

The Religious Sentiment of the Japanese (I)

— *Kami and Hotoke* —

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Many comments on the Japanese have been introduced thus far, but a number of them regard the religious sentiment of the Japanese as enigmatic. In order to duly appreciate the Japanese culture, one must understand what underlies the culture. That which plays an important role in it would be their religious sentiment.

In this chapter, therefore, I would like to throw light on the religious sentiment of the Japanese as best I may by investigating the ancient Japanese outlook on the universe and the nature, and Shintoism and Buddhism, both of which have greatly influenced the contemporary Japanese.

(1)

One thing which I have learned from my experience in teaching English to Japanese students, Japanese culture to several foreign students in Japan and, for a short period of time, the Japanese language to university students in New Zealand, is the need to export Japanese culture and the Japanese philosophy. Since many years ago Japan has made every effort to import different cultures and philosophies from abroad. Many years ago we imported from China much of their culture and thought, as we have done in recent times from Portugal and Holland, and are still doing, from the U. S. A. The Japanese have indiscriminately absorbed many things from overseas, selected what seemed beneficial to us and altered them to best suit our needs ; in this way we have formed our unique culture.

Today Japan has become an economic power : as a result, she experienced differences of opinion over trade with many other countries. Japan has to cope with such international difficulties and it is quite natural that the need for the Japanese to adopt a more international outlook should now be prevalent in this country. The differences of opinion over trade are equally cultural ones, between the respective countries.

Having experienced the hardships of World War II, the Japanese who wish for world peace, hope to avoid not only an actual war but an economic one too. To achieve this purpose, international understanding is of vital importance. The first thing the Japanese

have to do is recognize their own culture and share it with other countries, because Japan is often considered enigmatic. Until now, our traditional culture such as the *Noh* play or the *Kabuki* has been exported, I think, however, that many aspects of modern Japanese culture should also be introduced to overseas countries.

The export of material commodities is remarkable. Transistor radios, TV sets, automobiles and so forth made in Japan, do not, however, promote an international understanding of the Japanese mind at all.

There have been many books published dealing with the Japanese ; some of them really come to the point and others reveal what we Japanese have not yet noticed about ourselves, but all of them seem to give a rather distorted picture of the diverse Japanese of today ; tending to put us into far more narrowly defined categories.

Here, therefore, I would like to make clear the Japanese sentiment underlying the Japanese culture. Needless to say, Japanese culture is unique and complicated mainly because Japan is geographically isolated from the rest of the world.

I would like to examine the Japanese sentiment from a religious point of view, because I firmly believe that the culture of any nation cannot be discussed without taking into consideration this standpoint. However, the religious sentiment of the Japanese is thought to be complicated and incomprehensible. For example, according to Всеволод Овчинников¹⁾, in general, the Japanese are not especially pious and aesthetics play a far more important role in Japanese religion. Edwin O. Reischauer²⁾ also points out that religion in Japan has been a little too secular since ancient times, driven into a corner and has not been very influential. Isaiah Ben Dasan³⁾ says that if one regards Islam and Judaism as religions, then the Japanese are followers of Japanism ; in other words they are far from irreligious and Japanism stands high among them.

A certain newspaper published in September in 1986 contained the following article : the Catholic Church in Guam decided not to let a Japanese couple hold their wedding in their churches in future. They had allowed Japanese couples to use their churches for weddings, but most of them performed their marriages just to enjoy the atmosphere of the marriage service. This was the reason why they refused Japanese couples to use their churches. This can be a severe criticism on the religious sentiment of the Japanese. This sentiment may be an enigma to Westerners.

In fact, according to a survey of the religious sentiment among young Japanese people, about eighty percent of them are irreligious. This low rate is really unparalleled anywhere else in the world. This is also true of older people in Japan. Despite this fact, all Japanese perform marriage and funeral services in accordance with a religious rite. Those Japanese

who are bold enough to admit that they are irreligious visit Shinto shrines on New Year's Day, swear to Shinto priests, and join their hands in veneration in Buddhist temples. How should they be interpreted ?

