



THE RELIGIOUS SITUATION IN PRESENT-DAY JAPAN

By Dr. Keiji Nishitani,
Professor of Kyoto University

Our subject, "The Religious Situation in Present-day Japan," confronts us with the fact that generally speaking the Japanese people are indifferent to religion. However, this indifference is not entirely unique to this country. It is, in fact, somewhat common throughout the modern world and can be noted even in Europe and America. In Europe, however, Christianity is still active and exerts a real influence, while in Japan there are exceptional features which make the situation quite different.

I

The Westernization of the Japanese People

What is the reason for these exceptional features? It is, I believe, inescapably connected with Japanese history. After the Meiji Restoration, Occidental culture was vigorously introduced into Japan and our life was very much Westernized not only in its outward, but in its inner aspects as well. Consequently, there developed a deep historical and cultural chasm between the present and the past. For example, many types of science, various techniques, and new political, economic, and educational systems were introduced from the West, so that the life of the Japanese was almost totally changed into the ways of living,

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thinking, observing, and feeling of Western people. Even our sensibilities changed. Yet at the same time something fundamental, a formative element in the development of Western history, was not accepted by Japan, and this created a problem. I refer, of course, to Western religion and philosophy.

Parliamentary Government

Consider, for example, parliamentary government. Needless to say, its basic concept is political freedom and equality, which rose from the still more basic idea that people are free and equal in their fundamental character as human beings. In the West, this idea had its origin in the Christian view of man which, briefly stated, is that individuals regardless of their social status, property, education etc., are fundamentally equal before God as human beings. The same religious consciousness that transcends and abolishes all such things as social status, property, and education, has also produced the basic consciousness of freedom.

Moreover, this basic consciousness of freedom and equality together with its religious foundation, has been taken into serious consideration in the philosophy of the West; and thus the concept of political freedom and equality, which is the foundation of parliamentary government, is itself based on a religious and philosophical principle. Needless to say, politicians in the West do not always act as this fundamental principle demands. The so-called secularization of Christian principles is showing its political effects more and more. Nevertheless, the religious and philosophical point of view always underlies the political concept of freedom and equality and in case of

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need lays claim to the attitude of politicians.

In Japan, however, when the parliamentary system of government was introduced, together with the concept of political freedom and the "sciences" of politics and law, the underlying religious and philosophical principle was not accepted. Consequently, only the outward system and the political concept of parliamentary government, separated from the fundamental consciousness of the freedom of human beings as human beings, were established. I think this is the reason why parliamentary government has not yet taken root in this country. It has not taken root in the inwardness of the people. In other words, because it does not involve the religious spirit, which lies at its foundation, parliamentary government in Japan does not touch the root of the people's mind.

Beethoven's Ninth Symphony

The same can be said regarding other areas of experience. We are sometimes moved by Beethoven's music, the Ninth Symphony, for example. At the depth of Beethoven's mind there was a strong religious spirituality that manifests itself in his music. We can sense, while listening to it, the spiritual breath in it. But although we listen to the same music I think there is a fundamental difference between the feeling of Europeans, who have been brought up breathing the spiritual atmosphere of Christianity, and the feeling of we Japanese, who have been brought up in another atmosphere. In Europeans there must be awakened a vivid sense of the religious spirituality that is breathing in the Ninth Symphony. That spiritually must be something real and something close to them, while it is not to

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us. The sense of reality felt by Europeans on hearing the finale of the chorus, for example, cannot be experienced by Japanese in the same sense.

This may be compared to the difference between pressed and living flowers, or between a wrestling or baseball match on television and one which we see at the edge of the ring or at the baseball grounds. In one case we feel a vital atmosphere, while in the other we do not. This vital atmosphere is sensed only when it emanates from living wrestlers with their hot breath or from living flowers in their shining colours. In the case of the Ninth Symphony, what is called the religious breath can be really felt only in such a vital atmosphere. Therefore, the sensibility to such an atmosphere becomes real only when we are actually in it. Perhaps it does not become real, perhaps it does not grow into an actual feeling in its true sense, even in the case of Europeans who have become indifferent to the Christian faith and find therein no vital atmosphere. How then can it be real to us? We are hardly conscious of such a slight difference, yet I think it is indeed a major problem.

