

JAPANESE ETHICS.

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No effort will be made in this paper to trace in detail the influence of Christianity, or of occidental modes of thought on Japanese ethics, nor to discuss at length the state of Japanese morals at the present time. But this discussion will confine itself to those phases of ethics that have been characteristic of the Japanese people for several generations or centuries. Neither is this an effort to describe the morals of the masses of the Japanese. Rather it is an attempt to set forth what might be termed the standard ethical code of Japan.

And "standard" will naturally mean that which is highest and best, just as the standard Christian ethics would not be the actual practices, not even the ideals of the average professing Christian—not to say those of many of the citizens of so-called Christian nations—but would be formed only in the hearts of the best and most enlightened Christians. If this fact is borne in mind, it will counteract the possible impression that the morals of Japan are being praised unduly.

The subject will be treated under three main heads, as follows:

- I. Are the Japanese ethical?
- II. Some sources of Japanese ethical teaching.
- III. Some characteristics of Japanese ethics.

I. To thinking people who are cognizant of the place Japan has won for herself in the modern world it may seem superfluous to ask if they are ethical. But there are those who pose as champions and representatives of our Western civilization, who for one reason or another, persist in branding the Japanese as unethical. Some brood over the hardships, imaginary or real, of the Japanese women and exhaust their vocabularies in condemning Japanese civilization. Others make the sweeping

statement that there is no virtue among Japanese women, while as a matter of fact those who make such statements are simply revealing the kind of company they kept while they were in Japan. Others still are led to condemn the whole race as dishonest and as liars because of the so-called "defective integrity" of certain merchants and traders. Such persons may justly be compared to the Englishman who argued that all American deer have horns because he saw one American deer that had horns.

There may also be zealous propagandists who find it part of their stock in trade to make their "patients" out as bad as possible, but to the present writer this attitude is not only unnecessary—seeing the Japanese are a part of the same humanity with all other nations (Acts 17:26), and therefore heirs to the same shortcomings—but is unwise and in the end harmful. But to turn to the positive side of the question there are several facts that tend to establish as truth the contention of this thesis.

a. First let us notice the Japanese institutions and see how social, or even socialistic they are. The family and the state—these are the cornerstones. But either of these would be impossible if the individual were not taught his duty to the institution. And they have, as a rule learned these duties so thoroughly that the institution often appears to count for everything and the individual for little or nothing.

b. Then there is "Bushido", the most distinctively Japanese code of ethics.

This strenuous and highly wrought system reminds us that among soldiers in old Japan supreme emphasis was placed upon conduct and character. This will be discussed more fully in part three.

c. Another striking illustration of the Japanese tendency to ethicize everything is found in the system of wrestling called "Jiu-jitsu" or "Judo". This is an art much in vogue among the better class of Japanese and consists simply in using anatomical knowledge for pur-

poses of self-defense. No weapons are used, and the purpose is not to kill unless killing is absolutely necessary, but only to disable temporarily, by striking at the proper place. It is hard for a Westerner to see any ethical or moral value in such an art, but there are able Japanese educators who claim that it furnishes all the ethical teachings necessary for young men, and some would even exalt it to the position of a religion.

d. Another proof of the ethical bent of the Japanese mind is the fact that Buddhism, which was originally an atheistic or at best a pantheistic system of philosophy, has come to be in Japan a much more practical cult, and more closely allied with moral teachings than anywhere else in the world. This writer is at present bringing out through the Asiatic Society of Japan a translation of a series of sermons on the Buddhist Ten Commandments. A glance at a list of these commandments will show that, in theory at least, the Japanese mind has the same leaning morally that we have.

These commandments are as follows:

- I. Thou shalt not kill.
- II. Thou shalt not steal.
- III. Thou shalt not commit adultery.
- IV. Thou shalt not lie.
- V. Thou shalt not exaggerate.
- VI. Thou shalt not slander.
- VII. Thou shalt not be double-tongued.
- VIII. Thou shalt not covet.
- IX. Thou shalt not be angry.
- X. Thou shalt not be heretical.

e. The choice of Confucianism as the foundation on which to build their nation illustrates our contention that the Japanese are ethically inclined. Confucianism is more strictly ethical than any Oriental cult. In fact it may be said to be wholly and only ethical. Confucius refused to have anything to do with philosophical and religious matters, and claimed to have enough to do to work out a scheme for proper relations between man and man.

f. The Japanese have from time immemorial laid more stress on conduct than on intellect, and on decision of character than on decision of problems. The sole purpose of Japanese education until modern times was to develop strong and positive character, and to teach the individual to consider himself as of no importance when greater issues were at stake. How this was accomplished will be discussed later.

Though we can successfully claim that in the realm of human relationships the Japanese ideals are not essentially different from those of the West, still there is a realm in which there is a marked difference. That is the matter of the consciousness of sin. The Japanese have no dogma of "original sin", and the average Japanese who is not a criminal will not admit that he is a sinner. In fact the Japanese language has but the one word for "sin" and "crime", and consequently it requires special teaching to get a man to see the difference. Native Christians are now trying to make the discrimination by using different Chinese ideographs for the two words. But it will take considerable time for this distinction to find its way into the thought of the people.

