

ARE THE JAPANESE RELIGIOUS?

SAID Prof. Pfeleiderer to the writer in the winter of 1897: "I am sorry to know that the Japanese are deficient in religious nature." In an elaborate article entitled, "Wanted, a Religion," a missionary describes the three so-called religions of Japan, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Shintoism, and shows to his satisfaction that none of these has the essential characteristics of religion.

Mr. Percival Lowell has said that "Sense may not be vital to religion, but incense is."* In my judgment, this is the essence of nonsense, and is fitted to incense a man's sense.

The impression that the Japanese people are not religious is due to various facts. The first is that for about three hundred years the intelligence of the nation has been dominated by Confucian thought, which rejects active belief in supra-human beings. When asked by his pupils as to the gods, Confucius is reported to have said that men should respect them, but should have nothing to do with them. The tendency of Confucian ethics, accordingly, is to leave the gods severely alone, although their existence is not absolutely denied. When Confucianism became popular in Japan, the educated part of the nation broke away from Buddhism, which, for nearly a thousand years, had been universally dominant. To them Buddhism seemed superstitious in the extreme. It was not uncommon for them to criticise it severely. Muro Kyu-so,† speaking of the immorality that was so common in the native literature, says: "Long has Buddhism made Japan to think of nothing as important except the worship of Buddha.

* "Occult Japan," p. 23.

† Cf. chapter xxiv.

So it is that evil customs prevail, and there is no one who does not find pleasure in lust. . . . Take out the lust and Buddhism from that book, and the scenery and emotions are well described. . . . Had he learned in the 'Way' of the sages, he had not fallen into Buddhism.* The tendency of all persons trained in Confucian classics was toward thoroughgoing skepticism as to divine beings and their relation to this world. For this reason, beyond doubt, has Western agnosticism found so easy an entrance into Japan. This ready acceptance of Western agnosticism is a second fact that has tended to give the West the impression referred to above. Complete indifference to religion is characteristic of the educated classes of to-day. Japanese and foreigners, Christians and non-Christians, alike, unite in this opinion. The impression usually conveyed by this statement, however, is that agnosticism is a new thing in Japan. In point of fact, the old agnosticism is merely re-enforced by the support it receives from the agnosticism of the West.

The Occidental impression of Japanese irreligious race nature is further strengthened by the frequent assertion of it by writers, some of whom at least are neither partial nor ignorant. Prof. Basil H. Chamberlain, for instance, repeatedly makes the assertion or necessitates the inference. Speaking of pilgrimages, he remarks that the Japanese "take their religion lightly." Discussing the general question of religion, he speaks of the Japanese as "essentially undevotional," but he guards against the inference that they are therefore specially immoral. Yet, in the same paragraph, he adds, "Though they pray little and make light of supernatural dogma, the religion of the family binds them down in truly social bonds." Percival Lowell also, as we have seen, makes light of Japanese religion.

This conclusion of foreigner observers is rendered the more convincing to the average reader when he learns that such an influential man as Mr. Fukuzawa declares that "religion is like tea," it serves a social end, and nothing more; and that Mr. Hiroyuki Kato, until re-

* "A Japanese Philosopher," p. 120.

cently president of the Imperial University, and later Minister of Education, states that "Religion depends on fear." Marquis Ito, Japan's most illustrious statesman, is reported to have said: "I regard religion itself as quite unnecessary for a nation's life; science is far above superstition, and what is religion—Buddhism or Christianity—but superstition, and therefore a possible source of weakness to a nation? I do not regret the tendency to free thought and atheism, which is almost universal in Japan, because I do not regard it as a source of danger to the community."*

If leaders of national thought have such conceptions as to the nature and origin of religion, is it strange that the rank and file of educated people should have little regard for it, or that foreigners generally should believe the Japanese race to be essentially non-religious?

But before we accept this conclusion, various considerations demand our notice. Although the conception of religion held by the eminent Japanese gentlemen just quoted is not accepted by the writer as correct, yet, even on their own definitions, a study of Japanese superstitions and religious ceremonies would easily prove the people as a whole to be exceedingly religious. Never had a nation so many gods. It has been indeed "the country of the gods." Their temples and shrines have been innumerable. Priests have abounded and worshipers swarmed. For worship, however indiscriminate and thoughtless, is evidence of religious nature.

