

The Religions of Japan (Sadasad Vikaram Na Sahate)

by Anonymous

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MUCH interesting and new matter concerning the religious tenets of Japan comes to us from two sources; from a letter written by a Fellow of the Theosophical Society from Miako, and from a paper recently read before a meeting of the Imperial Geographical Society of St. Petersburg by a Russian missionary, a resident of Japan of many years' standing. According to the latter, had we to judge of the intensity of the religious feeling in a nation by the number of its temples and religious monuments, then would the Japanese have to be regarded by the Europeans as the most pious people on the face of the globe. And, seeing that several great and entirely disagreeing religions, each of them divided into many diverging [Page 19] sects, exist openly and freely in the Empire, not only tolerated but strongly protected by the latter, we cannot but regard the Japanese as an exceedingly free-minded, liberal people. There is no hostility between the different forms of religions; and invariably the Sintonite, the Confucian, and the Buddhist profess the same respect for the creed of their neighbours as for their own — at least, outwardly. They differ in modes, but agree in essentials — the difference in their point of view never serving one of them as a pretext to condemn the others. It is unjust, therefore, as some writers do, to lay the blame at the door of the Japanese for the terrible religious persecutions to which the Christians were subjected in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. These persecutions were entirely due to the intrigues of the ever-plotting Jesuits. When, in 1549, Japan was visited by the "Apostle of the Indies", the famous St. Francis Xavier, whose great eloquence led him to convert even three sovereign princes — (who apostatised afterwards) — and nearly 7,000 Japanese, the authorities of the State remained indifferent to the spread of the new doctrine, so long as the public tranquility was not disturbed. When petitioned to prohibit the new faith, the Emperor Nobunangua is said to have inquired of the native *kanusi* (Sinto priests or spiritual teachers) how many different creeds there were in Japan; and when answered that there were thirty-five, he remarked: "Where thirty-five religions are tolerated we can easily bear with thirty-six. Leave the foreigners in peace." In the days of those persecutions the Protestant Dutch were left unmolested, and the whole wrath of the Government was directed against the Roman Catholics, who began to be suspected of evil doings against the State as early as the last quarter of the sixteenth century, in 1580. Taiko Sama having once asked a Spaniard: "How is it that your king has managed to conquer half of the world?" it was boastfully but very imprudently answered: "*He sends priests to win the people; his troops are sent to join the native Christians, and the conquest is easy*." This answer was never forgotten, and seven years later the first edict for the banishment of some missionaries was the result. But it was brought on by the fault of the Christians and the incessant instigations of the missionaries, who, instead of taking measures to pacify the Government, defied it, and began to overthrow idols, ruin places of worship, and pull down the Japanese temples. This led to dreadful reprisals, native converts being put to death, with twenty-three European missionaries, their schools and churches destroyed, and Portuguese traders no longer allowed free access to the country. ...'

After stating so much, the lecturer passed to the examination of the three principal religions of Japan. The most important one, according to Father Anatolig, is that embraced by the best educated and highest classes — Confucianism, imported into the country in the middle of the sixth [Page 20] century from China, together with the written language. Buddhism, however, is the most popular creed. It is professed, without any exception, by all the ladies of the highest society, even by those belonging to the Imperial family, as well as by most of the women of the middle and lower classes, while the male population is more inclined towards the religions of Sinto, Confucius, and Lao-Tye. To convert any of the followers of the great Chinese philosophers to Christianity is next to impossible, the most zealous attempts in that direction having hitherto sadly failed. Next to Buddhism and Confucianism stands in importance the doctrine of Sinto, having, like the two others, its origin in China. In 872 A.D., after a difficult struggle with popular Buddhism, it was embraced by the Imperial family and proclaimed as a State religion. This creed, professed by the entire body of officials and Government servants, is based upon the legends of historic personages, now become deified heroes. Strictly speaking, Sintoism is no religion, but rather a system strongly upheld by the State, as it consists in the worship of the Emperors, who are included in the number of heroes, and thus receive divine honours. It is the sincere opinion of Father Anatolig that it is useless for Christianity to wrestle in Japan with Buddhism, Confucianism, and especially Sintoism, as neither the philosophy of the two former, nor the sense of security for the reigning dynasties, involved in, and dependent upon the latter creed, are likely to yield to a system whose first requisite is blind faith. The only means left to the Christian missionary is to establish as many schools as possible, "wherein he could imperceptibly infiltrate the teaching of Christ, *thus implanting it among the less intellectually-developed masses of the people*".

