

NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY



SOCRATES,

BUDDHA,

AND

JESUS.

BY

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SOCRATES, BUDDHA, AND JESUS.

THREE more imposing and memorable figures of antiquity than Socrates, Buddha, and Jesus it would be impossible to name. Each of them religious reformers in his day; each working with an unselfish patriotism to improve the condition of his fellows; each proclaiming high moral principles, and leaving to posterity an example worthy of ardent imitation; while, in addition, two of them—Socrates and Jesus—were persecuted by bigots, and unjustly condemned to death for having the manliness and courage to advocate unpopular opinions. These great reformers are types of the men to whom the world is indebted for its social, moral, and religious advancement; and, though by some they are elevated to a position beyond their merits, and worshipped as veritable gods, their lives afford interesting study to Freethinkers, who, in estimating the value of their work for humanity, are free to accept all that is good in their teaching, while wisely casting aside all that is false and harmful.

Our first character,

SOCRATES,

probably one of the greatest philosophers the world has ever known, was born at Athens in the year 469 B.C., and, after a life of great activity, both intellectually and physically, died the death of a martyr, at the ripe age of seventy, in the year 399 B.C. His father, Sophroniscus, was a sculptor, who had performed some good work in his noble profession; and, being desirous that his son should follow the same calling, had him specially trained for that purpose. Although Socrates early achieved considerable success as a sculptor, he was not destined to work at the noble art for long. A wealthy

Athenian, named Crito, was so struck by his charming manner, so impressed by his intellectual strength, that he determined to have him thoroughly educated, with a view of giving him a better opportunity of shining in the world. His academical studies completed, Socrates abandoned the art of sculpture for philosophy, and, among his most ardent disciples, succeeded in winning Crito, his worthy benefactor.

The personal appearance of Socrates was certainly far from favourable to the philosopher, who is described as a "brawny, squab, ugly man;" but sensible persons do not judge by outward form alone. "Handsome is who handsome does" is an old maxim, the truth of which most of us acknowledge; and assuredly, in the case of Socrates, no nobler soul could have been set in more uncomely frame. His extreme ugliness was matter for daily comment. Like all wise men, however, Socrates despised those who merely judged him by his appearance, and not by speech and conduct. In his habits he was consistently temperate, esteeming this as one of the highest virtues that belong to man. By temperance Socrates did not understand merely moderation in the use of drink; he meant by it much more than this: to him the term included temperateness in eating, drinking, attire, and, above and before all, in speaking—in fact, moderation in all things. Some malignant opponents calumniate him by declaring that, on one occasion, at a public banquet, Socrates indulged so excessively that, while regular "old toppers" had succumbed to the large quantity of drink they had consumed, and dropped helplessly drunk under the table, he sat complacently in his seat and drank on. These petty traducers of the reputations of great men do not boldly declare that this philosopher, like many other estimable men, from bishops downwards, on one occasion got drunk, though they insinuate as much.

Socrates married; but, unfortunately for him, his choice was anything but a happy one, for in Xanthippe, his "partner for life," he found nothing but a perverse, scolding woman, who did her best to render his life as miserable as possible. No doubt Xanthippe could find many defenders among modern representatives of female superiority. But, in plain truth, Xanthippe was a shrew.

Though naturally of an irascible temperament, Socrates bore his wife's scoldings with remarkable coolness and forbearance. It is recorded that on one occasion the coolness of his bearing, during one of her severest torrents of abuse, so exasperated Xanthippe that she emptied a vessel of water over him, upon which he remarked: "Did I not say that Xanthippe was thundering, and would soon rain?" On another occasion, on being asked by a friend what induced him to marry such a shrewish woman as his wife, he wittily replied: "Those who wish to become skilled in horsemanship generally select the most spirited horses: after being able to bridle those, they believe they can bridle all others. Now, as it is my wish to live and converse with men, I married this woman, being firmly convinced that, in case I should be enabled to endure her, I should be enabled to endure all others." But, though Socrates himself thus playfully condemned his wife's temper, he was exceedingly careful that her children should show her proper respect, and promptly rebuked her son, Lamprocles, for deviating from his duty in this respect.

