than this we can go back is purely a matter of conjecture; but scholars agree that we cannot be sure of any thing earlier than from 100 to 150 years after Buddha's death. 'We can hardly expect to get nearer to Buddha himself and to his personal teaching than the council under Asoka, in 250 B. C.' (Max Muller). Historically we are unable to get nearer Buddha than this. The main features of his history may be true, they may have been correctly and orally handed down; but the earliest records leave us a century or a century and a half away from Buddha. And when these records were made there were no contemporaries, no ear-witnesses or eye-witnesses living; there was no one in existence to

vouch personally for the facts. The records of Buddha belong to another generation. The records of Christ belong to His own generation. Two of His actual companions wrote gospels whilst many who had known Him were still alive. By common admission the chief writings about Jesus come from the hands of men who lived at the same time and in the same place with Him of whom they wrote, and they existed in essentially their present form before the generation in which Jesus lived had passed away.

We may conclude then that historically the Christian position is as strong as it can be ; that we can get very near indeed to Jesus Christ in His life and work among men ; and that Christianity, in this respect, has a great advantage over Buddhism.

And coming thus near to the person of Jesus we find He is everything. The great feature of Christianity is not a system or method of salvation but a Person who saves, and who saves, not by a system or method, but by Himself. In the salvation wrought out through Jesus Christ He is and does everything. Not for a single moment during all the process can He be dispensed with ; it is He who saves, not His doctrine or His example or His method. It is not so in

Buddhism. Buddha calls attention to his method of deliverance, not to himself ; and when his followers think of him as a deliverer it is that they may look to his doctrine, to his eight-fold way, to his example, not to him. He can do nothing for them. He is only of value as he shows a method, and when the method is grasped he may be dispensed with. Among his last words to his followers were : " After I am dead let the Law and the rules of the Order be a Teacher to you." " Work out your own deliverance with diligence." So Buddha himself is now of no importance. According to his teaching his personality has been completely and finally dissolved, whilst his method of deliverance remains and is everything. He is not a personal and continuous deliverer. Deliverance is hoped for through Buddha's method, not through Buddha himself. The Buddhist admires, and all but adores, the memory of Gautama because he considers him a revealer of the way out of the cycle of birth and death ; whilst the Christian worships Christ as the Son of God who lived and died, and who, living again, has all power to achieve an utmost salvation for those who trust and submit to Him.

" It was plainly the method of Buddha, not the person, which was to save his brethren. As

for the person He passed away, 'with that passing away in which nothing whatever is left behind,' living on only metaphorically in the method and teaching which he bequeathed to His followers. We are touching on no disputed point when we assert that according to the Buddhist scriptures, the personal conscious life of the founder of that religion was extinguished in death. But this single fact points the contrast with Christianity. The teaching of Jesus differs in fact from the teaching of Buddha not more in the ideal of salvation which He propounded than in the place held by the person who propounded the ideal. The personal relation to Himself is from first to last of the essence of the religion which He inaugurated" (Gore's Bampton Lecture).

And so the Christian and the Buddhist think of the chief person in their religion differently. The Christian thinks and speaks of the living, the reigning Christ; but no Buddhist thinks of Buddha as a present living person and power. The glory of Christ when He came to His last earthly hour was that "in three days He should rise again" and should thereby be proclaimed "the Son of God with power." The glory of Buddha at the moment he died was that he could be no more. He is dead, dead for evermore. Christ for ever lives. He is "alive for evermore." He fulfils His promise: "Lo, I am with you always even unto the end of the

world." He holds fellowship with His people, hears their prayer, sends them help. He is the living, the reigning Christ. His people look to Him as their Saviour and Lord, whilst they look back upon the example of His earthly life. This book is a glance backward at the life which the now risen and exalted Saviour once lived on earth in the flesh.

It is evident, therefore, that a complete history of Jesus Christ is impossible. The great facts of His earthly life are known to us; but He is still living and teaching and acting in His church, and He has been doing so ever since He ascended to the Father :

"The life of Christ is one thing, His history another. The life He lived in Judæa; the history is as long and as extended as Christendom. The life He lived in Judæa is written in the Gospels. The life He has lived in the world is represented by the history of civilized man. And before He can be known these two must be combined. If we would understand Him, our view must not be limited to the Gospels, or to His thirty years in Judæa, or to the first half of the first century of our era. . . . We must look at the centuries that came after Him and His action in those centuries, if we would know either who or what He is." (Dr. Fairbairn).

