

## BUDDHISM COMES WEST<sup>1</sup>

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**W**ESTERNERS who profess and call themselves Buddhists are, and will probably remain, few in numbers—however distinguished and worthy. Organised Buddhism in Christian or once-Christian countries is, and will probably remain, negligible. But a good Buddhist cares little for what he calls 'names and forms'; and Buddhism is a force which a Christian even in the West can no longer ignore.

It is alleged (such rumours are hard to check) that in several European countries images of the Buddha outsell crucifixes and madonnas by a considerable margin; it is certain that there are British manufacturers and merchants who will supply you with both or either with detached impartiality. It is astonishing to find in how many British homes—and those by no means only of the more 'educated' classes—a Buddha is installed. Of course, to their owners they are just 'art' or ornament, as inevitable almost as the Van Gogh *Sunflower* or the crazy pavement. And, lest there be any mistake about it, the Buddha will, as often as not, be found fulfilling some such utilitarian function as supporting an electric lamp or propping up a row of novels. But, if the owner is deceived, the good Buddhist is not—and the good psychologist will understand him. An image of the Buddha inculcates Buddhism (whether we call it that or no) more effectively and profoundly than many books about it. Even if we set aside the subtler symbolism of Buddhist iconography (and to those in the know, every single feature is charged with significance—the posture, the gesture of the hands, the curve of each finger, the very folds of the drapery), the appeal of a Buddha-image to a modern Westerner is understandable, however little he may consciously avert to it. It speaks to him of just what he lacks, but deeply needs—tranquillity, poise, inwardness, depth, assurance, a quiet, unharassed and undistracted joy. Nor can its mass-reproduction quite take away the slight

<sup>1</sup> *Buddhism*. By Christmas Humphreys. (Penguin Books; 1s. 6d.): *The Buddhist Way of Life*. By F. Harold Smith, D.D. (Hutchinson's University Library; 7s. 6d.): *Buddhism: Its Essence and Development*. By Edward Conze; Preface by Arthur Waley. (Faber, for Bruno Cassirer; 18s.): *Aspects du Bouddhisme*. Par Henri de Lubac (Editions du Seuil.)

flavour of oriental strangeness, the unfamiliarity that breeds reverence, the appeal to take *omne ignotum pro magnifico*.

But neither is the wide dissemination of popular books about Buddhism to be despised. Their circulation in Western countries must be immense; the liberality of the supply argues the extent of the demand. The translation of the Sacred Books of the East and of the Pali Texts into European languages has been compared by C. G. Jung to the recovery of pagan antiquity at the Renaissance, and it is reasonable to suppose that it is proving hardly less challenging to Western Christendom than was the New Learning, or the discovery of Aristotle and the 'Arabs' in the thirteenth century. Will this new challenge stimulate the equivalent in our day to the Christian humanists of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, or to an Albertus Magnus or Thomas Aquinas of the thirteenth? Some work has already been done to correlate the 'wisdom of the East' with the traditional theology, philosophy and 'spirituality' of the West, but, if we except some important monographs by Ananda Coomaraswamy, some works by a few Jesuits in India, some rare flashes of insight from René Guénon, the results are so far unimpressive. Patient, meticulous, word-for-word commentaries on the principal oriental texts—akin to St Thomas's commentaries on Aristotle—will be necessary, to say nothing of kindred *experience*, before we can hope for anything like a synthetic *Summa*. It should be a rewarding work, for there is already many a European who has found his way back to understanding and appreciation of his own tradition, and even to the rediscovery of Christianity, through acquaintance with Hinduism, Taoism or Buddhism.

At all events, the literature and history of Buddhism have long ceased to be a prerogative of scholars, a crank of theosophists, or an interest for such people as enjoyed *The Light of Asia* or profited from the London Buddhist Lodge's *Concentration and Meditation*. Buddhism is now made available, and very attractive, to everyman in his Pelican Books and his Home University Library—to say nothing of sympathetic articles in *Picture Post*, and frequent favourable references in popular books and articles on psychology.

Each of the three English books we have listed (all published within the past few months) offers a useful general survey of the whole subject, each gives every appearance of dispassionate objectivity, first-hand acquaintance with primary sources, enviable

ability to digest and present a vast and complex range of material, and, at least in the case of Mr Humphreys and Dr Conze, direct experience of Buddhist ways. Of the three authors, Dr Conze is the most ready to make concessions to the general reader, and, deeply sympathetic though he is with his subject, his approach is not without a certain detached, sometimes sardonic, humour. Mr Waley's preface says that 'there is not at present in English or any other language so comprehensive and at the same time so easy and readable an account of Buddhism', and neither Mr Humphreys nor Dr Harold Smith is likely to change that estimate, despite the fact that Dr Conze takes us further into exotic Tantric byways than either of them. Unusual but welcome is Dr Conze's recognition that, 'In their desire to express disapproval of Christianity, many authors have painted the record of Buddhism too white, and it will be necessary to admit that on occasion the Buddhists were capable of behaviour which we usually regard as Christian'. Fresh from the customary glowing comparisons of the heights of oriental wisdom with the seamier sides of Christians' behaviour, we feel altogether more at home to know that the propagation of Buddhism, no less than that of the Gospel, was largely due to the sword.