However much impressed we may be by Beethoven's music, there must be a fundamental limitation in our impression. As in the case of parliamentary government, the music does not reach the very depth of our heart, our spiritual consciousness. The understanding of the music must stop at a little shallower level than the depth of the heart. Even when we are moved from the bottom of our hearts by Beethoven's music, it seems inevitable that there must remain in the innermost region of the heart a blank, an empty space.

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As was said above, all things, including our mode of living, our way of looking at things and our responses, have been Westernized. Westernization has destroyed almost all our traditions, including the traditional spirituality, the religions, and philosophies of our ancestors; and what may be a substitute for the traditional spirituality has not as yet been imported. Consequently we have an empty place in the foundation of our life, at the depth of our spiritual being.

Philosophy and Religion are not Readily Transplantable

There are good reasons for what we have been saying. Such things as philosophy and religion by their very nature cannot be readily transplanted in the same way as techniques and political systems, for example, can. When a religion or philosophy is transplanted, there is no other way but for it to spring up from the inner source in the mind of the people. Such is their nature. In other words, they belong to the field of human self-consciousness, or self-awareness. They cannot be easily transplanted, because they are connected with one's most fundamental consciousness and with matters which concern one's own true self. The path can be opened only by each one alone, and attained only by one's own effort. It cannot be handed over to or taken from a person like something material or imported from another country like something ready-made. When we act, or feel, or think of something, there lies at the bottom of all such experiences a basic dimension, where the religious significance is asked or philosophical proof is sought.

For example, even such things as a fair election under a parliamentary government, or the real impression of Beethoven's

music, must have something to do with the above-mentioned basic dimension wherein our fundamental self-awakenedness arises. It is in this fundamental place that the mind of modern Japanese in general has a blank spot, an emptiness. They seem to have something hollow at the root of their spirit.

The Decline of Religious Influence

Generally speaking, religion means to become aware of the unique relationship to the Absolute in one's self. To seek after religious truth means to endeavor to find such a unique relationship in which we are to be made truly alive and enlightened by the eternal Life and Light that transcends our short life and death. Only such a relationship can give a steady basis to our existence and make us truly become ourselves. By religion we are given an indestructible faith, a firm confidence. If this is lacking, all other things become rootless. Religion is, so to speak, the rivet of the fan of life. Therefore, all races at all times have sought religion and it has functioned for them.

Needless to say, there have always been religions in Japan. Shinto, Buddhism and Confucianism have existed in this country and have taught the Way of the Kami, the Way of the Buddha, or the Way of Heaven, showing us our relation to the Absolute, or the great Life and Light which transcends us. In this regard, our ancestors lived at a higher spiritual level than we do now, in so far as this most fundamental point for human beings is concerned.

Until the middle of the Meiji era the religious mind in Japan seems to have been effective in the formation of human life. After that, as this country was more Westernized, the effect

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of religion suddenly lessened. Since then the traditional religions have become alienated from actualities and have ceased to work vitally in our social and mental life. For example, many Japanese visit the Ryuanji temple or the Saihoji temple in Kyoto to admire the gardens there. Sometimes their admiration amounts almost to enthusiasm. I wonder, however, whether many visitors today can understand the spirituality and appreciate the religious mood—in this case the Zen Buddhist mood and spirituality—which manifests itself in those gardens, as truly as the Japanese of olden times did when Zen Buddhism was functioning as a living religion? What I said about Beethoven's music can be said also about the garden of Ryuanji. It is doubtful whether many visitors in their admiration are really inspired by it, or whether their emotional responses are true ones.

Modern Japanese have alienated themselves from the religions of the East and they have lost spiritual mentality which existed among the people of old. At the same time they have not accepted the religion and philosophy of the West. At least this can be said about the people in general. Therefore, the inner structure of the life of the modern Japanese is different both from that of modern Westerners and also from that of Japanese of the past. It exists under quite exceptional circumstances. We think that we lead a normal life as human beings. But from a broad viewpoint it can be said that there is some fundamental defect in ourselves. It is in this regard that I referred in the beginning to the exceptional characteristics of modern Japan.

