

THE  
INFLUENCE  
OF BUDDHISM  
ON PRIMITIVE  
CHRISTIANITY

A. LILLIE

# **The Influence of Buddhism on Primitive Christianity**

[The Influence of Buddhism on Primitive Christianity.](#)

[PREFACE.](#)

[INTRODUCTORY.](#)

[CHAPTER I.](#)

[CHAPTER II.](#)

[CHAPTER III.](#)

[THE GREAT BANQUET OF BUDDHA.](#)

[CHAPTER IV.](#)

[CHAPTER V.](#)

[CHAPTER VI.](#)

[CHAPTER VII.](#)

[CHAPTER VIII.](#)

[CHAPTER IX.](#)

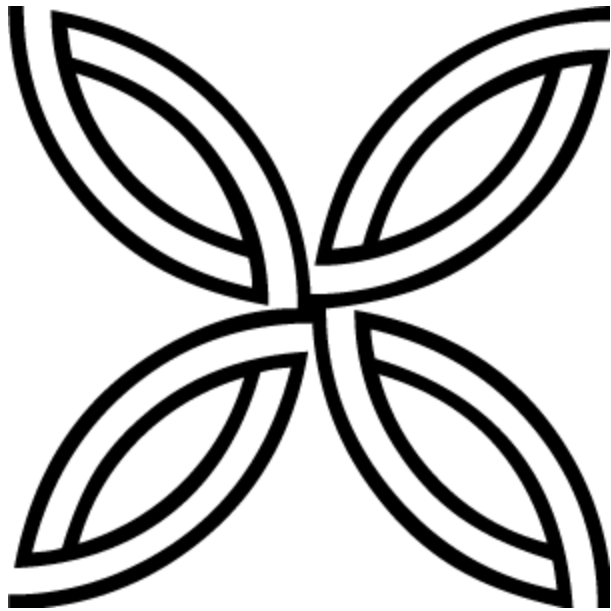
[CHAPTER X.](#)

[CHAPTER XI.](#)

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# **The Influence of Buddhism on Primitive Christianity**

**Arthur Lillie**



# PREFACE.

A volume that proves that much of the New Testament is parable rather than history will shock many readers, but from the days of Origen and Clement of Alexandria to the days of Swedenborg the same thing has been affirmed. The proof that this parabolic writing has been derived from a previous religion will shock many more. The biographer of Christ has one sole duty, namely, to produce the actual historical Jesus. In the New Testament there are two Christs, an Essene and an anti-Essene Christ, and all modern biographers who have sought to combine the two have failed necessarily. It is the contention of this work that Christ was an Essene monk; that Christianity was Essenism; and that Essenism was due, as Dean Mansel contended, to the Buddhist missionaries "who visited Egypt within two generations of the time of Alexander the Great." ("Gnostic Heresies," p. 31.)

The Reformation, in the view of Macaulay, was the struggle of layman *versus* monk. In consequence, many good Protestants are shocked to hear such a term applied to the founder of their creed. But here I must point out one fact. In the Essene monasteries, as in the Buddhist, there was no life vow. This made the monastery less a career than a school for spiritual initiation. In modern monasteries St. John of the Cross can dream sweet dreams of God in one cell, and his neighbour may be Friar Tuck, but to both the monastery is a prison. This alters the complexion of the celibacy question, and so does the fact that the Christians were fighting a mighty battle with the priesthoods. The Son of Man envied the security of the crannies of the

"fox." He called his opponents "wolves." His flock after his death met with closed doors for fear of the Jews. The "pure gospel," says the Clementine Homilies (ch. ii. 17), was "sent abroad secretly" after the removal to Pella. The new sect, not as Christians but as Essenes, were tortured, killed, hunted down. To such, "two coats," "wives," daily wine celebrations were scarcely fitted.

Twice has Buddhism invaded the West, once at the birth of Christianity, and once when the Templars brought home from Palestine Cabbalism, Sufism, Freemasonry. And our zealous missionaries in Ceylon and elsewhere, by actively translating Buddhist books to refute them, have produced a result which is a little startling. Once more Buddhism is advancing with giant strides. Germany, America, England are overrun with it. M. Léon de Rosny, a professor of the Sorbonne, announces that in Paris there are 30,000 Buddhists at least. A French frigate came back from China the other day with one-third of the crew converted Buddhists. Schopenhauer admits that he got the philosophy which now floods Germany from a perusal of English translations of Buddhist books. Even the nonsense of Madame Blavatsky has a little genuine Buddhism at the bottom, which gives it a brief life.