The method is not new, and is now proven to be the only effectual one in so-called "heathen" countries. It is but the most grossly ignorant and the poorest in non-Christian nations that are generally caught with this bait. But what are we to think of the intrinsic merit of a religion whose *divine truths* are able to "come home" but "to the least intellectually developed" classes of a nation — a religion, as its representatives themselves confess, which is utterly powerless to impress itself on the more educated and philosophic minds? . . . Verily, "blessed are *the poor in spirit*, for theirs (*i.e.*, the ignorant, the uneducated, the superstitious, and the simple-minded) is the (Christian) kingdom of Heaven!". Sincerity and open-heartedness being the most rare virtues among the padris, we feel really thankful to Father Anatolig for his unequivocal confession, and will now turn to hear what our other informant says of the religions of Japan.

As in all the oldest nations, we find in Japan, as its most ancient religion — Sun-worship. Nor are the Elements forgotten, as those are the abodes of all the "minor gods or spirits" — namely, the Powers or Forces of Nature. The Sun still receives deific honours; and its emblem has [Page 21] fully survived in the Sinto temples, called Maya, [Divine residence. Hence the name of the ecclesiastical metropolis Myako, the abode of the Spiritual Emperor] where no idols or images are to be found, save a bright mirror in the shape of a disc, before which are placed high metallic poles, with long and broad slips of paper attached to them, and mysterious inscriptions on these, traced in the *Nai-den* style, that peculiar sacerdotal written language used only for religious and mystical subjects. Strange to think, the Japanese practise in reference to Sun-worship that curious ceremony so well known in India under the name of the *aswamedha*, or sacrifice of the horse. Anciently the horse was considered by every nation an emblem of the primeval and universal manifested being, who, when identified with the Sun, had the horse given him as his attendant.

"The horses of the Sun" are famous, and were deified in all the old religious systems, even in the youngest of the latter — the Mosaic, or Jewish creed. [And he (Josiah) took away the horses that the Kings of Judah had given to the Sun, at the entering of the House of the Lord. (2 Kings, xxiii. II)] Every Sun-God has a horse (always white) associated with him. Sosiosh, born of a virgin, is expected to appear at the end of the days upon a white horse as Redeemer, says the book *Bun Dehesh*. Vishnu, or the "Kalanki Avatar", is to come upon a white horse; and St. John, in the Revelation (xix., 11, 14), sees the heavens opened and the "Faithful and True", or the coming Christian Messiah, seated on a *white horse*; and the "armies which were in heaven followed him upon *white horses*". The white horse is the horse of the Sun; and Mithra, the old Medo-Arian Sun-God, reappears everywhere. ["The Manicheans held that the Sun, who is Mithra, is Christ himself," says St. Augustine (cap 8) who had belonged to that sect] For the Sun is the fiery source of Spirit-power or Spirit of LIFE, while the chariot typifies the body, and the horse its animating principle. And thus in Japan Ten-Zio-Dai-Zen, "he who darts out his rays" is presented with its emblem, the horse, at its Temple on certain festive days. A number of sacred horses in pictures and horses cut out of paper with sacred inscriptions on them are hung on the walls.

"This Sinto religion", then, is not mere hero-worship, but the Sun and Spirit-worship rather, when viewed in its popular presentation, and something else when considered esoterically. The Sun and the elements are called the *Dia-Zin*, or "Great Spirits", the inferior ones consisting chiefly of deified heroes, or historical personages canonized for some great deeds. Fatsman, the sixteenth Emperor of Japan, is the God of War, yet the *Kanusu* or spiritual *gurus* — the priests attached to the Sinto temples — are, in fact, no priests at all; for they are neither ordained nor have they any special privileges, but are very learned men belong to the highest class of [Page 22] society and respected above all others. When pressed to give an explanation of their religion, they evade the question by answering that it is *no religion at all*, but simply a system, a philosophy based on the mysterious intercourse between the world of the worshippers and their spiritual chief. That spiritual Emperor, or Dairi, whose title is better known as that of the Mikado, is the embodiment of the idea of an absolute, divinely inspired sovereign, whose office is very similar to that of the Dalai-Lama of Tibet. Contrary to the statement of the Russian missionary, Buddhism is so mixed up with Sinto doctrines that many of the images of *Niu Rai*, or Amita (the Japanese names of Gautama Buddha) are to be found in Sinto temples, for the Sintonites regard Amita, they say, as the "chief hero", or the spiritual head of the great army of *deceased* heroes, who were all mystics and whom they are said to worship.

