

RELIGIONS IN JAPAN

—Impressions of an Academic Tourist—

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Your Highness, Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen :

There is an old Hebrew proverb, actually the confession of an ancient rabbi recorded in the Talmud, which says "I have learned a great deal from my teachers, I have learned far more from my colleagues, but most of all I have learned from my students." I think that I had better explain at the beginning of this farewell talk, that if I have not learned enough in Japan, it is because — while I have had excellent teachers and excellent colleagues — I have had no students to teach. At the same time I gladly admit that the drawback of having no students was offset by a significant advantage. Relieved of the teacher's burden, I could move around with an easy mind and the irresponsible freedom of a tourist — albeit an academic tourist.

When my friend Mr. Woodard asked me to give a short talk at this Institute, I felt that he had come at just the right moment. If the invitation had come a month earlier I would have said: "A lecture? No. The very least I shall do is to write a book." If it had come a month later, I might have refused to deliver even a short talk, because I would have realized my incompetence to do even that. As it happened, the invitation reached me about the middle of my visit here, and I accepted. The result is this brief and somewhat in-

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coherent address which I am giving almost on the eve of my departure.

I want to emphasize that I am speaking tonight as an "academic tourist" for two reasons. In the first place, no visitor who does not speak and read Japanese can do more than merely record impressions, even if he believes himself to have pursued the most intensive studies. The student who cannot enter into direct, immediate, living communication with the people who profess the religions which he studies, had better realize that his account has no more than "impressionist" interest and value. In the second place, even scholars can, from time to time, be just a little human, and I think there are rare occasions when this is legitimate. One of these rare occasions is when we are in a parting mood. And so, as I am about to leave Japan, I feel that my mood increases in mellowness every day. I find it increasingly difficult to maintain scholarly standards "beyond likes and dislikes." In our normal working lives we pretend to have no preferences. Every phenomenon, we would like to believe, is regarded with equal sympathy and equal detachment. We analyze everything according to the same scientific methods. Nevertheless, on occasion, we permit ourselves — perhaps even without the obligatory bad conscience — the luxury of indulging our human weaknesses and our human reactions, as we remember our experiences and try to recollect our emotions in tranquility. This is actually what I am trying to do just now: reporting on my experiences and reactions in a straightforward manner, and without even attempting to submit them to the chastening rigours of scientific discipline.

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My first experience in trying to study Japanese religions — and the experience has been repeated over and over again — was a very disturbing one, namely, the realization that in Japan it was even more difficult than elsewhere to arrive at a common, agreed, and tolerably satisfactory definition of what religion is. I am sure no serious scholar really wants to define religion. It would be impossible at the present moment. We all more or less know what we are driving at when we are talking about religion. We don't try to define it because we know that our definition would be either so wide as to be meaningless, or so narrow that it would leave out ever so many important things. The most we can expect at the moment are operative *ad hoc* definitions, adequate for the specific purpose which we have in mind, for the particular kind of analysis we are pursuing, for the particular type of research we are engaged in.

If this is the way we normally go about studying religions, I must confess that I have found it particularly trying and confusing in Japan. Very often people here insist on calling something a religious phenomenon, whilst I refuse to do so. And this can lead to complications even on the level of basic statistics. A Shinto priest will explain to me that he has two million, or five million, or three hundred thousand, or five hundred worshippers — the number does not matter — at his shrine every year. Being an incurable Westerner, my immediate reaction, or rather conditioned reflex, is to ask: "Do you mean sightseeing groups or worshippers?" Whether by training or by temperament, I simply cannot help making this distinction. The question is usually meaningless to the priest who gave me the information, and I suspect that if he understood its

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meaning he might be offended at its implied insinuations, and pained at my Western obtuseness and insensitivity.

But what, after all, is a definition? Or, transposing the question to another level of analysis, up to what point am I entitled to insist on my definition, viz., my distinction between tourism and sightseeing on the one hand, and pilgrimage and worship on the other? May I, or may I not, force the distinction on the situation I find here in Japan, even assuming that it was perfectly legitimate in the place where I originally got it? I mention this question by way of an illustration of my perplexities; I shall not try to discuss, let alone to answer it here. But as I have grandiloquently announced that I would be speaking as an all-too-human tourist, permit me to affirm my conviction that, in spite of all, I *am* entitled to stick to my guns and to my distinction, and that I *am* entitled to disagree with priests and others who contest it. Perhaps this is just an example of human obstinacy on my part. It has, however, a wider implication which troubles many students of religion here.

