

TRADITIONAL VALUES AND THE MODERNIZATION OF JAPAN

by Robert Bellah

Today I have taken an enormous subject to treat in one evening and I want to start by expressing my humility. It was easier to write my first book about Japan before coming than it will be to write my second book after having been here.

Before turning to the material on Japan, I must say a few words about my way of thinking and approach to the problem, because it is so different from that usual in Japan today. In the first place, my approach is quite different from any version of Marxism, since I do not think the economy or social class has any ultimacy or even primacy in the explanation of social process as historical process. On the other hand, I find my work often placed in the category of *Seishin-shi*,^a but I do not accept that category either. At least my assumptions in connection with such an approach are rather different from anything current in Japan under that title.

Let me be a little more specific. In the first place, I think that there is such a thing as a cultural system which is for certain purposes analytically distinguishable from the social system. The cultural system would include such things as literature, science, art, philosophy, and so on. The cultural system, or parts of it, are the objects of several disciplines: History of Literature (*Bungaku-shi*^b), History of Ideas (*Shiso-*

a. 精神史 b. 文学史

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shi^a), History of Culture (*Bunka-shi*^b) in a broad sense, and History of the (national) Mind (*Seishin-shi*^c) in one sense. I am interested in the cultural system but not primarily for its own sake. My concern is with the social system itself in the first instance. But I would argue that there are cultural elements which are actually constitutive of the social system. This is what I mean by values.

I believe that social action itself is determined not just by structures of economic, political, and social relationships, but also by structures of social values. These are values which any society has relative to what is a good society, what is good social action, what are good social relationships, and what is a good person as a member of society. These values limit choices and make some choices more likely than others, and make some choices almost impossible. This is the system of social values which exists in any society, and creates a set of possibilities and impossibilities for social action in that society.

Now, even so far any relatively flexible Marxist might be able to go with me, but not to the next point, I think. Namely, I do not believe that such value systems are direct reflections of economic or class forces. I do not believe they change necessarily when economic or class forces change. In fact I believe they are far more stable and persistent than economic or class factors, and change coming from economic and class causes will be channeled by the structure of values.

The next point relative to our consideration tonight is that religion, I believe, is close to the core of any social value

a. 思想史 b. 文化史 c. 精神史

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system. The word religion is very ambiguous and has many meanings. So I have to specify what I mean in this context. And here, again, my earlier distinction between cultural system and social system comes into relevance. I do not mean by religion the abstract patterns of belief in themselves. In the case of Japan, I do not mean Buddhist philosophy or even Buddhism. But rather, from the point of view of social values, Buddhism becomes relevant only for and in so far as it is actually involved in the structure of values in everyday life.

So what I mean by religion for these particular purposes is the structure of beliefs and practices seen in daily life, around the Buddhist family altar (*Butsudan*^a), the Shinto household altar (*Kamidana*^b), the village shrine (*Omiya*^c), the tutelary deity (*Ujigami*^d), the temple (*tera*^e) and the cemetery (*hakaba*^f), the festival (*matsuri*^g) in all its various forms, the worship of ancestors (*sozen sūhai*^h), emperor worship (*tennō sūhai*ⁱ), and such matters. In the case of Japan the distinctions between Buddhism, Confucianism, and Shinto are clear enough in the realm of pure culture, and very vague and blurred in the functional religion of everyday life.

Now I would argue that the basic pattern of Japanese values which is still dominating Japanese society today is very old indeed. It certainly predates the Edo^j period (1603—1868), although it was developed and elaborated in that period but certainly was not invented. Most of its essentials can be perhaps traced back to the Kamakura^k period (1185—1333). In some respects it can be traced right back to Prince Shōtoku^l

a. 仏壇 b. 神棚 c. 社宮 d. 氏神 e. 寺 f. 墓場 g. 祭 h. 祖先崇拜
i. 天皇崇拜 j. 江戸時代 k. 鎌倉時代 l. 聖徳太子

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(574—622 or 573—621) in the very beginning of Japanese civilization. There is nothing unusual in this. This is the case with other societies as well and, in fact, systems of social values are highly resistant to basic alteration and show a tendency to persist through long periods of time.