The ordinary conversation of Socrates was rather peculiar. He mixed with the workers in tan-pit and brass-foundry, and seemed to take a strange interest in their employment. So that Plato remarks: "If any one will listen to the talk of Socrates, it will appear to him extremely ridiculous; the phrases and expressions which he employs fold around his exterior the skin, as it were, of a rude and wanton satyr. He is always talking about brass-founders and leather-cutters and skin-dressers; and this is his perpetual custom, so that any dull and unobservant person might easily laugh at his discourse. But if any one should see it opened, as it were, and get within the sense of his words, he would then find that they, alone of all that enters into the mind of man to utter, had a profound and persuasive meaning, and that they were most divine; and that they presented to the mind innumerable images of every excellence, and that they tended towards objects of the highest moment, or rather towards all that he who seeks the possession of what is supremely beautiful and good need regard as essential to the accomplishment of his ambition."

Nothing seemed to give this philosopher greater plea-

sure than to mingle with the people, and glean as much information from them as possible. He never pretended to be a teacher; and when, in the Market Place, he encountered the learned sophists in debate, he modestly disclaimed all pretensions to knowledge, saying that he came to learn and not to teach. Upon subjects that most people thought themselves competent to speak upon Socrates showed how little even the most learned knew respecting them. He would ask his opponents what they meant by "justice," "piety," "law," "democracy;" and he invariably found that those who pretended to know most respecting these things knew positively nothing. Socrates was called wise; but, said the philosopher: "I am not wise; yet in one thing I am wiser than my fellows: I know how ignorant I am, whereas they are ignorant how ignorant they are."

Though the Athenian philosopher devoted a great deal of time to the discussion of important problems, he did not neglect his manifold duties as a citizen. Not only did he perform every duty devolving upon him in relation to his family and the State, but, as Plato has declared, he comported himself with great bravery in three battles, and won for himself the admiration of all who beheld his incomparable heroism under trying circumstances. Yet this was the man who, when ripe with years, old in the service of mankind as teacher, philosopher, and guide, was brought before the tribunal to answer the charge of "impiety and corruption"! Socrates treated the charge with contempt. It is true he had denied the Athenian gods, and that, perhaps, might be construed into impiety; but he believed in the great unseen God of the universe, who directed him in all his actions. As to the charge of "corrupting the minds of youth," there was really nothing in it; and Socrates steadfastly refused from the first either to make any defence himself, or to allow any of his friends to engage an orator to make one for him. And so he was condemned to suffer death! After his sentence had been pronounced the philosopher opened his mouth, and delivered, perhaps, the most eloquent and touching address on record, which speech the reader will find in Plato's immortal "Apology." One thing all can admire in this address. Socrates told his judges that he would

“sooner die having spoken after his manner than speak in their manner and live.” Thirty days after the condemnation Socrates drank of the hemlock, and died as quietly as one who—

“Wraps the drapery of his couch about him,
And lies down to pleasant dreams.”

Socrates was undoubtedly a Theist, though the deity in whom he believed was of a very ethereal kind. The philosopher frequently admonished men to talk less about the gods, and to concern themselves more about things of which they had positive knowledge, rather than proclaim their wisdom in matters celestial, while in terrestrial matters they were superlatively ignorant. Socrates regarded ignorance as the true source of all misery and crime, and knowledge as the only means of attaining virtue. To him virtue meant the highest happiness of which man was capable. To use Grote's words: “Socrates resolved all virtue into knowledge, all vice into ignorance and folly. To do right was the only way to impart happiness, or the least degree of unhappiness compatible with a given situation. Now, this was precisely what every one wished for, only that many persons from ignorance took the wrong road, and no man was wise enough always to take the right. But as no man was willingly his own enemy, so no man ever did wrong wilfully: it was not because he was not fully or correctly informed of the consequences of his actions, so that the proper remedy to apply was enlarged teaching of consequences and improved judgment.”

In this, then, we see the groundwork of Socrates's theory of ethics. But the philosopher saw that it was not enough to teach men that they must do right; they must be taught further that every action carries with it consequences which, whether good or evil, fall inevitably upon the actor as well as those by whom he is surrounded.

The life of Socrates supplies us with an illustration of the power of knowledge to direct man aright in all his actions towards his fellow men: in him Freethinker and religionist alike will find much to admire, much that is worthy of emulation. Faults he possessed, no doubt; but no man is free from them. When we reflect, however,

upon his unselfish career, his high moral principles, his great wisdom and invincible heroism; when we remember that it was he who said: "A man who is good for anything ought not to calculate the chance of living or dying; he ought only to consider whether in doing anything he is doing right or wrong, acting the part of a good man or a bad. For wherever a man's place is, whether the place which he has chosen or that in which he has been placed by a commander, there ought he to remain in the hour of danger; he should not think of death, or of anything but disgrace"—when we remember all this, we cannot refrain from paying him the "homage of our admiration and love."

