

Religious Pluralism: The Japanese Case

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Together with reports on Korea, the Philippines, (both of which were published in Inter-Religio No.5), and China (published in Ching Feng 27:1, 1984), the following concise but carefully-worded presentation of religious pluralism in Japan was presented at the Second Conference of Inter-Religio by a veteran observer of the religious scene in Japan.

If religious pluralism means a system or a situation which recognizes more than one ultimate principle, Japan seems to be an ideal place for such pluralism. For almost fifteen hundred years a plurality of religions have existed side by side fairly harmoniously. Shinto, Confucianism, and Buddhism could be compared to a tree: Shinto, as the indigenous Japanese religion, represents the roots; Confucianism is the stem and branches, contributing the basic social framework; and Buddhism is the blossoms and fruit. The three traditions are not separate entities, but coexist as an organic whole.

It is a well known fact that most Japanese adhere to all these traditions. Few Japanese are conscious about their Confucian heritage, but Confucian ideas penetrate the social structure and define the way people relate to each other. In the field of religious practices most Japanese, according to times and circumstances, function both as Shintoists and Buddhists. Shinto generally celebrates important aspects of this life, such as the life cycle of the household, birth, childhood, and weddings; the agricultural cycle, with new year, spring, and harvest; and all sorts of activities and concerns, from personal happiness and entrance examinations to house-building, industry and wars. Buddhism, on the other hand, cares for the next life and functions primarily as a funeral religion, one-sidedly devoted to funeral rites and ancestor rites. Along with the above-mentioned traditions, people are often involved in folk religious traditions, independent from established Buddhism and Shintoism. They may even send their children to Christian kindergartens and schools in order to

give them a touch of Christianity. Christian wedding ceremonies are popular also among people who are unrelated to any church.

Certainly, Japan must be a paradigm of religious pluralism. At the present time there is no oppression of religions and ideologies; quite contradictory traditions are allowed not only to exist peacefully side by side, but even to propagate freely. It is, however, necessary to take a closer look at this type of pluralism. Japanese pluralism is not as simple as one is often led to believe. It has many faces and includes contradictory trends which complicate the image of harmony and peaceful coexistence.

The most characteristic attitude to religious pluralism is probably the unsophisticated and pragmatic Eastern wisdom that social harmony is the vital condition for a good life. This insight is often supported by a popular sentiment that relativizes all absolutes: there is no ultimate principle, only partial and relative expressions of truth. It may be expressed as a positive affirmation that all ways will ultimately lead to the top of Mount Fuji; anyone who claims absolute allegiance to one particular authority threatens the harmony. Or it may signify halfheartedness and lack of commitment: religion is of no ultimate concern. This often seems to be the case in the modern Japanese society, where religion plays only a peripheral role. Rather than religion, there are other more powerful forces and vital concerns which are constantly changing and molding the Japanese society. Religions have generally adapted themselves to this situation, and seem to have accepted their secondary role as passive supporters of the dominant forces in society.

Along with the emphasis on social harmony and the relativization of all absolutes, there is another, somewhat contradictory trend, which assimilates all other religious traditions into the ultimate truth represented by one particular faith. This is the most popular solution in Buddhist thought. Buddhism seems extremely tolerant towards other traditions. It has included almost the entire Indian pantheon; Chinese traditions have 'been assimilated; and in Japan the Shinto gods and innumerable local divinities and folk traditions have been included. When the Buddhist pioneers established their large temples, they received oracles expressing the consent of the local gods, who were then enshrined within the temple ground. This all-inclusive tolerance, however, is based upon a philosophical foundation which maintains the ultimate principle of Buddhism, and recognizes other faiths and practices merely as inferior expressions of the truth. According to the Buddhist philosophy of assimilation, Buddhas and bodhisattvas were regarded as the "original essence" (本地 *honji*), while other powers and gods were merely secondary "trace manifestations" (垂迹 *suijaku*) and included as divine protectors of the Buddhist Dharma. One character-

istic example is the magnificent synthesis of Kukai (774–835), who established the supremacy of (Esoteric) Buddhism by demonstrating the inadequacy of all other doctrines, while at the same time integrating them into his system.’¹

A similar solution is found also within the Shinto tradition, notably the so-called Yoshida Shinto. It attempted to unify the various branches of Shinto, and included Buddhism as a secondary expression of Shinto.

