Japanese Views of Religion as Opposed to Those of the West

By Eido Tai Shimano

I have lived in the U.S. for over 30 years. When you live for an extended period of time in a Western country, you realize that while you may have an intellectual grasp of its religion—in this case, Christianity and Judaism in particular—western religion here is a living, breathing part of people's lives, an integral part of culture, a fundamental way of thinking. As a way of warming up to the theme of Japanese views of religion, I will start with a consideration of religion in the U.S. and of how people here view their established religions.

In today's world, I can think of no two countries whose culture and character are of a more disparate nature than Japan and the U.S. It is often said that what is common sense in Japan goes against common sense in the U.S., and that, likewise, U.S. decency is Japanese absurdity. This characterization is right on the mark. The U.S. is the most individualistic, religiously open, and optimistic country in the world. Americans are a diverse crowd, comprised of people of European, African, South and Central American, Middle and Near Eastern and Asian extraction. It follows that there are many religions, too: among them not only Judaism and Christianity but also Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and Shamanism. Judaism and Christianity, however, form the mainstream of religion in the U.S.

Now, you must understand that Judaism, Christianity and Islam repudiate the mix–and–match approach to religions, viewing it as heresy. In Japan however, a child's birth is announced to the Shinto gods, weddings are conducted under the auspices of Shinto or Christianity, daily life is fairly Confucian, and death is marked by a Buddhist memorial service. While Confucianism may not be a religion in the strict sense of the word, Shinto, Buddhism and Confucianism are based on entirely different, mutually contradictory principles. According to Shinto, for instance, the world in which we live is the best place, and when we die we go to a filthy, odious nether world. Buddhism holds the opposite: that this world is full of pain and filth, and that when the physical body perishes we return to the real world, a clean, pure land. In Confucianism, there is no world but this one. Each view, of course, flatly contradicts the others.

I believe that in this way the Japanese are a broadminded, tolerant people with an immunity to contradiction and an ability to believe in and become attached to three or four religions at once.

Sizing up Judaism and Christianity

With this in mind, let us turn to a few basic components of Judaism and Christianity. First, we have the creation of heaven and earth, the famous story that appears in the beginning of the Old Testament. Second is the existence of God. Third is the idea of a covenant between humankind and God that permits the existence of humankind. And fourth is the sizable issue of guilt and sin. One could also add love and forgiveness, and social service. The first four form the basic principles, and while the latter two would seem to be somewhat separate, they are all part of the same chain of beliefs.

First, consider the story of creation. "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth," begins Genesis. The passage continues, "The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters." Read literally, this passage seems to say that God is outside of time, space, and the universe. I feel some resistance to this idea and, as I found, so do many Americans.

In contrast, I have near me philosopher Daisetz T. Suzuki's translation of a passage by the great 13th century Zen master Daio: "There is a reality even prior to heaven and earth. Indeed it has no form, much less a name." While Genesis has it that "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth," Daio asserts "There is a reality even prior to heaven and earth." For better or worse, Japanese do not have an equivalent of the Bible, and most have probably only vaguely ever contemplated the creation of heaven and earth; they generally have reached adulthood before they learn the sentence in Genesis about God's creative powers.

In a collection of essays entitled *Shunto Zakki*, (Spring Lamp Memorandum; Notes by a Lamp in Spring), the late Shiba Ryotaro says, "Christianity too is in grave straits. This religion is built on a single, grand lie—an absolute creator—which it has gone through much agony to prove. It was a great achievement, of course, in that it spread the concept of the absolute throughout Europe. Contrasting sharply with Asia's tranquility, this agony can even be said to have built European civilization. Yet Europeans have been unable to prove the existence of God to those, like ourselves, who do not already have faith."

Western ex–believers in Christianity or Judaism who come to my Buddhist temple often say, "What difference do the details of religious doctrine make? Right in front of your eyes there are beautiful flowers blooming. The sun rises in the morning, there is a full moon once a month. There is a beautiful rhythm to the world. Isn't that enough? If you can enjoy such beauty, what does it matter who created the heavens and the earth?" I can't help thinking that this perspective is very close to the Eastern way of thinking, which is this: Looked at broadly, eastern and western religions are local religions. If one looks at the bigger, universal picture, at how precisely crafted is the flower by the road or the human body, one need not investigate who created them or other such details.