II

Three Modern Problems

I said in the beginning in regard to the religious state of modern Japanese, that it has a status common to all the world. There is a deep invisible gulf between religion and modern life or the modern way of looking at things. The fundamental reason why this gulf has appeared seems to lie in the fact that science and scientific rationalism have gradually gained control of modern life. It goes without saying that, on the one hand, scientific progress has greatly contributed to mankind but, on the other hand, it has caused many serious problems. Here I should like to list only three.

Human Mechanization

In the first place, as is often said, human life is rapidly becoming mechanical. Mechanization does not only concern that which is outside us. It also concerns our mentality itself. The important fact about the mechanization of our lives is that the mind and its functions have become more mechanized. Human relations, including that of parent and child, brothers, friends, and other relations in the larger society contain in their nature something delicate which cannot easily be reasoned out. When one boldly cuts off such delicate and, therefore, sometimes troublesome fringes from human relations and makes of them something clear-cut and rational, by making a contract, for example, one may then feel relieved. But, when such rationalizing continues for a while, the parent is no longer a parent, the child no longer a child, the husband no longer a husband,

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and the wife no longer a wife. Their relationship, as well as they themselves, become more or less a sort of mechanism. They enter a dreary state and lose a human-like way of life. Here is the reason for the fact that all things superficially rational soon lose their appeal and cause weariness, even though they may have a strong charm at the beginning like a new machine for a child. Such a process, that is, the mechanization of man and his life, is generally called "de-humanization."

De-humanization

In the second place, this fundamental de-humanization, or de-spiritualization on account of the "rationalization" of human life, paradoxically brings about a fundamental de-rationalization of human existence. The more a man is involved in a mechanized state of existence and the more his conduct and thinking become mechanical, the more the inner-most power of the mind itself becomes inert. The depth of the mind gradually ceases to function and goes out of sight. This means that a man becomes non-reflective. (Dr. Paul Tillich, the famous German theologian who is now in America, speaks of the "depth of reason.") Man's power of functioning from the "depth of reason" becomes weakened and his mind works only superficially. He may be very cheerful, healthy, bright, and light-hearted; but all the same, he is flippant, superficial and non-reflective.

The same conditions of the present age, which tend to rationalize and mechanize human life, external as well as internal, individual as well as social, rob us of the power of a rational grasp of ourselves and make us an easy prey of instinctive desires, lust for power, or other irrational motives. From behind

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our rationalized life something fundamentally irrational is apt to emerge—even frantically sometimes. “Rationalization” weakens our power of self-reflection, that is, the faculty of reason, and evokes all sorts of irrationality in its lower form.

We meet everywhere with this ironical phenomenon of derationalization through “rationalization,” so to speak. For example, on the streets, we often see a young man drive a motorcycle at full speed, making an amazing noise and raising a terrible dust. Yet the driver looks very triumphant and pleased with himself. Whenever I see such a young man, I wonder what he is proud of. Behind the fact that a motorcycle has been manufactured is the hard labor of technicians and scientists during the long course of history ; but the young man, himself, has not participated in any way in this effort, I am sure. Moreover, behind the invention or improvements of technicians are scientists, innumerable people of many countries, the teachers and parents, who have brought up these scientists from childhood, and the tax-payers of various countries, who have also contributed indirectly to the accomplishment of these things. I wonder if he has ever reflected on such matters. If he had done so, he would not have driven in such a manner. He might have been throwing dust on some technicians or engineers who at that very time were trying to improve the motorcycle.

Speedy driving itself is not a bad thing. The question lies rather in the egoism with which the driver indulges in his own pleasure and neglects the interests of others. When we look at him dashing by, we cannot but feel that he, himself, is a sort of machine moving together with the machine, a

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modern centaur, as it were; and that he is being controlled without reason by only momentary feelings of pleasure and is being driven by a very simple egoism. In other words, he is de-rationalized as well as mechanized; and the very vitality, the efficiency, and speed of the modern centaur makes us feel that there is some desolate emptiness.

This is only a small example, but I think that similar things on a much larger scale can also be found everywhere in various spheres of life, which reveal a feeling of emptiness.