The modern "science of religion" is a Western invention; and inevitably much of its vocabulary has grown out of a pre-occupation with particular religions. This vocabulary, its implicit categories of thought, its overtones and undertones, its frames of reference, are largely derived from intensive studies, historical and philosophical, of Christian religion; Biblical religion, and Near Eastern religions in contact with Biblical religions. This specific Western *Religionsgeschichte* was the anvil on which much of the vocabulary of *Religionswissenschaft* was forged. The resulting horizon was of necessity

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limited, and remained so even after scholars began to go increasingly beyond Western and Near Eastern religions for subject-matter (e. g. primitive religions), and beyond history and philosophy for method (e. g., sociology of religion), when all is said and done, we are still carrying a goodly portion of this conceptual heritage, and cannot help applying it, for better and for worse, to the study of utterly different religions such as the Japanese.

It is always difficult to learn. But it is even more difficult when learning requires unlearning. And it is extremely difficult for the foreign visitor to unlearn earlier thinking habits, and to train himself not to ask stereotyped questions about the religions which he encounters, e. g. questions of the type "Is this polytheism? or pantheism?" or any other -ism concept that may be inadequate or even utterly irrelevant. Everybody knows that in Shinto you have the presence of the divine, viz., *kami* everywhere and in everything, and yet neither pantheism, nor animism, nor even polytheism would be the right word. We must learn to dispense with some of the sacred formulae to which *Religionswissenschaft* has become addicted. Travelling in Japan, I was often reminded of the plight of the Australian native who on his sixtieth birthday became the unhappiest man on earth because his friends presented him with a new boomerang. At first our aboriginal tribesman was very happy with the beautiful present, but then he became very, very unhappy because from that day on he spent the rest of his life vainly trying to throw away the old boomerang, which being a boomerang, always came back. Isn't this an allegory of the eager student, who tries so very hard to learn something new, and who wastes

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his time in futile attempts to throw away his old boomerang which, in one way or another, always seems to come back to him?

But tonight, for once, I shall not be apologetic about our difficulties how to understand religious phenomena, how to ask the right questions, how to avoid the wrong ones, etc. No doubt the foreign visitor will always ask some wrong questions. But I make bold to say that these "wrong" questions perform an extremely important function in the partnership and mutual give-and-take of living scholarship. From the point of view of the visiting student the positive function is obvious, because his Japanese colleagues will point out his faulty perspective. But the visitor's obstinate questioning, in addition to betraying his blind spots and his lack of understanding, may also provoke his local friends into questioning some of their own axioms and dearly held assumptions. It is all very well for my friends to tell me: "We are living here. We were brought up here. We can sense the style and the atmosphere of it all, and we can show where your questions are wrong and miss the point." But perhaps in saying so they are taking so much for granted that there is no harm in an obstinate and ununderstanding foreigner trying to shake them out of their complacency. And it is to some such questions — I would not call them criticisms — on the subject of Japanese religion that I would like to devote the rest of my talk.

I admit without hesitation that many of us are too prone to define, analyze, distinguish, arrange in neat typologies, etc. And there may be some virtue in occasional vagueness. But is there only virtue in vagueness, or is it just possible that vagueness is not always and not necessarily virtuous? This is

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a serious matter when we want to deal with Shinto and with certain forms of Buddhism as I found them here. It is all very well to take refuge in the triple jewel of non-analytical, aesthetic vagueness when trying to explain that this or that is not a system of beliefs, is not a system of dogmas, is not a doctrine, is — perhaps — not even an articulated value system. Perhaps it is a mood. But what is a mood? And can one step out of modern, logical, scientific thinking into the mood, and, back again? Because this is, after all, what religion in 20th century Japan would have to mean. Either religion is made the object of a solid intellectual effort, integrating an understanding of the nature of modernization and modern culture with an awareness of the structures of traditional values and metaphysical orientations, or else you keep stepping in and out of two increasingly unrelated spheres.

