

THE PROBLEM OF RELIGION AND MODERNIZATION IN JAPAN

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An Example

Numerous superstitions continue to prevail in Japan. Take, for example, the figures of Obinzuru that we can still find today in many popular temples. Usually they are wooden images in a seated posture. According to popular belief anyone with a physical disorder who touches the affected spot of his body and then touches the same spot on the image will be cured by the divine favor of Obinzuru. Thus, we have what may be called a faith-cure by means of suggestion which in itself may not be altogether meaningless. The actual harm resulting from this practice, however, must be far greater than its usefulness.

Why do so many harmful and useless superstitions prevail in such a modernized society? It is because customs that can clearly be recognized today as superstitions were once regarded as appropriate religious observances. It is only recently, a matter of a couple of generations, that the contagious nature of some diseases has become common knowledge. People formerly knew nothing about this. Consequently, it is not strange that belief in the mysterious power of Obinzuru was regarded as an excellent solution to a real human problem, that is, the cure of disease.

THE PROBLEM OF RELIGION AND MODERNIZATION IN JAPAN

Why does Japanese society have such widespread superstitions? This cannot be understood unless the problem is considered together with the change of the times and the progress of culture. The method of solving human problems is not always the same. As times change and culture advances, the meaning of human problems also changes and, therefore, the solutions change. Former solutions can no longer be used. Such being the case, what was once an appropriate religious observance may later be regarded as a superstition. The fact that there are many out-of-date religious solutions today in Japan reflects the social situation of Japan under the heavy pressure of Westernization and modernization.

The Modernization of Japan

As human society becomes modernized, man's problems change and consequently changes occur in the manner of solving human problems, including the solutions offered by religions. It must not be forgotten that religions contain permanent elements; but it is also true that they contain elements which must change with the times. If the changeable elements are kept unchanged, it may result in a religion becoming out of date and ceasing to function vitally. Taking this point as our key, I am going to consider the problem of the modernization of religion in Japan.

At the beginning of the Meiji era, that is, about a century ago, Japan began to take long strides toward modernization. Needless to say, Japanese culture in the past, even during the Tokugawa era (1603—1867), had been oriented in the direction of modernization, but progress was very slow. It was only in

THE PROBLEM OF RELIGION AND MODERNIZATION IN JAPAN

the Meiji era that the country suddenly began to increase its stride toward modernization.

However, in becoming modernized, Japan had to face peculiar situations very different from those of the countries with Western civilization. The modernization of Japan was not achieved solely by her own efforts. Modern Japanese culture arose as a result of the impact of modernized Western culture which was introduced to Japan after the middle of the nineteenth century. In few countries in the world, in fact, have Western civilization and the indigenous culture of a country met so thoroughly and so directly as in Japan.

Why were the Japanese people so well prepared to receive modern Western civilization, and why were they able to succeed in modernization? This is an interesting problem; but, since it has no direct connection with our subject, in this paper we will omit any discussion of it.

Modernization and Westernization Confused

Modern Japan was successfully established only after overcoming many difficulties caused by confusion over differences between modern cultural elements and Western cultural elements. Approximately one hundred years have elapsed since the introduction of modern Western culture. The Japanese people have been generally unaware of the fact that modern Western culture includes two different elements: Western elements and modern elements. Thus, during the past century two operations were in process in Japan: Westernization and modernization.

Western cultural elements and modern cultural elements, Westernization and modernization, are different both in their

THE PROBLEM OF RELIGION AND MODERNIZATION IN JAPAN

nature and meaning. Western culture has been fostered in the historic Western tradition. The modern elements which are comparatively new have come into existence along with the development of the modern age. For example, languages like English and German are a part of traditional Western culture. To eat Western food with a knife and fork is an element of traditional Western culture. Such things as railway trains, steamships, telephones, and television, however, are modern cultural elements. These two different elements have been combined to form modern Western culture; but they were introduced into Japan as one and the same thing. And the Japanese people, being unaware of this difference, accepted them as if they were the same.

Actually, however, these two elements were working in different directions, and various problems arose because they were not clearly distinguished from each other. For example, the fact that Japanese traditional religions, the so-called established religions,* have fallen behind in modernization can substantially be explained by this confusion. Therefore, it is necessary to clarify this point in order to understand the present-day condition of religions in Japan. First, however, it is necessary to discern the distinction between Westernization and modernization.

