

From a Woman's Point of View

Human Nature

By Emily Wright.

Human nature, in the ordinary acceptance of the term, is a composite, elusive, subtle thing. We are constantly brought into contact with people who do certain things, wholly unexpected of them, and we wonder what it is in their nature that prompted them to do them. Life is largely a conflict between desire and conscience. A woman may have a whim to follow the fad of the moment—tango teas, midnight cabarets—without unduly shocking her conscience. She might enquire into a new "ism" or a new "cult," in order to gratify a curious desire, without there being any particular or lasting harm in it, although her conscience may warn her to be wary. A man who deems he has been served shabbily by a capitalist, may find himself a leader of the labour party; and an Anglican whose Bishop has been impertinent, may become a Methodist. But conscience may not have had anything to do with the change.

However, when a Britisher—who has in all probability been reared in the Christian Faith—becomes a Mohammedan or a Buddhist, we naturally look for something deeper than petty spite or irresponsible desire, as the motive for so extraordinary a change. It appeals to us as a strange thing and one that must have conscience for its base.

Some years ago, in an English city, there was a certain lawyer of somewhat ill-repute. He was regarded with suspicion by the profession and with contempt by the public. He would handle any case, respectable or otherwise; but he seemed to specialize in the latter. It was not until one of his wives was objecting to their "plurality" that he announced himself—publicly—a Mohammedan. It came as a great surprise, but by it he at once justified his harem and preserved his respectability! Whether conscience played any part in the acceptance of this religion, he knows best; but the consensus of opinion was that the motive was already supplied, that he had used Mohammedanism to cloak his crime. Shortly afterwards, the Sultan, exceedingly pleased with his new convert, created him a great Potentate of Mohammedanism in England.

Now, within the month, there comes a report from Bombay that a Sheffield man has just been initiated in Ceylon as a Buddhist novice. It is an extremely rare case; few Englishmen have ever so embraced this religion. It is said that the "Cingalese Buddhists tried to persuade him from taking the step, as the life of a Buddhist monk is by no means an easy one."

Nevertheless, he was not deterred. So earnest is he that, after he has studied for three years, he intends returning to England to spread Buddhist doctrines.

That he would not depart from the heart of a Christian country and embrace another religion as a monk—involving as it does a severe asceticism—without earnest thought and serious motive seems evident. And one wonders what the motive power was that drove or persuaded him into his present belief. Therefore the last part of the meagre report is interesting, as possibly supplying the key to the situation. He is said to have been "a conscientious objector during the war, and to have been imprisoned for not performing military duties."

Should this be true, he may have thought that he received very scant justice and, becoming embittered with the lot thrust upon him, sought for something other than Christianity, which might satisfy his moral and spiritual needs. But malice should find no place in the heart of a Buddhist monk—

and probably there was none in his. To all appearance, at least, sincerity seems to have marked his actions; yet one wonders what it is he expects to gain by becoming a Buddhist that will be more satisfying to his conscience than Christianity.

It is worthy of note that one of the five commandments, which must be strictly observed by an aspiring Buddhist monk, is "to kill no living thing—not even a worm or an ant." Perhaps this appealed to his extremely sensitive conscience, together with the other conditions, which really resolve themselves into a course of self-punishment. He will become homeless, will have to beg for his food, will have to dress in anything he can get. He must remain celibate all his life. He must crush all evil and low desires, must put away the will to live as a sinful being by cultivating the opposite virtues, and striving to attain to that state of perfection and ineffable bliss—commonly known as "Nirvana"—when "transmigration" shall be no more, when all pain and suffering will have ceased, because there will be no more rebirths with their attendant miseries.

Buddha did not acknowledge a soul or a God. Indeed, Buddhism has been described as a system of philosophy rather than a religion. Though the generally accepted European theory of some years ago, that Buddhism taught that "all is perishable, all is miserable, all is void," may be a misconception, yet there is an emptiness in it which strikes the Christian forcibly. A late Bishop of Calcutta asked an apparently pious Buddhist, whom he happened to observe praying in a temple, for what he had just been praying. He replied, "I have been praying for nothing." "But," urged the bishop, "to whom have you been praying?" The man answered, "I have been praying to nobody." "What!" said the astonished bishop, "praying for nothing to nobody?"

There is much that is very beautiful, couched in exquisite poetic language, in their teaching, but it is no more beautiful nor more pregnant with meaning than that contained in the New Testament. It contains sublime precepts, the practice of which would undoubtedly tend to bring one to a state of perfection, but these in themselves are not sufficient. What mankind needs is the moral and spiritual power which is capable of making obedience to these precepts a reality. Buddha did not place this power in himself; Jesus Christ did. Buddhism lacks the living principle, the vital force, the incentive, which Christianity offers in the Person and Presence of Jesus Christ. And they who have seen the vision of the Christ and heard His voice, they who have felt His Presence and have knowledge of Him, know that the secret of His power lies not so much in His teaching as in His ideal character and unique example.

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