CHAPTER TWO
THE JAPANESE RELIGIO-CULTURAL CONTEXT

Introduction

This chapter introduces three factors that provide essential background information for my investigation into Endo’s theology of inculturation. First, I give a historical sketch of Japanese religion. Secondly, I look at different types of Shinto and clarify aspects of koshinto that inform contemporary Japanese culture. This is important as koshinto with its modern, psychological, and spiritual meanings is the type of Shinto that I observe in Endo’s attempts at inculturation. In connection with this I introduce the Japanese concept of the ‘divine’, and its role in the history of Shinto-Buddhist-Christian relationships. I also go on to propose that koshinto plays a fundamental role in shaping both different types of womanhood in Japan and the negative theology that forms a background to Endo’s type of inculturation.

Outline of Features in Japanese Religious History

Japan’s indigenous faith is Shinto, which has its roots in the age prior to 300 B.C. The animistic beliefs of this primal religion developed into a community religion with local shrines for household and guardian gods, where people worshipped the divine spirits. Gradually people began to worship ideal kami, personal kami and ancestorial kami.\(^1\) This form of Shinto is frequently called ‘proto-shinto’. Confucianism was introduced to Japan near the beginning of the 5th century as a code of moral precepts rather than a religion.\(^2\) Buddhism came to Japan from India

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\(^1\) The Japanese word kami is usually translated into English by the term deity, deities, spirits, or gods. Kami in Japanese can be singular and/or plural. In this book I use the term with the same ambiguous meaning.

via China and Korea around the middle of the 6th century. Gaining imperial patronage, it went on to exercise great influence throughout the country and was able to develop and transform itself in relation to the surrounding Japanese culture. In the early 9th century Buddhism promoted the institutional synthesis of Shinto and Buddhism. In the Kamakura period (1192–1333), an age of great political unrest and social confusion, many new Buddhist sects emerged that offered hope of salvation to warriors and peasants alike. In the 16th century Christianity was brought to Japan by Jesuit missionaries and began to spread rapidly. However, Christianity was strictly proscribed during the period of national isolation from 1639–1853. In 1858 Christian missionaries were again allowed to enter the country, resulting in the second introduction of Christianity. A third period of Christian mission followed after Japan’s defeat in World War II in 1945. Freedom of religion was guaranteed to all under the Constitution in 1947. Several new religious movements appeared, some of them based on Shinto, some related to Buddhist sects, and others of mixed religious orientation. Christianity is very much a minority religion but actively involved in various social and cultural activities.

Shinto before the Introduction of Buddhism

Shinto 神道 (the way of the kami) is the name given to the Japanese indigenous faith. In Japan prior to 300 B.C. there was a proto-shinto religion, frequently named koshinto. The objects of worship at this stage of koshinto were neither gods nor goddesses, but rather the power of spirits. According to the Shinto perspective, the pure Japanese religious experience in ancient times can be found in their conceptualization of kami as spirits: a dynamic force. Divine spirits were believed to be present in all natural objects and phenomena, as well as in human beings. The ancient Japanese did not have a name for their indigenous beliefs, but they have existed continuously from before the founding of the

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3 The prohibition of Christianity started already in 1614 for the Japanese Kirishitans.
4 Article 20 of the Constitution. ‘Freedom of religion is guaranteed to all. No religious organization shall receive any privileges from the State, nor exercise any political authority. No person shall be compelled to take part in any religious acts, celebration, rite or practice. The State and its organs shall refrain from religious education or any other religious activity.’
5 Kannagara no Michi (神随らの道) in Japanese.