Now I am well aware of the fact that the dislike of compartmentalization is a distinctly Western culture trait. The Western tradition combines maximum cultural differentiation with a repudiation of watertight compartments, and actually compels its intellectually articulate members to engage in attempts at theoretical integration. In other words, the Western pattern demands a relatively high degree of consistency between values as well as between values and institutions. On the other hand the Japanese pattern — so we all learned from our anthropological textbooks — tends to recognize distinct spheres of life and value, and enables a man to step out of one into the other and back again, according to well-defined social rules and cultural conventions. It is wrong to behave according to the rules of one game, when you are in the sphere of

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another game. It is wrong to behave in a way suitable to pleasure, when you are in the sphere of serious business, etc. Clearly the Japanese pattern allows for a greater degree of compartmentalization. But I ask: how long do modern Japanese think that this will remain a genuine possibility? Can religious leadership really advocate or expect a revival of religion as a life-giving force informing society and culture, if they keep religion in the non-descript sphere of mood, traditional folklore, or doubtful myth?

There are, occasionally, advantages in loose thinking — or in what appears to me to be loose thinking — but the price may be too high. Take, for instance, the habit of identifying Shinto (or certain aspects of Buddhism) with the Japanese way of life, the Japanese “life-feeling,” certain Japanese mental attitudes, patterns, or what have you. You have gained something, but in reality you can no longer pose the religious problem of Shinto in a precise fashion. Everything is Shinto, and hence the religious system cannot be analytically isolated from the rest of the cultural and social system. It has happened to me more than once in discussions of modern Shinto that my partners, when pressed, would say: “Well, but everything you feel and see around you is Shinto; Shinto is the Japanese soul, it is the spirit of Japanese culture, it is the Japanese way.” On such occasions I couldn’t help feeling that my questions were evaded rather than answered. In fact, a tautology was substituted for an answer. For if Shinto is synonymous with the Japanese spirit, then there is no point in seeking to define it as a religious system or sub-system, and investigating the nature and history of this particular (sub-) system in its

interaction with other parts of the cultural system. All branches of religious studies (history, sociology etc.) assume the existence of a religious dimension that can be analytically isolated. If no such distinct dimension exists in Japanese culture, then we must quit speaking of the study of Japanese religion.

Curiously enough there seems to be negative proof of the existence of Japanese religion. I am referring to its absence from the lives of an important section of modern Japan. The intellectual élite of the country is utterly and thoroughly non-religious — and you cannot simply dismiss them as “ Westernized ” and hence un-Japanese. But the religious dimension has simply ceased to exist for them ; it is not worthy of any attention — not even of hostility. Facts like these should make even die-hard traditionalists pause in their game of identifying the Shinto (or any other) mood of traditional culture with Japanese culture — even with traditional medieval culture — as a whole.

The situation which I have referred to just now strikes me as presenting one of the most characteristic differences to the West. In the West religion seems to be recognized by a sizeable section of the cultural élite as a significant phenomenon and a genuine problem. It is held worthy of serious intellectual effort, both by adherents of religion and by students. It is something to be taken notice of in ever so many different ways. An intellectual need not, by definition, ignore religion. The contrast with Japan is patent.

Closely connected with this absence of religion from the “ universe of discourse ” of the Japanese intelligentsia, there is another marked difference which no foreign visitor can help

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noticing. This is the extent to which "superstitious" beliefs and practices, magic, divination, good luck charms and the like make up the religious life of the people. In fact, they are the major part of "popular religion" which is still very much alive here. Now obviously these things exist everywhere, to a greater or lesser extent. But here they appear to be the most manifest, the most conspicuous, the most vital part of religious life. What happens in a temp'le? What happens in a shrine? You go there and get your paper slips for divination. You go there and get your good luck charms for taking home or putting into the rice fields. You take your car along for purification. Most of what goes on on the manifest level, visible to the tourist's eye and camera, is of the kind we'd normally classify as fetishism, magic, superstition, divination and the like. Fetishism, I hasten to add, is certainly not the right word, at least if used in the precise sense which it has in our professional jargon. But "superstition" is surely permissible, if used not in any pejorative philosophical sense, but in its strict phenomenological signification.

