

# ***The Cosmic Faith of the Japanese***

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The theme, "Cosmic Faith of the Japanese" focuses our attention on the overall unity of Japanese religion and its depth of spirituality, despite its very diverse character through history. It is very common, however, to hear that the Japanese are not very religious. This judgment, of course, depends on the definition and standard one uses for religion. The noted Japanese Protestant theologian, Seiichi Yagi, has written:

"Let us define spirituality as an awakening to the activity of the Transcendent in man, the Transcendent which is invisible, formless in any sense, but which acts in man as light and life, so that egoism is overcome and coexistence is realized. Then such spirituality has strongly influenced Japanese culture since the arrival of Buddhism in Japan..."<sup>1</sup>

Emerging from prehistoric times, the Japanese possessed a rather well defined perspective on life which has endured to the present time, giving shape and color to native or foreign religious traditions. This perspective on life and religion evolved along with the introduction of wet rice agriculture in what is known as the Yayoi culture from about 250 B.C.E. till 250 C.E. It extends into 250 C.E. to 500 C.E. when Japan enters more fully into the light of history.

Because of the agrarian basis of Japanese life, the Japanese perceived the world of nature as a dynamic, living reality. Nature was awesome, sometimes fearsome. Nevertheless, blessed with a beautiful and bountiful land, it became an article of faith for the Japanese that Nature was essentially benevolent through its creativity and productivity which nurtured human and non-human life. The Japanese belief that they were a sacred people in a sacred land, the land of the Kami, placed them in a cosmic setting, related to the very powers that govern the universe. The Japanese affirmation of life and light as the foundation of human existence is reflected in various ways throughout the tradition, in native religion, in Buddhist developments and in modern reformulations in New Religions.

The significance of this theme lies in the ongoing process of secularization which mechanizes, manipulates and externalizes our lives, cutting us off from the perception of our deeper root in Cosmic life. Part of the attraction of Japan for westerners stems from the fact that, despite modernization and secularization, Japanese culture as a whole retains an awareness of that deeper dimension of life. There is in Japan less sense of contradiction between secularity and spirituality than in the west. A Shinto priest can bless a modern 747 plane with ancient rites of purification and appreciation for the power in both man and machine that makes it possible. The plane also has its element of divinity. They easily combine the traditional and modern.

There are several basic features that make up Japanese religious perspective and the traditions through which it is expressed. They have all fused as a lamination, a braid or a tapestry. Everything exists together—the ancient and the modern, the native and the foreign, the primitive and the sophisticated, the natural and the contrived, the beautiful and the ugly, the pure and the polluted, the simple and the complex, the minute and the gigantic, the doctor and the shaman, the traditionalist and the modernist. There is folk religion, Shinto, Confucianism, Religious Taoism, Buddhism, Christianity, and a host of New Religions which draw on all traditions. The curious complex that is Japan is illustrated by plastic flower arrangements and electronic fortune telling devices.

For those who may not be as familiar with Japanese religious tradition, we can best visualize it as a tapestry. The warp includes a variety of traits which together form the Japanese religious perspective to which we have referred. These traits interweave with these traditions, giving them their Japanese character. The woof constitutes the various threads of

interweaving religious tradition, native or imported, that make up the more formal expressions of religion such as organizations, buildings, practices and membership.

The basic features of Japanese religion are modes through which they express their faith in the powers of the Cosmos and Nature. Their orientation to nature has influenced deeply their religious perspective forged through history. There are six traits which are shared in some way by all the more formal or organized religious traditions. These are communal-ancestralism, purity-pollution, shamanism, this-worldly practicality and naturalism, syncretism, and aestheticism. These traits, found elsewhere in religion, converge in the Japanese setting giving it its distinct character.

The communal-ancestral basis of Japanese religion is perhaps the most central as it gives focus to much of Japanese religious concern and social relations. In ancient times, in all cultures, survival depended on the harmony of the group. Authority and obligation were based on kinship bonds.