Christianity has, of course, been the “trouble-maker” in this context, because it ignored the accepted rules of social harmony and tried to convert people to absolute allegiance to its principles. But also Japanese Christians found their version of assimilation, as they finally, in the 1890s, managed to appreciate other religions as preparatory stages toward Christian faith. The theological and philosophical bases for such evolutionary theories have been questioned, but the attempt to relate other religions to Christianity in terms of preparation and fulfillment still seems to be the most popular solution of the problem.

The above-mentioned models have generally satisfied the need to solve the tension between the concern for religious ultimacy on the one hand, and the facts of religious pluralism on the other. It might be questioned, however, whether such solutions actually come to terms with the real situation. Expressed more bluntly: there is a certain extent of self-deceit in the attempts of various religions to combine ultimacy and pluralism. My contention is that there are in Japan other values and traditions of more ultimate character than religions, a primary concern under which a plurality of religions are allowed to coexist.

I have already referred to the unsophisticated acceptance of social harmony. Harmony might, in fact, be characterized as one of the ultimate virtues in Japan. It was proclaimed as the first point in the Seventeen Article Constitution of 604:

“Harmony is to be valued, and an avoidance of wanton opposition to be honored.” This harmony was certainly a remarkable virtue, but was, on the other hand, built into a vertical social structure based on Confucian values. Seen from the standpoint of the common people, harmony easily becomes oppressive

“When the lord speaks, the vassal listens; when the superior acts, the inferior yields compliance.”² From the point of view of religion, the concern for harmony radically weakens the ultimate meaning of religious truth. Views that endanger the social harmony have to be suppressed or neutralized. It is, therefore, characteristic that whenever religious groups have been persecuted in Japan, it was not caused by doctrine or philosophy as such, but primarily by the social and political implications of the doctrines. If political or social harmony

was endangered, religions were forced to abandon their activities, change their ideas, and adapt themselves to the circumstances, or face suppression and reprisals.

The common-sense preference for social harmony over religious ultimates has often been strengthened by a nationalism which defines the state as the supreme concern of the people. Presently there is a clear constitutional separation between state and religion, and there seem to be few obstacles to religious freedom, so the problem may seem irrelevant. It has, however, been a crucial issue in the modern history of Japan, and there is no reason to believe that it will not again emerge as a threat to real pluralism.

The intimate relationship between state and religion in Japan goes back to prehistorical times. Actually, the very word for religious rituals, *matsurigoto*, was also used for statesmanship (祭政). Throughout the centuries religion has served the state and been utilized by the state. Buddhism was introduced from above as a state ritual. One of its important functions was expressed in the term 鎮護國家 *chingo kokka*, “to pacify and protect the nation” by prayer and the power of Buddha. “Protection of the state” (護國 *gokoku*) has been one of the most characteristic functions of Buddhism.

Whenever religion was suppressed on a larger scale, the reason was that it posed a threat to the suzerainty of the regime. In his attempt to unify the country in the late sixteenth century, after a century of civil wars, Oda Nobunaga found it is necessary to crush the power of Tendai Buddhism, burning the three thousand temples at Mount Hiei. The powerful centers of Shin Buddhism were defeated for similar reasons. And a few years later, in the early seventeenth century, Christianity was proscribed, oppressed, and almost completely extinguished because it allegedly served the territorial ambitions of the Portuguese and Spanish powers. At that stage Buddhism served as the loyal agent of the Tokugawa regime in its attempt to extinguish the “evil religion” of Christianity.