It must be admitted however, that there is a difference of opinion about the fact above stated and some arguing deductively contend that since all men have a consciousness of sin the Japanese also must have. But this is not in keeping with the testimony of many thoughtful Japanese.

Still this does not prove that the Japanese are not naturally religious, for all will admit that they are, and for this there is abundant proof on every hand. And if the question should arise as to the consistency of these facts, that is too big a question to be discussed here. It might be remarked however that the Japanese religiousness seems to be a thirsting for spiritual truth rather than a desire to escape the penalty of sin.

II. The Sources of Japanese Ethics.

(a) Buddhism. It was observed above that the Japanese environment has wrought changes in Buddhism since the latter was introduced into Japan over a thousand years ago. It is true also that Buddhism has influenced Japan, but probably not to the same extent in the sphere of ethics that it itself has been affected. The average Buddhist priest of the present day does not appear to be a very decided force in the moral world. The same might be said of temples and other parts of the Buddhist paraphernalia. But there are Buddhist products such as the volume of practical sermons mentioned above, lying covered with dust in the old book shops, that have wielded no mean influence in the past in shaping the thought of the people. There is little doubt that much of the stern stolid stoicism seen everywhere in Japan is due to Buddhist influence. For Buddhism "furnished a sense of calm trust in fate, a quiet submission to the inevitable, that stoic composure in sight of danger or calamity, that disdain of life and friendliness with death". Buddhism is the greatest of the Japanese religions, and is next to Christianity the greatest religion in the world, but its teachings are too ethereal for a practical mind like the Japanese, and hence it was necessary for Japan to look elsewhere for definite ethical teachings.

(b) Shinto. Shintoism has not the standing of Buddhism as a religion. In fact it is often if not commonly denied the name of religion. But it probably comes near to taking the place of religion in the hearts of many of the people. At any rate it has somewhat to offer in an ethical way. First it comes with loyalty, the keystone in the virtues of the knight. And this has worked its way down from the soldier class to the masses and is now considered a most important virtue for all classes. It also brings with it filial piety, the second great virtue among Japanese. Along with filial piety comes reverence for the memory of ancestors, and these two not only have

weight in shaping the character of the individual, but are a great asset in maintaining the institution of the family and the state.

Shinto has fostered a kind of nature worship which has doubtless affected the aesthetic side of the Japanese nature and made it gentler and more appreciative of the tender side of things. The purity of the human soul is emphasized by the mirror which is hung in every shrine. By looking into this mirror the worshipper is supposed to see the divinity which exists in his own soul

Shinto is to Japan what royalty is to Great Britain—"the author and symbol of unity". It embodies the great principles or emotions that hold the nation together and make it a compact unit.

(c) Confucianism. But as to strictly ethical precepts the teachings of Confucius were the most prolific source. And the much-paraded "Bushido" (Knight-ways) is nothing more than Japanized Confucianism. But "Japanizing" here must be understood to mean the putting into Confucian doctrines much of the genius and temperament and history of the Japanese race. When Confucius wrote on the "five relations" and emphasized the mutual duties of master and servant (the governing and the governed), father and son, husband and wife, older and younger brother, he was merely sketching a scheme of things similar to that which was to develop in Japan independently of his teachings. Thus the Japanese found in Confucianism the teachings that fitted their case and they with alacrity appropriated them to their own use. The aristocratic and conservative tone of Confucius suited the ruling soldier class, and once adopted Confucianism held uninterrupted sway until the phenomenal rise of the proletariat took place in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. (Shinto also borrowed much from Confucianism)

(d) Feudalism. As many of the customs of the Occident had their origin in feudalism and chivalry, so it was

in Japan. In Japan these institutions lasted much longer than in Europe, or until 1872. Though it may not be possible to trace many of the ethical ideas of Japan to feudalism and chivalry as their source, still these furnished the environment for the development of such things as were borrowed from the three sources mentioned. And some of the virtues, as loyalty for example, were undoubtedly molded anew in the mold of these medieval institutions.

(e) Utility. But from whatever source the teachings were derived they all had to be tried in the crucible of utility, and since there was no voice of authority whatever, only such things as were found adapted to the end of perpetuating and glorifying the family and the state were retained. Thus utility was the final test.

III. Some Peculiarities of Japanese Ethics.

As has been seen before (especially in connection with the Buddhist Ten Commandments) many of the ethical standards revered by the Japanese were identical with those of all ethical peoples. It is not surprising that it should be so. If all men are brothers it is but natural that the fundamental principles underlying moral conduct should be the same everywhere. So it is safe to say that in most cases what is right in Japan is right elsewhere and *vica versa*.

