



NATIONAL CHARACTER AND RELIGION

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The meaning of “National Character”

The meaning of the term “national character” (*kokuminsei*)^a has not been well defined. Perhaps this is because the substance of its meaning has changed in the course of history. For instance, we speak of the “soul of Japan” (*yamato-damashii*)^b or the “Japanese Spirit” (*yamato-gokoro*)^c, but although these concepts are closely related to the character of the people, they do not clearly express the national character. The ancient usage of *yamato-damashii* in the *Tales of Genji* (*Genji Monogatari*)^d, the *Great Mirror* (*Ōkagami*)^e, and *Konjaku Monogatari** had quite a different connotation from what it has had since the Meiji era. Let me illustrate this with a story from the *Konjaku Monogatari*.

Once upon a time there was an Assistant Professor, a Doctor of Law and Ritual, whose name was Yoshizumi Kiyohara^f.

a. 国民性 b. 大和魂 c. 大和心 d. 源氏物語 e. 大鏡 f. 清原善澄

* *Konjaku Monogatari*, 今昔 a book of tales of antiquity published about the eleventh century, sometimes translated “Ages Ago”

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Though he yielded to none in learning, yet even after reaching the age of seventy he was not given a worthy position and remained very poor. One night burglars broke into his house, and stole or destroyed his property. After they had left, Yoshizumi, who had hid himself under the floor of his home, ran to the gate and angrily shouted, "I know all your faces well, and when day breaks I will tell the police who will arrest all of you." Hearing this the thieves returned, so Yoshizumi again sought refuge under the floor, but he did not succeed in hiding. The thieves dragged him out, and crushed his head with swords until he died. In the last part of the original text of this story we read the following moral: "Though Yoshizumi was learned, he had no *yamato-damashii*, but said very childish things and lost his life in vain."

Yamato-damashii in this quotation is used in the same meaning as in the *Tales of Genji* and the *Great Mirror*. It means good-sense or worldly wisdom, which is quite different from what it has meant since the Meiji era. The modern meaning developed after the middle of the Edo period and many will be surprised to learn that the word formerly meant something else. From this it can be seen how the concept of "national character" has also been formed historically.

Our recorded history is less than two thousand years, but our history as a race is much longer; and our national character, which began to take shape in the prehistoric period, has been formed during several thousand years, and will not perish in a brief space of time. It may change, but it will do so very slowly; so slowly that sometimes it may be thought to be unchangeable. However, it does, in fact, change. Therefore,

I cannot use the word “national character” unconditionally because, if I did, it would have no meaning.

Japan's Racial Religion

Today, I am going to speak about how our national character appears; how it has developed in our racial religion; what kind of changes were made when higher religions were introduced into this country; and what characteristics were prominent after they were received?

Shintō^a, the racial religion of Japan, is based on shamanism, a primitive religion that spread not only over the Japanese archipelago but over the wide area from Siberia on the north to the islands of south-east Asia. Etymologically the word shaman is from the Tungusic language and means “jumper” or “dancer.” Necromancers (*miko*)^b and sibyls (*ichiko*)^c are the equivalents of shaman. When they are possessed by kami*, they transmit the divine will. This occurs even today, as can be seen in such religion as Tenri-kyō^d, which often employes dances, chants, and incantations to induce possession.

Shinto is closely related to Japanese mythology, including the state myth; and the establishment of the state related in that myth is closely connected with the Imperial Family. Herein lies the special character of Shinto. The myth which tells about the Imperial ancestors is also associated with the myth of the origin of the “universe”, that is, Japan. This form of myth is peculiar to Japan.

In this myth Izanagi^e and Izanami^f gave birth to Ōyashima^g

a. 神道 b. 巫女 c. 市子 d. 天理教 e. 伊弉諾 f. 伊弉册 g. 大八島

* 神 A Shinto term for deity or a noble spirit.