First of all, it is difficult to assess the religious sentiment of the Japanese by using Christian logic. Is it not necessary to make its logic, viewpoint and measurements more flexible ?

(2)

To start with, I would like to take up the ancient Japanese outlook on the universe and their religious consciousness. According to "The Encyclopedia Japan," in ancient times they used to think of the universe as something like a three-storied building : in the Heavens was the *Takamagahara* (the Land of Gods), under the soil was the *Yominokuni* (the Land of the dead) and in between was the *Nakatsukuni* (the Land of man). In the *Takamagahara* were heavenly gods who gave good luck to man living in between, whilst in the *Yominokuni* lived many evil spirits giving man ill luck. Both the *Takamagahara* and the *Yominokuni* were thought to be closed to man in the beginning. After death, human bodies were returned to earth and their souls remained somewhere near the *Nakatsukuni*. So it was thought to be possible for human beings and souls to communicate easily with each other.

In olden times people thought that the Land in between had been created by Gods but they never thought so regarding man. Long afterwards it was thought that souls rose to the heavens or were shut up under the soil after death.

Then what kind of attitude did the ancient people have towards life ? First of all, it seems that they did not fear death as much as we do. For them, Japan was a wonderful land, rich in natural blessings. Japanese waters offered many good fisheries because warm currents and cold currents meet around Japan. Although Japan is a volcanic country, there were not so many eruptions or earthquakes. This was also true of typhoons and floods. There must have been a lot of fruit in the fields and mountains. The balance sheet was that they seem to have had more luck than misfortune. They must have felt more blessed than cursed. In other words Gods used to have dominion over evil spirits all the time.

The ancient people are on the whole optimistic, broad-minded and earthly-oriented. In "*The Ancient Chronicle*"⁴⁾ is a myth dealing with the creation of the country. Reading it, we easily associate it with the human sex act. This kind of myth may show that they were really of a generous nature. In "*A Collection of a Myriad Leaves*"⁵⁾ are the following poems by *Tabito Ōtomo* who composed them after his wife died. They may suggest the

ancient Japanese view of life. It was about 200 years after the introduction of Buddhism into Japan when they were composed. Therefore, such ideas as the Pure Land and transmigration had been widespread then.

1. So delightful in this world,

how can I mind spending the next incarnation
even in the shape of
an insect or a bird.

この世にし 楽しくあれば
来む世には
虫に 鳥にも われはなりなむ

2. All living creatures

must go eventually.
Earthly joys, I will
seek as long as I live.

生けるもの 遂にも死ぬるものにあれば
この世 なるまは
楽しくを あらな

These poems sang the joys of this world. The ancient people were earthly-minded without believing in the next world and also realistic without thinking of future Judgment. This momentary, pleasure-seeking attitude toward life has been inherited by the Japanese of today. The characteristics of the Japanese are not very different from those of our remote ancestors. I feel more convinced of having observed existing ceremonies, and the unconscious behavior of the contemporary Japanese.

It is thought that the ancient Japanese character was formed mainly through geographical, climatical conditions and also by working on irrigated rice fields. From a geographical point of view, Japan is isolated from other countries in the world, as is often said. This means that Japan has been fairly free from threat of invasion. Historically, Japan has been a mono-lingual and therefore mono-cultural country. This has deeply affected the ethos of the Japanese. This small country located in a monsoon zone extends north and south, and is rich natural blessings. So our ancestors had to learn to live in harmony with, and be incorporated into nature. In Japan, nature was, unlike in Western countries, not

considered to confront man. The Japanese had perceived the supernatural agency in nature and paid due respect to even insect and plant life before Shinto nearly completed its form in the 8th century. So it cannot be denied that the Japanese became aware of something absolute through the senses in all nature.