In the Japanese context, we are all familiar with the fact of the predominance of group relations in Japanese society. The individual Japanese is generally more a representative of group than an independent individual. One does not usually ask a Japanese what his/her religion is, but to what religion does one's family belong. Shinto shrines became ancestral centers and the ancestors were believed to provide the rain and fertility of the soil. Buddhism quickly allied itself with this ancestral concern. Ancient temples were built and dedicated to ancestors seven generations back.

Confucian teaching gave content and substance to this perspective with its reverence for ancestors and its ethical principle of respect for elders and superiors. In our modern situation, we have often heard the exhortation: "Make no shame!" Family honor is the key concern. The recognition of generations serves to define authority and establish the hierarchical nature of Japanese society. The modern new religions which have emerged, particularly in the post-war period, have stressed devotion to ancestors as the basis of a happy life in this world and the foundation of ideal social and ethical behavior.

Many problems are now arising in Japan as this feature of religion and society has weakened in the wake of Japan's defeat. Since the traditional way has been associated with authoritarianism, there has not yet arisen a satisfactory basis of self-definition and social obligation in a democratic society which can give direction and meaning in life, particularly for the youth.

The second prominent trait of Japanese religion is a concern for purity and avoidance of pollution. This feature expresses itself in many ways in all traditions. With the value of harmony as uppermost in ancient Japanese life, purity became essential to maintain or restore positive relations with the Cosmic life that nurtures us and with society.

An important part of a Shinto shrine is the water fountain before the shrine whereby one rinses mouth and hands, mind and body of impurities before approaching the deity. The principle of *makoto* to be true and sincere became a central value in Shinto

In the modern New Religions, such as Tenri, there is effort to purify the soul from the dusts of egoism which create the many personal and social problems we encounter.

The third dimension of Japanese religion we have called the shamanistic and magical. Whatever the force that embraces our lives, intermediaries are required in order to reveal its will for specific events and needs. This aspect of Japanese religion has been very prominent since the Chinese first observed the power of Queen Pimiko whom they described as a sorceress. With the institutionalization of Shinto, headed by the priestly Emperor, female shamans were submerged. They appear in folk tradition and even today there are

many women practitioners. In Buddhism which had precedents in China, this function was taken up by the *yamabushi*, those who prostrate themselves on mountains and cultivate spiritual power through the practice of *Shugendo*.

The fourth dimension of Japanese dimension of Japanese religion is its naturalistic, this-worldly, and practical character. The Japanese do not merely speculate about cosmic life, but have concrete expectations resulting from harmony with that life. While in the west religion has generally been considered as an end in itself in doing all for the glory of God, for the Japanese, religion is a means to the end of prospering life. Much emphasis is laid in Japanese religion on "benefits."

With respect to the this-worldly orientation, we may observe that Japanese have beliefs concerning the afterlife. However, their main focus is living in this life. Afterlife concerns function as a matter of filial piety and respect to care for the dead and their well-being in other worlds. In early primitive contexts concern for the dead was to avoid vengeance of ill-treated spirits. Even today stories are told of *batchi atari* (retribution) resulting from improper treatment of the dead. Beliefs in transmigration drawn from Buddhism also motivated a concern to give proper treatment of the dead. There is belief in Pure Lands or Paradises and appeals of salvation, but they do not become the object of such intense an personal concern as we can see in the West. The center of gravity is in this life. Most of the modern new religions aim to construct a paradise on this earth, in some ways similar to the concept of Kingdom God in modern Christianity.

The practicality of Japanese religion roots in the everyday needs of the people. They aspire for health (*Byoki-naoshi*), for wealth (*Shobai-hanjo*), and spiritual security (*Anshin, Wakei-seijaku* harmony, reverence, and tranquility - a phrase from tea ceremony).

The fifth dimension of Japanese religion flows from what has already been outlined. It is the syncretic feature. The practical this worldly interest of Japanese religion does not emphasize the question of true or false in religion, but whether it works. Whatever world or yields benefit will be maintained. Depending on the need, Japanese resort to various religions traditions. When they bless their house and family or marry, they may go to a Shinto shrine. When they must bury a loved one or have a memorial, they go to the Buddhist temple. If they are ill, they may also resort to a shaman practitioner, a New Religion, or all traditions together. Thus the founder of Seicho no Ie, Dr. Taniguchi Masaharu, employed materials from the Bible, Shinto mythology, and Buddhism to expound his view of the truth of life. Because Japanese do not draw strict and clear doctrinal and organizational lines in the practice of religion, it is a well-known fact that the total religious population exceeds the actual population of the nation.