Come we now to our second character, Gautama, called

BUDDHA.

More than five hundred years before the birth of Christ, at Kapitavattu was born the great Indian philosopher and reformer. Of Gautama's early career little or nothing is known, except that in connection with it there are various legends, bearing a remarkable resemblance to those which surround the lives of other religious teachers and reformers—examples of which will be given hereafter. It is pretty clear, however, that Gautama came of good parentage, and that he received an excellent intellectual and moral training, though the common Buddhist view of his descent from a long succession of Buddhas may be doubted. India, six centuries before the Christian era, had already attained a high degree of civilisation.

Learned Hindoos concerned themselves with the study of philosophy and religion. Schools of philosophy were established, in which considerable freedom obtained in regard to the discussion of theological and religious questions. Brahmanism, the prevailing religion, had millions of adherents; but it was ultimately superseded by Buddhism, of which Gautama was the founder.

As a young man, Gautama was so profoundly impressed by the great suffering and misery with which human beings were afflicted that he left his home, and for some time lived in seclusion, firmly resolved, if possible, to find out the cause of this great evil, with a

view of alleviating the sufferings of his fellows. He had not studied for many years before he was convinced that nature, at bottom, was radically wrong ; that for sentient beings life was an inevitable struggle, with which pain and misery were indissolubly connected.

Like many other religious reformers, Gautama was a pessimist. To him, nature did not appear to be the work of a deity, for he was not mentally blind to the manifold evils in the universe, which it seemed inconsistent to ascribe to a being combining the attributes of infinite wisdom and goodness with that of infinite power. Buddhism, as a philosophy, is based upon the indisputable principle that concerning the existence of God and the reality of a future existence nothing whatever is known.

The first sermon of Gautama is, perhaps, one of the most remarkable discourses ever delivered by man. It embraces, in truth, the true principles of a Secular philosophy, and is the one great theme upon which Buddha constantly spoke. Dr. Rhys Davids, who has done more than any other man in England to disseminate a knowledge of the teachings of Buddha among the people, thus translates Gautama's Sermon on the Mount :—
"There are two extremes," said the Buddha, "which the man who devotes himself to the higher life ought not to follow—the habitual practice, on the one hand, of those things whose attraction depends upon the passions, and especially of sensuality (a low and Pagan way of seeking gratification unworthy, unprofitable, and fit only for the worldly-minded) ; and the habitual practice, on the other hand, of asceticism (or self-mortification), which is not only painful, but as unworthy and unprofitable as the other. But the Buddha (or Tathagata) has discovered a middle path, which avoids these two extremes—a path which opens the eyes and bestows understanding, which leads to peace of mind, to the higher wisdom, to full enlightenment—in a word, to Nirvana. And this path is the noble eight-fold path—that is to say, right views, high aims, kindly speech, upright conduct, a harmless livelihood, perseverance in well-doing, intellectual activity, and earnest thought."

"Birth," continued Buddha, "is attended with pain ;

and so are decay and disease and death. Union with the unpleasant is painful and separation from the pleasant ; and any craving that is unsatisfied is a condition of sorrow. Now, all this amounts, in short, to this : that wherever there are the conditions of individuality there are the conditions of sorrow. This is the first truth—the truth about sorrow. The cause of sorrow is the thirst or craving which causes the renewal of individual existence—is accompanied by evil, and is ever seeking satisfaction—now here, now there—that is to say, the craving evil for sensual gratifications, or for continued existence, or for the cessation of existence. This is the noble truth concerning the origin of sorrow. Deliverance from sorrow is the complete destruction, the laying aside, the getting rid of, the being free from, the harbouring no longer of this passionate craving. This is the noble truth concerning the destruction of sorrow. The path which leads to the destruction of sorrow is this noble eight-fold path alone—that is to say, right views, high aims, kindly speech, upright conduct, a harmless livelihood, perseverance in well-doing, intellectual activity, and earnest thought. This is the noble truth concerning the path which leads to the destruction of sorrow.”

