

# BUDDHIST CHINA

## CHAPTER I

### THE “THREE RELIGIONS” OF CHINA

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 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 centre 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

## 2 THE “THREE RELIGIONS” OF CHINA [CH.

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. Śākyamuni Buddha occupies the place of honour in the centre. 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.<sup>1</sup> 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 recognise that Confucianism, if somewhat weak on the religious side, is strong

<sup>1</sup> 三教一體九流一源百家一理萬法一門

I.] THE SAGE FU HSI 3

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

#### 4 THE "THREE RELIGIONS" OF CHINA [CH.

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

I.]                    THE ALTAR OF HEAVEN                    5

—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. There are rumours that the state subsidies hitherto granted at regular intervals for the upkeep of the great sage's temple and tomb at Ch'ü-fou will perhaps be withdrawn, and that in the state schools and colleges reverence is no longer to be paid to the canonised representative of Chinese civilization and moral culture. There are signs that not even the holiest sanctuary in China is to remain inviolate: for the whisper has gone forth that the silent and spacious grove that surrounds the Altar of Heaven—that marble index of a religious system which even in the days of Confucius was hallowed by the traditions of an immemorial antiquity—is to be adapted to commercial uses and turned into an experimental farm.

Among the guiding spirits in the destructive and constructive work undertaken since the overthrow of the Manchu dynasty are men of fine ability, unquestioned patriotism, and earnest zeal for their country's welfare; but many of them have been so bewitched by the glamour of Western methods, and so impressed by the material successes of Western civilization, that they have lost all touch with the spirit of the traditional culture of their own race. The iconoclastic tendencies of to-day have not been guided by the will of the people—for the will of the

## 6 THE "THREE RELIGIONS" OF CHINA [CH.

people has not yet found a means of making itself known and felt. They have not sprung into activity in obedience to the voice of China—for the voice of China has not yet been heard.<sup>1</sup>

Yet perhaps, after all, the prospects of the "three religions" are not quite so dismal as a glance at the present state of affairs might lead us to suppose. That the iconoclastic activity of to-day will be succeeded sooner or later by a reaction in which all the traditional conservatism of the Chinese race will take a strenuous part, is one of the few prophecies with regard to China's future which may be uttered with reasonable confidence. The reaction will itself be succeeded, no doubt, by further oscillations, more or less violent, before China can hope to attain that condition of stability and peace without which there can be no permanent reconstruction of her shattered polity; but we need not be surprised if the China that emerges victorious from the political chaos of to-day is found to have quietly gathered up and loyally preserved many of the traditions of imperial China which the triumphant Revolution was supposed to have torn in fragments and trampled under foot.

It is improbable, on the whole, that the reorganised Chinese State will show hostility to the religious idea as such; it will not, we may assume, waste its strength in a foolish and necessarily futile attempt to suppress the religious

<sup>1</sup> Written in January 1913.



## 8 THE "THREE RELIGIONS" OF CHINA [CH.

intimate connection between ethics and statesmanship in this chosen land of moral philosophers, in spite of the fact — inevitable in China as elsewhere — that practice has not always conformed to precept. A Chinese Government which disclaimed full responsibility for the moral welfare and guidance of the people, or which confined its activities in this direction to the occasional amendment of its penal code, would be regarded as having definitely cut itself adrift from the most sacred traditions of past ages, and would have to face the hostility of all the conservative sections of Chinese society.

The separation between religion and politics will not necessarily, in China, affect the traditional intimacy between politics and morals. In spite of the references to supernatural powers and agencies, and to religious ceremonies, in the old-fashioned Chinese proclamations and rescripts, it is undoubtedly the fact that in China the distinction between creed and morals—or perhaps we should say their separability—has for ages been tacitly recognized. The view that sound morality is impossible except in alliance with a definite religious creed, belief in which is therefore an essential condition of good citizenship, is a view which has never been accepted by Chinese thinkers or rulers. It is a curious and instructive fact that while in the West—under the influence of a privileged and intolerant Church—ethics and institutional religion are regarded, or were till



i.] RELIGION AND MORALS 9

recently regarded, as inseparably linked together, in China the association has been rather between ethics and politics. This is part of the practical outcome of the national recognition of Confucius as the supreme Teacher. It is in Confucianism that we find the closest approach to a fusion between ethical and political ideals, and it was Confucius who, while showing a genial tolerance towards the tenets of popular religion, recommended his disciples to consider and minister to the ascertainable needs of men before perplexing themselves over the problematical demands and requirements of the gods.

According to the educational theory which in parts of Europe has for some time dominated the relations between religion and the State, definite religious instruction forms no necessary part of the content of ethical education and has no vital relation to moral conduct; but it is usually agreed, nevertheless, that respect should be paid to the religious idea, and to spiritual interpretations of life, and that tolerance should be shown to all forms of religious expression.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Cf.* the speech by the French deputy at the Moral Education Congress held in London in September 1908. Canon Lilley has more recently (August 1912) told us that in France "a new sense of religious need is everywhere making itself felt throughout the national life." This is very probably true: man's religious instincts will not suffer themselves to be extinguished at the bidding of a political party. But a revival of religion does not necessarily imply a revival of belief in a theological system or a readiness to subscribe to definite credal formulas. The French intellect once emancipated from ecclesiastical domination in spiritual matters is not likely to return of its own accord to a condition of spiritual servitude. France is

## 10 THE "THREE RELIGIONS" OF CHINA [CH.

This is no place for an enquiry into the justice or adequacy of such views, but that they are in entire harmony with the letter and spirit of Confucian teachings is a fact which, if it were fully realized, might go far towards bringing about a permanent reconciliation between the moral and educational and to a great extent even the political aims of the "progressive" and the conservative parties in China. It has long been recognized that Confucianism is an ethico-political rather than a religious cult.<sup>1</sup> Such definitely religious elements as the system contains, including those resulting from the elevation of Confucius to quasi-divine rank, might be got rid of, or might be ignored by the State, without gross violence being done to any deep-rooted popular prejudices; for the ritual solemnities that took place at regular intervals in the Confucian temples were always the affair of the emperor and his officials, and their suppression

growing restless because she is realizing the insufficiency of a civilization which concentrates its whole attention on material interests and is contemptuous of the needs of the spirit. As for China, she, too, will discover, sooner or later, that Western civilization, in spite of its outward splendour and its alluring promises, is but too prone to pamper the body and starve the soul; though whether China will find it impossible to satisfy her spiritual needs except by throwing away her own spiritual heritage and adopting that of another race, is a different question.

<sup>1</sup> It is true, no doubt, that Confucian statesmen have been guilty from time to time of persecuting Buddhism and other cults which were, or were believed to be, irreconcilable with Confucian teachings; but such persecutions have been undertaken on political and social grounds, not with the aim of crushing or penalizing religious opinions as such.