

CORRESPONDENCE

BUDDHISM AND IMMORTALITY.

To the Editor of BLACKFRIARS.

SIR,

Mr. G. K. Chesterton, in his article in the April number of BLACKFRIARS, makes great sport of Mr. H. G. Wells, and there would be no harm in that if Mr. Wells had really said about Buddhism what Mr. Chesterton made out. But there seems to be a regrettable misunderstanding.

Mr. Wells, as quoted by Mr. Chesterton, says: 'There are three principal forms the craving of life takes, and all are evil The second is the desire of personal immortality,' and again: ' . . . Nirvana does not mean extinction but the extinction of all the futile personal aims that necessarily make life base ' Hereupon Mr. Chesterton rides off on his gloriously high horse and has a fine time showing how illogical is Mr. Wells to maintain that there is no personal immortality and yet that Nirvana does not mean extinction. By some astonishing oversight Mr. Chesterton failed to notice that Mr. Wells did not say that Buddhism taught that there was no personal immortality. Mr. Wells said precisely the contrary, *vis.*, that the Nirvana of Buddhism does *not* mean extinction. But, says Mr. Wells, Buddhism does teach that the *desire* (my italics) of personal immortality is evil. Here is the thing which Mr. Chesterton missed. There is personal immortality (*nirvana*) but the *desire* for personal immortality is evil. Now that word 'desire' is the whole point, and the doctrine is not so very difficult after all. For example: we Catholics do not deny that a Christian state may be rich and that its riches may be enjoyed by all; yet we do teach that 'the desire of riches (*cupiditas*) is the root of all evil' (St. Paul, I. Tim. VI, 10). Is there then a discrepancy? Certainly not. Both statements are true. Riches are good and the desire of riches is evil.

In the same way the Buddhist says there *is* personal immortality of a sort (*nirvana*), nevertheless, the desire of personal immortality is evil. And so it is, even for us Catholics, if we think of heaven simply as the place where *we* are glorified. Is this not precisely the sense of Matthew xx, 20-23? When our Lord rebuked the mother of the sons of Zebedee surely the whole point of His rebuke was that she was desiring Heaven as a place of personal glorification for her sons. Heaven is not such a place. The Catholic doctrine of the Beatific vision im-

Blackfriars

plies, as the Buddhist doctrine does, that in Heaven we shall be beyond the desire of personal glorification and shall delight only in the glory of God.

It is true that among Catholics it is not commonly said that the desire of immortality is evil. But that is simply because among Catholics the desire of immortality is taken to mean the desire of the Beatific vision—union with God. It may be supposed that the desire of immortality is called evil by the Buddhist simply because he is 'up against' a conception of heaven as a place of merely personal glorification and gratification. And perhaps Mr. Wells may be forgiven for viewing with sympathy the Buddhist doctrine for, as a person brought up by and living among Protestants, he is properly revolted by the fact that the same degraded conception of Heaven is the one commonly held by his neighbours. Of course, there is personal glorification in heaven—the glorified body of the Resurrection, the glory of all the Saints and all the other glories. But these things flow out from the Beatific Vision and are, so to say, its panoply. They are not the substance but the accidents of immortality.

Buddhism and Christianity are widely divergent religions—the one a false religion, and the other the true religion. What we desire therefore, is that non-Catholics shall see the truth and deny falsehood. More particularly we desire that 'men of good will' shall find the peace of God. Is it not regrettable then that such should be 'put off' by mere misunderstanding?

Yours, &c.,

ERIC GILL, O.S.D.

DITCHLING COMMON, SUSSEX.

16/4/23.

P.S.—When I say that riches are good and the desire of riches is evil, of course an inordinate or disordered desire is understood. And when the Buddhists say that the desire of personal immortality is evil, of course an inordinate or disordered desire is understood. For the word 'cupiditas' means an inordinate desire of riches, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee, like most Indians and Red Indians and like most Protestants (and, I suggest, like not a few Catholics, including myself, alas!), had a disordered desire of heaven. The doctrine of Nirvana is the Buddhist attempt, however inadequate, to counter this disorder. It is necessary, if we wish to convert the Buddhists (and Mr. Wells), to show that the Catholic doctrine of the Beatific Vision beats the doctrine of Nirvana, and at its own game!

E.G.