As intimately connected with Buddhism are the doctrines of Lao-Tye, the most mystical and spiritual of all. Their followers are called the *Yamabusu*, or the "Hermit-Brothers". Says an overwise encyclopaedia: "They pretend to magical art, and live in the recesses of mountains and craggy steeps, whence they come forth to tell fortunes, write charms, and sell amulets. *They lead a mysterious life, and admit no one to their secrets except after a tedious and difficult preparation by fasting and a species of severe gymnastic exercise.*" !!

There are other "Hermit -Brothers" residing nearer to Bombay than Japan, and occasionally visiting Northern, Central, and Southern India; but no more than their colleagues, the Yamabusu, do they "sell" amulets or charms, though they may occasionally bestow such presents upon those whom they find worthy of their attention. Were the proficient of these so-called "magical arts" Christians, they would be called great saints and prophets, their phenomena attributed to *divine gift*, and they would see themselves forthwith classed among such miracle-mongers as the Saints of the Golden Legend. But they are "heathen", hence — devil-worshippers and *impostors*. That is why it is as difficult to meet one of such

"Hermits" away from his "craggy steeps" as "for a yak to thrust its tail into the hole of a plank adrift on the ocean", to use a Tibetan expression.

But to return to the Mikado. The Spiritual Emperor claims direct descent from Sin Mee, a *hero* who was the first to establish a regular Government in Japan, in the year 666 B.C., just about the time of the birth of Gautama Buddha in India. He is believed to be an incarnation of some mysterious power, like the never-dying Buddha, which emigrates from one Grand Lama to the other. He is called the "Son of Kanon", the Goddess of Mercy, who is exceedingly honoured in Japan. Her image is found in every house, and she is called "the Mother of God", an appellation which became the pretext with the Christian missionaries, never too bashful before an anachronism, to claim that her worship [Page 23] originated in an idea of the Virgin Mary carried at an early age from the West through China to Japan, whereas she is one of the most ancient deities of Japan, and far older than Christianity. *Maya*, Buddha's mother, is also called the "Saviour's Mother" by the Buddhists, and Guatama himself is claimed as a Catholic Saint by the authors of the *Golden Legend*.

The Mikado, though nominally the supreme ruler of the Empire, has, in reality, no political power at all; nor does he claim it, leaving — to the Tycoon, or temporal emperor, the whole burden of the State affairs. "Never do we hear of any religious dispute among the Japanese, much less discover that they bear each other any hate on religious grounds", says Meylan in his *Sketches of the Manners and Customs of the Japanese*. They esteem it, on the contrary, an act of courtesy to visit from time to time each other's gods and do them reverence. While the Kobo sends an embassy to the Sinto temple at Isye to offer prayers in his name, he assigns at the same time a sum for the erection of temples to Confucius; and the spiritual emperor allows strange gods, imported from Siam or China, to be placed, for the convenience of those who may feel a call to worship them, in the same temples with the Japanese. If it be asked whence this tolerance originates, or by what it is maintained, we reply that worshippers of all persuasions in Japan acknowledge and obey one superior, namely, the Dairi, or Spiritual Emperor. As the representative and lineal descendant of Buddha on earth, he is himself an object of worship, and as such he protects equally all whose object it is to venerate the Deity (?) the mode of their doing so being indifferent to him. After taking exception to the word "deity" and God, which the Japanese use no more in connection with Buddha than the Sinhalese Buddhists, the inference seems very correct, and our Popes, Metropolitans, and Bishops would lose nothing by following the example of the heathen Japanese.

To conclude, our correspondent (the F. T. S. in Japan) has come to the strange conviction that Sintoism and Lamaism are twin sisters, which represent two esoteric systems, and at the same time two *spiritualised* "heresies" so to say, of that abstruse and for the masses too grandly philosophical and metaphysical system known as "Buddhism" pure and simple; the latter being now represented but by the Nepaulese school of the Svabhavikas, and the Siamese sect of the Buddhist priests of Ceylon,