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(“The Great Eight Islands”), that is, Japan, and then to the kami of water, wood, and fire. When the goddess Izanami died after being burned by the kami of fire, Izanagi, having returned after following her to the realm of the dead, washed himself and in the process gave birth to the Sun Goddess (Ama-terasu-ō-mikami),^a the Moon kami (Tsuki-yomi-no-mikoto)^b and the Storm kami (Susano-o-no-mikoto)^c. According to the myth this Sun Goddess became the ancestress of the Imperial Family. Thus, through the myth of the origin of heaven and earth, the idea of the supremacy of the state and Emperor (*Tennō*)^d worship became associated with Shinto, and the idea of the Emperor as a human god (*arahito-gami*)^e is derived therefrom.

Shinto, which was founded on such a myth, has continued until today as the racial religion of the Japanese people; and because of this foundation, although it has been somewhat influenced by Buddhism and Confucianism, which are of foreign origin, it nonetheless restricts in various ways the Japanese people's reception of higher religions such as Buddhism and Christianity. Shinto welcomed Buddhism, Confucianism, and ancient Chinese philosophy in order to systematize its doctrines. It is rather noteworthy, that even Buddhism, in playing an important role in the history of Japan, was somewhat limited because of being Japanized by Shinto.

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Buddhism and the Racial Religion

Shamanism gradually developed into Shinto, and since Shinto

a. 天照大神 b. 月読尊 c. 素戔嗚尊 d. 天皇 e. 現人神

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is related to the mythological origin of the country, the supremacy of the state, and the worship of the Emperor, which came therefrom, it affected the reception of Buddhism.

In the Nara period, Buddhism was forced to emphasize protection of the country rather than personal salvation. Indeed, it was for this reason that it was welcomed. At that time it was believed that a kind of magical power derived from such acts as building temples and pagodas, reciting and copying sutras, and contributing alms to priests; and it was thought that people could live peacefully by means of the spiritual merits derived from such "good works." In the Nara period, the most respected sutras* were the *Konkōmyō-kyō*^a and the *Konkōmyō-saishō-kyō*^b which emphasize protection of the state and the worldly benefits of incantation. It was the unique characteristic of Buddhism in the Nara period, that it especially valued these sutras which had a rather rare doctrine.

In the Heian period two great priests, Saichō^c and Kūkai^d, returned from China with the doctrines of Tendai^e and Shingon^f respectively. Shingon is esoteric Buddhism, which especially emphasizes prayers and incantations; while Tendai, though not the same as Shingon, also stresses these. Accordingly, Buddhism in the Heian period was predominantly esoteric. It was this emphasis of esoteric Buddhism that, combined with Shinto, produced Shugendō,^g the religion of mountain priests (*yamabushi*)^h. This is a case of the mixture of Buddhism and Shinto.

a. 金光明經 b. 金光明最勝王經 c. 最澄 d. 空海 e. 天台 f. 真言
g. 修驗道 h. 山伏

* These are two versions of the same sutra.

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Then, in the Kamakura period new forms, such as the Nichiren Sect appeared. Even today on the anniversary of its founder, for instance, the believers of Nichiren Buddhism can be seen marching down the streets reciting the holy invocation* in a loud voice and beating fan-like drums. Such a custom does not exist in either India or China. Then, why did it come into existence in Japan? We can only understand this by considering the shamanistic basis of religion in this country. Moreover, even in the teaching of the Jōdo^a Sect, there is the dancing invocation (*odori-nembutsu*)^b of Kūya,^c which also has a shamanistic element. Furthermore, dancing plays an important role in the new religions now prevalent in Japan.

However, instead of mentioning more cases, let us consider the shamanistic elements in Buddhism in general. This also is evident in the way sutras are recited with the pronunciation of ancient South China that nobody understands today (*go-on*)^d. (Incidentally, this is quite different from the way preachers quote the holy scriptures in Christian churches.) Because of the high regard for the element of incantation in the sutras, those who hear them have a pious feeling, even though they do not understand the words. In Japan's reception of Buddhism, especially in the form of its widest dissemination among the people, we can see something shamanistic, which is the prototype of the racial religion of Japan.