Still, owing to the peculiarities of Japanese society, there a few mountain peaks standing out above the plain of the usual principles, and by these the whole is usually judged.

(a) Loyalty. As intimated the greatest virtue of which the Japanese boast is loyalty. And this plunges us at once into the question of the relative importance of the individual and the state. Some have compared the morality of Japan to the morality of a beehive, since the individual is expected to lay down his life to protect the state against any enemies and all enemies as the bee does for the hive. This is sometimes used to prove the undeveloped state of Japanese civilization. But there are two

sides to the question, and there are many things that seem to indicate that Western peoples are headed the same way. For was it not Tennyson who wrote:

“And the individual withers,
And the world is more and more.”

And was it not recognized among the Hebrews also that it is better for one man to die than for the whole nation to be destroyed?

This principle of loyalty which became highly developed in feudal times was at that time mainly directed toward the feudal lord or “daimyo”, but since the Restoration of 1868 the Emperor has received all the homage that was formerly bestowed in all directions. But the Emperor is the Empire personified and as in Hebrew literature it is often hard to tell whether the writer refers to the Messiah or to Israel, so in Japan loyalty to the Emperor and loyalty to the State are one and the same thing. If it be argued that this is not conducive to the development of individuality it may be said in the reply that it is not at all certain that the self-centered man is superior to the man who is centered in something bigger than himself. True, this doctrine does not encourage individualism, but there is a big difference between individualism and individuality. There is something in the Japanese contention that the state antedates the individual since the latter is born into the former.

(b) Filial Piety. Space will not permit a full discussion of filial piety, but the essential facts are that a child must (1) obey its parents while they live, (2) support them when they are old or helpless, (3) worship them when they are dead.

There are many abuses of this doctrine, and while it is in some respects a source of strength to the Japanese nation, it is in other respects a source of weakness. It lays great stress on the duties of children and leaves unmentioned the duties of parents, and the latter are too often willing to take advantage of this fact. This has been

one of the most fruitful causes of the prevailing poverty in Japan, since there was not the necessity of laying by something for old age, and since parents were tempted to cease productive labor as soon as the eldest son was in a position to support them. This must change and the sooner the better. But on the other hand filial piety has done much for the nation. Family pride is a powerful incentive to worthy effort. And while we can in nowise apologize for ancestor worship, where it is really worship, still the keeping green of the memory of parents is a great stimulus to noble endeavor on the part of the living.

(c) Politeness. The politeness of the Japanese is proverbial, but it is not so easily understood. It is sometimes sneeringly spoken of as simply a veneer—all on the surface. It is true that in all well-bred Japanese politeness has become, as it were, second nature. This is the natural outcome of habit that has been assiduously cultivated for many centuries. While there may be much insincerity veiled by a smiling countenance and much hypocrisy in the low bows and elegant language, still the original motive was and is a good one, viz: regard for the feelings of others. No well-bred Japanese would persecute another person by relating his own sorrows and troubles any more than he would hurt another's feelings by praising his own things and boasting of his own achievements. This explains the inability of the Japanese to understand Americans who praise their own wives to others. They claim that this proves the Japanese husband and wife to be "one" more truly than is the case in the West.

(d) Rectitude. Among soldiers the quality called rectitude was highly prized and since its meaning is not made clear by the word itself, it requires a word of explanation. By rectitude they meant practically, decision of character. A man must cultivate power of decision and once he had made a decision he must never change. It is readily evident that this would be a very lop-sided virtue. And it is this that gets the Japanese statesmen

into so many critical as well as comical situations. For whenever a cabinet, for instance, has taken a position and fails to carry it through there is nothing for that cabinet to do but to resign, since this principle makes it impossible for it to change its policy while in office. This explains most of the changes of government in Japan.

(e) It is generally conceded that the most defective point in Japanese ethics is their commercial morality. And this defective integrity is said to be the thorn in the flesh that keeps the admirers of Japan from being exalted overmuch. But it is easy to trace the causes of this. The "Samurai", the cultured gentleman-soldier, despised money and money getting, and merchants were put at the bottom in the classification of society. Penury was exalted to the position of a virtue and luxury was branded as a vice and called the greatest menace to manhood. Consequently, merchants had little encouragement to develop character.

Then again the socialistic ideas did not require a man to keep a contract to his own ruin. But while a man was permitted by custom to break a contract rather than lose his means of livelihood, in other words for the sake of a living, he would not have been allowed to do the same thing, I believe, for the sake of getting riches. For at the present time businesses that are run with large capital are run strictly according to universal commercial principles.

This is a bare outline of the ethical foundation on which the Japanese state has been established. But it is on this foundation that those who build for the future must build. This foundation is not sufficient for the State of the future, nor even for the State of the present, but this must be the starting point for those, who would build a greater Japan. Have we of the West a better foundation to offer? And can it be put in the place of the old one without causing the superstructure to collapse? And are we offering it in such a spirit as to make it acceptable? These are the vital questions concerning Japan today.