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Japanese Religious Attitudes from the Standpoint of the Comparative Study of Civilizations

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Japanese Religious Attitudes from the Standpoint of the Comparative Study of Civilizations

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1. INTRODUCTION

It requires no small degree of courage or foolhardiness to offer yet another set of remarks on the subject of the religious attitudes of the Japanese. For more than one hundred years now, foreign observers of the Japanese scene have been variously intrigued or astonished by what they have rightly or wrongly taken to be a phenomenon of unparalleled variability, flexibility or downright apathy—or a combination of all three. Surely, one might think, there is little more that need be said on the subject. Yet just as certainly, from the standpoint of the comparative study of civilizations, the Japanese case affords us a chance to reconsider some of the central assumptions of the study of comparative religions. I shall undertake such a reconsideration, however limited in scope, using some recently collected observations of contemporary Japanese religious behavior.

It is sometimes said that the dominant Japanese attitude toward religion is one of apathy. If by religion is meant issues of doctrine and dogma, the observation seems to me to be accurate enough. Others have argued that the Japanese exhibit an unusually high degree of tolerance of religious belief and practice. I think that claim is less well founded than the first, particularly with regard to the Japanese treatment of Christianity. Yet there is some truth to the claim, which I should prefer to state somewhat differently. My own opinion is that the Japanese attitude is less one of tolerance than lack of interest in and unconcern with the religious beliefs and practices of others. Just as one may select his own clothing, choose his own diet, and conduct much of his daily business according to his own lights, so may one put together his own version of religion. There is, in short, a marked lack of orthodoxy in the absence of which heterodoxy flourishes unchallenged.

2. HETERODOXY IN JAPANESE ANCESTOR WORSHIP

It has often happened that when I am in a group of people and some question of religious practice is raised, all are astonished to learn what the others think and do. The surprise is freely expressed, but seldom is any value judgment rendered. Not long ago, for example, I was with a group of university students and, never one to let an opportunity pass, I asked what they knew about the ancestral tablets in their natal households. One student reported that it is the custom in the part of Japan from which he comes for every child—sons and daughters alike—to receive a copy of parent's tablet, there being no distinction between the "real" tablet and the copies. Another young man in the group, expressing his surprise, said that in his part of the country all sons receive a copy of the tablets, but the daughters do not. Two others, equally surprised at both accounts, said that they had always thought that only the successor keeps the tablet of the parents. The issue is hardly a trivial one, for the ancestors are after all a central fixture of the household and its domestic religious rites. Why should none of these young people know that such differences as these exist? The answer, while simple enough, reveals a profound aspect of Japanese religious practice. Because the ancestral rites are so thoroughly *domestic*—so centrally a concern only of family and household members—there is hardly any occasion on which an outsider can become acquainted with the practices of another family. As a consequence, what is proper practice may usefully be defined as what one's household has always done. It is merely considered odd that other people do things differently.

The variability is even greater than this one example suggests. There are households whose Christian members maintain Buddhist altars for the ancestral tablets, and there are Christians whose photographs are kept in Buddhist altars. While exceptional, there are cases in which funeral services for a given individual are performed in turn by two or more religious sects. The essentially private nature of the decisions made about key domestic rituals of this kind insures their continued variability.

Then there are the television dramas. Whether they be contemporary or period pieces, it is the rare series that lets pass some moment at which the living interact with the spirits of the dead. A widow speaks to the tablet or photograph of her deceased husband; children address the spirits of a parent; people at graves talk to deceased family members. In my experience, all of this is quite true to life, although the requirements of the dramatic form may lead to some exaggeration. Let me offer some examples.

A young widow, just returned from the hospital where she has given his first solid food to her teenage son, paralyzed in an accident, goes to the *butsudan* (household Buddhist altar). In it is a photograph of a young man, her husband who died thirteen years before. She sits and looks at it—there is a flashback of his changing the baby's diapers. "How could you leave me alone like this? He is eating at last, but I don't know how long it will take for him to recover fully. What shall I do?"

Or consider the following moving scene from the television play based on the book *Mo Ichido Umi e Yukitakatta* (I Wanted to Go Once More to the Ocean). The young father has died of cancer, embittered, after accidentally learning that he is terminally ill. The two young children and their widowed mother are at home, the boy playing music full blast on a cassette machine, while the mother and daughter distractedly set up the dolls for Girls' Day. There is no memorial tablet or altar, but the father's photograph sits on a low table. Everyone is tense and cross, and when the emperor (*dairi*) doll is unpacked, they find that its head has broken off. The little girl bursts into tears, and her mother tries in vain to comfort her. Exasperated, she orders her son to turn off the loud music, and just as he reaches for the switch, the father's voice is heard. He has taped his *yuigon* (last testament), which contains advice to his children, an expression of faith and trust in his wife to carry on, and a cry of frustration. All fall silent as the tape plays on, and when the voice stops, the children are transformed. The mother goes to the table, takes the father's photograph, and sets it on the top doll-shelf, where the male *dairi* doll would ordinarily have been placed. Paternal authority and concern reasserted, all will be well. Note that the media employed are a photograph and a cassette tape. The technology is relatively new; the sentiment is very old.