The eclecticism and syncretism of Japanese religions has made Japanese tradition more tolerant of religious differences than we are familiar in the West. The Japanese are more like the ancient Romans in tolerating any religion so long as it does not threaten the established social order. Unconventional religious movements in Japanese history have experienced persecution until they adapted to the social requirements of the culture.

The sixth dimension of Japanese religious tradition is its aesthetic character. It is a basic Japanese intuition that life is beautiful and beauty is an essential ingredient of life. Japanese aestheticism became especially prominent among the Heian nobility for whom all that was worthwhile had to be beautiful.

For the Japanese religions in art and art and art is religion. In contrast to western approaches to art which have sometimes been rejected in religion or used more didactically, art has been employed in Japan as a means for understanding reality and shaping life attitudes and behavior. Art is a means to experience reality, and harmony with reality manifests itself through artistic endeavor. Zen Buddhism has inspired various forms of art

as a means of realizing one's true nature, while the spontaneous, un deliberate practice of the art reveals the depths of one's harmony with cosmic reality.

We should note that here is also a moral quality to Japanese art which proceeds through the master-disciple relationship. This relationship requires ethical considerations, as well as aesthetic, in the achievement of the harmony and tranquility desired in life.

## Summary

Japanese religion was initially an agrarian religion focused on fertility. Natural elements such as mountains, trees, and rocks, were regarded as divine. In the mythology we see that the Sun and natural elements, the land itself and natural formations were gods (*kami*). Everything that held significance for human life was divine. Gods might be unruly, but there was no absolute distinction of good and evil. The ancient awareness was institutionalized in two major forms, Shinto (The Way of the Gods) and Buddhism. Each tradition shared the basic aspects of Japanese religion in ways expressed by their teachings. Though they have proliferated into many sub-traditions those traits remain and give Japanese religion its distinctive character among the world's religions.

We should note that despite the many differences among Japanese religious traditions, they possess "a vitalistic conception of salvation" in which "the cosmos is regarded as a living body or a life force with eternal fertility. In this way, the whole universe is grasped as one living body. And from this stems the notion that all things are harmonious, interdependent, sympathetic, and constantly growing. From the standpoint of each component of the cosmos, especially that of human beings, the universe or the world is seen as the source from which all living beings spring. Hence, the universe will also be imaged as a beneficial and gracious entity which gives each individual being eternal and ultimate life."<sup>2</sup>

Japanese throughout their history have been deeply aware of the forces of nature that nourish our lives. They have stood in awe at the profundity of the mystery of existence. It speaks through their religious faiths, their arts, their social relations, every aspect of their lives. While this faith can be observed in specific traditions, it also shapes many the basic features of religious perception that form those traditions and given them overall unity, despite diversity.

## Conclusion

The basic features of Japanese religion have emerged from prehistoric times and interacted with foreign traditions to produce the wealth of symbols, beliefs and practices that make up the diverse array of Japanese religious phenomena. It is clear that the whole sphere of Japanese religion is bound together with a deep yearning for harmony with, and support of, the Cosmic life, which is the foundation of our own existence. Though many features of modern Japanese life maybe belie this awareness, its potentiality to give meaning to life is significant, not only for Japanese culture, but also for world culture, as people, particularly in secular, technological societies, struggle to renew their bond with nature and a deeper reverence for life.

## Endnote

<sup>1</sup> Seiichi Yagi, "The Maternal Bond as a Paradigm of Japanese Religion," LOOK JAPAN, July 10, 1983. p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Tsushima, M., Nishiyama, S. Shimazono, S. Shiramizu., "The Vitalistic Conception of Salvation in Japanese New Religions," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, 6/1-2, (March-June 1979). pp. 142-143.