Eido Tai Shimano

The third characteristic of Judaism and Christianity is that the covenant between humankind and God permits the existence of humanity. This notion is very difficult for Japanese to comprehend, and seems even comical. In the U.S. and other western societies, and in today's Japan as well, individuals sign contracts with companies, and companies sign contracts with each other. Traced to its origins, this practice I believe stems from the covenant between God and humankind. But in Japan one need not sign contracts for every little thing. If I bring friends to a restaurant I know well, I can eat without paying then and there because we trust each other, and because my face is known. Of course, a first–time customer is not trusted in the same way and must settle the bill when he or she finishes. In this situation one may not notice any direct connection to religion. But in this story we can perceive the concepts of covenant between humankind and God, trust and faith.

Moses' Ten Commandments are a hierarchical contract between humankind and God. If one sticks to the contract inherent in "Thou shalt not kill," one believes in God. And to believe in God is to stick to that contract.

Next comes the problem of guilt and sin, and this is truly an enormous problem. If western religion had not taught sin and guilt, if westerners were not brainwashed since childhood to believe in those concepts, there would be only one tenth, even one hundredth the number of western psychiatrists there is today. There are many lawyers in the U.S., but had there been no covenant between God and humankind the number of lawyers might also be one tenth, or one hundredth, the current total. One could say that the covenant between God and humankind swelled the ranks of the lawyers, and that brainwashing people to believe in sin and guilt added to the preponderance of psychiatrists.

On this point, we Japanese people should be grateful for our Buddhist tolerance, or to put it in a bad light, our irresponsibility; we should be grateful for the flexibility that allows us to mix and match and swallow everything in a gulp. Right or wrong, the teachings of sin and guilt create a framework that divides the world into black and white. What is right defies definition. The problem is if you are taught you must do the right thing or else you will go to hell, and then you come to a Buddhist temple to sit in Zen meditation and eventually reach Buddhist enlightenment, you are still, as they say—as a boy, so the man. Once brainwashed, you are stuck with that heavy burden for the rest of your life.

I see this quite clearly among the many Americans who come to my monastery. They come from predominantly Judeo–Christian backgrounds. So I often think, for instance, a person who was brought up Catholic and is now a Buddhist may be called culturally Catholic and religiously Buddhist. The same can be said of the Japanese Christian community; they are culturally Buddhist but religiously Christian. This is an important thing to keep in mind as our business and cultural worlds become a global village.

Behind all of this, however, is the concept of total love and forgiveness. The idea is that people are no good, so we should forgive them, and by forgiving each other, we can be wrapped in God's great love and can be saved. Somehow, however, the God of the Old Testament, the God that created heaven and earth, impresses me as a God of wrath and harsh judgement. Many Japanese novelists since the Meiji Era have found themselves deeply affected by their brushes with Christianity. Among many such novelists were Shimazaki Toson, Arishima Takeo, more recently Akutagawa Ryunosuke, and after the war Dazai Osamu. They all eventually separated themselves from Christianity, perhaps because of this angry and judgmental God.

Looked at solely from the perspective of social service, the spreading of the Christian spirit through volunteerism and hospices is an axiomatic part of western society. It is a wonderful thing, reaching far beyond the limits of Japanese religion and religious activity. Looking at it, however, from a different angle, we can hardly rejoice that people carry out social service simply to alleviate their guilt. For the somewhat unsophisticated Japanese, this is what is so hard to understand about social service.

On Japanese religion

Well, then, what of Japanese religion? Above I use the words "disparate nature," and to be sure, there is a disparity between the nature of Japanese religion and western religion. I believe that this disparity cannot be captured by such phrases as cultural gap, for instance.

One characteristic of Japanese religion is a concern with life and death, the problem of mortality. As Zen master Dogen said, "To relinquish life, to relinquish death, is the highest Buddhist karma." These words express it with such simplicity. To relinquish means not to give up, but rather to clarify. What does it mean that I live, what does it mean that I die? What am I, where did I come from, where am I going? Such

questions, consciously or not, run deep within the Japanese psyche.

A sense of the evanescence of life also characterizes Japanese religion. I believe the sense of evanescence that runs through *The Tale of the Heike* and other works of literature is a religious consciousness possessed by all Japanese. The other day, I had a conversation with a visiting American who remarked, "I am a materialist. But I believe in the concept of transience. Whether I choose to believe or not, this is the incontrovertible truth."