While Dr Conze leaves us in doubt as to whether he would call himself a Buddhist, Dr Harold Smith's last pages make no bones about his being a Christian. His exposition of Buddhism appears to be none the less objective and fair for that, but it is very much more condensed and textbookish, and will probably be preferred by the academic student of comparative religion and philosophy; it will certainly serve as a better book of reference. Some 'Concluding Thoughts' under the heading, 'East and West', tend in the main to the 'never the twain shall meet' view. He agrees with Professor Northrop in finding in the respective epistemologies of East and West an almost insurmountable barrier to their mutual understanding. This overlooks the indubitable attraction which Eastern ways exercise on many Westerners—to say nothing of the reciprocal process. He is more helpful when he pinpoints, as the principal issues between Buddhism and Christianity, belief in a personal God, Karma, Reincarnation, and their respective attitudes to suffering. Without minimising the difficulties, a Catholic and a Thomist (one, that is to say, who will not be deceived by merely verbal incompatibilities) will probably be less pessimistic about

the prospect of understanding. What Buddhists have to say about Nirvana should prompt him to an *approfondissement* of his tractates 'On the Divine Names', and 'On Beatitude'; what they have to say on Karma should lead him to take more seriously what St Thomas has to say about causality, about the *rationes seminales*, about Fate (as the sum of determined and determining secondary causes), about the consequential character of *poena* as both the result and the predisposition of *culpa*. Reincarnation, though for the Buddhist (and indeed the Oriental generally) the corollary of Karma, is a more serious stumbling-block, but its cruder and more exoteric presentations are as false for the mature Buddhist as for the Christian; and the *principles* behind the belief are not altogether alien to the Catholic doctrines of inherited sin and suffering, temporal punishment and purgatory. If we may accept Ananda Coomaraswamy's contention that the doctrine of the One and Only Transmigrant represents its original and authentic form, we must recognise that it also embodies the basic Catholic truth of the divine omnipresence and the interpenetration of temporal existence by eternity.<sup>2</sup> When Dr Harold Smith writes, 'Buddhism sets out to end suffering, Christianity to accept it as integral to the Divine plan', he seems to be comparing incommensurables, confusing ends and means. For the Christian also, though the way must be the way of the Cross, the end is bliss and impassibility; while for the Buddha—the king's son who having joy set before him left all out of compassion with man's woe, to share it and seek its cause and cure—it is also true that 'love in a sinful world inevitably suffers and heals by its willing acceptance of the inevitable'. The inevitable!—yet on the previous page Dr Harold Smith found the doctrine of Karma 'a barrier between him [the Buddhist] and Christ'. The Buddhist must find Christian critics hard to please.

It is doubtless this eminently Christlike story of the Buddha's compassion which, more than anything else in Buddhism, has won him the love and devotion of millions of human beings through the centuries. But the peculiar attractions which Buddhism as a whole, at least as presented in European languages, can exercise on modern, post-Christian, Western man, is not lightly

<sup>2</sup> This important paper, *Recollection, Indian and Platonic, and On the One and Only Transmigrant*, was published as a supplement to the Journal of the American Oriental Society, April-June, 1944.

to be estimated. Its emphasis on experience and experiment, its reluctance to impose dogmatic presuppositions that cannot be tested, its stress on causality and its rejection of chance and caprice, its sceptical refusal to express the inexpressible, its unenthusiastic tolerance towards 'organised religion', its indubitably profound and detailed practical psychology, its idea of the conscious guidance of evolution (so akin to what is most attractive in both Marxism and Dr Julian Huxley's recent Third Programme talks), all this can hardly fail to appeal to the modern Westerner who is brought up in a *scientiste* climate, and is at the same time spiritually starved. This appeal is implicit rather than expressed, whispered rather than shouted, in Mr Christmas Humphreys' 'Pelican', and is all the more effective for that. Mr Humphreys is Recorder of Deal, one of England's most distinguished lawyers, a professed Buddhist, founder of the London Buddhist Society, promoter of 'reunion councils' of Mahayana and Hinayana Buddhists, prophet if not founder of a 'Navayana'—a new Buddhist 'vehicle' which, he suggests, will have 'passed through the crucible of Western experience and Western spiritual needs', notwithstanding that 'the West will never be "Buddhist" and only the most unthinking zealot will strive to make it so'. But it is as judge rather than advocate that he presents Buddhism; there is little pleading of a case, much judicious and unemotional summing up of relevant matters of fact. Only when he comes to describe the ways of the Zen school does he really warm up to his subject, but he seldom leaves the reader cold.