The Beginning of Modernization

What is meant by modernization? There appears to be quite

* The term "established religions" (*kisei shūkyō* 既成宗教) generally refers to the traditional denominations of Buddhism and Shinto. It does not as a rule include Christianity, *Konkō-kyō* or *Tenri-kyō*.

THE PROBLEM OF RELIGION AND MODERNIZATION IN JAPAN

a variety of views regarding the concept of modernization but I should like to consider the problem from a viewpoint based upon the theory of Professor Ralph E. Turner of Yale University, a scholar in the field of world history. Professor Turner tries to analyze the phenomenon of modernization in relation with the nature of the power resources which are employed in the formation of a culture. According to Professor Turner, from ancient times until the eighteenth century when modernization in a real sense began, the power resources in the formation of culture were ordinarily muscle power, primarily that of human muscles. The great pyramids, for example, were built by slave labor. Prior to the modern age there were no means of transportation driven by mechanical power. Neither trains nor airplanes existed. This meant that in order to travel there was nothing for a person to do but to walk or to use the muscle power of other men or animals. If people did not use their own muscles in riding on horseback or in palanquins, they were dependent upon the leg muscles of palanquin bearers or horses. Of course, men could utilize such simple "machines" as the wheel and lever to some extent, but they in turn were still dependent on muscle power. In other words, these "machines" played only a secondary role. Thus, the evaluation of a large majority of the people was based upon the strength of their muscles. A trained brain was not what was expected of the people. Men were valued mainly as power resources.

Especially in the West, men made great progress in understanding the laws of natural phenomena. The more they were able to develop their understanding, the more they could make use of machines to employ the power hidden in nature. In

THE PROBLEM OF RELIGION AND MODERNIZATION IN JAPAN

other words, they were able to replace muscles with machines as power resources. This could not happen without exerting great influence on human society. This was the beginning of modernization.

As a result the position of man changed. In the past man's role had been largely limited to being a power resource, but with the development of mechanical power resources, he became the controller of machines. Consequently, the importance of the operation of his brain increased. It became necessary for man to be trained to manage machine power instead of offering his own muscle power. In modern society man's brain power has exceeded in importance his muscle power. This means education. The education of people in general has become absolutely essential.

Modern culture was ushered in by the development of mechanical power and is characterized by respect for brain power. The value of man was heightened because of his increased capacity to control mechanical power. We should not forget, however, that it was relatively late when this change took place even in Western culture. The industrial revolution, which developed from the application of machine power to the loom, is a relatively recent event in Western culture. Professor Turner says that it was only about 1750 that modernization of the West in this sense took place.

Such is not the only reason, of course, for the rise of modern Western culture. Various causes such as the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and democracy impelled it.

There are two main elements which constitute the backbone of modern culture. The first is science and techniques that

utilize the laws of natural phenomena. The second is respect for human personality. Modern culture is centered in man. The authority of the sacredness of religion, the value of art, —all of these have tended to be reevaluated in terms of man.

Modern Culture and Western Culture Distinguished

Another important point of historical significance is that modern cultural elements came into existence in the West. They came into existence in the land where traditional Western culture had prevailed for a long time. Modern cultural elements were at the beginning something that was added to Western cultural tradition. Because it happened to arise in the West, the first modernized culture to come into existence on this globe was modern Western culture. But if its main cause was the shift in power resources from human muscles to machines, it could have also occurred in the East. It might have taken place many hundred of years later ; but it surely would have occurred even without any contact with the West. Then it would have been possible for the world to see a genuine Eastern modern culture independent of Western culture. In other words, theoretically modern cultural elements can develop in any culture. There can be a modern Eastern culture as well as a modern Western culture. Modern cultural elements can be possessed in common by all cultures.

Thus, Western cultural elements and modern cultural elements are essentially different from each other. Nevertheless, for historical reasons they occurred first in the West. Modern Western culture came into existence in a compact form. When Japan was opened to Western intercourse, it was with this

compact culture that the people came in contact. They were dazzled by its brilliance. Of course, they were utterly unaware of the distinction between the components of this compound of Western cultural elements and modern cultural elements. They merely desired by all means to whole-heartedly absorb it at once: such was their enthusiastic endeavor for the so-called "civilization and enlightenment" (*bunmei kaika*)².

The people put up with much difficulty, confusion, inconvenience, and the hardship of a double life as a result of the coming of modern Western culture. Indeed, the new course they took was a very adventurous one. They were willing to lose their course in the raging waters of Westernization and modernization and even risk the complete destruction of their traditional way of life both for the individual and society as a whole. The new Japan, however, was gradually established. The country made great progress during the preceding century, getting somewhat hastily modernized as well as Westernized in almost every respect.

