

Japan

A Christian Perspective

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The defining moment in the formation of the Japanese culture was the typhoon of 1281 AD that destroyed Kubla Khan's fleet shortly after it arrived off the coast of Japan. That armada consisted of 4400 ships and was, by far, the largest the world had ever seen. Four thousand of those ships were sunk or destroyed by the storm. The significance of the event was dramatically increased by the fact that it was the second time Kubla Khan's intended invasion of Japan had been stopped short by a typhoon. The first occurred in 1274 AD. That two attempted invasions were met with two destructive typhoons during a period when no other known country was spared defeat by Kubla Khan established the typhoons as, "kamikazes," or divine winds. Because the event was a real and overwhelmingly dramatic experience for all the Japanese defenders in the area, it could not be doubted, nor could its importance be lessened by intellectual reinterpretation. The stories were told and retold, and inevitably a deep conviction emerged from within the Japanese that Japan was spared by divine winds because it was a divine nation. Such was the depth and strength of that conviction it became the formative power in the Japanese culture.

Prior to the destruction of Kubla Khan's armada the Shinto religion was a loosely defined collection of religious practices with no belief in a divine being, or beings. After the "divine winds," Shinto became exclusively identified with Japan and the carrier of Japanese idealism. As late as May 2000, then Prime Minister of Japan, Yoshiro Mori, created a political uproar when he said in a speech to a group of Shinto priests that Japan was a, "divine nation." He spoke those words to a group of Shinto priests because they were the very people committed to "reminding" the Japanese people that Japan was a "divine nation."

Centuries after the "divine winds," a Shinto priest was asked why Shinto had no moral code. The answer was, "Japan is the moral code." A perfectly logical statement when it was understood that Japan was established as a "divine nation" by; 1) a real event that contained no indication or manifestation of a divine being, 2) included no transmission of knowledge, and 3) contained no moral admonition or requirement. The consequent conclusion that Japan was a "divine nation," meant that whatever Japan did was an expression of the divine. Since there was no moral code by which to judge or evaluate the conduct of another, the custom emerged for an individual to commit suicide when

they brought dishonor on themselves, or when the military or business unit for which the individual was responsible did not exemplify the “divine stature” expected of Japanese. In the modern period the custom of suicide was mitigated into “taking upon oneself the humiliation of individual or group conduct that dishonored Japan.” A good example of that conduct was Emperor Hirohito’s request to General Douglas MacArthur, head of the Allied Occupation after World War II, that he alone was to be held responsible for Japan’s conduct during World War II. Another example was Yasumoto Takagi, President of Japan Airlines when the crash of a Japan Airlines jumbo jet on August 12, 1985, killed 520 people. As expected, he resigned from the Presidency of the Corporation, moved into modest quarters in downtown Tokyo, and spent the remainder of his years doing penance, and communicating the corporation's sympathy to the families of the victims.

Japan’s brutality during World War II, particularly their treatment of the Chinese during their invasion of that country in the late 1930's, was an emulation of the divine winds that established the Japanese culture. Those winds destroyed Kubla Khan’s armada with overwhelming brute force, and without a shred of mercy. Japan purposed to defeat China with an overwhelming brute force that showed no mercy.

Though Japanese values and behavior expressed during the modern period were clearly linked to that culture’s ancient tradition, there appeared to be a dramatic difference between the Japanese culture of 1281 AD to the restoration of the Meiji in 1868, and the mighty industrial culture which emerged after 1868. Westerners were certainly keen to portray Japan as having, “opened-up to the world,” after 1868. But the conclusion that Japan changed from a backward, undeveloped culture, to a modern culture, “like us,” derived more from the deep conviction that Western values were actually the “divine values,” and Japan had recognized the superiority of those values. That judgement appeared confirmed by the subsequent economic success of Japan. Nevertheless, Japan was intensely criticized by Western economists, businessmen, and politicians for failing to act according to Western values in solving its prolonged economic recession in its most recent history. What was the explanation for Japan’s apparent dramatic change in 1868, and its refusal to change in the modern period in order to extricate itself from recession?

Clearly Japan acted-out the conviction that it was a divine culture from 1281 AD to 1868 AD. That acting-out was characterized by a deep and enduring commitment to perfection in everything, even the most common and routine activities. The “Tea Ceremony,” a perfect expression of the act of drinking tea, was the quintessential expression of that commitment. But the quest for perfection extended to all activities including, but not limited to, sword making, pottery, carpentry, and purple dye creation. The commitment to perfection in their own expression was paralleled by a complete lack of interest in the activity and expression of any other culture. From the Japanese perspective, other individual humans, and other human cultures that were less than divine, could not threaten a divine nation, were not equal in any way to Japanese, and therefore were of absolutely no interest?