I am reminded here that Americans often ask me to write the ideogram for dream. To them, dream connotes the American dream—the dream of success, becoming rich and enjoying life. But if a Japanese asked me to write the *kanji* for dream, he or she might be thinking of the American dream, but there is also something deeper, something different. As Oda Nobunaga put it, "The world is but an illusion." This notion, running through *The Tale of the Heike* and indeed all of Japanese literature, is at the foundation of Japanese culture. But what is interesting is that the Japanese see the Buddhist concept of transience as a positive concept, while for westerners, dream has, at times, a negative connotation. The American dream is itself nothing but illusion, although Americans think it is real. Americans think that dreams are real, Japanese on the contrary, regard reality as a dream—and I can't help but think that there lies the interesting relationship between Japanese and religion.

In Japanese religion—and this is true despite confusing trends in current Buddhism—the motivation is not to get something but to investigate the very existence of humanity, of all living creatures, of spirituality itself. We just happened to have been born as humans, a temporary form that lasts about 70 to 80 years, 100 at most, and sometimes considerably shorter. The four elements are earth, water, fire and air. Earth is the bones, skin, flesh—all the solid parts of the human body. Water stands for liquid and blood and the sea. Fire is body heat, and air is what we breathe in and out.

As most Japanese realize, Japanese religions generally include some notion of past lives, the present world, and a next life. Most westerners do not believe in past lives, but think that physically they are born in the here and now; when they die their soul goes to heaven or hell, their body becomes dust, and it is over. But everybody, not just physicists, studies the law of conservation of energy in school. And even physicists acknowledge that modern science tells us nothing about a whole range of questions, including how the law of conservation of energy came into existence, why energy exists, or what matter is. Western civilization, having come thus far with science, still thinks it can rely on science to solve everything. But little by little it has become apparent that there is something that cannot be touched by science—is this "something" not the essence of religion? Eastern religion is an investigation into that essence. Japanese people have begun to realize that their religious motivation is quite distinct from the one which guides western religion: the belief that human improvement and perfection can emerge from faith.

Western people are pragmatic. Any pursuit—whether of faith, aestheticism, or studies—is an investment. Having spent precious time and energy, you expect some reward. In religion, for instance, you will want your ticket to heaven validated, or you will want to become a perfect, wonderful person respected by all.

As I said above, human existence is like a bubble—when the bubble bursts, it returns to the water. When we are in the bubble it is hard to see the water. In the bubble is ego, desire; we think the bubble is reality, and even if we understand its transience on an intellectual level we still find it hard to grasp. But as you practice religious austerity and develop your karma, you suddenly "get it." "It" is something that cannot be put into words, but that corresponds to the reality in Zen master Daio's words, "There is a reality even prior to heaven and earth. Indeed, it has no form, much less a name." Once you have realized that this reality, which has no form or name, is your true essence, you find peace. You are afraid of nothing, not even death, and you are able to work with humility for the world and humanity.

To me this is the ideal religion. And it does exist in Japan, but somehow most Japanese now have the illusion that religion equals prayer and ceremony—funerals and memorial services, weddings and shrine-going. Religion includes ceremony, but there is also something more fundamental. In today's Japan, however, the big problem is how to deal with real evil, as when a murderous religious group like Aum Shinrikyo is recognized as a religion.

So, if we look at asceticism and

Narita Shinshoji Temple's Kanretsu *ceremony. Priests walk in a line through throngs of visitors more than five times daily.*

enlightenment, we see that only a limited number of Japanese actually practice religious asceticism. An even smaller number may have reached enlightenment. But it is not the number that counts, but the fact that the tradition still persists as a part of Japanese religion at the end of the 20th century.

I think that Japan is a very religious country. But in the latter half of the 20th century, Japanese people do not recognize how religious they are. And from this side of the Pacific, it appears that Japanese tend to see it as fashionable to say they have no religion or to call themselves atheists. As we move into the 21st century, it will be of great importance for the Japanese to wake up to their rich religious heritage without worrying about what part of that heritage goes into which religious category.

I have a story that expresses this perfectly. Some 30–odd years ago, when I was at the University of Hawaii, I attended an East–West Philosophers Conference. Daisetz T. Suzuki also attended, and I had the opportunity to assist him for two or three days. At one meeting, an American asked him, "What is your religion?" The person asking the question of course knew that Suzuki was an authority on Zen, an authority on Jodo Shinshu, and that he knew a lot about western religions. Suzuki's reply went something like this: "To realize my original nature and to do good is my religion." His religion is thus to discern clearly and distinctly the nature of his existence, even though that existence is but a fleeting fantasy; during the momentary lifespan of 70–80 years, he will do as much good as possible. I had just arrived in the U.S. at that time, but those words were burned indelibly into my memory and stay with me even now.