With the Meiji Restoration (1868) the government attempted to establish Shinto as a state cult, revering the gods and absolutizing the Emperor. This policy implied a reduction of the status of Buddhism, but the Buddhist leaders soon adapted themselves to the new situation and fervently offered their service to the state. Buddhist apologetics and service to the state were combined with consistent attacks on Christianity as incompatible with the national polity. Throughout the Meiji period (1868–1912) nationalism was a primary concern for Buddhist propagation, even at the cost of basic Buddhist doctrines. It is, for instance, characteristic that Buddhist leaders consistently supported the popular criticism of Christianity as unpatriotic and subversive. The

common arguments were that the Christian faith in God as the supreme Lord, combined with its concern for universal values and indiscriminate love, contradicted loyalty towards the Emperor and other nationalistic priorities. It was, actually, Christians who from time to time had to remind the Buddhist leaders that Buddhism also stood primarily for universal values and that spiritual concerns were more vital in Buddhism than secular ones. Loyalty to the state and to the Emperor were of such ultimate character to Japanese Buddhists that some of their fundamental doctrines were forgotten, abandoned, or adapted to the circumstances.

The primacy of the state was expressed in a characteristic way by a Buddhist leader who discussed whether or not Christianity should be recognized. He described the relationship between state and religion as the warp and woof in the great “embroidered brocade of Yamato (Japan).” Hitherto Shinto, Confucianism, and Buddhism had sufficed as the religious woof, while Christianity had been excluded as destructive of the national warp. Since Christianity had now (in the 1890’s) demonstrated its patriotic virtues, the time had come to include Christianity and even other religions, and thus add colors to the brocade; however, the absolute condition was still that the national warp should not be destroyed. The symbolism indicates that the state was of primary importance as the warp, while religious truth was acceptable as woof only insofar as it did not threaten the state.³

It is also worthwhile in this context to notice the ideological background of the Meiji Constitution (1889). The Japanese leaders felt the need for a spiritual basis for the Constitution. In Europe the constitutional system was the result of a long development, and religion (Christianity) had penetrated and unified the people. But they failed to find a similar spiritual foundation in Japanese religions. Buddhism still exerted a strong influence, but was about to decline; and Shinto, qua religion, failed to provide spiritual unification, even though it expounded the precepts of the ancestors. The conclusion was that only the Imperial Household could be the spiritual axis of the Japanese people

The development after the 1890s reveals clearly the power of nationalism and the Emperor system. Whatever was antagonistic to these ultimates was stigmatized as subversive and dangerous. Most religions adapted themselves to the dominant ideas. Buddhism has always tended to identify itself with the existing regimes; the main streams of Christianity became increasingly nationalistic, and cooperated positively with Buddhism and Shinto in the front against “dangerous thoughts,” primarily Marxism, anarchism, and whatever threatened the national unity and morality. Religions and ideologies which were

regarded as incompatible with nationalistic ideas were either forced to compromise and change, such as Tenrikyo and, to a great extent, Christianity; or they were suppressed, such as Omoto and some other new religions, the Marxist movement, and a few Christians.

I have dealt quite extensively with the issues of nationalism and the Emperor system, not only because of their historical interest, but primarily because of their latent power.

In sum, at the present time there seem to be no obstacles for peaceful coexistence of a number of religions claiming ultimacy. The various religions tend to combine their concern for the ultimacy of one particular faith with the recognition of other faiths as secondary truths. This is the characteristic “religious” solution of religious pluralism. From another point of view, however, the harmonious image of coexistence of a plurality of absolutes seems to be modified by two trends: (1) the pragmatic wisdom that social harmony is more vital than specific religious claims of ultimacy; and (2) the latent trend of nationalism which recognizes no other ultimate values than the state and the Emperor, at the cost of all other claims of ultimacy.

In spite of centuries of harmonious coexistence, religious pluralism in Japan still poses great challenges.

Notes

1. See, e.g., Alicia Matsunaga, *The Buddhist Philosophy of Assimilation: The Historical Development of the Honji-Suijaku Theory* (Tokyo: Sophia University Press, 1969); Yoshito S. Hakeda, *Kukai Major Works* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972).

2. The Seventeen Article Constitution is recorded in *Sources of Japanese Tradition*, ed. Ryusuke Tsunoda, Win. Theodore deBary, and Donald Keene, 2 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), 1:50–53.

3. An article in the Buddhist journal 四明餘霞 *Shimei yoka* (Nov. 1896), pp. 195–196.

4. *Sources of Japanese Tradition*, 2:170–171.