The religions of earth mean strife and partisan watch-cries, partisan symbols, partisan gestures, partisan clothes. But as the daring climber mounts the cool steep, the anathemas of priests fall faintly on the ear, and the largest cathedrals grow dim, in a pure region where Wesley and Fenelon, Mirza the Sufi and Swedenborg, Spinoza and Amiel, can shake hands. If this new study of Buddhism has shown that the two great Teachers of the world taught much the same doctrine, we have distinctly a gain and not a loss. That religion was the religion of the individual, as discriminated from religion by body corporate.



# INTRODUCTORY.

In the *Revue des Deux Mondes*, July 15th, 1888, M. Émile Burnouf has an article entitled "Le Bouddhisme en Occident."

M. Burnouf holds that the Christianity of the Council of Nice was due to a conflict between the Aryan and the Semite, between Buddhism and Mosaism:—

"History and comparative mythology are teaching every day more plainly that creeds grow slowly up. None come into the world ready-made, and as if by magic. The origin of events is lost in the infinite. A great Indian poet has said, 'The beginning of things evades us; their end evades us also. We see only the middle.'"

M. Burnouf asserts that the Indian origin of Christianity is no longer contested: "It has been placed in full light by the researches of scholars, and notably English scholars, and by the publication of the original texts.... In point of fact, for a long time, folks had been struck with the resemblances, or rather the identical elements contained in Christianity, and Buddhism. Writers of the firmest faith and most sincere piety have admitted them. In the last century these analogies were set down to the Nestorians, but since then the science of Oriental chronology has come into being, and proved that Buddha is many years anterior to Nestorius and Jesus. Thus the Nestorian theory had to be given up. But a thing may be posterior to another without proving derivation. So the problem remained unsolved until recently, when the pathway that Buddhism followed was traced, step by step, from India to Jerusalem."

What are the facts upon which scholars abroad are basing the conclusions here announced? I have been asked by the present publishers to give a short and popular answer to this question. The theory of this book, stated in a few

words, is that at the date of King Asoka (B.C. 260), Persia, Greece, Egypt, Palestine had been powerfully influenced by Buddhist propagandism.

Buddha, as we know from the Rupnath Rock inscription, died 470 years before Christ. He announced before he died that his Dharma would endure five hundred years.

(Oldenburg, "Buddhism," p. 327.) He announced also that his successor would be Maitreya, the Buddha of "Brotherly Love." In consequence, at the date of the Christian era, many lands were on the tip-toe of expectation. "According to the prophecy of Zoradascht," says the First Gospel of the Infancy, "the wise men came to Palestine," expecting, probably, Craosha, as the Jews expected Messiah. The time passed. Jesus was executed. His followers dispersed in consternation. The conception that he was the real Messiah was apparently long in taking definite form.

First came a book of "sayings" only. Then a gospel was constructed—the Gospel of the Hebrews—of which only a small fragment can be restored. This was the basis of many other gospels. At the date of Irenæus (180 A.D.) they were very numerous. (Hœr i. 19.) As only the Old Testament, at that time, was considered the Bible, the composers of these gospels apparently thought it no great sin to draw on the Alexandrine library of Buddhist books for much of their matter, it being a maxim of both the Essenes and the early Christians that a holy book was more allegory than history. But before I compare the Buddhist and Christian narratives, I must say a word about the early religion of the Jews.



# CHAPTER I.

*Moses.*

Until within the last forty years the Old Testament has been practically a sealed book.

It found interpreters, no doubt—two great groups.

The first group pointed to its useless and arbitrary edicts, and pronounced them the inventions of priests inspired by fraud and greed.

The second group practically admitted the arbitrary and useless nature of most of the edicts, but maintained that they were given by the All-wise, in a book penned by His finger, to miraculously prepare a nation distinct from the other nations of the earth, for a special purpose. They were "types" of a higher revelation, a "better covenant."

Practically, with both of these interpreters Mosaism was a pure comedy.

But comparative mythology, unborn yesterday, is telling a different story. It shows that the religion of the Jews, far from having been a distinct religion miraculously given to a peculiar people, had the same rites and gods as the creeds of its Semitic neighbours. It shows us these Semites, or descendants of Shem, in two great groups, differing much in language and religion. It shows us the southern Semites, the Arabs, the Himyarites, the Ethiopians. It shows us the northern group, the Babylonians or Chaldeans, the Assyrians, the Arameans, the Canaanites, the Hebrews. It shows us their gods, El and Yahve, and Astarte of Sidon; and going a step back shows how the Semites borrowed from an earlier civilisation, that of the Acadians, the yellow-faced Mongols who seem to have preceded the white races everywhere. "The Semite borrowed the old Acadian pantheon *en bloc*," says Professor Sayce ("Ancient Empires," p. 151).

But the work of the archæologist and the anthropologist has been still more important.