Japanese religion in everyday life and language

A discussion of Japanese and religion might include ancestor worship or shamanism, but it must include the concept of *jocho*. While not an aesthetic practice like Zen meditation, to perform morning prayers before the Buddhist altar is a kind of religious practice, and creates a certain state of emotion called jocho. A person totally immersed in the world of jocho has a hard time understanding it, just as a fish is not aware of the water in which it is swimming. But to the person living in the desert, an oasis takes on vital importance.

There is no word in English that corresponds exactly to jocho, but if you tried to define it, it is the state of emotion attained when there is no distinction between yourself and others, nothing to separate yourself and Buddha or God, and no sense of time. It therefore cannot be understood within the Christian or Jewish framework, in which time and space are there from the beginning.

The Japanese have long tended to categorize religion into two types: those that depend on a "power within," that is, salvation in these religions comes from within the believer; and those that depend on an "external power" for such salvation. Superficially, Zen falls into the former category, while Jodo Shinshu Buddhism and Christianity, in the broad sense, fall into the latter. But, as we can clearly see from the above example of what is called jocho, this system of categorization is a very superficial one. The idea of a dualism between "within" and "without" is itself suspect. Still, "absolute external power" is a religious expression that comes up quite often in Japanese.

In Japanese, one can say one is "being allowed to live" (*ikasareteiru*), a very different concept than saying one is "alive" (*ikiteiru*). This concept is a very good example of the Japanese attitude toward religion. In the West, people take the line that they are alive; Asian people, particularly Japanese, retain a feeling of gratitude that they are being allowed to live. This feeling of respect for an invisible something prompts them to refer to all things as "being allowed to live." It is in this way that Japanese people subconsciously reveal their religiousness.

Another expression is *okagesamade*, meaning thanks to you (somebody/something). Asked "How are you?" (literally, "Are you healthy?"), people often will say "Yes, thanks to (you/somebody/something)." The phrase is very difficult to translate. The expression originates from the word *kage*, meaning shadow; this is also the same character used for the shady "yin" of yin and yang. Literally, then, okagesama (kage is sandwiched between two honorifics, *o* and *sama*) is an expression of appreciation for the shadow. Shadow exists only because of light; the appearance of a shadow proves the existence of a solid object behind it. Okagesamade implies gratitude to the shadow, and to the something whose shadow it is. Here again one can discern a religious aspect to the expression.

Yet another example is the phrase *mottainai* (how wasteful). This expression is used in all sorts of situations: doing something futile is mottainai, using water in a wasteful manner inspires the same comment. Again, the meaning is hard to capture in English. Perhaps originally an admonition not to waste any of the invisible "something" for which Japanese people feel respect, the phrase at some point came into everyday use. As far as I can tell, however, all three of these phrases—ikasareteiru, okagesama, and mottainai—are becoming obsolete. They are not, I believe, used as often as they used to be.

I keep saying "religion" or "religiousness;" but, I sense that the word religion is linguistically different from the Japanese word, *shukyo*, that it is being used in translation. The *shu* in shukyo means "fundamental," while the *kyo* means "teaching"; shukyo, then, means fundamental teaching. The nuance of the word religion in English is quite different. Fundamental teaching encompasses transiency and impermanency: these concepts are universal, all things are transient. In any place, in any time, even without the advent of Buddha, or Christ, this is the fundamental reality. Buddhism, in other words, has simply picked up reality as one form of teaching.

Many people seem to feel that religion—fundamental teaching—has no direct connection to their lives. Some

people have no qualms about living without religion; some even think that religion is nothing more than superstition. Even worse, there are those that believe religion is an opiate of the people. These people, surely, have no understanding of how religion works in our everyday lives, the necessary role it plays. In our everyday lives, everybody knows about intelligence; everyone knows what sense and sensibility are. But few are tuned into the world of spirituality. Most are convinced that the spiritual world is an unreal, ideal, imaginary world, the purview of poets, idealists, or the particularly devout; they think that the average company man has only intelligence and sense, and has need of nothing else. But the human being is not an animal that can live by intelligence, sense, and flesh alone.

