KING'S THEOLOGICAL REVIEW

Volume V Number 1 Spring 1982

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RELIGION AND REASON IN THE JAPANESE EXPERIENCE

Michael Pye

The phrase 'religion and reason' trips off the tongue easily enough in English, and to those engaged in the history of ideas it conjures up centuries of intellectual warfare. Indeed the history of western religious thought from the time of the early Christian Apologists onwards can more or less be written in terms of endless variations on the relation between faith and reason. There is no precise analogy in East Asia to this fundamental pattern of western thought. This becomes rapidly clear when one speaks with Japanese students about elementary features of western Christian systematic theology. For example, to discuss the relationship between natural and revealed theology it is necessary first of all to explain the presupposition of two independent sources of knowledge. Needless to say, a good account of the matter might provide a highly integrated view of the relation between these, but then, that would mean moving towards a solution of a problem which, to the Japanese students, had not appeared to be one.

Does this difference of presupposition occur because the Japaneseare neither religious nor reasonable? Many would claim that Japanese society today is mainly and intrinsically non-religious, or secular. It seems to them to represent the ultimate triumph of de-religionised economic rationality. Others note a marked tendency to the sentimental, the romantic, the existentialist, or the theatrical. However both these emphases fall somehow wide. Whether or not Japan is a secularised society turns on a series of difficult definitions but the brief comment on this question must be that many millions of Japanese people engage in religious observance of various kinds, even though they may lack a strong intellectual commitment to a particular religious viewpoint. One has only to think of New Year's visits to religious places, which in various mutations take place right up to mid-February because of the persistence of the old calendar's New Year. I am thinking here mainly of visits to Shinto shrines, but larger Buddhist temples also attract a significant crowd on the **ennichi** or karma-day, and in January this is invested with a significance not much different from that of a New Year shrine visit. The great Shingon temple at Kawasaki, for example, which is half-way between Tokyo and Yokohama, attracts a massive crowd on the January day in memory of Kōbō Daishi, the founder, (the day being known in Japanese as **Hatsu Daishi**, and thus reminiscent of the shrine concept of first visit or **hatsumōde**). Or again, one person in six belongs to a religious movement of some kind which has been recently started and which thus entails a more or less distinct invidivual stance. As to the place of the apparently arbitrary dramatic gesture, of which the prominent example is **harakiri**, this takes its force through being the negation of, or the only remaining alternative to, what is required as normal activity, namely playing one's part in a rationalised political, economic or other social structure. This comment may serve as a reminder of the various levels of meaning carried by reason, rationality and related terms, for I am speaking here of an organisational rationale as in Weberian usage. At this level one might indeed say that much of Japanese experience has been based on the interaction between socio-political reason and the creative or despairing acts of individuals who have stumbled against irrational points in successive systems.

As with the question of secularisation, agonising over tortuous definitions of terms such as rationalisation will be eschewed. However, an understanding of the paradoxical Japan of today which displays a high level of economic efficiency but a low level of international rapport, does depend on recognising the role both of rationalisation in a social sense and of the project of human reason in an intellectual sense. Both of these are intimately connected with the place of religion. I hope to shed some light on these interlocking matters by referring to three main areas of Japanese experience. I also hope that they will provide sufficient explanatory context for the terminology which is used in the process. These three main areas are firstly, a form of Buddhist experience which I call Japanese Buddhist immediacy; secondly, Neo-Confucian rationalism, especially as applied to religion; and thirdly irrationalism in contemporary Japanese value systems.

The word 'immediacy' may need some introduction. When thinking about this lecture I was at first inclined to speak at this point about intuitionism, for intuition, in our language, may easily be contrasted with sustained reason. However it occurred to me that this might lead to some confusion with the so-called idea of intuitive knowledge associated with Nakae Tōju and derived from the Chinese Neo-Confucian Wang Yang-ming.[1] By 'immediacy' I mean in part, a lack of dependence on sustained reason, but also the expectation of radical religious transformation in present or shortly forthcoming experience. Japanese Buddhist immediacy has impinged particularly on the western world by way of the writings of Suzuki Daisetsu and other exponents of Zen, who have argued that Zen Buddhists are free from the distorting effects of the discriminatory intellect typical of the west and are able to discern their own Buddha-nature without dependence on discursive reason. The Zen Buddhists draw of course upon China, especially the suddenist school, and India, but they also belong to a wider family of thinkers in Japanese Buddhism, which goes back at least as far as Kūkai (or Kōbō Daishi) who lived from 774 to 835. Kūkai, the Pure Land leaders Hōnen and Shinran, the Lotus Sutra devotee Nichiren, or the Zen master Dōgen, are but the most outstanding examples of a creative Japanese Buddhist piety which has one thing in common. This is that it seeks to cut through the plodding efforts of physical and mental discipline and to lay hold of immediate spiritual transformation. They all saw the crucial events in religious consciousness as taking place, not on some distant heights yet to be scaled, but now, in this existence. Kukai's slogan was 'attaining Buddhahood in this very body' (**sokushinjōbutsu**). Hōnen and Shinran abandoned self-reliant, progressive practice and relied instead on the great compassionate vow of Amida Buddha to carry them through, in one act of deliverance, to the Pure Realm and thence to nirvana. Nichiren expectantly sought a socio-political transformation in his own real life-time, and although this did not materialise he went on the proclaim the immediately effective power of a physical manifestation of the Lotus Sutra in mandala form. Dogen declared that to practice **zazen** is to experience Buddhahood now. Of course there are many differences between all of these, but what they have in common is a radical displacement of ordinary experience, and this by a wisdom not attained through argumentative dialogues, chronicles or commentaries, which have been the three main seed-beds of rationalism in East Asia. They demanded a discontinuity with the accepted systems of moral and mental effort.

