GLIMPSES OF THE RELIGIOUS LIFE OF NEW JAPAN

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ABSTRACT

The currents of new life, as Japan has become a conscious part of the larger world, are finding expression in new forces and ideals in religion.

1. There is a remarkable liberalizing of Buddhism. Some men of unquestioned scholarship regard Buddhism as superior to any other religion. The unrest due to the war and new industrial conditions has intensified the reforming spirit, and in some quarters Buddhism is urged as the inspiration of a Pan-Asiatic program which shall preserve Oriental culture from the destructive influences of Western influence.

2. Shintoism, the religion of Japanese patriotism, is undergoing a marked revival; and a religious call to Japan to be the inspired power in the reconstruction of the world is being widely propagated.

3. If Christianity is to extend its due influence, it must relate itself positively to the dominant ideals of Japan. In literary and artistic expression, as well as in liberal theology, much remains to be accomplished.

“We are hungry and have cried for bread, but they merely teach us the theory of making it”—this cry of the Japanese scholar Takayama met with a very wide response in the early years of the twentieth century. Japan was passing through a spiritual ferment and everywhere the younger men and women were seeking, dissatisfied with the official teachings. “There was discord,” says the Buddhist scholar, Dr. Anesaki, “but audible therein was an adagio of sincerity and earnestness.” This was seen in the wistful and restless turning to the study of great Buddhist prophets such as Hōnen, the pietist, and Nichiren, the reformer, in the eager reading of Tolstoy, Ibsen, and other idealistic and individualistic writers, in the starting of a Tolstoian colony, in the appearance of men and women claiming prophetic gifts, in the staging of religious plays, and in similar ways. And twenty years ago Captain Brinkley wrote in his History of Japan of “a sort of Buddhist revival” which he attributed to the advent of Christianity. Undoubtedly in Japan, as in India, this has had a great deal to do with reform movements in the old religions, and with the stimulating of a spiritual unrest. But there is in addition the
obvious fact that Japan has entered into the stream of the world's life, and that the currents which are flowing through the world affect her as never before. It is therefore of peculiar interest to study these currents, first as they are affecting the Buddhists of Japan, and then as they have stirred up strange activities in the old Shinto faith.

I

In the first place Buddhism, like Christianity, is in a stage of transition from a conservative and dogmatic spirit to one of progress and liberalism; there are intelligent and learned men, Scots, Germans, and Americans, who have become Buddhists and indeed have been ordained as Buddhist monks, though forty years ago Dr. Rhys Davids said in his Hibbert lectures, "There is not the slightest danger of any European ever entering the Buddhist order!"

Amongst its own people Buddhism in this liberalized form is offering itself as more scientific than Christianity, and in the two Buddhist universities at Kyōto, where nearly a thousand young men are being trained for the priesthood, training in the Christian religion is a part of the regular curriculum, and comparison is being encouraged. We have to note, too, that each of the Buddhist sects can boast great scholars trained in our western universities such as Dr. B. Nanjio, who was thirty years ago a colleague of Max Müller at Oxford; Dr. M. Anesaki, well known in this country, especially at Harvard; and many others, and that these men, having made a lifelong study of both religions, remain active Buddhists, and would be a great credit to either religion. They would be the first to disown some of the quacks and charlatans who, under the name of "Esoteric Buddhism," are palming off a hotchpotch of spiritualism, theosophy, and strange superstitions amongst sentimental and gullible people in the West. There is a unique example in San Francisco.

A second sign of the Buddhist revival is in the active promotion of Buddhist Sunday-schools. The Western Hong-
wanji sect, for example, which believes in salvation through faith, claims to have 150,000 children in its Sunday-schools, and has a well-organized educational bureau, while nearly three-quarters of a million children are in Buddhist Sunday-schools. A booklet recently published as a gift for the delegates to the World's Sunday-School Convention in Tokyo sets forth in attractive form the facts of this movement and of Buddhist work for young people in general. In all this Christians can sincerely rejoice, and the organizers of the Christian Sunday-school movement are to be congratulated upon this by-product of their activities; for materialism, and not Buddhism, is the chief foe of Christianity, and it is a cause for rejoicing that these attractive and brilliant children of Japan are growing up to believe in an Unseen Order controlling their destinies, and in salvation by faith in a compassionate Savior.

For the adolescent, the Young Men's Buddhist Association is beginning to do "something of the splendid work accomplished in the West by the Y.M.C.A." So says The Mahāyānist, a journal now defunct, but founded to investigate and interpret Mahāyāna Buddhism. It was very interesting to me to find in the Hawaiian Islands a headquarters of the Y.M.B.A., with numerous branches on the plantations; and it is working in Japan also. Here again, we can wish God-speed to this movement for building up moral manhood in the Buddhist world.