As we have already noted, Buddhism in the Nara period emphasized the protection of the state and, though the charac-

a. 浄土 b. 踊念仏 c. 空也 d. 吳音

* *Namu Myōhō Renge Kyō* 南無妙法蓮華經 "Adoration be to the Lotus of the Perfect Truth."

ter of Zen Buddhism in the Kamakura period was far from Nara and Heian Buddhism, the "Treatise on the Protection of the State and the Revival of Zen" (*Kōzen Gokokuron*)^a was written by Eisai,^b the first founder of Zen Buddhism in Japan. Again, to give another example, the real name of the temple Kenchōji^c is Kyofukuzan Kenchō Kōkoku Zenji,^d that is, a Zen temple which makes the state prosperous. Moreover, the first temple built by Dōgen^e after his return to Japan has as its complete name, Kannon Dōri-in Kōshō Gokoku Zenji^f which has the meaning of protecting the country. And Nichiren's treatise on "The Establishment of Righteousness and Security of the Country" (*Risshō Ankokuron*)^g has been associated with Japanese nationalism. But in the case of Jōdo and Jōdo Shin^h Buddhism, Hōnenⁱ and Shinran^j were often adversely criticized because they had no patriotic element in their teaching.

In the *Tales of Heike* (*Heike Monogatari*)^k and *Rise and Fall of Minamoto and Taira* (*Genpei Seisuiiki*),^l there is a scene in which Shigemori,^m remonstrating with his father Kiyomori,ⁿ states that there are four favors (*on*) in the world: first, the favor of heaven and earth; second, the favor of the king; third, parental favor; and fourth, the favor of the people. To know these is humanity and being unaware of them is to be a brute. Among them the favor of the king holds first place. This idea of the four favors is found in a sutra called *Daijō Honjō Shinjikan-gyō*,^{*} but according to scholars,

a. 興禪護國論 b. 栄西 c. 建長寺 d. 巨福山建長興國禪寺 e. 道元
f. 觀音導利院興聖護國禪寺 g. 立正安國論 h. 淨土, 淨土真 i. 法然
j. 親鸞 k. 平家物語 l. 源平盛衰記 m. 重盛 n. 清盛

such a view of the king is rather exceptional in Buddhist scriptures; and as for the four favors, they are only enumerated in this sutra. In this connection, the favor of the Three Treasures, that is, the Buddha, the Law, and the Order, is most valued; but in the remonstrance of Shigemori, the favor of the king occupies the highest place. This is a purely Japanese interpretation.

Reception of Confucianism

The same way of thinking was also revealed in the reception of Confucianism. (We cannot admit that Confucianism is a genuine religion. It is a system of philosophy that has been popularized for a long time as a religion.) In the reception of Confucianism our people rejected the political usage existing from ancient times: the abdication of King Gyō^a in favor of Shun,^b who was not his heir by blood, for example, and the case of Bu,^c king of Shū,^d who conquered Chū,^e king of In.^f The "Discourses" of Mencius, though as highly regarded as a Chinese classic as the "Analects" of Confucius, was rejected in Japan on the ground that it contained revolutionary ideas.

Ancestor Worship

An important matter here in this country is ancestor worship. To a certain extent this was influenced by Confucianism, but

a. 堯 *b.* 舜 *c.* 武 *d.* 周 *e.* 紂 *f.* 殷 (Japanese pronunciations)

* 大乘本生心地觀經 A Sutra on the attainment of Buddhahood through meditation in a quiet place on the faculties of the mind. The second chapter interprets the four favors of parents, people, kings, and the "Three Treasures."

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since succession in Confucianism is by blood, an adopted son, who has no blood relationship, is not recognized. In Japan, however, the system of adopting a son as a means of perpetuating the family name has been recognized from ancient times, and Buddhism, by approving of ancestor worship, has become a spiritual foundation for the people. Originally the idea of ancestor worship did not exist in Buddhism. It became a part of Buddhist teachings when it was introduced into China, because the idea of ancestor worship was already in Confucianism; and since Buddhism was introduced into Japan its emphasis on ancestor worship has been a conspicuous development.

In this country ancestral tablets with posthumous Buddhist names are put in the Buddhist home altar along with a Buddhist image. This is a distinguishing feature of our home altars. But Shinran, founder of Shin Buddhism said: "I have never prayed to Amida for the discharge of filial duties." However, if this teaching of Shinran had been followed, his sect would not have spread among the people. For the expansion of Shin Buddhism, ancestor worship as practiced by the people in general had to be added. Today, even those who no longer have faith usually continue their relation with their temple in so far as the veneration of the ancestors is concerned. This has significance as a popular function for the community and the family in the form of the *Bon** festival and the annual memorial services.