Now it is true that the world of Kūkai's Shingon Buddhism was a magical world, at least for his followers, and this magical world was left largely intact by Nichiren. The calling on Amida Buddha also was practised in a magical way, as has been well described by Hori Ichirō.[2] It was however in the context of this Buddhist immediacy that the disentangling of religion from magic began. This new phase was ushered in by the radicalisation and purification of the reliance on Amida Buddha by Hōnen and then further by Shinran. It was significantly paralleled by Dogen's rejection of practices other than **zazen** as unnecessary. With these moves

the ordinary world was demagicised and left as a more or less plain place, to be understood and in the long run manipulated. The sociological importance of this has been rightly stated by Robert Bellah in his fine work **Tokugawa Religion** (1957) where he writes as follows:

> 'Whereas traditionalistic religion may give a blanket sanction to myriads of discrete customs and thus help to slow or prevent any social change, salvation religions may, by depriving these discrete customs of any sacred character (in Weber's phrase, "freeing the world of magic")and substituting instead certain general non-situational maxims of ethical action, lead to a rationalization of behaviour which can have important effects far beyond the sphere of religion itself.'[3]

While Bellah was right to go on to point out that most forms of religion in Japan have elements of rationalization **and** of magic, nevertheless it seems clear that Pure Land Buddhism and Zen Buddhism took the lead in the process of disenchantment. They did so from within the spiritual matrix of Buddhist immediacy which emphasised the disjunction between ordinary mental work and Buddhist attainment or transformation, between scholastic Buddhist reason and vital religion.

Between mediaeval and modern Japan however there lies a second significant phase. This is marked in a broad manner by the Neo-Confucian moralism which was studied by Bellah with special reference to the Shingaku movement associated with Ishida Baigan. This socially useful moralism fitted easily with the type of Buddhist spirituality already described, and it was accepted in the long run by samurai and merchant alike. The intermediate phase is more sharply marked however by a rationalist and historicist critique of religion which was carried through in the eighteenth century, by Tominaga Nakamoto.

During the Tokugawa Period, running from 1600 to 1868, thinking was a serious pursuit in Japan. The seminal importance of this period for the later accelerated modernisation of Japan is nowadays increasingly recognised. It was a period in which civil wars were no longer the order of the day and in which the functionless samurai were increasingly challenged in social importance by the ever more successful merchant class. Increasingly people of merchant background shared in scholarly pursuits and they displayed an independence of mind not dissimilar to that of the European bourgeoisie. It is not surprising that ideas should have surfaced in that context which are analogous to those of the European Enlightenment.

Tominaga Nakamoto was the son of a prosperous soya-sauce manufacturer resident in Osaka, and seems to have been an omnivorous pupil at a private educational establishment. It is recorded that he was compelled to leave the school when he compiled an unduly critical survey of Confucianist teachings, which is now lost to us. Of his various writings there now remain two relevant to the present subject. One is a short piece entitled Writings of an Old Man **(Okina no fumi)**, of which an English translation was published by Kato Shuichi in **Monumenta Nipponica** in 1967. This contains trenchant criticisms of Bucchism, Confucianism and Shinto and argues that they should be replaced by practical morals relevant to the time. The other extant writing is a longer, densely written work which examines the problem of the origins and development of Buddhism in a spirit of historical criticism. Of this work, entitled **Shutsujōkōgo,** there is not yet any published English translation.[5]

The fundamental point about Tominga's attitude to the religions which he knew is that he was not satisfied with reforming one or other of them, or even interested in reformation, but rather sought to explain them all in terms of their historical development. In this sense Tominaga was modern. He did not write from the point of view of some one religious authority. He did try to explain why religious authorities arose. In Chapter IX of **Writings of an Old Man** he wrote:

