

body and soul by the power of the devil, whose image is their national emblem, whose trail is over all their land. Hence, too, the leaders of the people, the literary aristocracy, were led to profess a soulless creed, of which the present issue has been well described by an eminent authority* as "materialism put in action."

The study of the religious history of China, then, has a living interest very different from that of the discussion, now necessarily academic, of the religions and philosophies of Greece or Rome. While these long since disappeared as moulding forces from the lives of men in general, the native creed of China, at least as ancient in its origin, began to settle into its present form more than two thousand five hundred years ago, and to-day—devoid of power of life though it has become—is still reverentially regarded by more than a quarter of the human race.

A comparison, at any length, between Western pre-Christian philosophies and those of China would be outside the scope of an article in a missionary journal, even were space available. Such a comparison would show, however, that at the very time when, in Persia, Greece, and elsewhere, men were most actively searching for a key to the mystery of life, at that very time Chinese sages and philosophers were engaged in identically the same task; nay more, it would bring out the fact that the sages and philosophers of the East thought the same thoughts, expressed them under corresponding forms, and drew from them similarly divergent conclusions, whether speculative or moral, as did their contemporaries in the West.† The most important use of such a comparison, perhaps, would be the demonstration that the search for an explanation of life was most keen, even if it did not actually arise, at a period—600–250 B.C.—when Chinese religious thought had fallen into a stage of decadence; when, indeed, it was blindly struggling after, or reaching out for, that which it was losing or had lost, namely, a knowledge of God the Preserver and Ruler. Yet even in that stage of decadence some of its speculations took a flight higher than those of any of the pre-Christian Western systems outside the influence of revealed religion; and issued in ethical doctrine which, in comparison with the moral teaching of those systems, lay on a far higher plane. The explanation is doubtless to be found in the extraordinarily conservative instinct of the Chinese, and their associated traditional habit of reverence for the past; an instinct and a habit which, during the early ages of the national existence and well on into historic time, held fast, as a fundamental fact, that belief in one supreme and beneficent Governor of the universe which had been brought by their forefathers from their original home in Southwestern Asia. The loss of that belief formed the *first great downward step* in the religious life of the nation.

* *Ibid.*, *Chinese Empire*, ch. iv.

† See "Comparative Sketch of Philosophy, Ethics, and Religion of Taoism," *China Review*, 1901, by Author; also "Note on Philosophy of 'Chwang-tse,'" by Canon Aubrey Moore, in *Works of Chuang-Tzu*, by H. A. Giles (Quaritch, 1881).