

**LECTURES ON THE ORIGIN AND  
GROWTH OF RELIGION AS  
ILLUSTRATED BY SOME POINTS  
IN THE HISTORY OF INDIAN  
BUDDHISM**

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Lectures on the origin and growth of religion as illustrated by some points in the history of Indian Buddhism by T. W. Rhys Davids

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*THE HIBBERT LECTURES, 1881.*

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## LECTURE I.

### THE PLACE OF BUDDHISM IN THE DEVELOPEMENT OF RELIGIOUS THOUGHT.

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#### Right and Wrong Uses of the Comparative Study of Religious Beliefs.

It would be a hopeless task to attempt in six Lectures, that is to say, in six hours, to give any adequate account of that great movement which has influenced the greater portion of the human race during the lapse of so many centuries. It is therefore matter for congratulation that the task allotted to us is a much lighter one,—to discuss those points in the history of Buddhism which appear likely to throw light on the origin and growth of religious belief. This means, as I understand it, the origin and growth of religion outside, as well as inside, the circle of the Buddhist beliefs themselves. What we have to do is, in a word, to apply a particular method, the comparative method, to the study of the facts revealed to us by the history of Buddhism.

There is indeed a way of comparing religions one with another which leads to mere truisms, or even to erroneous conclusions. It is not uncommon, even now, to find such comparisons made with the object of evoking interest in other religions than our own, by showing that they teach some things which are also held among us. The Singhaliese have an epithet which they apply in good-humoured sarcasm to Europeans, and which means "fellows with hats, hat fellows" (Toppi-kārayo). These fellows with the hats, and eighty-ton guns, and other signs of artistic and spiritual pre-eminence, are sometimes gifted with a sublime and admirable self-complacency which leads them to be surprised when they find fundamental truths of morality, or good sense in philosophy, taught among peoples who are not white and who go bare-headed. And being thus surprised, they are led to produce any evidence of such things, as if they were remarkable and interesting phenomena.

I beg to deprecate very strongly the study of other religions than our own merely to find out points on which we can agree with them; in other words, for it usually comes to that, the habit of judging of other religions by the degree of resemblance they bear to our own beliefs. There are ideas in Buddhism, no doubt, with which we can heartily sympathize; but the most instructive points in the history of that, or of any other religion, are often those with which we can

least agree. The fact that truth can be found among all peoples and in all creeds, has been acknowledged through so many centuries by men eminent in the Church and out of it, that it has become almost a truism, and needs scarcely to be stated, certainly not to be proved.

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For such purposes, comparisons are no longer of any service; and they will be of worse than no service if we imagine that likeness is any proof of direct relationship, that similarity of ideas in different countries shows that either the one or the other was necessarily a borrower. We can easily understand how Clement of Alexandria found in coincidences between Christian and pagan belief convincing evidence that the whole of the wisdom of the world (as he knew it) was borrowed from the Scriptures of his own faith. His was at least both a more liberal and a truer explanation of the facts than that other theory of the Jesuit father, who is related to have been so struck with the similarities between the Tibetan and the Roman ritual, that he thought the devil had deluded those unfortunate people with a blasphemous imitation of the religion of Christ.<sup>1</sup> It would of course be going too far to

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Cor. x. 20, "They sacrifice to devils and not to God," may have suggested the idea. The Spanish Acosta, quoted in Lord Kingsborough's *Antiquities of Mexico*, Vol. vi. p. 410, advances a similar explanation of the Mexican ritual.



deny that coincidences of belief are occasionally produced by actual contact of mind with mind; but it is no more necessary to assume that they always are so, than to suppose that chalk cliffs, if there be such, in China are produced by chalk cliffs in the Downs of Sussex. They have no connection one with another, except that both are the result of similar causes. Yet this method of reasoning is constantly found, not only through the whole range of the literature of the subject from classical times downwards, but even in works of the present day.

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There is yet another use of the comparative study of religious beliefs, often hitherto, and still unfortunately, resorted to, against which we must be sedulously on our guard. One of the clearest statements of the doctrine I refer to may be found in a speech, most remarkable in many ways, delivered in our own House of Commons by a Member whose name has not been preserved, a "gentleman from Gray's Inn," in the year 1530. The date is significant, for the idea of religious freedom, or even of religious toleration, was then almost unknown.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Unknown, that is, among Christians. Complete toleration, as is well known, is one of the most fundamental teachings of Buddhism, and was laid down as a duty in edicts recorded on stone two centuries and a half before the birth of Christ. This is so striking that I quote these edicts in full in the Appendix.

“Mr. Speaker,” said this barrister, “if none else  
“but the Bishop of Rochester or his adherents did hold  
“this language, it would less trouble me. But since  
“so many religious and different sects, now conspicuous  
“in the whole world, do not only vindicate unto them-  
“selves the name of the True Church, but labour be-  
“twixt invitations and threats for nothing less than  
“to make us resign our faith to a simple obedience, I  
“shall crave leave to propose what I think fit in this  
“case for us laiques and secular persons to do. . . .

“For as several teachers, not only differing in lan-  
“guage, habit and ceremony, or at least in some of  
“these, but peremptory and opposite in their doctrines,  
“do present themselves, much circumspection must be  
“used.” . . .

Then, after pointing out the difficulty of choosing  
between these “several teachers,” the gentleman from  
Gray’s Inn proposes that

“. . . he [the laique] shall hold himself to common,  
“authentic, and universal truths; and consequently  
“inform himself what, in the several articles proposed  
“to him, is so taught as it is first written in the heart,  
“and together delivered in all the laws and religions  
“he can hear of in the whole world; this certainly can  
“never deceive him.” . . .

If this plan of arriving at truth be followed, “it will  
“concern our several teachers to initiate us in this  
“(universally accepted) doctrine before they come to

“any particular doctrine, lest otherwise they do like  
“those who would persuade us to renounce daylight  
“to study only by their candle.” . . . .

The gentleman from Gray's Inn then sets out what he thought to be such universally accepted beliefs, and concludes: “These therefore, as universal and undoubted truths, should in my opinion be first received. They will at least keep us from impiety and atheism. . . . Let us therefore establish and fix these catholic and universal notions: . . . so that whether the Eastern, Western, Northern or Southern teachers—and particularly whether my lord Rochester, Luther, Eccius, Zwinglius, Erasmus, Melancthon, &c.—be in the right, we laiques may so build upon these catholic and infallible grounds of religion, as whatsoever superstructure of faith be raised, these foundations yet may support them.”

The speaker—evidently a man of rare toleration and enlightenment—was a Catholic, and his speech is really nothing else but the *Quod semper, quod ubique, quod ab omnibus*, of the Catholic Church applied in a way which would have put an end at once to the bitter feelings and useless persecutions which so lamentably disgraced the eventful struggle then already commencing to shake thrones and peoples. His view has also much in common with another well-known adage, *Vox populi vox Dei*; and if the “gentleman from Gray's Inn” had been speaking only of