Furthermore, utterances like those quoted above in

* In immediate connection with this oft-quoted statement, however, I would put the following, as much more recent, and probably representing more correctly the Marquis's matured opinion. Mr. Kakehi, for some time one of the editors of the *Osaka Mainichi Shinbun* (Daily News), after an interview with the illustrious statesman in which many matters of national importance were discussed, was asked by the Marquis where he had been educated. On learning that he was a graduate of the Doshisha, the Marquis remarked: "The only true civilization is that which rests on Christian principles, and that consequently, as Japan must attain her civilization on these principles, those young men who receive Christian education will be the main factors in the development of future Japan."

regard to the nature and function of religion, are frequently on the lips of Westerners also, multitudes of whom have exceedingly shallow conceptions of the real nature of religion or the part it plays in the development of society and of the individual. But we do not pronounce the West irreligious because of such utterances. We must not judge the religious many by the irreligious few.

Again, are they competent judges who say the Japanese are non-religious? Can a man who scorns religion himself, who at least reveals no appreciation of its real nature by his own heart experience, judge fairly of the religious nature of the people? Still further, the religious phenomena of a people may change from age to age. In asking, then, whether a people is religious by nature, we must study its entire religious history, and not merely a single period of it. The life of modern Japan has been rudely shocked by the sudden accession of much new intellectual light. The contents of religion depends on the intellect; sudden and widespread accession of knowledge always discredits the older forms of religious expression. An undeveloped religion, still bound up with polytheistic symbolism, with its charms and mementoes, inevitably suffers severely at the hands of exact modern science. For the educated minority, especially, the inevitable reaction is to complete skepticism, to apparent irreligion. For the time being, religion itself may appear to have been discredited. In an advancing age, prophets of religious dissolution are abundant. Such prophecies, with reference to Christianity, have been frequent, and are not unheard even now. Particular beliefs and practices of religion have indeed changed and passed away, even in Christianity. But the essentially religious nature of man has re-asserted itself in every case, and the outward expressions of that nature have thereby only become freer from elements of error and superstition. Exactly this is taking place in Japan to-day. The apparent irreligion of to-day is the groundwork of the purer religion of to-morrow.

If the Japanese are emotional and sentimental, we

should expect them to be, perhaps more than most peoples, religious. This expectation is not disappointed by a study of their history. However imperfect as a religion we must pronounce original Shinto to have been, consisting of little more than a cultus and a theogony, yet even with this alone the Japanese should be pronounced a religious people. The universality of the respect and adoration, not to say love, bestowed throughout the ages of history on the "Kami" (the multitudinous Gods of Shintoism), is a standing witness to the depth of the religious feeling in the Japanese heart. True, it is associated with the sentiments of love of ancestors and country, with filial piety and loyalty; but these, so far from lowering the religion, make it more truly religious.

Unending lines of pilgrims, visiting noted Shinto temples and climbing sacred mountain peaks, arrest the attention of every thoughtful student of Japan. These pilgrims are numbered by the hundreds of thousands every year. The visitors to the great shrine at Kizuki of Izumo number about 250,000 annually. "The more prosperous the season, the larger the number of pilgrims. It rarely falls below two hundred thousand." In his "Occult Japan," Mr. Lowell has given us an interesting account of the "pilgrim clubs." The largest known to him numbered about twelve thousand men, but he thinks they average from one hundred to about five hundred persons each. The number of yearly visitors to the Shinto shrines at Ise is estimated at half a million, and ten thousand pilgrims climb Mt. Fuji every summer. The number of pilgrims to Kōpira, in Shikoku, is incredibly large; according to the count taken during the first half of 1898, the first ever taken, the average for six months was 2500 each day; at this rate the number for the year is nearly 900,000. The highest for a single day was over 12,000. These figures were given me by the chief official of this district. The highest mountain in Shikoku, Ishidzuchi San, some six thousand feet in height, is said to be ascended by ten thousand pilgrims each summer. These pilgrims eat little or nothing at hotels, depending rather on what

they carry until they return from their arduous three days' climb; nor do they take any prolonged rest until they are on the homeward way. The reason for this is that the climb is supposed to be a test of the heart; if the pilgrim fail to reach the summit, the inference is that he is at fault, and that the god does not favor him. They who offer their prayers from the summit are supposed to be assured of having them answered.