In this connection, I was struck by the following passage from a paper written, but not yet published by Lee Kwang-Kyu, "Ancestor Worship and Kinship Structure in Korea." There, after discussing the many changes that have occurred in the postwar period, he writes, "Confucian style ancestor worship was a self-conscious reform imposed upon indigenous custom, a policy that seems to have been overwhelmingly successful. Today, these rituals are Korean custom. But (there is also a) tension between regulations specified in the ritual manuals and variations and compromises in form and content over time and space. And ancestor worship continues to change as urbanites simplify offering food and sometimes include such unorthodox delicacies as canned beer. Also, many families now offer *chesa* (ancestral offerings) in the more convenient evening hours. *That they continue to make these adjustments is perhaps more significant than that they lapse from propriety*" (emphasis supplied). Just so in Japan, I think, where in any event propriety has been less of a concern than it is in Korean ancestral rites.

3. THE UBIQUITY OF THE POTENTIAL FOR VENERATION

I should like now to turn to another dimension of the religious scene. Here it is the dolls of Girls' Day that afford yet another example of considerable import to my theme. In the spring of 1979 there was on display on the first floor of the Mitsukoshi Department Store in Tokyo an enormous set of *hina-ningyō* (Girl's Day dolls displayed in tiers). Called *Miyabi*, it featured a very large five-tiered array of dolls, surrounded by a barrier of bamboo poles, the ground of the platform on which it rested covered with loose small white stones. A woman, richly dressed in the latest fashion, and her small son, perhaps eight or ten years old, came up to it. As

she was making the very contemporary remark that if they were to buy a set of dolls this large they'd have to build an extra room in the house, the boy stepped inside the bamboo guard rail and picked up a handful of stones from the surface of the platform. She scolded him and told him to put them back at once. He dropped the stones, faced the dolls, clapped his hands in the Shinto style of veneration, and said, "*Yurushite kudasai* (Forgive me)!" His mother laughed lightly, and as she led him away, she said, "*Kami-sama de wa nai desu yo* (They are not gods)."

But it had seemed to the little boy that they were. Perhaps it was the white stone and the plain bamboo railing that reminded him of a shrine. Whatever the reason, his reaction leads me to suggest that another major aspect of Japanese religious attitudes is the ability to see in almost anything and everything the potential for veneration, requiring the paying of respect. After all, do not forget, this scene occurred in a department store!

Other similar examples of this attitude in action come to mind. In Matsumoto City there is a famous cake-shop in front of which there is a hitching-post of stone, about two and one-half feet in height. Someone, at some time, decided that it was another kind of stone entirely, probably because of its unmistakably phallic shape. It now has around it a small *shimenawa* (a rope which designates the sacred) with *gohei* (paper pendants signifying the sacred). It thus resembles many such stones found within the precincts of Shinto shrines. I think it a perfect example of the ability to invest the most mundane objects with sanctity.

Yet another example of a somewhat different sort caught my eye in a large department store in the Ikebukuro district of Tokyo. In the *mingei* (folkcraft) corner there were several stone images of *Jizō* (a Buddhist guardian deity), the very small ones on a table, the larger ones sitting on the floor. Each had a price-tag attached to it, and on the floor in the center of the display was a small plate filled with coins, mostly of one, five and ten yen denominations. Fascinated, I asked one of the clerks about these offerings, and she told me that the staff had finally set out the plate because the loose coins left on the floor had become a nuisance. Later I encountered a similar arrangement in a ceramic goods shop in Tokyo, where a small dish had been placed on a table filled with statues of the deities *Kannon*, *Daikoku*, *Ebisu* and *Benten*. There the owner told me that he collects the coins over a period of time and offers them at the neighborhood *Inari* (fox) shrine. In the West, I submit, there are no deities in shops and department stores.

4. VENGEANCE

Yet another feature of contemporary religious attitudes in Japan involves the notion of *tatari* (vengeance), which I believe to be one of considerable power even among young people today. I stress the issue of age because so much of what I am discussing is so often mistakenly said to be behavior found only among the old. I know a young woman who married over her father's bitter opposition to the match. He went so far as to disown her and refused to accept either letters or

telephone calls from her or her husband. During her first pregnancy her father died quite suddenly, dashing her hopes for a reconciliation when the child was born. She gave birth to a child with one deformed hand, and she told me, "It is *tatari*, for my father never forgave me. This is his way of punishing me." The theme is as old as Japanese religion itself.

