

The Ethical Life of the Japanese.

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The ancient history of Japan, as recorded in native annals is very interesting because of the mythology, with which it is enshrouded. In these mythical legends, numerous deities play a conspicuous part, the country itself being styled the "Land of the Gods." It is asserted by them that there first existed seven generations of heavenly deities, followed by five generations of earthly deities, who were in turn succeeded by the mortal sovereigns.

It is difficult to ascertain the precise origin of the present race, but it is supposed that they are of Chinese origin, and in early times invaded the islands driving farther north the aborigines, of whom the Ainos of today are supposed to be the descendants. The idea that the Japanese are of Chinese origin probably comes from an old legend, that a daughter of a prince in central Asia, cursed by her father fled from home, and finding a deserted canoe on the seashore she boarded the waves, till she chanced to find an island for out in the ocean. Here she landed and her descendants peopled the island.

driving back the aborigines as they multiplied.

As regards their early beliefs, Shintoism was probably the first approach to any religion. For about twelve centuries this was the sole religion of the land. By the Japanese it is called "the way of the gods." It consisted essentially in implicit obedience to the Mikado, who as his name, "Son of Heaven" would indicate, is supposed to have descended from the gods.

In Shintoism there was no creed, nor any elaborate system of doctrines. The good gods were worshiped that there might be an increase of good gifts, and the evil ones that they might be appeased. The people prayed for an abundance of food, shelter, and clothing, and twice a year, held a grand festival of "general purification" when the whole nation was cleansed of its sins and pollutions. The Emperor was the god dwelling in the flesh, and of course his ancestors were to be worshiped. Besides the deified emperors

and heroes, there were hosts of gods who were the deified powers of nature.

However gradually grew away from religion into a cold empty system of statecraft used as a support to the government so that ^{when} in five hundred and thirty two Buddhism was introduced, the way was already paved for rapid progress.

Buddhism originated with a lofty philosophy, and a code of morals higher perhaps than any other heathen religion has ever reached before or after. Its three distinguishing features are metempsychosis, atheism, and absence of caste. First preached in a land cursed by secular and spiritual oppression it declared all men equally sinful and miserable, and all equally capable of being freed from sin and misery through knowledge. It taught that the souls of men had lived in a previous state of existence, and that all the pains and sorrows of this life were but

but punishments for sins committed in a previous state. Each human soul has whirled through countless eddies of existence, and has still to pass through a long succession of birth, pain, and death. All is fleeting, nothing real. This life all a delusion. After death the soul must migrate through many stages superior or inferior, till perchance it arrives at last in Nirvana, or absorption in Buddha.

But the morals of Buddhism were superior. They were the corner stones of a refined morality. Besides the cardinal prohibitions against stealing, lying, drunkenness, and so forth, every shade of vice, hypocrisy, anger, pride, suspicion, greediness, gossiping and cruelty to animals, was guarded against by special precepts.

Such was Buddhism in its early purity. Besides its moral code and philosophy, it had almost nothing. Driven from India, it swept through various countries and after twelve centuries

of condensing entered Japan. By this time the original bone doctrines had been transformed and made glorious in the apparel, with which Asiatic civilization had clothed them. It had a vast and complicated machinery, a geographical and sensual paradise, definitely located hells and purgatories populated with a hierarchy of titled demons and furnished after the most approved theological fashion. Of these the priests kept the keys, regulating and grading the torture or bliss. Buddhism thus had a perfectly mechanism, with which to work on an ignorant and superstitious people. It made a vast impression on them, but at one time nearly suffered obliteration from Christianity.

In 1542 as the native historians give it, the first Europeans come to the islands. These were Portuguese traders and brought with them the Christianity of Rome. In those days war and religion, commerce and piracy, were closely united, so that the Christianity

the big guns, and the powder, which these traders brought to the island, were regarded by the natives as equal members of a trinity of terrors, and synergous with each other.

At this time nearly the whole land was engaged in the petty wars of the different feudal lords. The mass of the people on whom the burden of the war fell, were in the lowest depths of poverty and misery. The native religions offered little comfort. Shinto was already almost forgotten except as a matter of history, by a few scholars, while Buddhism was gradually sinking into a system of masses and prayers.

Then came the priests of Rome, with the crucifix in their hands, and eloquence on their lips. With gorgeous robes, and impressive ceremonies, processions and mysteries. They brought pictures, gilt crosses and images, and erected splendid altars. They preached that all believers should enter Heaven immediately after death, as against the cycles of Buddhism, and in this way stored up

the utmost of enthusiasm. They even made use of the old religion to further their own. The very idols of Buddha, after slightly slightly altered with the chief served as images of Christ. The Buddhist saints were transformed into the twelve apostles. Even the warriors went to battle with the cross on their helmets, and embroidered on their breasts, like the Crusaders of old who went to Jerusalem.

The native rulers noticed the profession of foreign precious metals, and wishing to show their professed Christianity, and such was their zeal that they compelled all their subjects to either embrace the faith or immediately leave the land.

Gradually as the different orders, the Jesuits, Franciscans, and Augustinians increased, they began to encroach on each others' parishes. This gave rise to innumerable quarrels. The friars rigorously excommunicated each other.

while the pagans sneered, and the native priests rejoiced. The ears of Europe were carried by the traders and missionaries to distant seas. The Protestant Dutch and

English stirred up hatred hatred in the Japanese for the the Jesuits, and the Spaniards and Portuguese blackened the character of the heretics, and vigorously abused each other whenever it served their interest

Finally as the gold of the Christians grew less abundant, and a new ruler took charge of affairs in Japan Christianity took a different place. The most frightful of persecutions took place, so that at the end of the seventeenth century the existence of Christianity in Japan was a mere historical fact. It left no marks on the Japanese mind, and on its departing Japan took up again the old religion of Buddha.