This sermon, short as it is, contains for man the whole philosophy of life. Socrates might talk of the “great spirit” which guided him in all his actions ; Jesus might preach of man’s duty to his “heavenly father ;” but Gautama assuredly was the first great teacher to proclaim the true mission of man to be to understand and reform himself. For some years Gautama journeyed from place to place, preaching his noble doctrine, that man was to be judged only according to the quality of his deeds ; and the great teacher was gladly welcomed by the common people, among whom he made many converts. Not only did Gautama teach his disciples what they must do to attain to true happiness ; he also told them how to avoid present misery. They were to refrain from drinking intoxicants, from lying, stealing, all impurity, and from self-destruction. Among their chief virtues were to be purity of conduct, forbearance and fortitude in the time of trouble. Thus Gautama proclaimed a great Secular faith—a salvation for man on earth without

belief in God or desire for a future life. What constituted Buddha's view of true divinity has been well expressed in the following stanza :—

“ Pure men and modest, kind and upright men,
These are the so-called divine beings in the world.”

When Gautama came to die he called together his disciples and inquired of them if they had any doubts or misgivings concerning his teachings, for he was anxious that it should not be afterwards said that “ our teacher was face to face with us, and we could not bring ourselves to inquire of the Blessed One when we were face to face with him.” But his disciples were silent. Then, turning to them, Gautama said: “ Behold, now, brethren, I exhort you, saying, ‘ Decay is inherent in all component things—work out your salvation with diligence ! ’ ” And so he died. His life's work, however, lives : his teachings to-day are being brought more and more under the notice of earnest and intelligent men and women, who recognise in them the foundation upon which a grand Secular “ Religion of the Future ” may be erected—a religion broad enough to embrace all men, of whatever nationality or colour, within its all-expansive grasp : a religion that has its deepest roots in humanity's great heart, and for its sole end the peace, prosperity, and happiness of the human race.

In respect to our third character,

JESUS,

three theories are advanced :—

First. That he was the “ very God.” This is the theory of the Church. Some Churchmen, however, say that he was partly God and partly man ; but these are unable to distinguish the Divine from the human element in him.

Secondly. A second school contend that the Jesus of the Gospels never existed ; that he was only a myth.

Thirdly. All the Jews, and most Rationalists, hold that Jesus was a man, and only a man.

Was Jesus God ? Can an infinite Deity transform himself into a finite man ? Can infinite attributes be compressed into a finite compass ? Can an eternal God

be born, or die, or raise himself from the dead? Can the immutable change, or the all-knowing increase his knowledge? If Jesus were God, it is strange he did not say so in language of unmistakable clearness. Strange that he spoke of a God who was in heaven, and who was other than himself. Strange that he was afraid to die, and prayed that his "heavenly father" should let the bitter cup pass from him, when he must have known either that he could not die, or, if he could, he could easily raise himself to life again.

The theory of the Divinity of Jesus rests entirely upon faith, for no amount of evidence would be sufficient to demonstrate a finite being to be an infinite god in any sense of the word. Those who maintain that the Jesus of the Gospels is not an historical character at all stand on much more reasonable and solid ground than the Christians. They contend that the miracle-stories that form the groundwork of the life of the Nazarene carpenter, and without which Jesus would stand on the same common level with all great religious reformers, have been taken from certain traditions relating to other great men, who lived hundreds of years before. For instance, it is stated in the Gospels that Jesus was born of a virgin, whose name was Mary. Gautama is said to have been born of a virgin, too, and her name was Maya. Jesus was announced by angels—so was Gautama; endowed with prophetic vision—so was Gautama; baptised with water and afterwards with fire—so was Gautama. At the time of the birth of Jesus a number of children were slaughtered in order that he might be among them; the same is said of Gautama. Jesus had long arguments with learned doctors, and amazed them with his wisdom—so did Gautama; was tempted by a devil—so was Gautama; fasted for many days—so did Gautama; began to preach at the age of thirty—so did Gautama; delivered a sermon on the mount—so did Gautama; was hung on a cross—so was *not* Gautama, but so it is alleged was Christna. In further support of the theory that Jesus was not an historical character, they contend that there is no evidence of the existence of the "four Gospels" until the middle of the second century; that it cannot be shown that the authors whose names they

bear really wrote them, and that nobody knows when or where they were written.