Père de Lubac's book, as its title implies, is less comprehensive. It consists of three essays which, he admits, 'belong more or less to the despised category of apologetics'—perhaps 'polemics' would be a still more accurate word. But they are, as is to be expected from this author, polemics of a comparatively high order, and carried out with gentleness and profound reverence for the person of the Buddha himself. He holds, however, that 'the more his greatness is disclosed, the more is accentuated the sharp contrast between Sakyamuni and Jesus'. The versatile Père de Lubac has accustomed us to expect of him bright flashes of insight, and he does not fail us in this present book. But his use of Buddhist texts is curiously indiscriminating; a like critique of Christianity directed to an assortment of texts from General Councils, Marcion, St John of the Cross, Luther, and popular hagiography, without

note of their dates or representativeness, might miss any target at all. The feeling is hard to avoid that the author is out to prove a foregone conclusion on the hypothesis that Jesus Christ is somehow 'defended' by making the Buddha and his followers as unlike him as possible. This is easy to do, and with no great parade of learning, if we attempt to fit Buddhism into Western categories which do not belong to it, and then judge it for ill-fitting the clothes in which we ourselves have dressed it. The Buddhist *anatta* (roughly, 'selflessness'), which for Mr Humphreys and Dr Conze is fundamental, makes nonsense of much of Père de Lubac's criticism of 'Buddhist charity'. But he has very valuable and important things to say *en passant*, and on the symbolism of the 'Two Cosmic Trees' he is particularly stimulating. *Distinguer pour unir* is a principle understood in both East and West, and perhaps these polemics are necessary before well-grounded cirenics can begin.

But whether our approach be eirenic or polemic, books like those of Dr Conze, Dr Smith and Mr Humphreys will help us to ensure that it is not with phantoms of Buddhism rather than Buddhism itself, as actually presented to Western readers, that we are dealing. For most Western Christians, any idea that Buddhism can be 'baptised', in any sense parallel to the 'baptism of Aristotle' by a St Thomas, is ruled out in advance owing to the belief that Buddhism is no profane science, but a non-Christian, and therefore false, *religion*. Our authors should help us to assess just how far that presupposition is true or false, and compel us to define our terms with some precision. It seems certain enough that, whether or not Buddhism can be classed under our Western category of religion at all, it is not a religion in the same sense in which we may apply it to Christianity, and the supposition that it is such cannot exonerate us from approaching it in all loyalty to the demands of truth and charity.

We may derive some comfort from the reflection that this is not the first time that Buddhism has come West. Apart from any doubtful influence it may have exercised on Christian theology and spirituality by way of Alexandria, the story of the Buddha from the Lankavatara Sutra has been one of the most popular and influential stories in Christendom for centuries. With only a few fictitious additions to make a Christian preacher and martyr of him, the legend of the Buddha was a favourite one among Christians for over a thousand years, and as Saints Barlaam and

Josaphat (thought to be a corruption of Gotama-Bodhisat) the Buddha found his way into the menologies of the Eastern Churches and the Roman Martyrology. The story came with all the prestige of St John Damascene behind it (though the Greek version is now known to have antedated him), and, a thousand years later, the first printing presses widely disseminated it. For the story was prominent in the *Legenda Aurea*, the first of all best-sellers among printed books.

We do not know now how the Buddha-legend first came to Jerusalem (to which the first 'Christian' versions have been traced), nor do we know by what devious deceits or mistakes the legendary story of his life and his passing was turned into a witness-bearing to the Incarnation. However deplorable it may have been as a mutilation of history, perhaps there was more truth in it than meets the eye.

## AVICENNA AND WESTERN THOUGHT IN THE THIRTEENTH CENTURY<sup>1</sup>

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**T**HERE was something indefinite about the effect of Avicenna on the West in the thirteenth century. Constant and pervasive as his influence was—from its beginnings in Spain in the twelfth century, through the confusion of its first contacts with the Cathedral Schools and the nascent University of Paris, down to Albert and Aquinas and Scotus—yet it nowhere crystallised into a definite set of doctrines accepted by a clearly marked group or school, as did, later in the century, the influence of Averroes. Some years ago Père De Vaux<sup>2</sup> brought into circulation the term 'Latin Avicennism', parallel to the 'Latin Averroism' which Mandonnet had disclosed in his great work on

1 This article is based on a lecture given at Cambridge in March, 1951; one of a series on the life, writings and influence of the Arabian philosopher, Avicenna. Avicenna was born about the year 980 at Bukhara (to the north-east of the frontier of modern Persia, in what is now Soviet territory) and died in 1037. His prodigiously active life was spent in Persia, but nearly all his works are written in Arabic. Equally renowned as physician and philosopher, Avicenna shares with the Spanish Arab Averroes (1126-1198) the chief place in the intellectual history of Islam in the middle ages.

2 *Notes et Textes sur l'Avicennisme Latin aux confins des XIIe—XIIIe siècles.* (Paris: Vrin, 1934.)