The former has suddenly revealed to us chapters in the history of human experience hitherto undreamt of. He has allowed us to peer far, far into the past, to see man at an incalculable distance.

Thousands and thousands of years before Cain and Abel we see the palæolithic man, "dolichocephalic and with prominent jaws," pursue the great migrations of urus, reindeer, mammoth, and the thick-nose rhinoceros from Cumberland to Algeria, and Algeria to Cumberland, passing dry-shod to France, and from Sicily to Africa. He is naked. He is armed with a javelin with a flint head. He is an animal, struggling for survival with other animals. He eats his foes as wolves eat vanquished wolves. To extract the marrow from their bones he cracks them with his poor flint "celt" or "*langue du chat*;" and these cracked human bones 240,000 years afterwards are found in caves and in beds of gravel and sand, and brick earth, and tell their story. Some are charred, which proves that the notion of sacrifice to an unseen being was due to him.

To this poor savage our debt is quite incalculable.

1. He invented the missile. This made the monkey dominant in the animal world. He became a man.

2. He invented religion.

Here the valuable work of the anthropologist chimes in. He has collected the records of ancient and modern savages, and compared them with the records of caves and beds of gravel. In this way he has allowed us to peer into the mind of the stone-using savage, who lived at least 240,000 years ago. And the Bible of the Jews, from being a text-book for sermons which bewildered the moral sense even of children, has become, for the study of the great evolution of religion, one of the most valuable books in the world. It bridges the gap between the neolithic or polished-stone-using man and Christ and Mahomet.

Before we go further, let us say a word about the authorship of the Old Testament.

The Books of Moses were compiled by Ezra, at the date of Artaxerxes, the King of the Persians.

It is to be observed that this is not an extravagant guess of German theorists. It is stated authoritatively by Clement of Alexandria. (Strom. i. 22.) Irenæus, Tertullian, Eusebius, Jerome, and Basil give the same testimony. But a greater authority is behind. It is known that Christ and His disciples, and the early fathers, used the Septuagint or Greek version of the Bible, and Dr. Giles goes so far as to say that there is no hint amongst the latter of the knowledge of even the existence of the Hebrew version. In this Bible (2 Esdras xiv.), it is announced distinctly that the "law was burnt;" and that Ezra, aided by the Holy Ghost and "wonderful visions of the night," wrote down "all that hath been done in the world from the beginning which was written in thy law."

Let us write down a few dates from the accepted chronology.

	B.C.
Adam	4004
Abraham	1996
Moses	1571
Nebuchadnezzar leads Jews in captivity to Babylon	587
Jews restored	517
Ezra	457

Thus the story of Adam in its present form was written down 3547 years after it had occurred. The story of Abraham was written down 1539 years after it occurred.

The transactions between Yahve and Moses were written down 1114 years after they occurred.

To gauge the full significance of this, let us call to mind that the poet Tennyson a few years back compiled from old ballads and chronicles the story of Arthur, a king separated from him by about the same gap of time that parted Ezra and Moses. The poet was honest, according to our ideas of honesty, and sought to give a faithful picture of Arthur's court—with a success that is only moderate. But Ezra was not honest, that is, in our sense of the word. His nation had been a captive of the Babylonians, and had been released from slavery and the lash by Cyrus. In consequence, the molten bulls of the temples of the Jewish taskmasters stank in his nostrils, and led him to advocate the severe nakedness of the Persian fire-altar. And he proposed to do this, not so much by writing new books as by altering the old records and legends, and proclaiming his views through the mouths of the time-honoured patriarchs.

But all this involved a grotesque inference that he seems not to have anticipated. If Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Solomon, knew in their secret hearts that the one fierce hatred of Yahve was the graven image, their assiduous idolatry spread over 1500 years must have been a pure comedy, intended to insult Yahve, not to conciliate him.

What is the object of the religion of the savage? Anthropology has recently answered this question.

The religion of the savage is a slavish reign of terror. His rites and prohibitions are a vast apparatus of magic, to obtain food for the tribe, and safety from the plague and the foeman. In language borrowed from the New Zealander, it is a Great Taboo.

Early man found himself in the presence of the mighty forces of nature. The thunder roared. The lightning struck his rude shelter. A hurricane ruined his crops. The fever or the foeman came upon him. He had to guess the meaning of all this. Some dead chief, much feared in life, is seen in a

dream, or his ghost appears. He is silent and looks very sad. What is the cause of his sorrow? Want of food. The early savage knows no other. A storm, a pestilence vexes the clan, and the chief appears again, looking angry. The two facts are connected together. Beasts are slaughtered, and perhaps human victims, and placed near his cairn. The pestilence ceases. In this way the Hottentots have made an ancestor, Tsui Goab, into their god. Indeed, ancestor worship is the basis of all religions. But by and by, to resume our illustration, new calamities vex the tribe. Tsui Goab is angry once more. Fresh efforts are made to soothe him. Soon the Taboo develops into a number of complicated superstitions.

