

Part 2 (Last): Up to Present

History of Thought & Religion in Japan

By Kurozumi Makoto

A “National Religion” In & Outside the Country

Japan, an insular country, has incorporated diverse thoughts, religions and cultures internally under the background of animism. But it was Buddhism and *Shintoism* that provided (until the 17th century) the structure of “a national religion” established in various localities of the country during the process of national unification. During the subsequent Tokugawa Period (through the mid-18th century), all contacts with the outside world were prohibited, except limited trade and exchanges. This was later known as “*Sakoku*,” or National Seclusion. During this period of isolation, peace and order was maintained in the country, and there were no major military conflicts apart from minor local skirmishes. This prolonged period of calm has been referred to as *Pax Tokugawana*, or *Pax Tokugawa*, by some historians.

For us, the interesting question is: What kind of world view and ethics emerged in Japan during this period and how were they related and compared with the development of thought and religion in the greater East Asia region?

When one looks back on Japanese history, it was the Warring Period that was particularly and unexpectedly important. It was this period, prior to the emergence of a “national religion” and “peace” in Japan, that saw major ideological and religious confrontations taking place in and outside the country. During the 16th century, major fighting erupted in different parts of the country between warriors seeking political power and various Buddhist sects. War was also waged frequently against Christianity, particularly during the years preceding the National Seclusion, in order to purge the religion, which could be regarded as monotheist. It may be unimaginable in our age, but the people in Japan from the latter half of the

17th century had been required to register their names with a temple in their community to ensure that they were not Christians. Buddhist sects ceased to be concerned with the afterlife; instead, they worked as part of the internal order. It is important to note that it was under these circumstances that Ise Shrine and other *Shinto* establishments became the ascendant force.

In other words, it was the purge of Christianity, the conversion of Buddhist sects and the rise of *Shintoism* that prompted the birth of a “national religion” and the emergence of peace. In the process of these changes, *Shintoism* and Buddhism, despite their inherent spirit of animism – the belief that everything has a soul – began to be concerned with social order and internal affairs within such order, orienting themselves toward exclusion of outsiders and the practice of honoring only the souls of one’s ancestors or certain groups of people at their shrines and temples.

It is interesting to note that, for a period of time, *Shintoism* and Buddhism adopted the belief that the souls of friends and foes alike should be equally honored. During the medieval and post-medieval ages, even after Japan invaded the Korean Peninsula in the 17th century, rituals were held to enshrine the souls of one’s enemies. But after the Tokugawa regime closed the country, such practices were rarely seen. Instead, Buddhist temples and *Shinto* shrines started enshrining only the souls of one’s ancestors and members of certain groups, a practice that has continued to this day. This “national religion” character remained unchanged in Imperial Japan after the “opened” to the world through the Meiji Restoration of 1868.

Confucianism & Morality

Many Japanese, as part of this “national religion,” have long followed the age-old practice of celebrating birth

with *Shinto* rituals but going with Buddhist tradition in death. But this is not exactly how life comes to an end. This superstructure was infused with Confucian teachings during post-medieval times and sprinkled with science and civilized precepts after the Meiji Restoration.

First, let’s take a look at Confucianism. Regarding the way of human life, Neo-Confucianism originally taught people about what a community, including family clans, should look like and about the larger workings with respect to the state and political order. Neo-Confucianism puts these relationships within the cosmic concept of “Heaven and Earth,” or simply “Heaven.” In this sense, Neo-Confucianism can be regarded as cosmopolitanism. However, in pre-modern China and Korea, Neo-Confucianism was also linked to the political order through the *keju* civil service examination system. Japan did not embrace the *keju* system but set up numerous state schools where Confucian morality was taught. At the same time, a “national religion” of *Shintoism* and Buddhism had already been in existence since post-medieval times. Thus, Neo-Confucianism spread across Japan as a form of morality and academic concept devoid of religiosity and with little political color, and was syncretized with *Shintoism* and Buddhism to become the accepted norm in the general public.

