

## **Ethical Relationships (II): From the Meiji Period to the Present**

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In last year's *Theologia Diakonia* (XXX — 1996) I wrote about "Ethical Relationships through the Tokugawa Period." There, I briefly considered Japanese ethics from its ancient beginnings through the Tokugawa Period. Now, in this second installment on ethical relationships, I want to consider the same issue during the Meiji Period up to the present.

### **Bushido, Samurai, Hagakure**

When feudalism was formally established, the professional group of warriors come into glory. *Bushido* literally means the way of the warrior. This idea of "the way" has had a profound influence upon the Japanese throughout history. We have *Shinto* — or the way of the kami ; *shodo* — the way of writing; *sado* — the way of tea, and so forth. During the Tokugawa Era, the way of the *samurai*, called *Bushido* was born and became an ethical consciousness for the warriors, and this thinking was deepened through contact with Confucianism.

For the samurai, with their idea that archery, horsemanship, and other martial arts were forms of spiritual training, Confucianism was a means by which to cultivate inwardly an outlook and state of mind that would reinforce their skills as fighters. Consequently, they gave to their Confucian-oriented ethical code the name *Bushido*.<sup>(1)</sup>

This elite group was taught that they were to be models of virtue for the common people. There was an expectation placed upon them that they would lead austere lives, submit themselves to rigorous self-discipline, and serve their lord without question.

The *Bushido* was an unwritten and semi-articulate code of chivalry, binding even unto death. Actually it probably started out to be a few maxims handed down by word of mouth. It was not founded on the intellect of only one individual, but was a growth coming out of decades of military people and their thinking. This class became conscious of its role as the embodiment and protector of morality.

The essentially religious aspect of the *Bushido* can be seen in the *Hagakure*, an epitome of *Bushido* that was written in the early 18th century in the fief of Nabeshima, in the southern part of Japan. A few quotes from the *Hagakure* will help indicate the degree of loyalty present within the samurai. Maybe the most famous saying is "*Bushido* consists in dying — that is the conclusion I have reached." Other equally astonishing quotes are:

Never in my life have I placed mine own thoughts above those of my Lord and master. Nor will I do otherwise in all the days of my life. Even when I die I will return to life seven times to guard my Lord's house. We have sworn to do four things namely:

- 1) We will be second to none in performance of our duty.
- 2) We will make ourselves useful to our Lord.
- 3) We will be dutiful to our parents.
- 4) We will attain greatness in charity.<sup>(2)</sup>

The attitude toward death is closely related to the mystical state that is found once you go beyond life and death. If you are determined to die, death has no sting, and the self is eliminated. This part of the thinking

of the *samurai* is influenced from Zen Buddhism. Another quote from the *Hagakure*:

Every morning make up thy mind how to die. Every evening freshen thy mind in the thought of death. And let this be done without end. Thus will thy mind be prepared. When thy mind is always set on death, thy way through life will always be straight and simple. Thou wilt perform thy duty; and thy shield will be stainless.<sup>(3)</sup>

It seems that “dying” as used in the *Hagakure*, means doing one’s duty, ever ready to lay down one’s life for the master, concentrating on the task at hand, and taking all the responsibility upon oneself at the peril even of one’s life. Death in the service of one’s lord had from a religious standpoint, almost a saving quality to it.

As a point of reference and interest, I would like to present a quote to samurai women, which is a parallel to the *Bushido* of men. The following quote comes from the *Onna Daigaju* of Kaibara Ekiken, which was considered the standard work used in the education of women.

A woman must be ever on the alert and keep a strict watch over her own conduct. In the morning she must rise early, and at night go late to rest. Instead of sleeping in the middle of the day, she must be intent on the duties of her household, and must not weary of weaving, sewing, and spinning.... In her capacity of wife, she must keep her husband’s household in proper order. If the wife be evil and profligate, the house is ruined. In everything she must avoid extravagance, and both with regard to food and raiment must act according to her station in life, and never give way to luxury and pride.<sup>(4)</sup>