The third school say that there is naturally great difficulty in proving that Jesus was an historical personage; that he lived so many years ago that we are bound to rely, in a large measure, upon tradition: that the accuracy of history much more modern might be just as successfully impugned, because, before the printing press came into use, the people had to depend upon manuscripts, which were passed from one to another, and altered in a variety of ways, and were only valuable to the learned few, who used them for their own purposes. Moreover, they contend that it is much more reasonable to suppose that the man Jesus really lived; that he went about doing good; that he preached unpopular opinions, and that he was finally condemned as a blasphemer and put to death—than to believe that some Christian divine had genius enough to imagine the character, or goodness enough to formulate the doctrines which it is alleged Jesus proclaimed. It is, they further maintain, a singular thing that great thinkers and philosophers, like Voltaire, Paine, Strauss, Renan, John Stuart Mill, and others, should acknowledge the historical character of Jesus, if there be really so little evidence to support it as some imagine.

For the sake of argument, then, let it be acknowledged that Jesus really lived; that he was a good man, and did the best he could to enhance the well-being of his fellows. In what respect was he better than Socrates? Was he wiser or more virtuous? Did he fulfil his manifold duties better, or even as well? Was he a better citizen? Was he as diligent a student, or as wise a teacher? Or was he a better, a more truly divine man, than Gautama? Was he wiser, more virtuous, or more benevolent? In what respect was the goodness of Jesus superior to that of Gautama? Wherein were his doctrines better? In all sincerity, let the Christians answer these questions; and let not superstitious Freethinkers, who still cling to the notion that Jesus was the "divinest" man that ever lived, evade the difficulty.

Let the philosophy of Socrates be compared with that of Jesus; let the doctrines of Gautama be read side by side with those of the Nazarene; let the lives of

the three great reformers be fairly compared and contrasted, and it will be found that, in some respects, Socrates and Buddha are superior to Jesus. Space will not admit of a lengthy comparison of the doctrines of these men ; but it may be said that, while there is much that is good and true in the teachings of Jesus, there is also much that is exceedingly harmful and misleading. Socrates taught that all error and all misery sprang from ignorance, and sought to remove the evil. Jesus, apparently, did not mind how ignorant his followers were, providing their ignorance was allied with faith. He would rather that they should not be wise if their wisdom brought with it grave doubts and misgivings. Jesus said : " Love your enemies," which no man can do ; Gautama said : " Be just even to your foes"—

" Have good will
To all that lives, letting unkindness die,
And greed and wrath."

Jesus said : " If any man come unto me, and hate not his father and mother and wife and children and brethren and sisters—yea, and his whole life, he cannot be my disciple." It should be remembered, too, that it was Jesus who taught the frightful doctrine of belief and salvation, and disbelief and damnation—a blot sufficiently large to obliterate the good influence of his general teaching. Nothing that Socrates or Gautama ever said was half as bad as this. To the Secularist, however, it seems the highest wisdom to select the good teachings of each of these great men. We admire and love them for their wisdom, purity, and heroism ; but we are not blind to their shortcomings, and we should not be honest if we failed to recognise and acknowledge them. No man is perfect—perfection belongeth not to humanity. Socrates had his faults, and no man would more readily own them ; so, too, had Gautama and Jesus ; but, whatever their failings—and, when everything is considered, they were not numerous—they at least endeavoured, to the best of their ability, to raise their fellows above the common level, and to point to that higher life to which every noble soul aspires, and for the realisation of which every good man and every pure woman are arduously working. I agree with Pascal that " a man's virtue is not to be

measured by his great attempts, but by his common actions." Every action in our lives is important, and we shall be strengthened by our study of the great characters of the past only in proportion as we grasp this undeniable truth. Let us never flinch from performing our duty—the small task with the same enthusiastic fidelity as the large one. Allured on by the grand achievements of the world's heroes; sustained and encouraged by the knowledge that truth and justice must ultimately prevail; guided and directed in all things by the imperishable light of reason; sharing with mankind the joys and sorrows of life; diffusing knowledge here, helping a fallen one there; being gentle to the suffering, kind to the poor, and just to all—this indeed constitutes real greatness, of which Longfellow sings:—

“Lives of great men all remind us
We can make our lives sublime,
And, departing, leave behind us
Footprints on the sands of time—
Footprints that perhaps another,
Sailing on life's solemn main
A forlorn and shipwreck'd brother,
Seeing, shall take heart again.”

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