



Mabel Palmer

Religions of the Orient

MY OBSERVATIONS OF THE RELIGIONS OF THE
VARIOUS PEOPLE ON THE OTHER SIDE
OF THE WORLD

Mabel Palmer



FOR an Occidental to gain an unbiased point of view of the religions of these various countries, their various beliefs must be accepted in the way they are presented by the native, and looked at thru his eyes, and one must forget his own prejudices and form no opinion until he is well on his way from it all. When we went to the temples or wats, or mosques, or wherever it might be, where these people on the other side of the world worshipped, we respected them and their belief in whatever they had been taught to believe.

We were very far from home and wanted to see how the people on the other side of the world lived. We wanted to study their customs and methods of living in every way possible, so, with that in mind, whenever we arrived in a town or city, we immediately would obtain some native who was as well educated as we could secure, and who acted as our personal guide during our stay there. Even tho we had with us on our trip from the time we left the U. S. A. a man who served as our tour manager, and tho he spoke fluently many of the languages of the different countries we visited, we always insisted that we have a first-class native guide who would see that we got in touch with the things of special interest attached to his country. And when these guides learned we were there in a constructive way and not to criticize and ridicule, we learned many things we would not have been able to have learned, had we assumed any other attitude. In Japan, we were fortunate to have as our guide a Japanese friend who gave us a very wonderful insight into his country and people, and thus made it much more interesting than it would have been otherwise.

The religions of the oriental countries interested us very much. My observations and studies of the religious beliefs made on our 'round-the-world trip were jotted down in a series of notes during our stay in, or after we had departed from, the scenes we had visited, and I had no intention of putting them down in book form.

But when it was decided that I should write a chapter for this book, I found it quite a task to attempt to explain the complicated religions

of the people of the many lands we visited. Many scholars have given a lifetime study to it, and books by the thousands have been written upon the subject, but if my observations arouse in you a deeper interest in humanity, or if it merely gives you an insight into how our brothers and sisters are striving for soul satisfaction on the other side of the world, and if it makes us more tolerant of all people, I shall feel this effort of bringing it to you is worth every moment that I have spent upon it.

So, in this article, I will not be able to go into each religion as minutely as I should like, for much of great interest could be told, it being an almost inexhaustible subject, but I shall attempt to set forth in abbreviated form an outline of these religious beliefs in each country it was our privilege to observe.

Japan

SHINTOISM



As found, in Japan, they were followers of two religions—Shintoism and Buddhism. Shintoism is the earliest form of Japanese worship, based on conception of the divinity of natural forces, and its development has resulted in Mikado worship, ancestor worship, and Japan worship. Shintoism is the native religion, while Buddhism was imported from India and China and Korea. The two religions are so thoroly combined in practice, that it is difficult to say how many are pure Buddhists and how many are pure Shintoists.

Every Japanese from his birth is placed by his parents under the protection of some Shinto deity, whose foster child he becomes, while the funeral rites are generally conducted according to the ancient ritual of the Shintoists.

Shintoism is a mixture of nature worship and ancestor worship. It has many gods and goddesses of the wind, the sea, fire, food, and disease, of mountains and rivers, trees and temples—several hundred deities in all.

Shintoism has scarcely any regular services in which the people take part, and its priests do not dress differently from ordinary laymen, neither do they shave their heads as the Buddhist priests do, and only when engaged in presenting the morning and evening offerings do they wear a special dress, which consists of a long loose gown with wide sleeves, fastened at the waist with a girdle, and sometimes a black cap bound round the head with a broad white fillet.

The priests are under no vows, do not have monasteries, and so many marry as a matter of course.

The services consist in the presentation of small trays of rice, fish, fruits, vegetables, rice-beer, and the flesh of birds and animals, and in the recital of certain formal addresses, partly laudatory and partly in the nature of petitions, in a most monotonous tone.

We asked the guide what they were saying in this droning tone while swaying from side to side; he said: "No one knows—none of the common people can understand it, even if they are taking part in the ritual." All they know is that they are praying for something they desire and in return the priest keeps on saying prayers for those who come for guidance. At the same time, he keeps a close watch for the stray sen (cents) that are thrown upon the altars to the various gods.

At some temples young girls perform pantomimic dances which are known as "kagura," and assist in the presentation of the daily offerings.

Preaching forms no part of its institutions, nor are the rewards and punishments of a future life used as incentives to right conduct. The continued existence of the dead is believed in; but whether it is a condition of joy or pain, is nowhere declared.

Shinto is a Chinese word meaning "the way of the gods," and was first adopted after the introduction of Buddhism, to distinguish the native beliefs and practices from those of the East Indian religion.

Shintoism is considered by many as not a religion, since it has no dogma, no founder, no ethical code, and no sacred book, altho they believe fully in the immortality of the soul. Their temples are of wood, with immense gable roofs and supported by columns in front of which is a torii, or gateway, of light skeleton-like posts and crosspieces at the top, with delicate curved lines, and usually painted red.

The absence of a code of morals is accounted for by the innate perfection of the Japanese people as having descended from the gods, having no evil inclinations to overcome, and whose manners and customs need no reform. The precepts of the different sects, which differ only in a few details of ceremony, are: "Be pure in heart and body; follow the impulse of your nature, and obey your emperor."

Shintoism (says an authority) "aims at the happiness of earthly life, and assumes that the souls of the departed can essentially aid in securing it. They are conceived, therefore, to be present and are summoned by those who come to them, by clapping of hands, a bell, a drum, etc. The Shinto gods are by no means the pure and exalted forms which Buddhism presents to us—no saints thru the overcoming of sensuous pleasures—but affected by all human feelings and weaknesses, and taking pleasure in everything that adds enjoyment and amusement to existence. Accordingly, their worshippers seek to delight them on their festivals, not only with meat and drink, but also by theatrical processions, pantomimes, and so on, and do not think it objectionable that streets leading to certain of their shrines contain houses dedicated to the worship of Aphrodite.

"But Shinto worship has an elaborate ritual and numerous rules as to purification. From the earliest period the cult exacted scrupulous cleanliness, indeed, we might say it regarded physical impurity as identical with moral impurity, and intolerable to the gods. It has always been a religion of ablutions. Japanese cleanliness has been maintained, and was probably initiated, by their religion. Most important of all Shinto ceremonies is the ceremony of purification, o-harai, as it is called, or 'casting out of evils.'"