

THE RELIGIONS OF CHINA.

CHARLES CARROL EVERETT, D.D., LL.D., DEAN OF THE HARVARD DIVINITY SCHOOL, CAMBRIDGE, MASS.

Our information in regard to the early religion of China is derived from two works entitled respectively the Shu King and the Shi King.

Besides these, there is another ancient work greatly prized by the Chinese called the Yi King. This is, however, less important for our present purpose. The Shu King is made up of extracts from the ancient records of the Empire. These have been selected largely for their ethical or religious value. These records begin to be contemporary with the events they describe in the twenty-second century before Christ. The Shi King is an ancient collection of poems.

From these documents it appears that the religion of China in the early days of our acquaintance with it, was purer and loftier than it has been at any time since.

The Chinese at the time represented by them worshipped a Supreme Divinity, Shang Ti, the words meaning the Great Ruler. He was inflexibly just. He was no respecter of persons. Because the ancestors had been favored by him, it did not follow that the descendants could trust to a continuance of this favor. As soon as the virtues which had won the protection of Heaven in the case of the ancestors were neglected, the blessings they had enjoyed could no longer be expected.

Besides this supreme ruler, inferior spirits were worshipped. These were the spirits of the grain, of the mountains and of other objects.

In their thought of these spirits, as well as in that of the supreme ruler, the Chinese were extremely prosaic. The spirits of the grains and of the mountains were these, and nothing more. They were mere abstractions. The Great Ruler was this, and nothing more. No myth adorned the religious thought of this early people. The objects of their worship had no history and no concrete personality.

Devotion was also paid to ancestors. These were honored by feasts. At one time in those feasts the ancestors were represented by a youth, to whom the daintiest fare was offered and homage was paid.

The Emperor was relied upon to keep in order both the world of men and the world of spirits. He controlled both worlds by controlling the Empire. When the affairs of men were in disorder the spirits caught the infection, and broke through the proper bounds. This means simply that