Returning back to the idea of death for the *samurai*, suicide was seen as not only an appropriate way to express your loyalty to your lord, but it was also the best way to show your sincerity. *Seppuku* (self-immolation by disembowelment) was a sign of new life. Nitobe tells how the stomach was chosen as the part of the body used in this ritualized suicide. It was based on an old anatomical belief that the seat of the soul was to be found in the stomach. The spirit of the person was felt to dwell somewhere in this region. By committing *seppuku* the person was saying, "I will open the seat of my soul and show you how it is in there. See for yourself whether it is polluted or clean."<sup>(5)</sup>

Death involved the matter of honor, and was accepted as a key solution to the solution of many complex problems faced by the *samurai*. As Nitobe states, "Seppuku was not a mere suicidal process. It was an institution, legal and ceremonial. An invention of the middle ages, it was a process by which warriors could expiate their crimes, apologize for errors, escape from disgrace, redeem their friends, or prove their sincerity."<sup>(6)</sup>

Even in more contemporary Japan, individuals continue to use suicide as a means to save face and escape disgrace. In years past many school principals have committed suicide because of fires in their schools, which threatened the picture of the emperor, which was placed in every school. There was even a man who had inadvertently named his son Hirohito — the given name of the last late emperor, who killed himself and his child. In this fashion, suicide will clear one's name and reinstate his or her memory. In the West we view suicide as self-destruction, and a submission to despair. But many Japanese see it as an honorable and purposeful event. It is a person's final statement of courage and resolution.

### **Filial Piety, Loyalty, and Obligation**

One of the most important social virtues taken over from Confucianism was that of filial piety. In Japan, this was borrowed and used to reinforce and expand already existing ideas about the family. In Japan,

children traditionally have been brought up to be dependent on the family and loyal to the parents. However, this loyalty took on new meaning as it was imported into the country. In specifying the rules between inferiors and superiors, Confucian ethics laid emphasis on the obligations of the one in the subordinate position. This meant the retainer owed loyalty to the lord, and the child was to be obedient to the parents. In practice, often there was a clash with the ethical demand for loyalty and the demand of filial piety. In China, Confucian ethics made obedience to the parents the primary human duty. In Japan, loyalty to one's lord took precedence to the loyalty demanded by the family. Later in the Meiji Period, rulers insisted that the entire Japanese nation was like a family, so loyalty to the state was necessary. F. Calvin Parker writes:

The keystone in the arch of military virtues was loyalty. This was the organizing principle by which the samurai belonging to the same clan were united in one body, as in the ancient clan morality. The samurai owed his lord complete, unquestioning, unconditional loyalty. If this loyalty conflicted with family ties, the family — parents, wife, children, whoever — had to be sacrificed. The bond between a samurai and his lord was the supreme ethical bond.<sup>(7)</sup>

The following quote shows how a clash for loyalty could be resolved. It comes from Nichiren: "... when a father opposes the sovereign, dutiful children desert their parents and follow the sovereign. This is filial piety at its highest."<sup>(8)</sup> It is almost as if a child is trained in filial piety in order to be loyal to a master later in life. Feudal lords would often look for a loyal retainer among those considered the ones who respected filial piety the most.

Later with the breakdown of the feudal system, the imperial house and line (the emperor) became the goal of all loyalty. The Japanese

emperor asserted that the imperial line was directly descended from the *kami*, and by virtue of this was the source and basis of all legitimacy in all matters related to the government. Therefore all Japanese people owed allegiance to the emperor. The emperor was held up as not only the sovereign but also the father figure to whom all subjects should relate to as such. In this way the whole country was viewed as a family state or *kazoku kokka*. Ultimate power resided with the emperor. D. C. Holtom, talking about constitution of the empire writes:

We consider first the dogma of unbroken divine imperial sovereignty. This is the primary dictum of all Japanese education and the foundation on which the entire state is erected. The first article of the written constitution of the empire, promulgated in 1889 reads: "The Empire of Japan shall be reigned over and governed by a line of Emperors unbroken for ages eternal." The third article reads: "The Emperor is sacred and inviolable."<sup>(9)</sup>

By the 1930's when the militarists came into control of the nation, the teachings of filial piety, loyalty and industry were molded into a strong form of nationalism. At times this became blind loyalty to superiors and veneration of the emperor. Ruth Benedict relates a story about *chu* (loyalty to the emperor.) :