> 'Since ancient times it has generally been the case that those who preach a moral way and establish a law of life have had somebody whom they have held up as an authoritative precursor, while at the same time they have tried to emerge above those who went before. Later generations however, being unaware of this regular practice, are quite confused by it.'[6]

Thus as far as Confucianism was concerned Tominaga was at pains to argue that Confucius was not an ultimate **fons et origo** for final truth. The trend of the time was to argue away from Neo-Confucian interpretations to the basis of Confucian tradition. Thus Itō Jinsai stressed the purity of Mencius' thought as an early exponent of Confucianism, while Ogyū Sorai criticised even Mencius in favour of Confucius himself. These arguments were essentially reformist appeals to the origins of Confucian tradition. Tominaga however pointed out the Confucius' own teaching represented a choice between kings Wen and Wu on the one hand and what he called 'the way of the five nobles' on the other hand.[7] Thus Confucius was himself a thinker among thinkers and not some absolute reference point different in kind from all the others.

As to Buddhism, Tominaga argued at length in the **Shutsujōkōgo** that the whole tissue of Mahayana doctrine was a collection of individual viewpoints, each selectively emphasising some aspect or other simply to go one better than previous schools, and then coming up with misleading attempts to maintain consistency. It was Tominaga who declared for the first time that the Buddha was not the author of the Mahayana scriptures as Chinese and Japanese Buddhists until then had piously assumed. Thus this splendidly pernicious idea was not first introduced into Japan by the pupils of the European Max Müller in the nineteenth century as is often supposed. Not only that, Tominaga argued that the Buddha himself was one teacher among others. His account opens with the remark, 'If we consider the sequence in which Buddhism arose we see that in effect it began among the heresies.'[8] It was one teaching, he argued, among about ninety-six different ones which all claimed to take one along the way to heaven. Tominaga did not disenchant by sleight of doctrine but by straightforward scornful scepticism with respect to religious authorities. He went on to argue in detail about how the Buddha's disciples built up the system in different ways, each adding his own emphasis while claiming a direct authenticity and superior insight.

Tominaga was not merely pouring scorn on the received assumptions of religious piety; he was also putting forward a general theory about how it is that religion develops and changes. This theory may be summed up in his word **kajō,** which means literally 'adding and going above', or in plain English 'superseding'. It must be clearly recognised that Tominaga's was not just a reformist rebellion against distortions of religion which have intervened between ourselves and the perfect origins of faith. Admittedly he saw the three historic 'ways' of which he was aware, as assenting to and to some degree transmitting what he called 'the way of

ways'. The famous originators such as Confucius and the Buddha however are seen by him as part and parcel of the same process of construction to which all religious leaders contribute. Such a view belongs to modern, historicist rationalism.

The existence of Tominaga's work is important in that it demonstrates that the human mind is liable, universally, to arrive at a historically orientated critique of religion which dispenses with dogmatic norms. It is commonly held in the western world that such a basis for evaluating religious traditions was an exclusively western development with its roots in the period of the Enlightenment or **Aufklärung**. This is not the case. It is also commonly held that to apply such allegedly European views about religion to the traditions of the east is thoroughly inappropriate, in that it involves the imposition of alien modes of thought upon them. Examination of Tominaga's arguments delivers the **coup de grâce** to such arguments because it shows that such modes of thought also spring from within the intellectual tradition of Japan. Paradoxically, it is precisely because Tominaga's work falls entirely within the history of Japanese thought that it has a universal significance. This point was entirely overlooked by Katō Shuichi who bewailed Tominaga's lack of contact with western thinkers as a matter of great regret.

The combined forces of political conformity and popular piety meted out a terrible pubishment on Tominaga's ideas. Of the ten works which he is thought to have written before his death through illness at the age of thirty-one, only four have survived, and two of these are innocuous. Though he certainly helped to fuel the intellectual controversies raging through the Tokugawa Period when Japan was officially closed, he eventually suffered eclipse and his work was all but forgotten in the later rush to come to terms with the west.