Typhoons, heavy rain and excessive snowfall on the Japan Sea side not only stimulated them, but also taught them various wisdom for living and the importance of perseverance. Japan is a very humid country, so the Japanese like to bathe themselves in warm water. This kind of habit led them to their love for cleanliness, which came to have some connection with the exorcism or purification ceremonies of Shinto. I think this is worthy of note. Even today the Japanese use salt or fresh water to purify themselves. The Japanese have lived on irrigated rice farming since olden times. Roughly speaking, the difference between the rice-farming people and the stock-farming people can be compared to the difference between the culture of cooperation and that of independence. The distinctive changes of the four seasons make them sensitive to each season. In the rice planting or reaping season they must have been extremely busy and short-handed. Labour with perseverance and the greatest possible care was indispensable. This helped them develop their national character of submission and passivity. Their industry, cooperativeness and group consciousness probably originated from this national character. The custom of working together and enjoying meals together with their primitive faith in their common Gods formed solid village communities.

The primitive faith in Gods stemmed from their simple human relations in those village communities. In the *Nakatsukuni* where people lived appeared the God of the rice-field, the God of the wind, the God of the port, the God of the tree, the God of grass, the God of the mountains, the God of the fields, the God of water and so on. In short, the simple faith in worshipping nature as it is, appeared, which can only be termed 'animism' from today's angle.

This pure and simple worship of nature, however, can be linked with a profound theory of today, teaching us that life is part of nature : nature contains life. To put this another way, the ancient Japanese were thankful for what nature had done, rather than fearful of it. According to legend in Japan, the relationships among Gods were generally peaceful, as opposed to conflicts between good and evil in the West. The Gods of Japanese mythology are impersonal and very different from Greek or Indian Gods, though the people of these countries were polytheists too. Japanese Gods were of life vitality or spring.

Rice-cultivation was based upon the group work of a village community, which led to their faith in their ancestors' spirits and to their permanent settlement on growing rice.

Gods were believed to exist in the homogeneous dimension as man : Gods were close to man. when you did something against a God's will, the God would exact his revenge on you. This is a curse. To escape from a curse, it was necessary to perform a purification ceremony. This was their prayer or festival. Gods in the ancient times really had something human. These Gods laid the foundation of Shinto.

Buddhism was introduced into Japan in the middle of the 6th century and it planted its roots deeply at the end of the same century, although there was a dispute between the *Soga* clan and the *Mononobe* clan concerning whether Buddhism should be accepted or not. What was the background of its rapid success ? *Shōtoku-Taishi*⁶⁾ who has handed down his name to posterity as the founder of the Japanese Buddhism probably contributed not a little to its rapid success. Another possible element in its success was the generosity of the Japanese. The Japanese who felt their Gods very close to them lived in the world of polytheism and panpsychism. Buddhism is also polytheistic. This could be one of reasons why it did not meet any strong resistance in Japan. Buddhism was not only unresisted but also voluntarily accepted. Up until then, Gods had been invisible, but Buddhism brought with it Buddhist statues. They were visible and shining with gold. There were also brilliantly coloured idols. Around that time the Japanese had already taken interest in the Chinese culture and also yearned for it. Therefore they regarded those brilliant statues as the symbol of the Chinese culture. Furthermore, the teachings of Buddhism were more generous and more logical than many Gods of that time. This probably led the Japanese to accept Buddhism more readily.

No matter how logical Buddhism was, it was unable to replace Gods. In a society moving towards a law-governed state, the ancient Gods had to coexist with the more recent Buddhism. In this way Shinto was formed as a religion praying that peace might reign in Japan. In other words both Shinto and Buddhism have tended to serve the ruling classes of society.

The great ideas Buddhism brought over were ones about transiency, the impure world and transmigration. Although Buddhism was an imported religion, it came to hold a dominant position over Shinto in the state of their coexistence. Gods of Shinto which did not teach to save people were apt to be placed under Buddhism. In the *Edo* era, Confucianism was regarded as most important. Consequently, these three, Shinto, Buddhism and Confucianism have cooperated, harmonized with one another and fostered the religious sentiment of the Japanese. These have complemented one another, performing their respective role with success. Considering the contemporary Japanese from a psychological point of view, we may be able to say that they leave their celebrations to Shinto, death and future

to Buddhism and morals to Confucianism.