'He speaks for the Emperor' is a phrase that invokes *chu* and is probably a more powerful sanction than any other modern State can invoke. Lory describes an incident of peacetime Army maneuvers when an officer took a regiment out with orders not to drink from their canteens without his permission. Japanese Army training place great emphasis on ability to march fifty and sixty miles without intermission under difficult

conditions. On this day twenty men fell by the way from thirst and exhaustion. Five died. When their canteens were examined they were found to be untouched. 'The officer had given the command. He spoke for the Emperor.'<sup>(10)</sup>

To Westerners, this kind of loyalty may seem ridiculous, but to the Japanese it was expected and usually given. The reason is that traditionally all relationships in Japan revolve around obligation.

Ruth Benedict, the American ethnologist, has done the most definitive work on obligations and their reciprocals. However it is only fair to also give a criticism of her work. Jean Stoetzel writes, "While praising the penetration of the great American ethnologist, the Japanese have not been sparing of criticism, and have especially taken her to task for selecting too narrow a base for her study, for paying too little attention to the population as a whole, and for relying on documents supplied by intellectuals brought up in the *samurai* tradition."<sup>(11)</sup> Even with such criticism, I believe Benedict's work is helpful in getting a feel for some of the relational pressures the Japanese people feel. Her illustrations probably more readily reflect pre-war Japan better than post World War II individuals.

Using Benedict's scheme we have:

*On* — a debt or obligation that is passively incurred. These can come from the emperor, one's parents, lord, teacher, or from any contacts one has in life.

*Gimu* — One of the reciprocals of *on*. This repayment of the obligation is only partial and there is no time limit. *Chu* is duty to the emperor, the law, or Japan. There is also *ko* which is duty to parents and ancestors.

*Giri* — These debts are regarded as having to be repaid with mathematical equivalence to the favor received, and there are time limits by which this must be done. This can further be divided into *giri-to-*

the-world, and giri-to-one's-name.

The last category of *giri* is strictly a Japanese idea, which does not come from Confucianism or Buddhism. Loyalty, which used to be paid to one's lord is now used in the fulfilling of many different kinds of obligations to a variety of people. Today it is often used in phrases indicating resentment that one must repay *giri* against one's wishes. Often you will hear talk about how people are obliged to do something. Since there is no direct translation of this term *giri*, Benedict takes a parallel from the West. she compares it to paying back money that one has borrowed. In the financial world, one must pay back the loan by keeping up with his or her payments. If not, bankruptcy is the penalty for failure. The Japanese would consider a person as bankrupt if her or she did not repay *giri*. Whatever we say about the Japanese understanding of obligation, one thing is clear. In Japan, the first virtue is a sense of moral obligation that is expressed in the rather complicated scheme laid out in the above way.

### **Ethics in Modern Japan**

Now I want to proceed to modern Japan and look at what factors influence the contemporary ethical situation in Japan. Much of contemporary Japan has been influenced by the thinking of the *Bushido*. In many different ways, the morals of *Bushido* have filtered down and acted as leaven among the common people. The thoughts and actions of the *samurai* began in the elite class, but gradually became the inspiration for the nation as a whole. All of intellectual and moral Japan was influenced directly or indirectly by the former warrior class.

In 1890, the Imperial Rescript on Education intended to serve as the foundation for the moral education of the people. Within this document we find a compromise between the more traditional and the modern views.

In this imperial rescript a central place is given to the Five

Relations of Confucianism and the moral responsibilities they involve. For approximately a quarter of a century following the Meiji Restoration, Japan took Western civilization as its guide in a number of areas, but in the area of human relations, where the basic principles of social organization and morals are found, traditional values were preserved intact. In the households, villages, and other long-established institutions this was perhaps to be taken for granted, but even in the new enterprises begun in accordance with the government's industrialization policy, the indigenized Confucian ethic principles calling for devoted loyalty and gratitude in the relation of subordinate to superior continued unbroken.<sup>(12)</sup>

At the beginning of the 20th century, those in control became concerned with "the moral obligations of the people" (*kokumin dotoku*.) At this time the government designated certain textbooks on moral responsibilities, using the Imperial Rescript on Education as a guide. The four social classes of earlier times were abolished, and theoretically at least, all people were considered equal. Now the loyalty and obedience to the emperor, who was considered the sovereign was extended to all Japanese. And simultaneously, the code of the previous *samurai* class was now put forth as the right and duty of each and every citizen.