But beside these greater pilgrimages to mountain summits and national shrines, innumerable lesser ones are made. Each district has a more or less extended circuit of its own. In Shikoku there is a round known as the "Hachi-Ju-hakka sho mairi," or "The Pilgrimage to the 88 Places," supposed to be the round once made by Kobo Daishi (A. D. 774-834), the founder of the Shinton sect of Buddhism. The number of pilgrims who make this round is exceedingly large, since it is a favorite circuit for the people not only of Shikoku, but also of central and western Japan. Many of the pilgrims wear on the back, just below the neck, a pair of curious miniature "waraji" or straw sandals, because Kobo Daishi carried a real pair along with him on his journey. I never go to Ishite Temple (just out of Matsuyama), one of the eighty-eight places of the circuit, without seeing some of these pilgrims. But this must suffice. The pilgrim habit of the Japanese is a strong proof of widespread religious enthusiasm, and throws much light on the religious nature of the people. There seems to be reason for thinking that the custom existed in Japan even before the introduction of Buddhism. If this is correct, it bears powerful testimony to the inherently religious nature of the Japanese race.

The charge has been made that these pilgrimages are mere pleasure excursions. Mr. Lowell says, facetiously, that "They are peripatetic picnic parties, faintly flavored with piety; just a sufficient suspicion of it to render them acceptable to the easy-going gods." Beneath this light alliterative style, which delights the literary reader, do we find the truth? To me it seems like a slur on the pilgrims, evidently due to Mr. Lowell's

idea that a genuine religious feeling must be gloomy and solemn. Joy may seem to him incompatible with heartfelt religion and aspiration. That these pilgrims lack the religious aspiration characteristic of highly developed Christians of the West, is, of course, true; but that they have a certain type of religious aspiration is equally indisputable. They have definite and strong ideas as to the advantage of prayer at the various shrines; they confidently believe that their welfare, both in this world and the next, will be vitally affected by such pilgrimages and such a faithful worship. It is customary for pilgrims, who make extended journeys, to carry what may be called a passbook, in which seals are placed by the officials of each shrine. This is evidence to friends and to the pilgrim himself, in after years, of the reality of his long and tedious pilgrimage. Beggars before these shrines are apt to display these passbooks as an evidence of their worthiness and need. For many a pilgrim supports himself, during his pilgrimage, entirely by begging.

Pilgrims also buy from each shrine of note some charm, "o mamori," "honorable preserver," and "o fuda," "honorable ticket," which to them are exceedingly precious. There is hardly a house in Japan but has some, often many, of these charms, either nailed on the front door or placed on the god-shelf. I have seen a score nailed one above another. In some cases the year-names are still legible, and show considerable age. The sale of charms is a source of no little revenue to the temples, in some cases amounting to thousands of yen annually. We may smile at the ignorance and superstition which these facts reveal, but, as I already remarked, these are external features, the material expression or clothing, so to speak, of the inner life. Their particular form is due to deficient intellectual development. I do not defend them; I merely maintain that their existence shows conclusively the possession by the people at large of a real religious emotion and purpose. If so, they are not to be sneered at, although the mood of the average pilgrim may be cheerful, and the ordinary pilgrimage may have the aspect of a "per-

ipatetic picnic, faintly flavored with piety." The outside observer, such as the foreigner of necessity is, is quick to detect the picnic quality, but he cannot so easily discern the religious significance or the inner thoughts and emotions of the pilgrims. The former is discernible at a glance, without knowledge of the Japanese language or sympathy with the religious heart; the latter can be discovered only by him who intimately understands the people, their language and their religion.