Now it was not so much the fact that superstitions exist, over which my Western feet stumbled as the fact that they are cheerfully taken for granted not only by the mass of believers, but by the priests themselves, in fact by the priesthood as an institution. If there is one thing that even an unsympathetic critic of religion has to admit in favour of Western religions, then it is the fact that opposition to this kind of thing did not always come from anti-religious groups and from noble positivists desirous of saving mankind from its own stupidity and from the machinations of crafty priests. The

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opposition came from prophets, from theologians, from religious leaders and reformers, at times even from the priests and the official churches. This opposition is, of course, part of the Biblical tradition which had taught that in order to serve the true God you always had to smash up some false gods, destroy magic, and burn all abominations. God himself may protest against his own ritual and destroy his own temple. In short, the Biblical tradition gradually produced a religious pattern of critical self-transcendence, i. e., of radical criticism of institutionalized religion, superstition, and anything that might lead religion even at its best, into the twilight atmosphere where religion and superstition, ritual and magic mingle. There always has been, there always will be this twilight. But it is a good thing if the declaration of war comes from the heart of religion itself. It is all very easy to say that we should preserve rituals because ritual symbolism enshrines such great values. But before you realize even one of these values, you have instilled a hundred harmful superstitions into the group of worshippers who were supposed to be edified by the ritual. It is this awareness, at least, of the problem, the consciousness of the danger, which is one of the saving graces of Western religion. I do not wish to suggest that Western religions have avoided or "exorcized" these dangers. But they have shown a degree of awareness which my, admittedly limited, experience of Japan has failed to detect. I still have to meet the priest who objects to divination, or who feels that religion is called upon to ban all good luck charms, or who suggests that amulets are a spiritual menace, or who criticizes ritual because it actually makes us manipulate the divine instead of heightening

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our sense of its presence. Japanese religion, in all its variety and richness, operates on popular, as well as on highly formalized ritual levels. But radical self-criticism is absent from it except, perhaps, in some of the more "anarchistic" utterances of certain Zen masters. Significantly enough, however, this type of anarchist criticism lives only in the literary tradition of Zen "folklore," and not in the actual practice of Zen-priests and Zen-followers.

At this juncture you will rightly object that I have been preaching an inappropriate sermon. Instead of making a valid point I have merely complained that Japanese religion was different from Biblical religion, and that the Biblical element of prophetic criticism was alien to its phenomenology. But having promised you an honest and candid account of my personal reactions, and trying to be an "Israelite without guile," I feel that I would have lacked in basic *makoto* if I had shirked this issue.

It is hardly necessary to assure you that I have seen much that was moving and impressive. Why waste talk on such matters-of-course? We all know that there is a profound awareness of the Numinous Presence in every Shinto ceremony; that there is far more than magic in even the most commercialized *goma* sacrifice performed at a Shingon or Tendai temple; that there is more in Zen, as still practised in some places, than meets the eye or irritates the good sense and sensibilities of the unfortunate student exposed to the unbearable cant of fashionable Zen propagandists. But the real problem is the dynamic vitality of all these traditions in the actual concourse of social and cultural forces active in present-day Japan. And here again, in conclusion, I will say something very rude and

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very unscholarly. I felt that there was no real dynamism left in all the great Japanese religions, impressive as they are, powerful as they are, moving as they are to the student who (like a good phenomenologist) keeps his mind and soul open to the import of religious phenomena. But if he is honest with himself, and does not allow himself to be carried away by his aesthetic or emotional enthusiasm for the rituals which he witnesses, and for the metaphysical and mythological background which he appreciates; if, instead, he tries to take things soberly, he is bound to admit — at least I felt bound to admit — that there is no actual, historical dynamism any more in these venerable and impressive traditions. If you look for religious dynamism — and there is plenty of it around — then you will find it in the so-called New Religions about which it is so easy to be sarcastic and at which it is so easy to sneer. Undoubtedly the sneers and sarcasms are often justified. And yet the “New Religions” exhibit the kind of dynamism, devotion, sincerity, earnestness, and power of transformation, which all the great religions have had in their great moments, for otherwise they would not exist today as remnants of what they once have been. But the fact that genuine religious dynamism exists today only in “low level” religions, and in the kind of set-up which inevitably invites criticism and sarcasm, surely ought to provide food for thought not only to sociologists of religion but also to all the Japanese who profess religion and are interested in its development.

Ladies and Gentlemen, it is time for me to conclude. You have been very patient with me, and with the very partial and subjective manner in which I have presented a few of my

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impressions. My presentation, moreover, also emphasized the critical rather than the positive reactions. But even if my remarks were unduly personal, I hope they were not irresponsible. And the next time my good fortune brings me back to Japan — and if the International Institute for the Study of Religions will invite me once more — I hope that I shall be able to speak to you as a respectable scholar.

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