By the end of World War II, when the American military occupied Japan, the morality that had been taught was now removed from the public schools because of the strong nationalistic tendencies. But even as early as 1946 cries for moral teachings were heard from educators. In 1958 the Ministry of Education finally approved a number of series of books for ninth graders to improve the moral education. This was done on a voluntary basis. These books contained no overt nationalism, even though much of the writing seemed to aim for a sense of national identity.

In the text itself the Japanese are portrayed as inferior to other

people in areas such as littering and being considerate of others. In one chapter called "The Fine Person," we see this type of person who "constantly tries to improve himself. He does his work faithfully and without bringing offense to others. He is always considerate of others but not so fearful of offending that he forgets his own rights and privileges."<sup>(13)</sup>

The public school teachings on morality seem much closer to the Western world than were found prior to the war. There was also an emphasis upon looking at morals which if broken, would injure the whole society rather than segments of the society or individuals.

I am convinced that much did change after the war but remnants of the social order remained. Overt loyalty was no longer given to a sovereign, but I see this loyalty being transferred to the work place. In fact, I would go so far as to say that loyalty to the family now takes second place, after the work place. The consideration of superiors and inferiors is very much well and alive in business. Until recently, once you entered a company, you did so for life. In many ways the company worked for became the replacement for the feudal lord of the Tokugawa period. As a *samurai* was willing to give his life for the lord, a Japanese businessman is willing to spend long hours at the office in order for his company to be number one. To the chagrin of many businesses in the west, the *samurai* spirit is still very much alive even today.

There is still a strong sense of group dynamics that is present in Japan. This emphasis on the group rather than on the individual has been talked about by numerous authors. In *Twelve Doors to Japan*, Richard Beardsley notes the following:

Social life throughout Japan is noted for the solidarity of group associations. To be Japanese is to be involved in close, complex, and enduring relationships with one's family, one's neighbors, and other specific associates.<sup>(14)</sup>

Above and beyond this is the placing of personal wants behind the needs and requirements of the group. What might be considered an act of self-sacrifice in another culture is understood as an expected act of group loyalty in Japan:

Living alone without group support is subjectively as well as objectively difficult for persons deeply conditioned to putting group needs ahead of their own wants, and the same conditioning makes persons emotionally dependent on external reinforcement of their self-images. Hence, one cannot ease the guilt of failure to meet group expectations by running away for one carries one's guilt along and at the same time removes the support for one's superego.<sup>(15)</sup>

Another quote related to collectivity comes from Reischauer:

In theory, the individual does not even exist as an individual but only as a member of certain larger groupings — family, school, community, or nation. There are no individuals but only sons and fathers, students and teachers, citizens and officials, subjects and rulers.... The Japanese whenever possible avoid individual decisions and individual responsibility. Group decisions and group responsibility seem to him the only way to achieve group interests.<sup>(16)</sup>

From the above quotes I think the Japanese cannot truly understand themselves as individuals, but obtain a sense of identity only as a member of some group. Ideally any person should think and act with family (or group) interests ahead of personal interest. The interests of the family or group and the interest of the individual is one and inseparable. Historically a farmer or single family could not live independently, but needed to

cooperate to survive. In this way, value became attached to the continuance of the group rather than to individuals. Likewise in regards to morality, Japanese ethics is social and not individual. Sincerity, harmony, and peace can only come into existence through interpersonal relationships. Therefore, since ethics in Japan is social, one must win the approval of the group or be ostracized. Loyalty to the group is paramount.