Buddhism and Shinto Oppose Modernization

However, while modern Japan was being established in this way, among the so-called established religions Shinto and Buddhism by contrast appeared to be very much behind the times. Admittedly they were left behind. Yet in retrospect it is evident that a century ago, when the country was being opened, these religions were not in fact as far behind the times as is the case to-day. Certainly the excessive policy of protection adopted by the Tokugawa government had gradually deprived Buddhism

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THE PROBLEM OF RELIGION AND MODERNIZATION IN JAPAN

of any vitality, but it could still manage to attract popular interest. Today, however, that is, one hundred years later, what is the situation? Buddhism still remains in almost the same condition as it was at the end of Tokugawa era. In the dark interior of the main hall of candle-lit temples the priests are even now chanting sutras written in Chinese which no ordinary believer can understand.

As for Shinto, it should be noted that it provided the guiding spiritual principle for the revival of the Imperial rule : such was the vital part that it played at that time. But in present-day Japan Shinto shrines are still performing the same old pattern of ceremonies and the populace still becomes excited by the carrying about of portable shrines just as it did a century ago. Both Buddhism and Shrine Shinto are so remarkably behind the times that it makes us wonder whether or not they are deliberately turning their backs on modernization.

What can be the reason for this? There may be many reasons but, as I see it, the most important one seems to be related to the special character of modernization in Japan. As already stated, the special condition of modernization lay in the fact that Westernization and modernization were confused ; but the Japanese people in general were never aware of this. Neither were Buddhist and Shinto leaders. Both Shinto and Buddhism had been brought up in the Oriental cultural tradition. If they had been Westernized they would have lost their unique character. This was, indeed, of such vital significance to them that they had no choice but to struggle against Westernization to the utmost. Confronted as they were with modern Western culture in which the two elements were in-

THE PROBLEM OF RELIGION AND MODERNIZATION IN JAPAN

distinguishably mixed, Shinto and Buddhism were, consciously or unconsciously, forced to resist and unhesitatingly reject it.

Resistance to Westernization drove them into the position of struggling against the incoming culture as a whole. Thus, they were driven into a position where, consciously or unconsciously, they had to oppose not only Westernization but modernization also. For this reason the leaders hesitated even to equip their temples and shrines with electric lights? They could not wear Western clothes in public without considerable hesitation. And they passed an important century in this way. Naturally, then, they were gradually left behind by the speedy modernization which took place in Japan. Such was the inevitable situation.

It is often said that some of the established religions are declining into a hopelessly antiquated condition. They are even criticized as having fallen too far behind to be rescued. But is this really so? The answer seems to be still in the future. If these religions are continuously forced to resist modernization, a real problem may arise for them. They may become so hopelessly out-of-date as to be nothing more than archaeological specimens.

The Established Religions at the Crossroads

At present Japan is standing at the crossroads of a new development in awakening to the true meaning of modern Western culture. This new development is not limited to religious leaders. It also concerns the Japanese people in general. Present-day Japan, after a century of desperate struggle with foreign culture, has succeeded to some extent in establishing a

THE PROBLEM OF RELIGION AND MODERNIZATION IN JAPAN

modern Japanese culture. The present achievement of modernization has played the role of an object lesson. As a result of it the Japanese people are now ready to draw a distinction between Westernization and modernization. At least they are approaching this point. If the Japanese generally are able to make this distinction, then the leaders of the established religions will also be ready to follow their example. Consequently, it may be possible that the established religions, which have been left behind because of their opposition to modernization, will be able for the first time to make a genuine effort to modernize without fear of Westernization.

Such a turning point as this is gradually coming in sight for the country as a whole and, once the religious leaders become aware of this, it will not be surprising if both Buddhism and Shinto are able to modernize very rapidly. For Japanese religions the question to be faced at the present stage is: what are the permanent, unchangeable elements in their religions and what elements are changeable. This time-old question is now for them most important and most worthy of careful consideration.

Now in the future, when Buddhism and Shinto become modernized, what should these religions be like? This is our last point; but before discussing it I should like to consider Christianity and the new religious movements for a moment.

* For an explanation of the term "new religious movements" see *Contemporary Religions in Japan*. June, 1960, p 70.

