II

The Way of the Gods and the Three Foreign Teachings

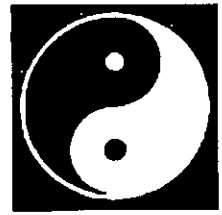
In Heian Japan of the time that the *Genji Monogatari* was written, there existed a curious blending of several religious strains.

To begin with, the native religion of Japan is Shintō 神道, literally "the Way of the Gods," according to which all the beautiful and vital manifestations of nature are deified. Furthermore, the living souls of departed ancestors were believed to pass into nature, thereby linking man and nature in a mystic union. Life and the forces of life in nature were glorified. Likewise, death and its forces of decay were abhorred and regarded as pollutants. At the top of the Shintō hierarchy, then as now, is the emperor who, as living descendant of the Sun Goddess and, therefore, grand ancestor of all the Japanese, is the high priest of Shintō and purest representative of the Way of the Gods on earth. In fact, the overwhelming concern of Shintō is with purity. Most of its rites deal with puri-

fication and lustration. Taboos, known as *mono-imi*, result when people or things are defiled by such negative forces as death, disease, and even menstruation, requiring elaborate rituals to restore their purity.

Very early, though, from China and Korea came three major modifications to Shintō. The first of these was Confucianism (Jukyō 儒教) which had a vast political impact from about A.D. 645 with the issuance of various imperial edicts that came to be known as the Taika Reform. Though superficially Confucianism shaped the Japanese bureaucracy and even the map of the capital, its severe ethics had little permanent effect on Heian religious tenets. It is true that the Doctrine of Filial Piety, which dictates strict observance of the loyalty and honor that should exist between members of a family, did become especially popular as it tended to fit into the Shintō sense of ancestral sanctity, but the cool logic of the Doctrine of the Mean and the relentlessly dispassionate concept of "the virtuous bureaucrat" did not flourish in Japanese soil.

Taoism, pronounced *dah oh ism*, (Dōkyō 道教) on the other hand, did make a strong impression. The magical formulas of Taoist rituals, in particular, were so similar to the familiar Shintō ceremonies that the Japanese readily adopted the Taoist obsession with astrological and numerological codes, adopting as well the *in-yō*, or yin-yang, explanation of nature's dualism. The yin-yang, visually symbolized in the *tomoe* crest, expresses the notion that reality exists in the dynamic tension or balance struck between passive



The yin-yang (in-yō) symbol.

(yin) and active (yang) forces. Taoism further teaches that there is no true purity, that opposites tend to converge, for in the midst of yin there is always yang (note the little white circle in the black comma), as in the midst of yang there is always yin. Although this seems to run against the grain of Shintō belief, as ever the Japanese have happily accommodated paradox when the truth is keenly felt or intuited.

Perhaps the best example of this penchant for accepting the incongruous can be seen in the third and most influential import from China: Buddhism or Bukkyō 佛教. While it is true that Buddhism originated in India, the Buddhism that had found its way to Japan by the tenth century was clearly a Chinese product. When we talk about Heian Buddhism, we must be careful not to confuse it with the well-known Zen Buddhism, which did not develop in Japan until long after the Tale was written. The primary sects, as seen in the *Genji Monogatari*, were Tendai and Shingon (esoteric) Buddhism.

If some of the other religious ideas introduced to Japan had non-Shintō elements, Buddhism seemed its very antithesis. While Shintō had almost a phobia about death and decay, Buddhism seemed determined to encourage morbid reflection. The way of the Buddha is to seek salvation by enlightenment, that is, by realizing that the beauties of nature and the physical pleasures of life are illusory and transient (a concept known as *mujōkan*). Man's material and emotional desires only tie him to a continuous cycle of rebirths. To seek enlightenment, man must put aside the things of this world and concentrate on the holy word of the scriptures, primarily the Lotus Sutra.[1] All efforts made to achieve enlightenment can, even if enlightenment itself is not achieved, benefit one in the next incarnation, and, conversely, evil deeds will assuredly follow one as a curse from one existence to the next. This concept of moral causality is known in Sanskrit as *karma* (a term used often in the Waley translation, but scrupulously avoided by Seidensticker). To the Heian mind *karma* neatly accounted for the apparent inequities in the world: why one man, despite his virtue, seemed to have nothing but troubles to live with, or why another was blessed with continuous satisfaction. It was also employed to explain such strong emotional affinities as when one falls in love at first sight, for people once bonded together in a previous life were likely to be pushed together by the force of *karma*. In fact, the term is often translated as "fate" because the Japanese were very fatalistic about the inevitable workings of *karma*.

Thus, in Buddhism all people are encouraged to put aside their family attachments (violating precepts of filial piety), divorce themselves totally from their material possessions, and take holy orders, so that upon their deaths they may be reborn as Buddhas on a lotus petal and escape forever the ignorance and desire of earthly existence. In *The Tale of Genji,* therefore, when reference is made to nuns and priests, we must remember that these were not a special caste or vocation as they are in Christian churches, but ordinary members of the court who, feeling that their lives or careers had come to an end, were preparing themselves for the final step by renouncing the world and trying to sever their karmic bonds.