This brings me to the third main area which I wish to consider, albeit more briefly and here, in a sense, we go backwards again. The modern fascination of Japanese life and culture for the observer derives in large part from the wholesale persistence of irrationalism. In spite of Japan's victorious modernisation the world of religious enchantment remains, both in large areas of Buddhist observance and also in the world of Shinto ritual which affects the consciousness of most Japanese people to some extent. Between Buddhism and Shinto there is a major continuity of assumptions in two regards. Firstly, the living and the dead are felt to stand in a mutual relationship of responsibility. It hardly matters whether the dead are regarded as **hotoke** (buddhas) or **kami** (gods). Secondly religious observance is widely believed to have a direct effect on personal well-being, as can easily be perceived by visits to the larger Shinto shrines and Shingon or other Buddhist temples. Admittedly, such observance may consist of little more than writing one's heartfelt wish on a tablet, costing about a pound, and hanging it up in the shrine or temple compound. People pray for cures, they pray for success in scholarship and examinations, they pray for romantic love to be requited, they pray for prosperity in business and the well-being of their home. Here a myriad individual actions link a myriad aspirations and prayers to at least ten thousand gods.

The realm of uncriticised enchantment extends however beyond explicit religion to a much more widely based life-style ruled by consumerism and the media. Commercial and social life are dominated by the rotation of the year which, though rooted in natural phenomena, is itself reinforced by almost all the organs of image-creation . During a recent stay in Japan I recall a television announcer informing us solemnly that autumn had come followed by the camera anxiously searching the hill-sides for a tree with a few reddening leaves. At New Year I also recall seeing the sun rise early in the morning of January 1st, on a mountain top, and one of the policemen restraining the crowds from danger complaining that the sunrise was ten minutes late! This inescapable mood of calendricity calls on most of society to take part in a wide range of actions which might not otherwise have resulted from the mere rational choice of individuals. These actions include journeys of homage and report, seasonal present-giving on a massively wasteful scale, semi-ritualised parties, and a string of holidays and festivals which hover uncertainly between the civil and the religious. This inescapable pattern of annual activity is understood to belong to Japan itself, Japan in this sense being not just a geographical location but a divinely endowed world complete in itself, in spite of the post-war disestablishment of the relevant mythology. This Japan is understood, to borrow the sociological term, particularistically, in that the events which make up its continuous celebration require no external validation, no basis in universal reason, and no critical attention. The same may be said for each and every Shinto festival, or in Japanese, **matsuri**. The **matsuri** provides a compelling fusion of the enchanted world and social reality which allows of no intellectual questioning. The **matsuri** is also a microcosmic integration of the whole of Japanese society, as is evident from the close interwovenness of local and national symbols.

What does this state of affairs mean for our overall understanding of religion and reason in the Japanese experience? The picture which I have tried to sketch out shows a remarkable diversity of intellectual styles. It includes a Buddhist call to immediacy of religious transformation, which implies a rejection of sustained ethical or rational effort. In some cases this led to the recognition of a post-salvation world of order and harmony open to reasoned attention and sincerely organised work, a world free from the claims of polytheist animism. To this was added the dry moralism of Neo-Confucian self-discipline, and a sustained effort of reasoned enquiry in the Tokugawa Period which included a very modern-looking, historically critical theory of religious tradition. At the same time it is striking that even while scientific and other forms of reasoned enquiry have become common-place, non-rational religion persists strongly in modern Japan. It does not matter that religious thought has itself contributed to economic and political rationalisation. The use of Shinto mythology in the nineteenth century and the first part of the twentieth shows that religion can contribute mightily to particularist political rationalisation while being irrational in itself. It seems that the highly rationalised industrial sector of today's Japan, which is based on science, technology and work-study of the highest standard, continues to be in principle subordinated to the politically and religiously defined social being of Japan. If so, this would mean that Japan's apparently highly rationalised economic strategies in the world at large might under pressure give way to non-rational political action reinforced by the value-assumptions of the ever-enchanted masses. On the other hand, it is less widely recognised, but we may hope in the long run more important, that in the eighteenth century historicist critique of religion there peaked a much needed opening, from within the Japanese mind, to the universal experience of reason.

1. For essential information on these and other thinkers mentioned below see R. Tsunoda (ed.) *Sources of Japanese Tradition* New York and London, 1958.

2. I. Hori, *Folk Religion in Japan*, Chicago and London 1968, especially Chapter III.

3. R. Bellah, *Tokugawa Religion*, New York and London 1957, p.8.

4. S. Katō, 'The life and thought of Tominaga Nakamoto, 1715-46, a Tokugawa iconoclast' in *Monumenta Nipponica* XII, 1-2 Jan. 1967 pp. 1-35.

5. Critical edition edited by H. Nakamura, in *Gendai Bukkyō Meicho Zenshu I Bukkyō No Shomondai*, Tokyo 1971. An English translation of Tominaga's work by the present writer is currently in progress.

6. Japanese text in Y. Nakamura (ed.) *Nihon No Shiso* 18, Tokyo 1971, p. 160.

7. Section XI, *Ibid.* p. 165.

8. H. Nakamura, *op.cit.* p. 4, cf. p. 76.

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