

## JAPAN AT THE BEGINNING OF THE EIGHTIES

Japan at the beginning of the eighties is a country that shares in the social and cultural changes which characterize the present predicament of the whole global community and, at the same time, a country that has its own problems and concerns, different (not least in its own eyes) from what is happening outside the boundaries of its island-society. These two elements—Japan as an international power and Japan as a nation-state, and their mutual relationship—form the background and basis for whatever can be said about the social, political, and religious situation of Japan at the present moment of history.

The quality of this global-domestic relationship seems, in fact, to be rather clear. It is one of tension, with a strong tendency to subordinate the value of universalism (internationalism) to that of particularism (nationalism) and all the consequences this entails. This means that whatever happens within the country itself takes precedence over all other issues that may arise in the world and, further, that whatever happens on the international scene tends to be acknowledged and evaluated only in terms of its usefulness for enhancing the harmony and prestige of the Japanese nation.

It is obvious that the application of this principle in a world increasingly interdependent is prone to invite resistance from many quarters. The criticism by foreign countries against Japan's ethnocentric behavior (or what appears as such) in economic, social, and other fields—illustrated, for example, in this country's basically negative attitude toward the refugee problem in Southeast Asia—is a case in point. But in Japan itself, increasingly strong voices are calling for the nurturing of more "true" international feelings, although, in most cases, these voices run afoul of social structures which impede universal openness, or they are drowned by the mass media's incessant emphasizing of the uniqueness of Japanese culture, whether superior or inferior to that of other nations. In sum, a struggle is going on, and the outcome is far from certain.

### The Political Situation

If we start by taking up the political situation of Japan, it is because Japanese society and culture in general are said to be characterized by the "primacy of political values." This implies the acquisition and maintenance

of the power to control the populace. As a matter of course, in this field also the internal problems of Japan far overshadow those of more international import. Admittedly, Japan is always reminded of the existence of the latter, be it only by the simple fact that there is a dimension of global politics in the condition of economic dependence stemming from its almost complete lack of natural resources. Yet, solutions to international problems consist mainly in finding ways to avoid international criticism and in trying to remain on a par with (or, where possible, ahead of) the "advanced" countries of the West, with little consideration given to the principles of a more universal nature which are expected to regulate international relationships.

What is foremost, then, is concern about the harmonious order of one's own country; and this, of course, requires a stable government. It is precisely in this respect that, at the start of the eighties, Japan is facing a rather fluid situation. If there exists in Japan a certain sense of crisis, it is not primarily because of a not-too-promising world situation, but because the stability of government—in purely political terms, the rule by one party, the Liberal-Democratic Party (LDP), for three decades—is gradually breaking down. Already for several years, the coming of a coalition government has been forecasted. Yet, despite many scandals and corruption (e.g., the notorious Lockheed affair and the resignation of then Prime Minister Tanaka Kakuei), the ruling party has each time been able to rebound, although at the price of gradual corrosion of general support among the people. At this time, it even looks as though the LDP has finally overcome its weaknesses and the trend toward a coalition government has been halted. However, the ugly intraparty strife which always reappears and other events related to this have seemingly put an end to the myth that one-party rule is the only feasible form of government. The future alone will teach us more about possible developments.

In any case, it is clear by now that the political stability that marked the postwar period has largely vanished. The transition to fluidity and uncertainty has provoked feelings of crisis among the politicians. Vote-getting has by definition been their main preoccupation. Now they must develop new constituencies in order to "stay alive." As we shall see later, it is precisely in this connection that the religious organizations of Japan have recently acquired a new importance and are undergoing some subtle changes which affect the role of the Christian churches in this country.

All this does not mean that the general public is much interested in what happens in political circles and, consequently, is imbued with a similar sense of crisis. Japan has always been a country governed from above, and the postwar advent of democracy has not altered this basic pattern. The people are mostly satisfied with the present state of affairs, for, as it is also the case in their everyday behavior, they like the security of being guided and having their life-directions prescribed. On the other hand, this presupposes a solid center on which they can rely and which provides for them the frame within which they can lead a harmonious life. This solid center since the latter half of the past century has been the "national polity" (kokutai) with the emperor system at its core, whatever the specific leadership makeup of the country at a given time. In fact, the emperor has been the rallying point around which the people gathered—or were made to gather—when unrest and turmoil prevailed. Although the emperor system as such was abolished after World War II, the idea of kokutai remains fairly strong, even to the extent that, for the people in general, belonging to the unique Japanese nation constitutes their most sacred value (the younger generation not excluded). It is in this sense that the "religion of being Japanese" forms the deepest layer of the Japanese value system.