"The savage," says Sir John Lubbock, "is nowhere free. All over the world his daily life is regulated by a complicated, and often most inconvenient set of customs (as forcible as laws), of quaint prohibitions and privileges.... The Australians are governed by a code of rules and a set of customs which form one of the most cruel tyrannies that has ever, perhaps, existed on the face of the earth." ("Origin of Civilisation," p. 304.)

"The lives of savages," says Mr. Lang, "are bound by the most closely-woven fetters of custom. The simplest acts are 'tabooed.' A strict code regulates all intercourse." ("Custom and Myth.," p. 72.)

Now, unless this system is clearly understood, Mosaism will remain a riddle. It is to be observed that Ezra, far from having relaxed the reign of terror of the Great Taboo of savage survival, had enlarged the number of petty faults and superstitions; and the Levites and Pharisees at the date of Christ, far from considering all this a comedy, were the most stiff-necked of believers. It results that a new religion that proposed to ignore the chief edicts of the Taboo must have come from some strong outside influence.

The two great foes of the savage, as Mr. Frazer shows in his able work, the "Golden Bough," were the ghost and the

necromancer. The first was deemed all-powerful, and the second sought to use this power to help the tribe and injure its rivals. His art was that of the farmer, the warrior, the doctor—in fact, in his view, pure science. And the laws and ordinances were a Great Taboo, acts forbidden or enjoined to control the ghosts.

Let the Deuteronomist himself tell us what Israel was to expect if she kept these laws and ordinances.

Yahve, it is said, "will love thee, and bless thee, and multiply thee, and he will also bless the fruit of thy womb, and the fruit of thy land, thy corn, and thy wine, and thine oil, the increase of thy kine and the flocks of thy sheep.... The Lord will take away from thee all sickness, and will put none of the evil diseases of Egypt which thou knowest upon thee, but will lay them upon all them that hate thee.... Moreover, the Lord thy God will send the hornet amongst them, until they that are left, and hide themselves from thee, be destroyed."

This was the religion of Moses. The ghostly head of the clan would give abundant flocks and fertile ground to those who fed him with burnt-offerings, but failing these, would send "the blotch, the itch, the scab" (Deut. xxviii. 27), the victorious foeman—and change the fertilising rain to the "powder and dust" of the desert.

"It must be admitted that religion," says Sir John Lubbock, "as understood by the lower savage races, differs essentially from ours. Thus their deities are evil, not good. They may be forced into compliance with the wishes of man. They require bloody, and rejoice in human sacrifices. They are mortal, not immortal; a part not the author of nature. They are to be approached by dances rather than prayers, and often approve what we call vice rather than what we esteem as virtue." ("Origin of Civil.," p. 133.)

In point of fact, the savage believes that sickness, death, thunder, and other human ills come not from nature, but the active interference of the god. He looks upon every one

outside his tribe as an enemy. The west coast negroes represent their deities as "black and mischievous, delighting to torment them in various ways." The Bechuanas curse their deities when things go wrong. All this throws light on the god of the Hebrews. Professor Robertson Smith, in the new "Encyclopædia Britannica," describes him as immoral, but perhaps it would be more correct to say that he has the gang morality of a savage chief. He counsels the Jews to borrow the poor silver bangles of the Egyptian women, and then to treacherously carry them off (Exod. iii. 22), because gang morality recognises no rights of property outside the gang. All through the early books, stories of cheating and lying are popular.

Palestine is a narrow strip of land between the Jordan and the Mediterranean, surrounded by deserts. To it, from a city named Ur, in Chaldea, 1996 years B.C., came Abraham and the Hebrews, or "Men from Beyond." These little Semite clans were like the modern Bedouins. They did not live in towns; they pitched their tents in the country. The soil of Palestine, even in Abraham's day, was quite unable to support these teeming hordes, for the sons of Abraham went several times to Egypt to escape famine. In similar fashion, ten or twelve thousand Arabs from Tripoli and Bengazi lately left their own country to reach Egypt.

All this must be borne in mind. It has been debated whether the earliest god of Israel was a sun-god or a moon-god, and whether his name was El or Yahve. In point of fact, his name was Starvation, and the Jewish Taboo a great food-making apparatus. This accounts for the extreme ferocity with which the struggle for the land flowing with milk and honey was carried on by the rival tribes.

"When thou comest nigh to a city to fight against it, then proclaim peace to it.

"And it shall be, if it make thee an answer of peace and open unto thee, then it shall be, that all the people that is