### Situational Ethics

Since the Japanese push for consensus and harmony, this naturally leads to a situational type of ethic. If someone is proven right and another proven wrong, that does not lead to a sense of harmony. And that may be a major reason why the Japanese are not a litigious people. Spae quotes from a book on Japanese law:

Litigation based on universalistic standards is felt, even now, to be incompatible with the demands of a society in which the social nexus is basically local and individualistic. The contingency of each man's role with that of another has led to the need for subordination of individual desires in favor of group agreement. Hence, the role of authority — upon which, in the final instance, depends the definition of societal good or evil — has been one of reconciliation between the litigating parties, and it has been patriarchal rather than despotic. Moreover, it could not be exercised by an application of universal rules but only by a consideration of the situational, i.e., human, factors involved.<sup>(17)</sup>

Kawashima Takeyoshi, writing about the notion of law in Japan, also emphasizes the importance of harmony over that of an individual's right.

In a concept of social obligation which does not have

the counterbalancing notion of "right," the interest of the individual is not made distinct and fixed. Here, an individual is not considered to be an independent entity. Rather, his interest is absorbed in the interest of the collectivity to which he belongs, and the interest of the collectivity is recognized as having primary importance, while the interest of the individual has merely secondary importance.

Under this notion of the individual, there has been no place for the concept of "human right." This does not mean, however, that a sense of respect for the honor, life, and feelings of other persons did not exist in traditional Japan.... But what makes these notions differ from the idea of "human rights" in Western society is that the essential element of the concept of "human right" is the emphasis on the notion of "right" in the sense that every individual is endowed as a human being per se with human "rights" by which he can demand that other people, particularly his own government, respect, or refrain from infringement upon, the interests which are vital for his existence as a human being. This very nature of a human right never occurred in the traditional culture of the Japanese until the early years of the Meiji period (1878-1912).<sup>(18)</sup>

As was seen at the beginning of this paper, moral value of an action differs according to the object, the time, the place, and the intention of the heart. Ethical categories which are so vitally important in our Western society, really do not exist in the Japanese understanding. This kind of thinking that we find with the Japanese, rejects a fixed and universal law, and concentrates on the particular situation at any given moment. The means that a Japanese uses to obtain a worthy end, is what is really important. When situations or circumstances change, the Japanese readily

and easily change. Changing midstream is not a moral issue for them. There is no one and only right way of doing something that does not change from age to age. Truth is only partial and there is never any proof that something is absolutely right or wrong. Decisions are always being made with incomplete evidence. Floyd Ross tells us:

This can be called a *contextual* approach since the context plays such an important part in the decision. The *Shinto* ethic can also be called an ethic of *intention* in that great stress is put on the motivation, the inner springs of action. The heart-mind must be right. One must have meditated upon his proposed action seriously, undergoing purification and then approaching *kami*. Then one can perform the action.<sup>(19)</sup>

Part of the Japanese reticence to depend upon fixed laws and moral understandings is the fact that loyalty is to a relationship and its structure instead of to abstract rules and principles. The relational and human nature of each particular situation must be taken into account before any decision can possibly be made. If you remember, traditional ethics depended upon the concept of sincerity. The truly sincere mind, which is simple and fresh will intuitively perceive the correct action to each situation as it arises.

F. Calvin Parker sums up the Japanese understanding of their ethics well when he writes:

Traditional Japanese ethics is relative, not absolute. It is situational, contextual, realistic, almost opportunistic, not universal or legalistic. True, universal principles have been advocated since the coming of Buddhism and Confucianism, and the rigid moral system imposed by the Tokugawa rulers (and the later militarists) was somewhat legalistic. But principles have never been taken in an absolutist sense, with

the possible exception of the loyalty principle. They have always yielded to particularism. Goodness or badness is a relative matter, determined by the social situation rather than a set of commandments. A change in circumstances means a change in ethics. The Japanese soldiers in World War II were thoroughly indoctrinated in the virtue of dying for the emperor, but when captured alive against their wishes, they proved to be model prisoners, fully cooperating with their captors. Another indication of relativity in ethics is that when a conflict arises, it is assumed that all persons involved are to some degree at fault.<sup>(20)</sup>

What has been part of the Japanese ethic traditionally, and is still present in contemporary Japan is the avoidance of open conflict and confrontation, and the striving for mutual understanding and consensus. This has become clear even in 1997 with the discussion of *sokaiya* (racketeers). These individuals receive large payoffs from major companies as rewards for cooperating in the smooth proceedings of the companies annual shareholder meetings. Huge amounts of money have been paid to prevent open conflict and confrontation.