In the present age of internationalization, this value is often questioned. Yet, as already mentioned, awareness of this challenge, while originating from the impact from abroad, finds its utmost expression in domestic issues and is deepened by a movement, orchestrated from above, to reaffirm the national identity of the Japanese people. The ruling party has always been the most outspoken promoter of nationalistic causes, countered only by a powerless and internally divided opposition. But it is interesting to note how in recent years the presumably middle-of-the-road parties have gradually come to join the ranks of the LDP in sponsoring these causes, thereby raising their chances of getting a "portion of the pie" in any future coalition government. It can be said, then, that attempts are being made to supplant the present political instability, fed by competition among political parties to grasp the reins of government, by a new stability based upon a common ideology, with nationalistic overtones, that seeks to unite the various parties of the middle and right.

There is a further element in this connection which gives a new impetus to this "right-veering" trend in Japanese politics and which is much more important than a first glance reveals. It is nothing less than the fact

that the present Emperor, the "symbol" of Japan's national polity, has reached an advanced age and is expected to disappear from the scene in the not too distant future. The intuition of the politicians is that the transition from the reign of the present Emperor, who after all remains the father of the family-state, to that of his son will very likely cause considerable psychological unrest. This political instinct is certainly not wide of the mark. (Moreover, it is an open secret that many of those on the political right do not trust the present Crown Prince because of the "Christian and democratic" education he received in the immediate postwar years.) To smooth this transition and to safeguard the "national polity" (with a "modernized" version of the emperor system), all kinds of movements are initiated and actions taken to mobilize the populace for this cause. Examples are legion. The recent legislation to ensure continued use of the gengō (imperial era names) and the persistent efforts to restore government support for the Yasukuni Shrine (for Japan's war dead) are but some of the most conspicuous ones. Closer to the grass roots is the establishment of Nippon o mamoru kai (associations for the defense of Japan) all over the country, with prominent political, social, and religious leaders in attendance.

#### The Social Situation

Any attempt to describe the social situation of a country like Japan in only a few lines is obviously a very risky business. To summarize it with the phrase "workaholics living in rabbit hutches," as was allegedly done in a secret European report on Japan last year, which was made public here and of course created a furore beyond all proportions, is still more risky. But, apart from whether this phrase is becoming or not, it nevertheless describes "some" realistic aspects of Japan's social situation and—as has so often happened in the course of Japanese history—the sensibility of the Japanese toward criticism from the "advanced" nations has, in this case also, opened their eyes to areas heretofore more or less overlooked.

It is true that, as a general rule, the Japanese work hard. It is not only that they have to; most of them actually like to. The ethos sustaining this attitude is the traditional value of loyalty to the group, from the local community to the company where one is employed and, finally, to the country as a whole. It is this special kind of work ethic that put Japan on the modernization path more than a century ago; it is the same work ethic

that has led to Japan's rapid recovery after defeat in the war. A further result of dogged devotion to work has been the rise to relative material affluence and the related belief among no less than ninety percent of the population that they belong to the middle class. Japan is indeed a prosperous country; and if it is true that commodity prices and the cost of living in general are extremely high, such certainly has not prevented the people from being among the biggest savers in the world or, at the same time, from enjoying a standard of living that compares favorably with the West. To this we should add the distribution of public and private facilities in all sectors of life, among which the widely available opportunities for education and employment merit special mention. These are accompanied by a relatively low crime rate, making Japan possibly the safest country in the world. And if life expectancy can serve as an index to sound social environment, then Japan is clearly "number one."

All these positive elements should not blind us to some less laudable aspects of Japanese society. While it may be true that Japan has attained the highest level of equality in the world with respect to the distribution of income and assets (as government reports claim), the question remains as to whether there are any loopholes in the self-asserted prosperity (a ninety-percent middle class). Of course there are. The term "rabbit hutches" might not be very felicitous, but it nonetheless indicates one area in which, especially in the cities, inequality of opportunity is still a big problem. The dense concentration of people in the urban regions obviously plays a role in this and other social problems, like pollution, so typical of modern industrial society. Rather than trying to pinpoint particular areas where Japan still falls short, however, we turn to another, much more relevant question: Has this society with so many opportunities equally available also created an environment in which the "quality of life" is duly safeguarded and continuously improved? It is difficult to answer this question without taking sides in the controversy over the merits and demerits of Japan's "vertical" social structure which historically and currently constitutes the larger framework in which the Japanese work ethic is nurtured and made to bear fruit. From a Christian viewpoint, especially, it can be asked whether in this structure the freedom and dignity of the individual person are sufficiently valued and given space for further development. It can hardly be denied that loyalty to the group, which this structure requires, often leads to exploitation, not only in the world of