I argued in *Tokugawa^a Religion* that Japanese modernization, both in its successes and in its failures, is in important respects understandable only from the point of view of the Japanese value system. It is rather more usual to explain Japanese modern history in terms like the following: In Edo Japan feudalism existed, but since the bourgeoisie was relatively weak a bourgeois revolution did not occur. Instead of a bourgeois revolution there developed Meiji^b absolutism which finally created Japanese capitalism. Japanese capitalism soon became a monopoly capitalism, leading to imperialism. The working classes fought for their interests and thus came to support socialism. However, for a number of reasons, socialist revolution was frustrated and instead we had facism. Facism led to war and defeat and the postwar period is explained largely in terms of the relationship between Japanese monopoly capitalism and American monopoly capitalism.

This is not very far from a great deal of what one sees these days, and explanations based entirely on abstract concepts which have no particular relevance to Japan at all, concepts that were every one of them developed for other societies, other times, and other places. It is not that these terms are entirely wrong. They have a certain explanatory power, but when used as the exclusive conceptual basis they are apt to

a. 徳川宗教 b. 明治

give a distorted picture.

Now everyone realizes that these terms have a somewhat different meaning in Japan than in the West. But there is a tendency to explain specifically Japanese features of modern Japan with one of these abstractions, namely, feudalism. Japanese society, insofar as it is different from the West, has feudal remnants.

I would like to turn to what I think is the main outline of the Japanese traditional value system. I do not believe this value system is adequately described by calling it feudal. I am certain that the value system in feudal Europe is fundamentally different. First of all, value is realized through groups or collectivities which are thought of as natural and total entities. The group itself, but most specifically the *Gemeinschaft* group, the *kyōdōtai*^a [literally, cooperative body], is the locus of value.

Secondly, these groups are integrated with the structure of reality and endowed with sacred religious characteristics as well as being secular. Concerning the theological basis for this I can not go into in detail, but just suggest that it rests on a divine-human continuity as, for example, in a family where the ancestors are clearly of a spiritual character and even the head of the family, the parents, have a somewhat religious awe. The village (*mura*^b), of course, has its own special religious protectors. Every political group is the same, and, of course, the concept of Japan is itself half religious and half secular. Man can only exist in such groups where they receive a constant flow of blessings from the protectors of

a. 共同体 b. 村

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those groups, from the kami, from the ruler, from parents, from all kinds of superior figures.

Thirdly, the individual is obligated to work unceasingly to repay in small measure the blessings he has received, and sacrifice himself for the group if necessary. The individual realizes himself socially only through the group, and the good man is the one who self-sacrificingly helps the group to succeed in prosperity.

Fourthly, science, ethics, philosophy, even religion are valued only insofar as they contribute to the realization of value to the group, not for themselves. At various times in Japanese history it has been said that the Japanese need no ethical code. This is because, if one only acts as one should in one's group obligations, there is no need for an abstract code. Now actually, the code that they had then is not in fact an abstract code. It is not a code in the Western sense but rather a statement of group obligations. For instance, the unanimously reiterated obligation to conform to *chū* (loyalty) and *kō* (filial piety), which one sees throughout Japanese history, refers to particular obligations and has no universal meaning. These apply only to the particular group context in question.

In spite of how completely the individual is merged in group life, there remains one area where he can be a relatively independent individual, namely, the realm of personal expressiveness. This personal expressiveness has many forms; it may be in mysticism, in various forms of art, in hedonistic recreation, and in various forms of skill. However, this field must not encroach on the sphere of group obligations, and provides no basis for a fundamental criticism of the structure of group

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obligations. Nevertheless, it may provide the individual with the way of reconciling himself with reality so that it is possible for him to live and to fulfil his obligations to the society.