### Summary

Much of Japanese ethical thinking has remained unchanged over the centuries. And this way of thinking is other than what the West is used to using, which can be confusing and frustrating. Ethics, rituals, customs, and manners all are thrown together and the distinction between one and another is not distinct. One thing we do know about Japanese ethics, is that ethics comes under the social and relational realm and not under the religious. The Japanese understanding of sin is not so much tied up with guilt before a transcendent being, but rather a form of pollution that needs to be purified through various rituals and rite.

In the end, the Japanese are looking for harmony, which is peace within one's self, and peace with those with whom the person relates. In this way, there is not so much an ethic of ends or means, but rather one that emphasizes maintaining peace and harmony with others. When no sense of opposition is experienced, this is a peaceful state. And it does not matter so much how you got there, but the fact that the harmony exists.

In order to reach such a condition, the Japanese have placed importance especially upon filial piety and loyalty, with loyalty being primary. In this scheme of things, each person has a station in life with expectations. If each individual fulfills their own position or role in life things will run smoothly. Historically those in superior positions have been expected to act from benevolence and those in subordinate places have been counted on to act with obedience. When all act and think with the group in mind, rather than the individual, things usually run well. In this way, the Japanese ethic can be called a social ethic. Over time, filial piety has remained fairly constant, and loyalty took on more importance once Confucianism reached Japan. We have seen how loyalty has been given to the feudal lords, superiors and to the emperor. Even today this loyalty is overtly expressed in the business world.

As I reflect back on Japan and the way the Japanese relate to one another, it makes sense to me, but only when viewed and understood from the context from which their system is derived. It reminds me of a young boy who played marbles with his friends. They had their rules which, when were closely followed, allowed them to play without difficulties. When this boy moved to a different state, he started playing marbles with his new friends. Suddenly he was being told that his rules were "wrong" and if he was going to play with these friends he would have to learn the real rules. Both sets of rules worked in their own context, but they couldn't be brought together and work simultaneously. Japanese ethics work, but when seen and interpreted from a Western frame of mind, Western ethics and those of the Japanese don't mix.

## NOTES:

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- (3) Ibid. p.38
- (4) Takaishi, Shingoro. *Women and Wisdom of Japan*. London: Murray, 1905, pp.40-41.
- (5) Nitobe, Inazo. *Bushido: The Soul of Japan*. New York: The Knickerbocker Press, 1905, pp.112-116.
- (6) Ibid., p.116
- (7) F. Calvin Parker. "Traditional Japanese Ethics," in *The Christian Gospel and Its Ethical Implications for Japanese Society*, p.33.
- (8) Quoted from N.R.M. Ehara in "The Awakening to the Truth" or *Kaimokusho by Nichieren*.
- (9) Holtom, D. C. *Modern Japan and Shinto Nationalism: A Study of Present-Day Trends in Japanese Religions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1943, p.7
- (10) Benedict, Ruth. *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*. Rutland: Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1946, p.129.
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- (12) Agency for Cultural Affairs, p.118
- (13) Ibid., p.127.
- (14) Beardsley, Richard, and John W. Hall. *Twelve Doors to Japan*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1965, pp.361-365.
- (15) Ibid.
- (16) Reischauer, Edwin O. *The United States and Japan*. 3rd ed. New York: The Viking Press, 1965, p.150.
- (17) Spae, Joseph. *Shinto Man*. Tokyo: Oriens Institute for Religious Research, 1972. This is taken from a quote in *Law of Japan*, edited by Arthur Taylor van Mehren, (Tuttle, 1964.)
- (18) Kewashima Takeyoshi. "The status of the Individual in the Notion of Law, Right, and Social Order in Japan," in *The Japanese Mind*, Ed. by Charles Moore., pp.264-265.
- (19) Ross, Floyd H. *Shinto: The Way of Japan*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1965, p.108.
- (20) F. Calvin Parker, p.38.