manual labor but equally so in other areas of social life. And another of its results, which certainly must be judged negatively, is the plight of those who, for one reason or other, fall outside this structure—whether individuals or minority groups such as the Japanese burakumin (outcasts) and foreigners, particularly Koreans and other fellow Asians. If this is true for "outsiders" within the country itself, it ultimately also defines Japan's attitude toward the "outsiders outside" and constitutes the biggest obstacle to a more universal openness. Most people seem to be happy in Japan and feel safe in being "guided" from above. It is, though, the happiness and safety of a still too much closed society. There seems to be little likelihood that abrupt changes will occur in this pattern or that people will revolt against it. But the kind of "isolation" that Japan has tried to maintain up to now is being challenged more and more from without, and the repercussions of this challenge are already being felt among the more sensitive layers of society. It is, again, the question which values will take precedence in the future: particularistic values which put the harmony of one's own country above everything else, or more universal values which imply a sense of responsibility toward the problems and peoples of the world.

#### The Religious Situation

It has always been a moot question whether Japan is really the most irreligious country in the world that it is often said to be. It certainly remains a fact that, according to all surveys, up to two-thirds of the total population claim to have no religious beliefs; and this percentage rises still further if we focus on the younger generation. On the other hand, this absolutely does not mean that there is in Japan a militant atheism in the Western sense of the word. At least half of the alleged "unbelievers" may readily affirm that religion is important in life, and they do not exclude the possibility that at some time they themselves may need it and, if so, will make use of it in order to be happy. In other words, religion—like most other values—is evaluated primarily in a pragmatic or utilitarian way, and the salvation it promises is mainly interpreted in this-worldly terms, as benefits of a material or psychological nature, with specific self-chosen time limits. It is this pragmatic attitude that explains the seemingly fervent religious behavior at some times of the year and at some times in the course of life. Foreign

visitors are regularly impressed by the crowds streaming to shrines and temples during the first days of the New Year and performing ceremonies for deceased ancestors at the O-bon (annual festival of the dead) and on other specific occasions. Hardly any Japanese would refrain from asking for a Buddhist funeral, not to speak of the growing numbers who seek to "benefit" from a wedding ceremony in a Christian church. But before these occasions arise or after they have passed, religion is not needed. The question of religious "truth" is far from being an important preoccupation, and it should certainly not interfere with the flow of everyday life. Indeed, far more than such questions of metaphysical import, it is the harmony of life in society that constitutes the primary focus of attention and consideration. To be a loyal member of Japanese society, from the smallest family unit to the community of the country as a whole, is the supreme value to which all others are subordinated. And all gods and buddhas are welcome insofar as they fit into and serve this pattern.

It is sometimes said (and surveys seem to prove) that in recent years a kind of religious revival has been occurring in Japan. What this means should be seen in the light of the foregoing remarks. It does not mean—at least for the majority—a commitment to well-defined religious truths or to organizations which express these truths. It involves, rather, a renewed interest in powers that lie outside the realm of man's immediate and palpable life-world and which, in spite of all technological achievements and scientific progress, have proven to be persistent. This new interest manifests itself in an increasing recourse, especially among younger persons, to all kinds of divination and fortune-telling ("You never know but what it can be helpful...") and in a rediscovery of traditional Japanese religious practices like festivals and other community-creating rituals. (Also, the current fad for things Oriental in the West has helped stimulate the interest of many young Japanese in their own religious traditions.) Admittedly, a genuine religious quest lies somewhere in the background of this popular "revival." All too often, however, genuine religiosity cannot attain full maturity, as there are so few people who know how to guide it in proper directions. Moreover, the general atmosphere of society is not very helpful, either. As already noted, a number of movements try to channel these religious aspirations in the direction of strengthening loyalty to the country as the supreme goal and, thus, prevent their growth into a sacred allegiance that transcends this and all

other this-worldly limits.

The place of Japan's religious organizations in this situation is worth noting. If the word "religion" (or "religiosity") has gained in recent years a greater degree of respectability than it used to have, it does not immediately follow that the religious organizations profit from this trend in terms of increased membership or active participation. Actually, as indicated by the customary Japanese practice of giving each religious tradition a "portion of the pie" according to circumstances, strict religious affiliation has never been a very personalized affair. One result of this pragmatic attitude has been and still is that religious membership is relegated to a very low rank on the scale of values that shape the identity of the Japanese and that, as a further consequence, the social influence of religious organizations has been acknowledged only insofar as they are of use by those in power for controlling the populace. Exceptions to this pattern are the "new religions" which mostly emphasize the nature of a certain kind of personal faith, including a sense of affiliation that excludes other religious ties. We should not forget, however, that despite the attention some newer religions get in religious circles and sometimes in the mass media (not because of their religious influence but because of real or alleged misdoings), they have in fact reached only a minor proportion of the population and have apparently come at present to a point of stagnation with few bright prospects for the future.