Of the activity of the Buddhist press much might be written; but I must content myself with just a few examples. Biographies of Gautama Buddha in Japanese and of the chief Buddhist patriarchs have all recently appeared, and one anthology of the scriptures has passed through over fifty editions in ten years, while a committee has been formed to translate Chinese and Sanskrit books into Japanese. All the leading sects have their monthly magazines, and some have quite a formidable list.

More obvious than these significant symptoms of the Buddhist revival are the building and repairing of temples;
Buddhist temples are steadily increasing, and there are said to be over 70,000 of them and no less than 123,000 priests, monks, and teachers apart from the large numbers devoted to the Shinto faith.

Amongst the more recent temple buildings, is one in Kyōto which cost nearly five million dollars, and for the transport of whose timbers hundreds of thousands of women sacrificed their hair, and even the ancient shrines of Hieizan are being vigorously repaired. Amongst the giant cryptomerias which sentinel them resound the blows of hammer and chisel as I write. One is being moved bodily à l’américain. Even the ancient and complex Tendai sect, like the others seems to be awakening to new life, and is in process of transition.

Again, there is an undoubted attempt at moral reform about which let The Mahāyānist speak: “Whilst formerly the moral sickness was allowed to go on unchecked, now the coverings are cast aside, and the disease laid bare, which is the first thing to do if the patient is to be cured.” One hears a good deal about misappropriation of temple funds, and moral laxity in matters of sex. It is not for a visitor to comment on these things; they are not peculiar to Japan. Personally I believe that Buddhism is on the whole a real power for good; and I am inclined to think that the beautiful courtesy and kindliness one meets everywhere largely spring from it, and are one of its many noble fruits. We in the West have made more of commercial honesty and less of courtesy and forbearance than Jesus was wont to do, and there is no more odious type than the self-righteous visitor from Western lands who comes to the East armed with a narrow and negative moral code and a critical spirit.

Certainly Buddhism is teaching “morals” to its children, and in a thousand ways its influence is felt in that very attractive character so truly described by Lafcadio Hearn as peculiar to the Japanese, of which the essence is a genuine kindness of heart that is essentially Buddhist.
Another proof that the chief sects are now filled with vigorous life is evidenced by their missionary activities: the "Faith" sects claim that they have 540 foreign missionaries outside Japan proper. The first Buddhist missionary from Japan to China was sent out by the Eastern branch of the Hongwanji in 1876; and since then missions have been established in Honolulu, in 1897, and in North America, some eighty on the Pacific Coast. Nor is missionary work neglected in Japan; owing largely to the influence of a layman Kiyozawa Manshi, the Shin sect has begun to work in jails, and to arouse a sense of sin in the inmates. Nearly a million yen is spent annually by Buddhists in social service, and as an example of it I may instance a training-school in Tokyo, where I found sixty students being trained in charity organization; and a lodging-house for the poor, where homeless people are given shelter. These two belong respectively to the Western and Eastern branches of the Hongwanji sect, and this is the most active in such ways, though unfortunately the members of the two branches fight "like brothers," as one of their chief men told me with a chuckle. And so far I have not been able to discover any movement toward reunion, such as those which are filling the Christian church with a new life. On the contrary a very popular play is that depicting the debates and mutual recriminations of Nichiren and the priests of the Jodo sect, whose pietism he called "a way to hell." It looks, however, as if social service and the spirit of liberalism which inspires such lay leaders as Ito Shoshin, the editor of a weekly paper devoted to these causes, might stimulate the ecclesiastical mind in the Far East as it has in the West to work for reunion.

II

How has the Great War affected all this? It has in the first place intensified the spiritual unrest, and in the second it has given an impetus to the demand for reconstruction at home and abroad. Very significant is the letter sent by the
Buddhists of Japan to the Peace Conference, calling it to lay the foundations of a peace which should be impartial and lasting, and showing the contribution which Buddhism may make to such a peace, and to mutual respect and good-will among the nations. How little did men at Paris heed the saying of the Buddha, "Hatred is never cured by hatred: only by love is it cast out"—and we still may learn much from this great teacher if we will.

Within Japan itself the Socialist party has grown steadily stronger and extremists are not wanting, as the authorities are well aware; chauvinists and imperialists realize that there is a steadily rising tide of liberalism, and especially amongst students and merchants is this true. Unorganized at present they are not lacking in courage and initiative, as is shown by the recent exploit of a boy of seventeen, who without a cent in his pocket walked through Korea, and then reported to the government that the people were ready to be friendly and challenged the present system of terrorization. Compare this sturdy courage with another boy who some years ago stirred the country deeply by killing himself as a protest against a world that was not worth living in; and with the feeble and decadent aestheticism of some of the students of Japan, who ape the worst of our Western decadents and show a hankering for the perverted and the bizarre, and a restless seeking after new sensations.