Even though the commitment to perfection was the most obvious and the most enduring attribute of Japanese culture, the most startling was its constant population during the period of 1281 to 1868. That population remained 20,000,000 for 582 years. From any conventional perspective it was an impossible consequence. Every other culture of that period encouraged population growth to strengthen and enlarge the military, and

therefore enable defense and cultural expansion. Even without a desire for political expansion, other agriculture based economies grew from within because individual families units considered their own growth in size as the best and easiest path to greater prosperity. Japan's constant population meant neither the culture nor the individual family units were interested in growth. The answer could not have been war, famine or disease because that would have required an appreciable rise above 20,000,000 and then a precipitous fall below 20,000,000. Even normal sexual relations between man and woman would have generated a steady increase in population. Therefore, a proactive custom was required to prevent that growth.

The social structure of Japan in 1281, and therefore through 1868, was comprised of a small ruling class, the Samurai or warrior class, and an agricultural class. A merchant class was nonexistent because there was neither industry nor foreign trade. Due to the extremely rugged geology, the population centers were limited to the proportionally small area along the coast. The interior was given to agriculture, but it was so rugged it offered no economies of scale, nor any opportunity for mechanization. Agricultural success during that 582 year period depended upon individual initiative on very small parcels of land. Established custom required a man and a woman to join together in working their small parcel of land. Babies were destroyed until the first son was born. All subsequent babies were destroyed until the father-mother-son unit achieved a degree of prosperity. At that point a female child would be allowed to live for the purpose of establishing a marriage relationship, and therefore an economic alliance, with another family. The lack of any economies of scale prevented family growth beyond such an alliance, and therefore established an effective limit to population. Japan's conviction that it was a divine nation legitimized that custom.

Japan's self identity was not challenged by any significant historical event, or completing ideology until Commodore Perry of the United States Navy entered Tokyo Bay with a fleet of five ships in 1853. That event did constitute a grave challenge. Not only did Perry enter Tokyo Bay unchallenged, his ships were far more advanced, and carried more firepower than anything Japan had seen or could conceive. And more serious than the physical attributes of the ships and weaponry, the ideological invasion was not prevented by natural forces. A key element in Japan's conviction that it was a divine nation, and the reason it made no effort to know the world around it, was the conviction it would be protected by natural and divine forces as it had in 1274 and 1281.

The humiliation for Japan got much worse. The emperor of Japan was at the center of Japan's belief in its own divinity. Since the Emperor was cast in a quasi divine role, yet was in fact an ordinary human, Japanese were never allowed to actually look at the Emperor. Anytime the Emperor passed in procession all Japanese but his personal entourage were required to kneel on the ground, and then bend over until their face touched the ground, with their hands placed alongside their eyes to further block their vision. During one such procession a sailor from one of Commodore Perry's ships was ashore, and remained standing and watched the Emperor pass. A Samurai came up behind him and lopped off his head with a sword without a word spoken. The incident created an immediate furor. Commodore Perry demanded the Emperor come down to his ship and personally apologize for the incident or war would be waged on Japan. After considerable delay and anguish the Emperor did apologize. That a divine figure of a divine nation could be subjected to such humiliation was unacceptable. The restoration of the Meiji in 1868 marked the beginning of redemption.

Japan had an urgent need for an industrial work force, but no conventional source for the required workers. There was neither a returning army that needed employment, nor an existing class of the unemployed. There was no consideration for importing workers because Japan's purpose was not the creation of an industrial nation per se, but the restoration of its divine identity. Therefore, any solution had to emerge wholly from within Japan. In fact, the ruling class turned to the agricultural class and offered to purchase the babies from the agricultural families that traditionally had been destroyed. Consequently, each of the original Japanese corporations began as nurseries under the supervision of Samurai. It was a very socially effective solution. The agricultural class was delighted with its new source of prosperity, and children that otherwise would be dead were now adopted by corporations committed to the restoration. The custom of life time employment, and the complete integration into and dependence of individuals upon the corporate culture was a natural and inevitable extension of the creation strategy. Japan's intended restoration of its divinity was made publically apparent during the lead-up to World War II. The attack on Pearl Harbor in 1942, which many military historian have criticized as ill-conceived, was at once a pay-back to the United States for the Japanese humiliation by Commodore Perry, and a theological statement of Japan's true stature and identity.

Therefore, Japan did not "open-up" to the values of the West, and did not acknowledge that Western values were superior or desirable. Rather Japan embarked on a grim and determined initiative to "make its values work and reclaim its divine status" no matter what the social and/or political cost. But that initiative began to falter toward the end of World War II. As the Allied Forces closed in on Japan, the Japanese responded with "kamikaze" pilots who flew their aircraft directly into enemy warships in suicide attacks. Kamikaze, of course, meant "divine wind," so the suicide attacks were at once a statement of Japan's foundation, and the belief that the demonstrated willingness to die for their nation would draw forth divine protection.