If religion were necessarily gloomy, festivals and merry-making would be valid proof of Japanese religious deficiency. But such is not the case. Primitive religions, like primitive people, are artless and simple in religious joy as in all the aspects of their life. Developed races increasingly discover the seriousness of living, and become correspondingly reflective, if not positively gloomy. Religion shares this transformation. But those religions in which salvation is a prominent idea, and whose nature is such as to satisfy at once the head and the heart, restore joyousness as a necessary consequence. While certain aspects of Christianity certainly have a gloomy look,—which its critics are much disposed to exaggerate, and then to condemn,—yet Christianity at heart is a religion of profound joy, and this feature shows itself in such universal festivals as Christmas and Easter. Even though the Japanese popular religious life showed itself exclusively in festivals and on occasions of joy, therefore, that would not prove them to be inherently lacking in religious nature.

But there is another set of phenomena, even more impressive to the candid and sympathetic student. It is the presence in every home of the "Butsu-dan," or Buddha shelf, and the "Kami-dana," or God shelf. The former is Buddhist, and the latter Shinto. Exclusive Shintoists, who are rare, have the latter alone. Where both are found, the "I-hai," ancestral memorial tablets, are placed on the "Butsu-dan"; otherwise they are placed on the "Kami-dana." The Kami-dana are always quite simple, as are all Shinto charms and utensils. The Butsu-dan are usually elaborate and

beautiful, and sometimes large and costly. The universality of these tokens of family religion, and the constant and loving care bestowed upon them, are striking testimony to the universality of the religion in Japan. The pathos of life is often revealed by the faithful devotion of the mother to these silent representatives of divine beings and departed ancestors or children. I have no hesitation in saying that, so far as external appearances go, the average home in Japan is far more religious than the average home in enlightened England or America, especially when compared with such as have no family worship. There may be a genuine religious life in these Western homes, but it does not appear to the casual visitor. Yet no casual visitor can enter a Japanese home, without seeing at once the evidences of some sort, at least, of religious life.

It is impossible for me to believe, as many assert, that all is mere custom and hollow form, without any kernel of meaning or sincerity. Customs may outlast beliefs for a time, and this is particularly the case with religious customs; for the form is so often taken to involve the very essence of the reality. But customs which have lost all significance, and all belief, inevitably dwindle and fade away, even if not suddenly rejected; they remain as "survivals," as Prof. Tyler has happily called them; they leave their trace indeed, but so faintly that only the student of primitive customs can detect them and recognize their original nature and purpose. The Butsu-dan and Kami-dana do not belong to this order of beliefs. The average home of Japan would feel itself desecrated were these to be forcibly removed. The piety of the home centers, in large measure, about these expressions of the religious heart. Their practical universality is a significant witness to the possession by the people at large of a religious nature.

If it is fair to argue that the Christian religion has a vital hold on the Western peoples because of the cathedrals and churches to be found throughout the length and breadth of Christendom, a similar argument applies to Japan and the hold of the religions of this land upon

its people. For over a thousand years the external manifestations of religion in architecture have been elaborate. Temples of enormous size, comparing not unfavorably with the cathedrals of Europe as regards the cost of erection, are to be found in all parts of the land. Immense temple bells of bronze, colossal statues of Buddha, and lesser ones of saints and worthies innumerable, bear witness to the lavish use of wealth in the expression of religious devotion. It is sometimes said that Buddhism is moribund in Japan. It is seriously asserted that its temples are falling into decay. This is no more true of the temples of Buddhism in Japan, than of the cathedrals of Christendom. Local causes greatly affect the prosperity of the various temples. Some are falling into decay, but others are being repaired, and new ones are being built. No one can have visited any shrine of note without observing the large number of signboards along either side of the main approach, on which are written the sums contributed for the building or repairing of the temple. These gifts are often munificent, single gifts sometimes reaching the sum of a thousand yen; I have noticed a few exceeding this amount. The total number of these temples and shrines throughout the country is amazing. According to government statistics, in 1894 the Buddhist temples numbered 71,831; and the Shinto temples and shrines which have received official registration reached the vast number of 190,803. The largest temple in Japan, costing several million dollars, the Nishihongwanji in Kyoto, has been built during the past decade. Considering the general poverty of the nation, the proportion of gifts made for the erection and maintenance of these temples and shrines is a striking testimony to the reality of some sort of religious zeal. That it rests entirely on form and meaningless rites, is incredible.