Of peculiar interest is the attitude of Buddhists to political questions. Their admirable letter to the Peace Conference is only one side of the story; they are also engaging in a Pan-Asiatic propaganda natural enough in the circumstances, of which the slogan "Back to Buddhism" means to many who use it "Asia for the Asiatics"—an Asia united by the ancient faith which once drew all its lands within its friendly net. Just so in India "Back to the Vedas" is the slogan of the Nationalist movement. It is a reasonable plea in either case, if it aims at resisting the exploitation of Asia by Western powers; I
personally wonder at the amazing patience of China and at the great courtesy of Japan in face of affronts and despoliation. But the cry is not altogether sincere, and it is significant that as soon as the Buddhists of Tokyo started the movement two years ago those of Peking set on foot a counter-move! And while in Korea Buddhism has apparently made no attempt to rebuke militarism and autocracy, but is rather helping the government in its ruthless policy of assimilation, the Buddhists of China are offering their religion as the best basis for the new democracy. Christians will remember with shame that they too have sometimes taken their religion less seriously than their patriotism; Jingo was an empress of Japan, but she reappears in other lands! And I was reminded of a saying of Dr. Orchard in England during the war, that he could blaspheme God in his pulpit and no one took offence, but that if he attacked the British Navy his mailbag was full to bursting the next morning.

III

It is only great souls in any land who really know with Edith Cavell that "patriotism is not enough," and we can hardly wonder that Buddhists in Japan are conservatives. Still less can we expect Shintoists to do anything "unwise," for devoted lip-service of the Imperial House is both of their "bene esse" and of their "esse," and they are sure that Heaven is on the side of Japan. Meantime chauvinism and imperialism are linking themselves with the revival of the old Shinto cult in ways that are well-nigh incredible, and that deserve close study as symptomatic of the present spiritual unrest. The death of the great Emperor Meiji Tenno led to a wave of religious enthusiasm, and the shrine recently opened in his honor is already a rallying-center for the national sentiment. Movements like Tenri-kyō and Omoto-kyō have gathered round them an amazing multitude of adherents of all classes, "patrioteers," megalomaniacs, earnest seekers, and many of the weakminded. Especially in the ranks of retired officers of
army and navy does Omoto-kyō recruit its most ardent supporters. "These men," says Dr. Anesaki, "whose only religion is their patriotism, could not escape the influence of the present spiritual uneasiness. They are readily attracted to any mystery, such as divination or god-possession, and find in these beliefs sanction for military enthusiasms." For these sects depict a new world with Japan at its head, they claim to work spiritual and mental cures, and they seem to pander especially to those who have much leisure and limited intelligence.

But that is by no means the whole story. Let us look more closely at Omoto-kyō which is attracting great numbers, and which has its magazines and even its daily paper—a thing which the entire Protestant Christian church is apparently unable to achieve in any part of Asia, a thing which it ought to do at once. The founder of this sect was an old lady born in 1836, uneducated, and claiming to be the incarnation of a Shinto deity, who will shortly reconstruct the world with Japan as its leader, for so only can the human race be prevented from exterminating itself in slaughter. Her O Fudesaki—"honorable writings"—are said to fill from five to ten thousand volumes, and to have been written in ecstasy, and are scribbled in an almost illegible hand; yet they have captured the allegiance of men of real scholarship like Mr. Asano Wasaburo, who has translated Shakespeare for the Japanese, and of many shrewd business men. Here is a specimen of them as translated in the Kobe Chronicle:

The world has passed under the sway of the Country of the Gods, which is as fine as the plum-blossoms, and whose rule is strong as the pine-tree. Japan must be governed by Shinto, for it is a country which cannot do without the help of the gods. Foreign countries are under the reign of brutes, the strong have the upper hand and devils abound. Japan has also come under the sway of brutes; but this will not do, and the god has appeared in order to rebuild three thousand worlds. This world is going to be turned into a new one. Three thousand worlds are to be subjected to a great cleansing, so that the Country of the Gods may hold rule in the world in peace forever. . . . . The minds of men are now perverted, and the world turned upside down; the upper and governing class are doing nothing good.
And there follows a prophecy that a good time is coming for the under dog, and that Japan as the Country of the Gods must cleanse herself from evil spirits, that she may be of service to a needy world.