Nihilism

This feeling exists throughout the world and has something to do with my last point, which may be expressed comprehensively with the word, "nihilism." Especially in the West, many thinkers, literary men, and social critics, critics of civilization, pay keen attention to this problem. This is because nihilism lies at the very basis of modern Western civilization. It means that there has arisen a tendency to disbelief in religion—in this case, Christianity—and that a religious indifferentism is more or less widely ignoring the relationship between God and man, that has been for a long time the solid basis of all the cultural and moral civilization of the West. The problem of nihilism is connected with the fact that this very basis has begun to be shaken today.

Now nihilism does not necessarily mean the sombre, so-called "nihilistic" mood. On the contrary, it is evident in the case of the young man dashing on his motorcycle that he is vital and energetic, and that he, himself, is not "nihilistic" in the least. Actually, however, this is a case of nihilism. In

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the truest sense, nihilism must be taken up as a serious problem of the spirit. Nihilism here means that something fundamental has been lost from our existence, and that all life has become ultimately meaningless.

The mechanization of our life, the de-rationalization of our mind, and nihilism, which lies at the basis of these phenomena, are the symptoms of a critical situation commonly found throughout the world today.

Western Concern What we have to note here, however, is that in the West this problem has arisen in the consciousness of many people, especially religious leaders, philosophers, literary men and others, and that they are sincerely making an effort to solve it as a most serious problem imposed not only on themselves but on all mankind,—a concern which cannot yet be seen in our country.

In the West various kinds of solutions are sought. Some try to overcome nihilism by means of Christianity. For example, Kierkegaard, Dostoevski, and many theologians belong to this group. Others regard nihilism as inevitable and try to affirm life, as it is, by plumbing its depths. Nietzsche and his followers had this attitude. And still others seek in Eastern religions and philosophies a way of solving the problem. Schopenhauer and others are in this category. The literature and philosophy of Europe today are almost incomprehensible without considering this serious struggle with nihilism.

Japanese Indifference The situation in Japan is, however, altogether different. The mechanization of life, the de-rationali-

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zation of the mind, and nihilism are also going on rapidly in this country; but there exist very few men of intelligence who are even aware of this as a problem, or are making any effort to solve it for themselves, not to speak of mankind in general. There seems to be neither literature nor philosophy which treats nihilism as a profound spiritual problem today. The actual state in Japan is that nihilism is always permeating our life without our being aware of it,—a fact which indicates that nihilism in Japan has its roots fastened all the more deeply in the soil. When there is no question, no answer can ever appear, and no effort can ever be expended to solve it.

What is the reason for this great difference between Europe and Japan? In Europe, because Christianity is still living and active, and has a vital influence; and because there has emerged a crisis in Christianity, which has produced a wholesale crisis of all the life-systems based on that religion, man is compelled to have a keen consciousness of the actuality of nihilism, and to search for a way to overcome it. The fact that such a consciousness does not arise in Japan means that our present-day religions have ceased to have any vital influence. Here we find the special situation in Japan. Many foreigners say that there is no country in the world where the people are so indifferent to religion as in Japan. Why do our religions have no vital influence today? What must happen to them so that they can recover their vital influence, awaken us to that hidden nihilism, which is engulfing our existence, and prompt us to overcome it?

III

Japanese Religions Isolated from Life

Why are religions in Japan so ineffective today? In a word, it is because they stand isolated from our actual life. As to the manner of their isolation, however, traditional Shinto and Buddhism are different from Christianity. In today's Japan the mode of living and the way of looking at things is a mixture of the Western and the Eastern. This is the actual condition of Japanese life. The traditional religions, however, have not developed in the true sense even one step from the conditions of the past before the introduction of things Western into this country. They do not have even any surface contact with things Western which have been introduced and fused into the everyday life of Japan today. In short, they are wholly isolated from living actualities.

As for Christianity in Japan, it was and it remains a transplantation from the West. It remains, as it were, a foreign plant that exists in a hothouse. It has made few efforts to adapt itself to the new climate, though there are some exceptions such as, for example, Kanzō Uchimura.^a It has no contact with and even isolates itself from the actual life of Japan and things Japanese.

In short, these religions lack any contact with actual life today. They stand in isolation from it, although they do so in different ways. Therefore, in order to recover their vital influence by correcting their isolation from the actualities of life, a different course will have to be taken by the traditional

^a.内村鑑三

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religions and by Christianity.