Christianity

Christianity, which was introduced at the time of the Meiji Reformation, poses an interesting problem. It should be remembered that Christianity was introduced to Japan after it had already been well refined in Western society and was arrayed in the garb of modern religion. At the beginning the Japanese people even thought that modernization, Westernization, and Christianization were one and the same thing. There were not a few persons among the pioneers of the Meiji era who were converted to Christianity because of their desire to study English and come into contact with Western culture. The early influence of Christianity looked so strong that at one time it was thought that Japan might become Christianized before the turn of the century. However, this was not to be the case. Despite a century of evangelistic work, Christianity, including both Catholicism and Protestantism, has acquired only about 700,000 believers against the total Japanese population of more than 90 million.

Seven hundred thousand may seem like a large number until it is compared with a religion that originated in Japan at almost the same time that Christianity was introduced. Tenri-kyō, for example, was founded by an unknown peasant housewife. Its early history was one of incessant struggle under government suppression. Yet, today this religion claims two million believers. Konkō-kyō, another religion which also arose in a farm village just a century ago, is said to number about 700,000 believers. Compared with these religions Christianity, which has spent an amazingly large amount of money for evangelistic

THE PROBLEM OF RELIGION AND MODERNIZATION IN JAPAN

work in the past one hundred years, cannot be said to have been very successful in gaining a large number of believers. It has certainly sent to Japan many talented persons backed by the prestige of modern Western culture. But why has not Christianity spread more widely? It may, of course, be partly because Christianity is too highly refined. A refined religion is more difficult to propagate than a religion devoted to the immediate welfare of man, as in the healing of illness; but there seem to be other reasons working also that are related to the problem of modernization.

One reason may be that Christianity, although it was introduced arrayed in modern vestments, has not been a champion of modernization in Western society. On the contrary, its role has been almost the other way around in the contemporary West. Therefore, Christianity could not take a lead in the modernization movement in this country. Even the Japanese people, who could not discern the difference between the two elements of modernization and Westernization, at a fairly early time clearly perceived the distinction between the modernization of Japan and its Christianization.

Another reason seems to be the fact that many people connected with Christian evangelism, including missionaries from abroad as well as Christians in Japan, confused the self-admitted superiority of Christianity with the superiority of modern Western culture. As a result of this they seem to have developed too much self-confidence regarding the Western cultural elements imbedded in Christianity. They introduced Christianity into Japan in a form which was deeply dyed with the color of Western culture and they neglected to remold Christianity

so as to adapt it to the Japanese people and Japanese culture. Unquestionably this was an unnatural process and it certainly did not help the wider propagation of Christianity. Some Japanese Christians seem to be engaged in a reconsideration of their position, —an attitude that is worth watching,

New Religious Movements

In regard to the new religious movements, many of which seem to contain a large number of pre-modern elements, why are they attracting so many people in modernized Japan? Social unrest after World War II and the inactivity and inability of the established religions must account in large measure for this. In that period people had many urgent problems which the established religions were unable to solve. There was a spiritual vacuum. This was undoubtedly the main reason for the new development. Another reason, however, seems to lay in facts related to modernization. Many new religious organizations that boasted of their prosperity did not stick to the traditional ways of doing things. They did not fear the modernization of their structures and activities. Instead, many of them actually added modern elements somewhat drastically. Without doubt this helped them to become prosperous.

Religions in the Future

Now, finally I should like to take up the problem of these religions—the traditional Japanese religions, Christianity, and the new religious movements. What will they become when society and culture have become more modernized?

There is a so-called modern view which regards all religion

THE PROBLEM OF RELIGION AND MODERNIZATION IN JAPAN

as nothing more than a relic of the past. Such a view claims that as society is modernized religions fade away little by little into insignificance and that ultimately they will become only museum specimens. This may be true if we limit religion to only the stereotyped phases of the established religions. It depends on how religion is defined. As long as religion is understood as having a role in solving the ultimate problems of human beings, it cannot be thought that it will fade away easily. Of course, it would be a real achievement if an ideal society were to be realized in which no problems remained unsolved and no religion were needed; but this is hardly to be expected.

In this regard religion is comparable to a doctor. Nothing would be more desirable than to have all diseases and illness eliminated so that no doctor would be needed; but such an age will hardly come to pass and, until it does, doctors will be indispensable. Likewise, religion will continue to exist as long as human problems remain which no other means can solve.

Yet, even though religion does continue to exist, what sort of religion will it be, and in what form will it remain? I do not think that religions worthy of fulfilling their duty in modernized society will be necessarily in the same form as they have in the past. Religions are destined to change. In order to solve the problems of modernized people, religions must modernize.