Rather the two atomic bombs dropped by the United States resulted in that country's third humiliation. On New Years Day, 1946, Emperor Hirohito publicly declared that he was not a divine being and Japan was not a divine nation. The post-war period began with Japan in a dependent relationship with the United States, but that dependency was soon to mutate into a symbiotic relationship. The corporate culture of lifetime family relationship created with the restoration of the Meiji in 1868, combined with Japan's centuries long tradition of perfection in the most routine tasks, once again transformed Japan into an industrial powerhouse. Japan needed the American consumer market as a counter-balance to its industrial acumen, for Japan's deep, intrinsic values would never manifest as a consumer market, nor as American style individualism. American style individualism was impossible in Japan because its sacred identity was a "divine nation." Individuals had no separate identity, and had meaning only as part of the whole. On the other hand, the consumer market in the United States was driven by American ideal of individualism. American individuals needed a limitless supply of inexpensive consumer goods to "keep pace" with other individuals . . . to maintain the appearance of equality, and even superiority. The economic alliance worked very well for both cultures for a number of years. By the 1980's Japan's economic ascent was so remarkable it was about to eclipse the United States. Japanese management style and corporate culture were held in awe by other industrial nations, who sought, unsuccessfully, to imitate their business practices. Once again the Japanese believed that had re-established their true stature in the world.

The symbiotic relationship between the two countries was not really working for either. America's need for inexpensive consumer goods was driving the American economy deeper and deeper into debt, and since that need was not inherently attached to Japan, it moved to the cheapest source available. That cheaper source emerged from the economic "globalization" that developed in the 1990's when Third World countries capitalized on their cheap labor force.

Japan's corporate culture was extremely successful in supplying the American consumer market through the 1980's, but Japan's deeply rooted belief in its divine character manifest in a passion for perfection that transformed its industrial product from cheap to quality. But it was still dependent on the American consumer market, which inevitably chose appearance over quality. Japan's industrial model could not prosper without a counter-balancing market that continually consumed more than it produced.

The failure of the initiative begun in 1868 and ended in military defeat in World War II, and the failure of the symbiotic relationship with the United States which had undergirded Japan's rise to a dominant industrial economy, have left that culture at a serious impasse. The deep instinctual inclination of the Japanese will play out in only two directions. There will emerge heroic efforts to "make the Japanese values and identity work no matter what the cost," and there will be increased expressions of resignation, despair, disillusionment, and violent bitterness.

Heroic efforts to reclaim Japan's identity as a divine nation have already manifest in the custom of "karoshi," that is, working oneself to death, and in the flirtations with Japan's aggressive military past by ex-Prime Minister Mori, and current Prime Minister Koizumi. This initiative will continue and will become more strident, however the proportion of the population that supports that initiative will steadily diminish. That steady decline in heroic aggression will be matched by a steady rise in the more individually oriented expressions of resignation, despair, disillusionment, and violent bitterness. Agreements, negotiated over the Internet, to commit suicide with a stranger represent that second instinctual direction. Both directions are self-destructive, yet inevitable.

Japan's rise, current impasse, and inevitable demise, followed a predictable pattern repeated by nearly every culture known to history. The rise and fall of Egypt under the Pharaohs and the rise and fall of Rome are appropriate examples. But there are many similar examples in the modern period. Stalin's brutality during the communist period in the U.S.S.R. was a sustained effort to "make the communist ideology work no matter what the cost." Hitler's rise to power after World War I was a sustained and brutal attempt to, "make the German ideology work no matter what the cost."

Though Japan's experience may have had many parallels, without new revelation it is destined for disintegration.

If the Japanese constructed the vision of a divine nation from the experience of the miraculous destruction of an overwhelmingly powerful conqueror, the driving force in that construction was a need for the divine, or more accurately a need for an absolute, that arose from the subconscious of the people that participated in that construction.

If that need for an absolute arose from the subconscious of the participants, it meant that need existed within them without their prior knowledge.

If the need for an absolute existed within those people without their prior knowledge, it meant they were created with that need and had not previously discovered it.

If those participants were created with a need for an absolute, it meant there existed in creation a true and pre-existent answer to that need.

The answer to that need is God.

If the answer to that need is God, is there a God who has demonstrated a knowledge of that need and took the initiative in communicating that answer to humans?

“How blest are those who know their need of God; the kingdom of Heaven is theirs.” Matthew 5:3, New English Bible.

And this is the great initiative, that Jesus Christ would die for us while we were still completely ignorant of our need for him.

The typhoons that protected Japan from Kubla Khan’s armada were indeed miraculous, and it was the intent of God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ to preserve Japan so that its experience could serve to communicate to humanity that:

Humans need God. If they are not told of that need and introduced to the living God, out of their subconscious yearning will emerge a false god, and that false god will destroy them.

Morality neither comes of itself nor is uniform across cultures. Morality is derivative behavior. It emanates from the group, event, knowledge, god, or God that bestowed meaning and significance. Immorality is the inevitable consequence of disillusionment, and the loss of meaning and significance. Jesus died for us before we knew him because he and God the Father knew humans could not . . . would not . . . be moral without first experiencing the love of God, and knowing their life had meaning and significance.

Failure of that which humans have bonded to as an absolute will always cause those who are so bonded to conclude the failure resulted from their inadequacy. They will strive for heroic and then for violent restoration. When those initiatives fail they will long to die . . .

“When this happens, men will long for death and not find it anywhere; they will want to die and death will evade them.” Revelation 9:6, New Jerusalem Bible.

But they will be kept alive so as to know their need for God, and to receive new life.