Japan's relatively unimportant religions are taken more seriously all of a sudden when a "minority" appears capable of exerting "undue" influence on sociopolitical trends. It can be argued that precisely at present such a situation obtains in Japan because of the changes in politics and the social situation, as described above. It is a fact that the politicians, particularly those of the (still) ruling party, are increasingly courting the religious organizations with the aim of mustering as many votes as possible so as to retain their power, now that the traditional stability is put into jeopardy. Although current trends in political circles are many and varied, it is clear that the links increasingly being forged between politicians and religious leaders are valued not merely because "politics needs a religious basis." Behind these movements lies the more or less explicit intent of trying to maintain a conservative government in power, if need be with participation of the more trustworthy parties closest to the center. If we probe still a little further, we can easily discover how



deeply the religious leaders and politicians are imbued with the traditional Japanese idea of the "unity of government and religion," whatever lip-service is paid to the modern principle of the separation of the two spheres as guaranteed by Japan's present constitution. And we should not forget, either, how all this goes together with the problem of nationalism and internationalism noted repeatedly above.

The nationwide campaign to reassert Japan's national identity, marked in the strictly political sphere by a swing to the right, is accompanied in the more strictly religious sphere by groups that were once opposed to each other now drawing closer together in the "defense of traditional values." This is especially true for some of the newer religions, because they are capable of mobilizing their adherents for such causes, and both their leaders and the politicians know how valuable such cooperation is for giving stability to the country when it seems to be on the threshold of some fundamental changes. The machinations around the "Study group for religion and politics," formed by influential LDP Diet members who enjoy backing by religious organizations, and the "vision"—as yet too visionary to be implemented—of expanding this group into a body in which the religious leaders themselves would actively participate, together illustrate best of all what is going on in this respect. Let us only add that the Christian churches are intentionally left out and, to a certain extent and indeed understandably, regarded with suspicious eyes.

Finally, we should call attention to another phenomenon in the religious world of Japan, one which at first sight might seem to contradict the trends outlined above. It is the ever-increasing activities of many religious organizations in interfaith dialogue on an international scale. There is certainly much here to be appreciated, and we should not doubt the good intentions of those who engage in this kind of dialogue. But we should not be so naive as to judge these activities apart from what is going on in the country itself and from the ideas that the Japanese have about the purpose of dialogue (which differ quite radically from what Christians used to think about this sort of thing). We cannot deny that here, too, a strong pragmatic element is at work and that, in interfaith dialogue as carried out by some Japanese, talk and actions of universal openness are often but a "means" for promoting the glory of one's own organization and, ultimately, the harmonious development of Japan. Where interfaith dialogue on an international level might have reached depths of

sincere exchange, on the level of organizations it constantly runs the risk of being manipulated for less purely religious objectives. It is not surprising that dialogue with the Catholic Church, especially, lends itself to that kind of manipulation. (A case in point is the International Conference on Religion and Ethics, after a sudden postponement now scheduled for the beginning of 1981, and sponsored by the Vatican and various Japanese religious groups, this time particularly of the Shinto tradition. This project is to a certain extent a part of the struggle by Japanese rightists to retain, or grasp, leadership in the religious world of Japan, and to get support for this by using the universal prestige of the Catholic Church.)

#### A Christian Question

The picture depicted above might look too bleak, or at least too one-sidedly critical, to be true. Let me stress again, however, that it is not intended as a value judgment on the good intentions and the potentialities of the individual Japanese. On the other hand, we cannot possibly overlook the fact that Japan is in the first place a society which must be seen in terms of group structure. While the strong coherence of this structure has propelled Japan into the modern age, it has also been one of the main factors preventing the individual's search for more universal values that transcend the limits of the closed group. And the present Japanese trend of emphasizing again and again the uniqueness of their own culture is certainly not conducive to fostering a search for universal values or promoting their role in sociopolitical processes. After all, a tension between universal and particularistic values does exist. But Japan might find in the future that acceptance of the ultimate primacy of the universal does not necessarily mean rejection of what is worthwhile in its own rich tradition. The Christian churches can and do have a role to play in this process. They themselves constantly face a similar tension—between becoming Japanese and proclaiming Christ's message of universal love. As Christians too are drawn into the present mood of stressing Japan's unique national identity, the problem for the church is that "incarnation" should not be allowed to absolve her from being at times a sign of contradiction. This sign is given not only by pointing out the dangers of narrow nationalism and the constant promoting of the interests of one's own group. It is given also by positive actions which open people's eyes to what lies outside their closed life-world, to the plight of the poor and the destitute

here and elsewhere in the world. If there is a Christian message for Japan, it is the message of Christ that everyone who crosses our path becomes our neighbor. The whole world is presently crossing the path of Japan. How faithfully are the Christians proclaiming this message?

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