In China and Korea, morality is strongly linked to the idea of “Heaven and Earth.” In Japan, there are also thinkers who demand *jin* (benevolence) and *rei* (decorum) in politicians, and preach about the need of enlightening the common people with “ethics and morality” in guiding their daily conduct. Some other thinkers stress the idea of *wa* (harmony), above the idea of *do* (assimilation), as a community virtue. Many thinkers also associate business and politics with morality. As these thoughts are associated with some politi-

Illustration: Iwasawa Akio

cians and business people in the 20th century, they cannot be ignored.

In Japan, as a general rule, morality was hardly linked to politics, let alone Heaven and Earth, and tended to be conscripted into individual relationships and the vertical order of human relations. In this respect, the ideas of *chuko* (loyalty and filial piety) and *makoto* (faithfulness) played important roles. *Chu* means faithfulness toward other people and *ko* means consideration for the kin. But in Japan, when these two ideas are used in combination under the *chuko* concept, the nuance changes, the suggestion being that the bond between sovereign and subject is stronger than family relations. *Jin* and *gi* initially meant benevolence and justice, respectively, but in Japan today *jin-gi* has become not an ideal but merely a concept to describe individual human relations and person-to-person dealings. *Makoto* initially meant links with the universe, but in Japan the idea is merely used in being faithful to one's work.

Thought, Morality in Imperial/Postwar "Opened" Japan

When Japan started opening itself to the outside world from the closing days of the Tokugawa Period, the prevailing precept was what the thinkers at the time called "Western art and Eastern morality." What this meant was: Take science and technology from Western Europe and uphold East Asian morality in the conduct of everyday life and politics. What happened instead in Japan with the onset of the Meiji Restoration was that the idea of morality fell into sideways during the process of enlightenment. To remedy this moral vacuum, the "Constitution of the Empire of Japan" and the "Imperial Rescript on Education" were promulgated in 1890. Through these two documents, the religious doctrine of animism as embraced by *Shintoism* and Buddhism and the idea of propagation toward Heaven and Earth as contained in the Confucian morality have been put entirely under the preserve of the "Empire" and the



"Emperor".

Within the Japanese Empire, the religiosity of what later became known as State *Shinto* took on a dominant, non-religious character and gave birth to a structure subsuming various religions; the emphasis was on "national morality." Socialists who proclaimed that morality transcends the state were suppressed in the closing years of the Meiji Period and the idea of civic morality was purged. The souls of people who died in war were enshrined at Yasukuni Shrine, a *Shinto*-cum-Buddhist establishment positioned at the center of the state. Enshrinement at Yasukuni Shrine became an only-for-Japanese affair and the concept of "equality between friends and foes" was no longer there. Japan at that time was no longer a small, closed country; it was aspiring to become a Great Empire. It was into such a state structure that science and technology, and West European thoughts and cultures were injected. An Empire thus built became further militarized from the 1930s onward.

When discussing the transformation of Japan as a militaristic state, arguments have been heard in Korea and China that by the historic traditions of Eastern philosophy, empire-builders in Japan

should have followed the "royal road" (moralism), not the way of "hegemonism" (military force). But Japan did not embark on the high road, and the consequence in East Asia and the Pacific was millions of deaths in wars, bombings, atomic bombs, and other calamities.

From 1945 onward, the history of thought in postwar Japan is said to have been marked by an encounter with further "nation opening". Christianity, the Quakers included, was accepted, and pacifism became the vogue. Japan increasingly turned politically, socially and culturally toward East Asia, including China and South Korea, instead of being oriented exclusively toward Europe and the United States as in the prewar years. Once again, morality has found its ties to politics and business. How far will this sense of morality spread in the public domain and assume an international character? The answer will determine the future direction of Japanese people's thought and religion.

J.S

Kurozumi Makoto is a professor at the Department of Area Studies in the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, the University of Tokyo.