In the mental attributes of the Japanese people, ambition, sentiment, good sense and artistic taste play an important part.

His ambition seeks nobility and greatness for their own sakes. It would be ashamed to turn back on account of risks. To this end Buddhism has contributed an element of pessimism, by never ceasing to remind

the people that all in this life is vanity.
The sounds of the evening bells. Coming from some distant hill top, slow measured and melancholy, reverberating through the whole town, the great halls and temples, clean swept, the clean shaven monks, calmly engaged in their daily devotions, the innumerable names and stories of men and women who have forsook the world and found rest for their tired spirits, all remind the people of life and peace, not to be found in this world. The happy fusion of activity and calmness, of ambition and resignation is well typified in their national flower, the cherry blossom. Among men the Samurai among flowers the cherry. In its season all Japan is covered with the white blossoms. But in a few days they begin to fall, and wafted by the breeze, they go, leaving behind no trace of a greedy hold on life. Thus it is, the flower is loved not only for its beauty but for its significance.

Confucianism had had a great deal to do with forming their ideal in ethics. The sacred books of Confucianism are largely ethical, social and political but above all practical. The merit of Confucianism was in its ethical teaching. Against the pessimism and vague speculations of Buddhism, it taught

the importance of the daily of life, and refused positively to speculate on the mystical and unseen future. The Confucian idea was to create a class of cultured men, "men of sweetness and light," as Matthew Arnold would say, to take the affairs of government, and guide the people. In the Analects of Confucius it is said, "A true man lays the foundation. When the foundations are laid, then is the way of truth secure. Filial piety and brotherly goodness, are not these the foundations for the establishments of righteousness?" The reason that Confucius so strongly upheld filial piety, was probably because he lived in a time of almost total anarchy. He traveled from prince to prince, but met with little earnest response. He did not feel that he was called upon to set up a king, but looked to providence to send him to some prince who should help him. He professed to be a transmitter and not a prophet. He once playfully compared himself to a jeweler with a rare and precious stone and said, "I would sell it, I am only waiting for a proper price."

The Japanese held that filial piety was the foundation of all virtue, yet practically

their first impulse was loyalty. The claims of the Mikado and the state, merged with religious devotion, held above all others. Think of one family ruling over a nation for some twenty centuries. In many cases the attachment between master and servant was the heritage of many generations. When the restoration from feudalism took place the Mikado was not only absolute in power, but was almost worshiped by the people as a divine personage. The mass of the people were still ignorant and superstitious but they possessed the good sense to know whom to follow.

The place of woman may be of importance in this connection. The Hindu theory of three fold obedience was taught, "when young obey your parents, when married your husband, and when widowed your son; Also the Chinese reasons for divorce, disobedience to the husband or his parents, childlessness, over jealousy, leprosy and other kindred diseases, over talkativeness, and committing of theft. The inferiority of woman however was not

at the bottom of all this. but the superior rights of the family over individual rights. So it was, that if the wife was in any way hostile to the general welfare of the household she was in duty bound to leave it.

The wife obeyed her husband, or if a son happened to be the 'head of the house' she and her sons obeyed the older son, as did also the father if he lived in retirement. From a western standpoint this sounds very harsh but it makes a difference as to whether a son succeeds to his fathers estate as a right or a duty.

Another phase of duty is shown in what they call "reasonable duty". In their novels and dramas this is ^{often} carried to singular extremes. We read of people compelled through "reasonable duty" to perform acts quite apposed to their most natural inclinations. A wife having two children, one her own, the other a child of her husbands former wife is twice as good to the latter. A child princess nurse realizing the danger in which he is placed by designing enemies, sacrifices her own child to save the prince.

The devotional loyalty to the Mikado still exists, but many of the old theories and conceptions were broken down with the collapse of the feudal system and the old religions. The introduction of the new

ideas of political rights and civil liberty, and the introduction of Christianity, learning and literature from the West. Depue lately said, "Japan has accomplished as much in the last quarter of a century, as Europe did in several centuries."

Laying aside all religion, Christianity impressed more than any thing else in Japan the principle of monogamy and personal purity.

Considered from a western stand point, the old system of ethics is too one sided. Theoretically considered it may be well balanced, but practically it is not. The duties of father, husband or elder brother were unfairly light when compared with those of child, wife or younger brother. And though the feudal times may have demanded a system like this, the people realize that the times are now changed and that a new system of ethics is needed. Japan has been acting under the higher impulses in freeing ~~the~~ serf from innumerable feudal exactions, and giving social and political privileges to all classes.

The new ideas in Japan are much like those of the West. The people once worked for the glory and upbuilding of their country for the good that they and their ancestors had derived from the king and the state. They begin to now

see and regard such matters as the Christian nations of the West; that is, "That history of the ~~past~~ human race is one vast ethical process; that is an evolutionary process toward an ethical end. so that all times all men, all peoples, are to contribute toward the realization of those states and conditions of things, which are the ultimate good of all history, and is the fulfillment of the visions and prophecies of the best men of all ages.

It took old Japan one thousand years to develop her own distinct ideas from China and India, and it is but reason able to suppose that it will take at least a century for them to thoroughly assimilate the ideas of Europe and America, and when they have succeeded in that, they will have attained what the best men of the present generation are earnestly hoping and praying for.

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