Now I would argue that this structure provided the basis of Japanese modernization, and within a certain limit it was a very successful basis indeed. It was successful, I think, for two primary reasons. First of all it provided a discipline group structure on which a modern state could be erected, which could direct and control the modernization process. Secondly, it provided the energy for labour necessary in a modern economy. Of course, there had to be a lot of other factors involved, but these two gave Japan a really remarkable advantage. I cannot think of another case of a westernizing nation which had these two advantages in anything like the degree that Japan had.

However, the cultural and religious basis of modernization in the West was fundamentally different. It is no accident that modernization began in the West. The conditions necessary for the emergence of modern society go back very deeply into Western cultural history. These conditions did not exist in East Asian society, and I believe that modern society could not have spontaneously emerged from a society of the type of Edo Japan.

Let me, out of this very enormously complex Western history, single out two factors which I believe are critical; one of which goes back to Israel and the other to Greece. The first of these is the transcendent idea of God. This provided one of the cultural bases for socially oriented individualism and for social groups of the non-*gemeinschaft* type based on a covenant or contract. I cannot go into the historical develop-

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ment of these influences, but I would suggest that modern individualism and *gesellschaft* society grew out of a line of religious social development culminating in the Reformation. By the way, *rieki shakai*^a (profit society) is a very poor translation of *gesellschaft*. Because Japan is such a *kyōdōiai* society, the very word used for *gesellschaft* has such a negative connotation as “*rieki shakai*.”

Now the second of these two factors I want to mention is the Greek idea of reason, which is related not only to the development of abstract thought and science in the West, but to rational legal forms of social organization which also contributed to the possibility of *gesellschaft* society in the West. I think there was no equivalent to these factors in Japan, and consequently I do not think, out of the Japanese cultural tradition, you could have created the modern type of society. Now there is one clarification I would like to make, and that is that there is a groping for transcendence that expresses itself more than once in the course of Japanese history. This is most clear in Kamakura Buddhism, but it also crops up in unlikely places in the Edo period among the people like Kaibara Ekiken^b and the Kokugaku^c [literally, national learning, that is, classical] scholars, although in none of these cases were the radical conclusions drawn as in the West.

I also think the Japanese response to Christianity has to be considered in these terms, because I think it is rather peculiar and different from most Asian societies. I think the response to Christianity, which was so surprising in the 16th century, is an indication of a kind of possible mutation in the Japanese

a. 利益社会 b. 貝原益軒 c. 国学

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value system. The possibility rests in transmuting the loyalty to superiors which is so central in the traditional ethics into a transcendent loyalty. In a way the samurai Christian in the Meiji era was simply transferring his loyalty to a new lord, a new kind of lord-follower relationship. Nevertheless, once this jump, this possible jump is made, the value system that I described before is placed in jeopardy, which I think occurred in both the 16th and 17th centuries and in the Meiji period. I believe that the Tokugawa persecution of Christians is not to be understood as primarily political, but as primarily religious. Of course, the distinction is not so clear from the point of view of the Japanese way of thinking, in which the political, the polity itself, is a half religious and half secular thing. But, nevertheless, I think it was religious persecution because Christianity threatened the core of Japanese religious values as earlier imported religions had not done, and religious persecution tends to develop where core values are threatened. So I think from this point of view, that Inoue Tetsujirō^a was quite justified in his criticism of Christianity in the Meiji era in his arguments as to what accepting the Christian way of thinking does to the traditional Japanese ethics.

I want to return to the main argument, my argument that Japanese modernization took place in terms of Japanese values which, by the way, I think is the only way that it possibly could have taken place. Looking at the development of ideology and state in the Meiji era, and comparing it with Western development, one can say that Meiji nationalism was peculiar and distorted and so on, as is so often said. But I

a. 井上哲次郎

think that in terms of Japanese history it was natural, inevitable, and in a sense normal. The problems which the Meiji leaders faced were tremendous. The first was the grave and continual threat of external invasion. The second was the threat to internal integration from the rivalries of traditional groups and from the destruction of various kinds of traditional groups due to the rapid economic social change. Now I believe the Meiji emperor system (*tennōsei*) was one solution for this problem. It provided the stability and intergration necessary to carry through the modernization process, and I myself have doubts if that process could have been carried through in any other way.