In Harmony with Science

From the viewpoint of the fundamental character of modern

THE PROBLEM OF RELIGION AND MODERNIZATION IN JAPAN

culture, which I have just examined, two points may be noted regarding the nature of religions in the future. In the first place, religions will become more consistent with science. The development of modern culture started from the discovery and utilization of natural law. Science and techniques form the basis of modern society. As John Dewey has said, as far as natural phenomena are concerned, truth is one and there "is but one method of ascertaining fact and truth—that conveyed by the word scientific in its most general and generous sense."*

Therefore, belief in superstitions and miracles, which have hitherto been abundantly found in religions, especially in Japan, will disappear in the future. However, the fact that religion depends upon science should not be understood to mean that the role and field of religions is altogether violated. Even people who live in modern society and depend on scientific knowledge have innumerable human problems which cannot be solved by scientific knowledge alone. There are many problems that are rooted in the realm of value that cannot be solved by science.

Humanistic, Man-centered

In the second place, religions will become more human-value centered. It is the modern way to give new valuation to the social system and the pattern of culture in terms of human values. Moderns have made every endeavor to destroy the political state in which the authority of the state is more high-

* John Dewey, *A Common Faith* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1934) p. 33.

ly esteemed than fundamental human rights. Man has been trying to reconstruct such cultural patterns as could be built up only at the cost of great human sacrifice. It is one of modern man's fundamental convictions that each human life is of ultimate value. Religion in the future will focus on this position. The giving of true happiness to each man, or showing him how to find the ideal life worth living in its true sense, will become central in religion.

The idea that religions are absolute because of their own inherent sanctity which demands man's total obedience will gradually disappear. The concern of modern religious leaders must be primarily with man. No one but he who can share suffering with a man in agony will be regarded as worthy to be called a religious leader. Religious leaders who seek their own personal advancement in the already established religious hierarchies, or who exploit religion for personal vantage, will cease to exist. If religions combine the scientific spirit and humanism, they will assume vital responsibilities and become indispensable even in modernized society.

The Domain of Religion

At the same time the domain of religion may possibly become narrower than it has been. This means that religion will become more genuine. In the early stages religion pre-empted all phases of human life as its domain. Gradually, however, this has diminished as various cultural domains separated from it and became independent. Philosophy developed from mythology and science from magic. Theocracy became democracy, and religious charity became secular social welfare

THE PROBLEM OF RELIGION AND MODERNIZATION IN JAPAN

work. This tendency has not yet come to an end. It must be recognized that this process is still going on today.

Then, in present-day Japan what is still to be separated from religion? At the moment there is one cultural phenomenon which seems to be in the process of establishing its independence. This is recreation. There is a new tendency for recreation to become an independent cultural realm. Japanese religions in the past have included a good deal of recreation for the populace within their domain. Such religious practices in Japan as visiting temples, pilgrimages to the Grand Shrine of Ise, mountain-worship, and carrying portable shrines at festivals will gradually fade away with the independent development of recreation. A religion that will become empty when it no longer functions in the area of recreation will not be worthy of propagation in the future.

Permanent Problems for Religion

What kind of human problems then will remain for religions to solve in the future? For one thing the problem of death will remain in the hands of religion, —death being something that man cannot easily solve. But the problem of death will not be limited to simply the problem of life after death. Religion should also enable people to view the whole span of life in a proper perspective. It is religion's task to teach people how to think about human problems in their proper relationship with all human life. Furthermore, man's life will always be enriched by having an ultimate ideal which is worth pursuing with wholehearted enthusiasm. Religion will continue to fill the role of finding what the ultimate ideal should be. And

THE PROBLEM OF RELIGION AND MODERNIZATION IN JAPAN

the way to cultivate an unwavering attitude, which can cope with worry or unrest, will also continue as a function of religion. These functions will endure to constitute the role of religion in life.

This is, however, a problem far away in the future. For the time being, in spite of the modernizing progress of society, various kinds of the same old human problems are left unsolved. As in the past their solution will continue to be the task of religion.

To recapitulate, then, recognizing that religion is bound to continue to exist in the future, this will not be because religion itself has a sanctity apart from human values. Man does not live for the sake of religion. Nor does religion exist for the sake of religion. Religion is, indeed, for man. As long as human problems exist, which only religion is able to face, religion will remain.

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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. Whenever possible expressions preferred by the author have been retained in the final draft. Editor.