Condition for Buddhist Recovery

Taking Buddhism as an example of the former, Buddhism is very much responsible for the fact that the emerging nihilism in the life of Japan today is unrecognized for the reason that, as was said above, “unconsciousness” lies in Buddhism’s exerting no vital influence. This may be called very cynical, but the same Buddhism is in truth the only religion that took up nihilism in a wholesale manner and probed it to the depth. For example, “birth, age, sickness, and death,” “all existence, is suffering,” “all phenomena are transitory,” and “all things have no self-identity(ego)”: all these doctrines advocated by Buddhism have something to do with the problem of nihilism. It is not too much to say that from the first Buddhism looked nihilism in the face and showed the way to overcome it. Therefore, if Buddhism can recover from its present inertia, it should contribute very much to save mankind from the spiritual troubles of today.

However, the present situation of Buddhism is blocked by the very way it should take to fulfil its own calling. In the first place, because the priesthood of most Buddhist temples is nowadays transmitted by heredity, as if a man could be born a priest, or as if temples were places where men might be born. Temples are places for those who are reborn, for those who were once born in the “world” and then made up their mind to enter a new life. The decision to live in accordance with Buddhism, that is, a Buddhistic conversion (*hotsu-bodai*-

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shin, or *hosshin*)* is, so to speak, the seed of religion, the source from which all religious life and religious activities spring. A tree cannot grow where there is no seed. Hence, when a temple ceases to be a place where Buddhism is practiced or preached, and becomes a place where only funerals are performed and visitors entertained, or a place for sightseeing, it is quite natural that the functions of Buddhism should gradually decline and become a sort of social custom. It is not too harsh to say that, if a reformation of Buddhist organizations is not accomplished, Buddhism will soon fade away. But as this problem has often been discussed, no further comment need be made here. The only question now is whether or not this reformation can actually be realized.

Putting aside problems related to organization and turning to problems of thought, what seems to be the most important thing for Buddhism today is that it develop from its own fundamental standpoint new religious thoughts and ideas related to the historical and social aspects of human existence. Although this aspect certainly has been the most undeveloped side of Buddhism in the past, I think that it is quite possible for it to establish a new point of view toward history and society that is quite different from that of the West. In this way, Buddhism may essentially overcome its isolation from the actualities of life. It is also, I am sure, the only way for Buddhism to accomplish its own revival. For example, one major problem is what social relations should be like and how historical life should be regarded from the Buddhist standpoint of the

* *hotsu-bodaishin* 発菩提心 literally, "aspiring enlightenment"; sometimes shortened to *hosshin* 発心

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non-ego. The famous historian, Arnold Toynbee, who was in Japan some time ago, wrote a book entitled "A Historian's Approach to Religion," which has become famous because of its deep discernment. In this book he discusses in detail the idea that the non-ego concept of Mahayana Buddhism should be an indispensable factor in the future existence of mankind.

Condition for Christianity being Influential.

Next, concerning Christianity in Japan, I think that it is most important for this faith to assimilate the concept or feeling that has developed in the East in connection with nature. The intimate contact with nature may be said to be the most undeveloped side of Christianity in the past. But if Christianity in Japan really succeeds, in introducing it, it will gradually come in contact also with the soil and climate of the Japanese people's mentality, get rid of the state of estrangement, and become firmly rooted in the soil of Japan. This also mean the possibility of Christianity finding an occasion in this country to make a new, original development.

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Buddhism originated in India and was transmitted to China, where it made a new advance as Chinese Buddhism. Then it was transmitted to Japan, where it made a third new development as Japanese Buddhism, especially in the Kamakura^a era. Now within this country it is encountering the West. Isn't it then natural to expect another new development to take place?

Likewise, Christianity came into existence among the Jewish

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people, and experienced new developments after entering the Hellenic and Roman worlds. Then it experienced another new development when it was transmitted to the Germanic people. In the present age Christianity is encountering the Orient, and a most profound and far-reaching encounter is seen within this country. Therefore, I think that it is quite natural to expect Christianity in Japan to make a bold start in another new, unprecedented development.

Both Buddhism and Christianity may get rid of the state of isolation from actual life by means of a new development of their possibilities. Then, for the first time, a way may also be open to overcome such problems as the mechanization of human life, de-rationalization, and nihilism, which are spoiling the present world.

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