I have heard that these annual memorial services do not exist in Indian Buddhism. They originated in China where

* 盆 —The summer festival for the dead, sometimes called the "Feast of Lanterns."

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only the forty-ninth day of mourning (*chū-in*),^a the one hundredth day service, and the first and third anniversaries of a death are commemorated. In Japan, however, such memorial services as the forty-ninth day, the one hundredth day, and the first, third, seventh, thirteenth, seventeenth, twenty-fifth, thirty-third, and fiftieth anniversaries are observed. And, even though an individual is not a believer, the Japanese usually have a parish temple with a family grave attached, where the funeral services are performed. This is the way of Buddhism in Japan.

Since Buddhism is associated with such "closed societies" as the state and family, it has lost the characteristics of a world religion. In Japanese Buddhism, the power of the sect is strong. Some sects are organized like the family with an hereditary system for the parish temple priests. Westerners often think that all Japanese are Buddhist; but as individuals most of them have no Buddhist belief today. Buddhism exists only as a family religion. Ever since it was first received it has been fostered by their tradition of ancestor worship, which is the foundation of Japanese racial religion.

Under these conditions an Absolute, which is above the state or family, or a universal doctrine that is characteristic of higher religions, is not highly regarded in this country. In this respect Japanese Buddhism is different from Christianity. However, in the Buddhism of India and China universal doctrine plays an important role, and to be enlightened is held in high esteem; but in Japan this is not the case, although the faith has been purified in some points. This is true especially of the sects that arose in the Kamakura period: Jōdo,^b Jōdo-Shin^c and

a. 中陰 b. 浄土 c. 浄土真

Nichiren^a Buddhism, as well as in the Zen^b of Dōgen.^c In all of these personal belief is highly regarded. Even in the Edo^d period, as well as today, there are many cases of *Myōkō'nin*,^e an unlettered man of deep faith, to be found in Jōdo Shin circles.

The God-concept and the Conception of Kami and Buddha.

Turning now to the relation between the conception of kami in Shinto and the introduction of Buddhism, in the Japanese racial religion the kami are not separate existences from men. For instance, it is an ancient custom to enshrine those who have rendered service to the state, the village, or the family. The kami are considered to have the same nature as men, but higher and greater than ordinary men. Hence, the conception of kami is quite different from that of the Christian God. The idea of the Emperor being a kami is quite strange in the eyes of Westerners; but according to our racial tradition it is natural because a kami is merely a higher and greater human being, and that is what is meant when we say that the Emperor is a kami. But naturally this conception of kami restricts the reception of higher world religions in this country.

Buddha is a man who attained enlightenment, which is something that man can attain. The Buddha concept, therefore, is different from that of the Christian God, although, the Buddha Amida^f in Pure Land (Jōdo) Buddhism, has characteristics similar to the Christian God. Generally speaking, however, the term Buddha is applied to those who have attained enlightenment, and this way of thinking can easily be assimilated

a. 日蓮 b. 禪 c. 道元 d. 江戸 e. 妙好人 f. 阿弥陀

with the Japanese concept of kami. Hence, the God-concept of the Christian religion, being different from the Japanese kami-concept, cannot be received here except with great difficulty.

Christianity

Before the Restoration (1868) Christianity suffered persecution for a long time. Near the end of the Muromachi^a period (1336—1573) Christianity was brought to this country and at one time it was extensively accepted. Then, because of its prohibition, Christians were able to exist only in the district of Nagasaki as “Hidden Christians” (Kakure Kirishitan).^b After the Restoration the Christian religion was persecuted in the name of patriotism or the national polity (*kokutai*),^c with the idea that Japan was a divine land, and the “Emperor First principle” (*Kōshitsu Chūshin-shugi*).^d At the time of the Russo-Japanese war, Christians were suspected of being Russian spies. I was a boy then, but I can still remember this.