Thus, the spirits of the dead are thought to have the power to punish the living, who can ward off potential harm only by making appropriate offerings and prayers. The aim of these rites is to pacify and reassure the spirits, to make them content, and thereby insure their benign protection—or at the very least foster their indifference to human affairs. The gods and buddhas are not feared, rather it is the spirits of human beings who have lived among men and died who are a source of possible danger. To reduce the threat they pose the living must do two things: Give them a proper location by seeing that they are settled somewhere, and make offerings of food and other objects to them. The world of the living and dead is a highly interactive one.

5. PERSONAL RELIGIOUS PRACTICES

It is often said that the really essential characteristic of Japanese religion is its expression of group affiliation and solidarity. Rituals are familial or communal, we are told, as though there were no individual behavior of a religious kind at all. Such personal, individual religious behavior is, however, very common indeed. Perhaps it has been largely overlooked because of the greater ease with which the group-oriented and group-centered rites can be observed and analyzed.

By individual, personal religious behavior I mean the kind that produces the *ema* and *o-mikuji*, the votive tablets and lots purchased at shrines and temples and hung or tied to tree branches, railings, and lanterns, or pasted on walls, gateways and statues. People seeking help, guidance or reassurance utilize both devices and the prominence of *o-fuda* (charms) and other religious artifacts in places of business, automobiles and trucks, as well as wallets and purses, clearly has very little to do with group-centered activity. I think it obvious that these individual and personal acts have assumed increasing importance as group-centered forms of ritual and ceremony have eroded during the last two generations since the end of the Pacific War.

After all, this is the first time since the institution of the *shūmon aratame chō* (Registry of Religious Affiliation) in the middle of the seventeenth century that the government of Japan has not been directly involved in the religious practices of the Japanese people. For centuries it required of them certain things, whether it be registering as *danka* (parishioners) of a temple and observing basic Buddhist rites, or following the prescriptions of the *shūshin* (ethics) textbooks and the admonitions of the *Kyōiku-chokugo* (Imperial Edict on Education).

To be sure there are elements of fashion and fad in this kind of religious behavior. In recent years these have played a major role in the economy of many of the sacred places of Japan. The hordes of *an-non-zoku* (fashion magazine faddists) in the

temples of places like Kita Kamakura were there as a result of the considerable publicity given its temples and shrines in the magazines and in guide books especially designed to appeal to the young. The phenomenon has faded somewhat, but it is a powerful reminder that fashion and fad have long played a role in Japanese popular religion, particularly with regard to the waxing and waning of pilgrimage routes.

Now I have been told repeatedly that none of this has anything to do with religion at all. I would maintain on the contrary that it has everything to do with religion as it is practiced today. In the course of Japanese history there have been innumerable instances of popular fashion bringing both young and old to places of worship through very similar devices and with mixed interests not unlike those of the present day. These are interests in worship, food, souvenirs and the more earthly pleasures. I for one see little psychological distance between the pilgrimage styles of the Tokugawa period and those of the followers of the guide books. That the latter wear jeans and T-shirts is a matter of no importance.

It is the habit of many to decry the death of religious faith and the decline of venerable religious institutions in contemporary Japan. It is true that the old institutions may no longer serve, and undeniably the traditional social organizations are weakening, but it seems clear to me that we must stop underestimating the importance of the innumerable acts of personal faith performed daily by members of this society. Personal religious practices flourish in contemporary Japan and they deserve the attention of those who would understand both past and future.

6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

From the standpoint of the comparative study of civilizations, then, contemporary Japanese religious behavior and attitudes can be seen to afford evidence of an unusual situation. Let me put my conclusion in terms of a somewhat outmoded vocabulary. Nara and Heian Buddhism, derived from a Chinese model heavily infused with Taoist belief and practice, was succeeded by the more popular sects of later historical periods. Neo-Confucianism prospered in the Tokugawa period (1603–1868), and from the Meiji (1868–1912) through the first half of Showa (1926–to date) periods was added to the newly formulated idiom of *kokka shintō* (state Shinto). Through it all, the underlying character of Japanese religion was animistic, and as the formal organizations and doctrines of earlier periods wane in importance, that basic animistic orientation endures. To focus on institutions alone is to see secularization everywhere in Japan; close attention to non-institutionalized behavior suggests another conclusion entirely. The lines drawn so clearly in the West between human and deity, animal and human, the living and the dead, the forces of nature and those of culture, are all indistinct in Japanese thought. It is a religious sensitivity that has responded differently to the forces of social change in the last century from the responses seen in comparable societies of the Western world.