When a person, for instance, with good health, intelligence and sense is overcome by a feeling that something is missing, this is precisely because he or she is not experiencing any spiritual intuition. To put it more concretely, people worry in a variety of ways about feeling hollow, of having actually lost something. I believe that this is a psychological condition, a subconscious longing for the authenticity of the spiritual world. I don't want to exaggerate, but as this condition becomes stronger it turns into a feeling of respect for something that has power beyond that of human beings. This is the first step toward religion. There is nothing wrong per se about the concepts of a power within and an external power, as I noted above. But rather than sit *zazen* and suffer leg pain, most people would choose the world of *Namu Amida Butsu*—the Buddhist chant by which one can, simply by chanting, achieve a world in which spirituality, the intellect and sensibility are unified—and wholehearted belief in Amida Butsu. Or, in Christianity, they would be moved to believe in God and Jesus Christ.

It may seem strange to say, but when people are young, they don't really feel that they are being allowed to live, and they tend to believe the power is within. As they get older, the feeling grows on them that every flower, every fruit on the branch of a plum tree, is connected to the spiritual world, and they are driven to the conclusion that the universe is a myriad of manifestations of a single essence. With this realization, people reach *anjin*—true peace, true rest.

Most Japanese families probably still say "*itadakimasu*" before a meal and "*gochisosama deshita*" after; leaving the house family members say "*ittekimasu*" and expect the answer "*itterasshai*;" returning home, they say "*tadaima*," to which the response is "*okaerinasai*." These greetings emerge almost unconsciously. They are part of neither the world of intelligence nor that of sensibility. These are instances in which the spiritual world makes simple appearances in everyday life; everyday life is thus imbued with a kind of religiousness that goes beyond Buddhism or Christianity or Judaism.

In other words, the world of absolute external power and the world of absolute internal power are but a single spiritual world. One may still think that spirituality is removed from everyday life; but I offer another example of a word, a spiritual expression, that is used in everyday life.

This word/ideogram is *ki* (mind, spirit, soul, essence). This word is probably used more in everyday Japanese than in any other language, and people hardly pay it any mind. The other day when I was in Tokyo, I took a cab. "Good weather today, isn't it," the driver says (in Japanese, weather [*tenki*] is written as spirit [ki] of the heavens [*ten*]). I reply "Yes, it is good weather." After a while, the driver asks "Where did you come from?" to which I reply, "New York." For his next query, "How are business conditions in the U.S.?" he again uses the character ki, this time in the word for business conditions (*keiki*). "Recently they've seemed to be very good," I say. A little later, the driver asks, "How long does it take from New York to Tokyo." I reply, "Airport to airport, about 13 hours." "Wow, that must be hard. For that much traveling, you look very healthy." Ki yet again: this time in the word for healthy (*genki*). In this inconsequential exchange, which could have taken place anywhere, ki came up three times: in tenki (weather), keiki (business conditions) and genki (healthy).

In Japanese there are over 300 words that use the ideogram for ki. A good friend has a compatible spirit (*ki no atta tomodachi*); *ki ni kuwanai* is something that gets on your nerves; *yoki* means cheerful while *inki* means melancholic; if your ki is getting far away (*ki ga tokunaru*) you are being overwhelmed, or, when you become aware (of something), it is expressed as *ki ga tsuku . . .* and so on. The spiritual word ki is thus used in everyday conversation, to give expression to something spiritual, larger than ourselves, that we sense on a subconscious level. People of all religions, and of no religion, say they "feel good/bad (*kibun ga ii/warui*)," or exclaim, "What a good feeling (*aa, ii kimochi da*)." In this way they live in the spiritual world, which in turn feeds their intellect and their sensibility.

In recent years *Aikido* and *Kiko* and *Reiki* have come into fairly common use in Europe and the U.S., and increasing numbers of people are practicing these techniques and using them for healing. Their minds have opened up to ki. I believe that in today's world people are beginning to open their minds to the fundamental ki that is behind intelligence and sense, to see that ki goes beyond race, era, sex, age; even animals and plants have ki.

Although people say they cannot see beyond the end of this century, it seems to me that the coming century will be the century of ki. I am convinced that when people learn to connect ki to ki, when people can truly let animals and flowers "into their spirits" (*ki ni iru*; colloquially meaning to like), when such an exchange of ki is possible, we will have reached a state of peace, anjin, the like of which we have never before known.

Eido Tai Shimano has been the Abbot of The Zen Studies Society since 1965. He is currently residing at Dai Bosatsu Zendo, the mountain monastery of The Zen Studies Society and commutes to New York Zendo Shoboji Temple in Manhattan. In addition, he conducts retreats and lectures in Europe and Japan.