Is there not something in it? We can get a glimpse from these few words of its appeal to world-weary folk, of its power over the retired officer, who in all countries likes to growl that the world is going to the dogs, and to criticize his own land while yet he plans her supremacy, and of its hold on young reformers, of whom Japan is full. The headquarters of Omoto-kyō are thronged too with those who desire to have their evil spirits exorcised; it is a religion that claims to work, and such are in great demand! But unfortunately it seems to encourage the belief in animal and demon-possession and has driven eccentric and weak-minded folk mad, until in the island of Formosa it has been necessary to forbid its practice of this art. Its adherents seem to dislike barbers and toothbrushes, and Japanese visitors to the headquarters at Ayabe near Kyōto are often alienated by this rather unprepossessing trait; "everything that meets your eyes and ears is unprepossessing, not to say odious. . . . .

You feel yourself oppressed and menaced. This is particularly the case in the evening when . . . . amidst the semi-darkness pervading the precinct you see long-haired people going the round of the temples by twos or threes, muttering and clapping their hands, while from a distant temple you hear a dreary voice slowly recounting that the world is inhabited by nothing but demons, serpents and four-legged brutes. . . . . You feel as if you were no longer in a human world."

How different all this is from the exquisite orderliness, the splendid intoned services, the gorgeous vestments, and the dignity of a great Buddhist temple such as that at Chionji. I visited it with an experienced missionary, and she was deeply stirred by the beauty and the sincerity of it all; as Mr. Cram has said, it is worthy to rank with St. Mark's, Venice, and its worship is paid to Amitāḥa, a being of compassion
and goodness far more appealing one would think than the deity incarnate in an illiterate old woman. Yet Omoto-kyō has ten thousand preachers, and its adherents are said to be increasing steadily, for like the vigorous and noisy Nichiren sect of Buddhism it panders to the chauvinist; like Christianity it aims at rebuilding a shaken world; like Christian Science it promises physical healing; and like Theosophy it is eclectic. Perhaps more significant still it is shrewd in its use of the press, and in its appeal to the mysterious. There are some things in it from which we need not be too proud to learn, above all this wise statesmanship in devoting a daily paper to its propaganda; and this leads on.

IV

What of the Christian church in Japan? So much has been written on this subject by those better qualified than I that I shall be very brief, and merely state my conviction as to the kind of Christianity that may be expected to win her allegiance. I take for granted that it must be sincere and earnest; but it must also be fearless alike in its theological thinking and in its social application of the teachings of Jesus. Already the Japanese are thinking more liberally than many of their teachers, and already the Japanese church is producing some fearless opponents of chauvinism and imperialism; it may need its martyrs yet. Next it must get alongside the Buddhists in much more cordial and sympathetic relationships, and its followers must study more closely and fair-mindedly this amazing religion which has done so much for Asia as to be a veritable Praeparatio Evangelica. Whilst some wise missionaries and many younger Japanese leaders accept this position, many, perhaps the majority, are too ready to condemn without study and to compare the best in their own religion with the worst in Buddhism; this is unscientific as well as grossly unfair.

Next I would emphasize the need for enabling Japanese scholars to secure the leisure and the atmosphere needed for constructive thinking; the need of Christian literature of the
right kind—not translations of Western books—is desperate, and the nation is reading with feverish eagerness. A reactionary is spending several million dollars on propagating doctrines of Christianity in the Orient which will all have speedily to be unlearnt; are liberal Christians going to stand by and lose a unique opportunity to win this very brilliant nation?

Lastly, though much more might be said, Japan needs an artistic presentation of Christianity and she has not yet been offered it. "Art," says Dr. Anesaki, "is an international language," and he makes a strong plea for introducing his people to the great things of Christian art. They go in millions to art collections. Why not send a loan collection of Christian masterpieces to Tokyo? It would help mightily toward mutual esteem and understanding.

Missionaries again must pay much more attention to architecture; in some Japanese cities almost the only ugly thing one sees is the Christian church or the mission compound. It is a big question and can only be touched here, but it is one of great importance: why should we make good and devoted work unattractive to the eye? How great is the esteem in which Fenollosa and Lafcadio Hearn are held in Japan because of their appreciation of beauty. And how great and noble a service might a Christian Fenollosa not render at this time in Japan by interpreting his Faith through its art, and incidentally in China by saving to the Chinese their great art treasures in the name of Him who is the Lord of Beauty and of all good life? As the Eastern nations bring their rich gifts into His Kingdom it will become worthy of Him and more alluring to us all; and we cannot afford to win only those without artistic taste!

Such then must Christianity be to win Japan, broad as mankind in its enthusiasm, liberal in its spirit, artistic in its expression, and believing that the Kingdom of God will gain greatly by the accession of this brilliant people. In such a faith many missionaries are at work. Let us hold up their hands.