Let us look at the alternatives for a moment. Political and ideological opposition in modern Japan, I think, can be classified in two main types. The first is that which stems from traditional peasantry violence, what I call the Ikki tradition. This type of opposition expresses the frustration that occurs when the expectations of a constant flow of blessings, which the traditional values set up, have not been gratified. This opposition does not criticize the system as such, though it may attack various privileged groups such as bureatracts, capitalists, and so on. This is the traditional right wing opposition from Saigō Takamori^b to Japanese facism.

The second is the principled opposition which questions not only the way the system is operating but the values on which it is based. Here as examples I would suggest some of the Christians, principled liberals and principled socialists. I use the modifier "principled" advisedly, because I believe that on

a. 一揆 b. 西郷隆盛

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the whole the so-called progressive opposition has very often really been of the first type, that is in the Ikki tradition, and that it includes a great deal of the *Jiyū Minken Undō* (Freedom and Human Rights Movement) and a great deal of the socialist movement, including the present. That is, these opposition movements often without a really profound understanding of the implications of their ideology, use this opposition ideology to express their frustration with the way the system is operating, although they do not really question the system as such.

I believe the main line of Japanese development before 1945 was the incorporation of a great deal of modern culture and forms of society under the protective umbrella of the emperor system (*tennōsei*^a) and national polity (*kokutai*^b) ideology; and that the traditional value system provided both stability and energy for the modernization process. But, of course, in the process of so doing, the whole cultural and social system has in many ways, large and small, been changed.

I think there are two possible ways of interpreting that change. First of all we can view this process as involving the gradual incorporation of liberal and democratic values into the Japanese value system and society. Actually the Meiji constitution, though it was a pillar of Meiji stateism, nevertheless, was a constitution, and so one can, as I think Ambassador Reischauer does, interpret the process of modern history as the gradual incorporation through Taishō^c democracy of ever wider areas, in which liberal and democratic values became institutionalized. That is, no one would argue that the Taishō period

a. 天皇制 b. 国体 c. 大正

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shows a perfect democracy or even in a sense a real democracy, but only that there were strong elements there that could have grown naturally, as they had been growing for decades, into a more democratic structure.

This way of thinking would interpret the period from 1930 to 1945 as essentially an aberration from the course of modern Japanese history caused above all by very unfavourable external conditions, and especially by the great depression at the end the 1920's. This way of thinking would view the history since 1945 as essentially picking up the interrupted threads of a normal course of development. And if, in spite of the new Constitution and various laws, Japanese society remains in many respects traditional, and the old type of *Kyōdōtai* continues to be very strong, this point of view would argue that it is only natural but that, nevertheless, within those structures a gradual process of democratic change is going on. From this point of view the role of the principled opposition is not to oppose the system blindly or completely, but to help the evolution of democratic tendencies wherever possible.

Now there is another way of thinking that I think you are very familiar with, one that would say that fundamentally the structure of Japanese society is so basically unmodern and undemocratic that only a socialist revolution, which will really change the essentials, will bring about a truly democratic and modern society in Japan. And another point of view that belongs, I think, in the same category, though it is a very different point of view, is that of some Christians like Brunner, who holds that only Christianization of Japan can provide a really stable cultural basis for a modern democratic society.

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I tend to favour the first interpretation, but certainly not without some doubts. So I would like to close with the question as to whether the traditional Japanese value system — which I would hold remains strong today not only among conservatives but in the labour unions, in the Socialist Party, in the universities, in fact everywhere in Japanese life, — whether this traditional value system, even though it has undergone many alterations in detail, so much so that it is hardly recognizable as the same thing that came from the Edo period, but which still maintains its basic continuity with the past, whether this value system can provide the basis for a democratic Japan.

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