So the New Testament writers were not accustomed to think of His work as ending when He died, or when He rose again and

ascended to the right hand of God ; they thought of Him as gone from vision only, as still being with His people and working with them in all spiritual movements and progress. And ever since, and always, He has lived and wrought with and for His people. His followers look forward to a time when all His purposes will be accomplished, when His kingdom, now come in part only, shall be fully established and He shall have universal dominion. And when that point in His purposes and accomplishment is reached His people will look back with Him upon His entire work and learn fully His history, the whole of that which He began to do and to teach on earth. And once more we may remind ourselves how different it is with Buddha. The history of Buddha himself is finished. There is nothing more to be known of him than the facts of his life in Magadha ; at the end of his long series of births his cycle of existence, we are told, was then complete. The history of Buddhism is not his history, for as a person he has done nothing since he died and can do nothing.

Again, there has only been one Jesus Christ. Christianity knows no other, for no other has done a similar work. When all the facts concerning Him are known there is nothing else concerning salvation

to be known, for there is no other Saviour. "In none other is there salvation: for neither is there any other name under heaven, that is given among men, wherein we must be saved." (Acts iv. 12). "Neither is there any other name." There is no other; there has been no other; there will be no other. It is not so in Buddhism. There have been many Buddhas. Gautama Buddha is one of a series. There were other Buddhas before him, appearing at intervals. The names of the twenty-four Buddhas who immediately preceded Gautama have been handed down to us in the Pitakas with some information about them, whilst a list of one hundred and forty three has been compiled. * Five Buddhas belong to the present Kalpa (Maha-bhadra Kalpa) or age, the fourth of whom is Gautama; and another Buddha, the fifth, is to appear in the year 5000 of Gautama's period. By that time Gautama's religion is to be forgotten and the new Buddha, Maitreya, is to open again to men the door of Nirvana. †

* "In Hodgson's "Illustrations of the Literature and Religion of the Buddhists" the names of 143 Buddhas are given, compiled from the Lalita Vistara, Kriya Sangraha, and Raksha Bhagavati." Hardy's Manual of Buddhism, p. 88.

† Hardy's Manual, p. 95; Rhys David's Buddhism, p. 180.

It will be seen at once how different is the place which Jesus Christ holds in His religion and how different therefore is the Christian view of Jesus Christ. Jesus has no lineage. He belongs to no succession. He had no predecessor, He has no successor. 'He abideth ever' is the oft-repeated statement of the Epistle to the Hebrews. "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and to day, yea and for ever," is the prevailing thought of the same epistle. The work of salvation has been done once for all. Jesus did it "once for all when He offered up Himself." He is the Eternal Son of God who "once at the end of the ages hath been manifested to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself." And having ascended to the Father the same Jesus will return. Christians look back upon the one earthly life and forward to the manifestation of the same Jesus at His coming again.

Lastly, everything belonging to Jesus Christ abides. His teaching is like Himself; it cannot pass away. This Life of Jesus gives us an account of the Teaching of Jesus; but there is one feature of it on which some stress may here be laid, namely, its universal truth and abiding nature. Buddhists, especially those who have received a Western education, often

assert that their religion is scientific and will therefore be the religion of the future, whilst Christianity will become obsolete because its characteristic teachings are not true to the facts of life. This view is quite untenable. Mr. Gogerly's *Pragnyapti*, Part I, * shows most clearly that Buddha was mistaken about many things and that he committed himself to many errors concerning the Sakwala, the earth, the sun, the moon and other material things. Mr. Hardy's *Touchstone* † gives us similar evidence and shows that the Pitakas abound in historical and scientific errors. He also says that "their exaggerations in chronology have no parallel." The progress of knowledge has shown that Buddha's teaching was deficient, mistaken and full of error and that therefore many of his words must necessarily pass away. One of the most striking features about Christ's teaching is that it has remained unshaken with every advance of knowledge.

"One of the strongest pieces of objective evidence in favour of Christianity is not sufficiently enforced by apologists. Indeed, I am not aware that I have ever seen it mentioned. It is the absence from the biography of Christ of any doctrines which subsequent growth of

* Christian Literature Society, Colombo.

† Wesleyan Book Room.

human knowledge—whether in natural science, ethics, political economy or elsewhere—has had to discount. This negative argument is almost as strong as the positive one from what Christ did teach. For when we consider what a large number of sayings are recorded of Him, it becomes most remarkable that in positive truth there is no reason why any of His words should ever pass away in the sense of becoming obsolete.” (The distinguished scientist G. J. Romanes in ‘Thoughts on Religion’).

The teaching of Jesus is consistent with all assured truth and with the highest thought of man. No scientific discovery can make it untrue or out of date. It is universally adapted to all men everywhere; it is eternal, abiding for ever. Like the great Teacher it knows no end. Everything confirms His own saying: “Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away.”