It was in the 13th century when Buddhism made rapid progress in Japan ; that is what is called the *Kamakura* Buddhism. Around that time, great Buddhists like *Hōnen*, *Shinran*, *Dōgen* and *Nichiren* were born. *Fusōryakki* says “*The latter days of the Law*⁸⁾” started in 1052.” At that time it was thought in Japan that no one would be religiously awakened after the lapse of 2000 years since Shakyamuni’s death and that a mere shell of the Buddhist teachings would remain for the 10000 ensuing years. In fact, the fall of the nobility at the height of their prosperity, repeated wars one after another and the sudden rise of the warriors which took place in those days, led all the people, from peers to commoners to feel concern and worry about the end of the world. To sum up, the apprehension about *the latter days of the Law* was probably the reason for the appearance of such great Buddhists as have been mentioned above.

The fruit of the *Kamakura* Buddhism was the popularization of Buddhism. Buddhism went away from the elite and came into the possession of the mass of the people for the first time. The prayer taught by *Nichiren*, sitting in meditation set forth by *Dōgen* and the other prayer to Amitabha started by *Honen* have still had a great influence on the people, even today. There has been no other period in which religious belief has been so grave a concern to the people than that particular era. The minds of the Japanese were greatly sublimed in those days. Especially, the *Jodo* sect founded by *Hōnen* and succeeded by *Shinran* is regarded as greatest in its purity and influence.

Next time I would like to clear up more the religious sentiment of the Japanese through a lady named *Hisako Nakamura* and her faith in *Shinran*’s teaching.

The references added last gave me valuable suggestions. I want to express deep gratitude to the authors.

NOTES

- 1) Всеволод Овчинников : the author of “Ветка сакуры”
- 2) Edwin O. Reischaur : the author of “The Japanese”
- 3) Isaiah Ben Dasan : the author of “The Japanese and the Jews”
- 4) *The Ancient Chronicle* : (古事記) The oldest history book in Japan. It consists of 3 volumes and was completed in 8th century.
- 5) *A Collection of a Myriad Leaves* : (万葉集) The oldest collection of Japanese poems. It was completed in *Nara* period and consists of 20 volumes.
- 6) *Shōtoku-Taishi* : (574-622) the first son of Emperor *Yōmei*. He promulgated the first Japanese constitution of seventeen articles.
- 7) *Fusōryakki* : (扶桑略記) A history book with 30 volumes completed 12 century by *Kōen*.

- 8) *The latter days of the Law* : A Buddhist theory that the teachings of Buddha decline with the lapse of time after the death of Shakyamuni and that we are now in the age of decadence.

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- 4) Tetsuo Yamaori ; *Gods and Buddhas* (神と仏), Kōdan Sha, Tokyo, 1983.
- 5) Tadamasa Isobe ; *The Faith of the Japanese* (日本人の信仰心), Kōdan Sha, Tokyo, 1983.
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- 10) Kiyoyuki Higuchi ; *Nature and the Japanese* (自然と日本人), Kōdan Sha, Tokyo, 1979.
- 11) Chikio Hayashi and Hiroshi yonezawa ; *The Depth-Consciousness of the Japanese* (日本人の深層意識), Nippon Hōsō Shuppan Association, Tokyo, 1982.
- 12) Hisao Tanaka ; *The Kamakura Buddhism* (鎌倉仏教), Kyōiku Sha, Tokyo, 1985.
- 13) Tetsuo Yamaori ; *The Feelings of the Japanese* (日本人の心情), Nippon Hōsō Shuppan Association, Tokyo, 1985.
- 14) Sen-ichi Hisamatsu ; *An Introduction to a Collection of a Myriad Leaves* (万葉集入門), Kōdan Sha, Tokyo, 1974.