Even the great Christian leader, Kanzō Uchimura, confessed that he had been worried about the conflict between Christianity and patriotism. In an article, “A Part of my Religious Life,”* he says :

Christianity is a teaching to save mankind. In Christianity there is truth. However, it was introduced into Japan by foreign countries along with many things which were difficult for our countrymen to accept. Let us not

a. 室町 *b.* 隠れ切支丹 *c.* 国体 *d.* 皇室中心主義

* The editor is indebted to Mr. John Howes for correcting the translation of this quotation.

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accept the foreign accretions, but make our own the kernel of truth within. I think it is difficult for today's Buddhists to imagine such hardship. Therefore, when I was converted to Christianity, I made the following decision. Let us believe in Christianity. But even though we believe, we will not receive foreign aid. Though we believe, we will not have any relations with particular churches and denominations in foreign countries. Let us Japanese believe in Christianity as Japanese. Let us propagate *Christianity in Japanese Garb*. This I determined to myself.

His Non-church Christianity principle was not only a return to the spirit of primitive Christianity and to the Bible; it developed because he was worried by the conflict between the patriotic spirit and Christianity. Uchimura associated Bushido with Christianity. He said that Christ and his disciples could be regarded as models for the warrior (*bushi*).^a He said, moreover, that Bushido was the unsurpassed gift which God gave to the Japanese people; that as long as it existed Japan would flourish; and that when it was lost she would cease to exist.

The way Christianity was received in the person of Kanzo Uchimura resembles very much the way Buddhism was accepted by our ancestors. They received what was close to Japanese traditional culture and conformed to it. They tried to harmonize it with Japanese traditional culture as much as possible. This is a common point in both cases. When Buddhism was introduced our ancestors regarded the authority of the state, princes, and parents as absolute and subjugated

a. 武士

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religion to them. The authority of religion, which should be above the state, was subjected to and made to serve the state. Hence, the age in which positions of importance in religious bodies were occupied by men from the Imperial Family or nobility continued for a long time. For example, the position of abbot of the Tendai Sect could only be held by those of high rank. There were temples also in which the chief priest had to be a member of the Imperial Family. This custom continued from the Heian period until the Restoration. Unlike Buddhism, Christianity is more militant and positive. It did not compromise with the Japanese racial religion, but it had one point in common with Japanese Buddhism in that it was Japanized.

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For this reason Westerners think that among civilized nations the Japanese people are most indifferent toward religion. We accept a certain Buddhist sect as a family religion and invite priests to perform funeral and memorial services; but most of us do not practice this religion as individuals. This being the case, Occidentals who think that the Japanese are Buddhists cannot understand the attitude of our people. As for me, I do not think that Japan is a non-religious nation. The nature of our religions is different from Christianity. Shinto itself is different; and Buddhism too, which was accepted on the foundation of Shinto, has Japanese characteristics.

This point cannot be understood by Occidentals, who regard Christianity as what a religion should be and consequently regard Japan as a nation without religion. But the *myōkō'nin*, the unlettered men of faith, as I have said before, reached a

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high state of the soul. Among them was a man called Saichi, a poor clog seller, who left some writing in a dialect and with many incorrect Chinese characters, but the state of his soul was very high. One time, when I asked Dr. Daisetsu Suzuki how he rendered *myoko'nin* in English, he said that it could not be translated. The fact that there are men among the laymen, even the illiterate, who attain an especially high state of religious belief, shows that to consider the Japanese at large as a people of no religion is wrong.

In considering the long history of Japan, when we see the foundation of racial religion and the way Buddhism and other world religions were received on the foundation of this racial religion, we notice that the power of "closed societies," such as the state, the family, and the village is great, while the characteristics of "open religions" are not always very conspicuous.

If we look at the belief of the Japanese people from this point of view and regard the Christian belief as what religious belief should be, the idea naturally occurs that the Japanese are less religious minded. Yet, in this regard we must reflect on the tradition of Japanese culture and its future trend.

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Note: The above manuscript was transcribed from tapes loaned by the Japan Broadcasting Corporation, translated, edited, submitted to the author for correction, and then re-edited. When-ever possible expressions preferred by the author have been retained in the final draft. Editor.