

# ONE

## Western Teetering and the Japanese Claim

THE MODERN PERIOD of exuberant Western and American expansion is over. A new, multicultural period of globalism and Asian entitlement has begun. In the midst of the vast uncertainties of this transitional time, some Japanese claim to have what America needs, to have, in fact, what is needed by all developed societies in the post-traditional, late twentieth century. The core of what they offer is mysticism, spiritual development as the necessary complement to the rational development that came out of the West.

In the social commentary in their own popular media, the Japanese address what they take to be the root of the many problems besetting our society now. They address not just the education problem or the family problem, not only the problems with leadership, work, and authority, or the several problems of a society based on materialism and consumption, but a deeper problem of which these are only expressions. They speak of our problem as a culture: our not really knowing how to live in the world community that has arisen from our own technologies and adventures. They speak of the problem of our moral disarray, political confusion, and religious unsteadiness, and the fact that in all three of these crucial subdivisions of culture we teeter between lethargy and fanaticism. It is at this root level that some in Japan perceive their superiority, and claim to have an orientation to life in general, a worldview, that other cultures can adopt and inevitably will have to adopt as they learn the hard lessons of this turbulent era.

It is important to understand this claim—what it is, why it is made, and what its benefits and dangers are. This importance is evident in immediately practical terms, as Japanese products and investors flood American markets. There is an undeniable vitality to the Far East, as though the energy of history itself were now focused through that region. And there is the simple fact that the Japanese are our neighbors now, if not just “down the road” then surely as fellow citizens in the new reality of humankind that is emerg-

ing in our time. We and they, as those who are among the first generations of world citizens, must learn to address and understand one another for the sake of peace and the future of our children.

The Japanese themselves have developed popular ways of engaging the question of their advantage in the new world situation: *nihonjin ron*, a theory of Japaneseness, appears as the topic of television series, books, and various forms of public discussion. A recent bestseller, for example, *The Japanese Brain: Its Singularity and Universality*, by Tadanobu Tsunoda, is an explicit attempt to demonstrate cultural superiority based upon racial superiority.<sup>1</sup> Clearly the Japanese claim is not without dangers.

One very effective forum in which to engage this claim in dialogue and benefit from what it has to offer, as well as to submit it to critical scrutiny, is the Kyoto school of philosophy. Very briefly put, the Kyoto school makes two basic points, each of which indicates the uniqueness of the Japanese position in a different way. First, because of the peculiar combination of Western and Eastern values that have intermingled there for some time, Japan is said to be "a kind of laboratory for an experiment in a future world culture."<sup>2</sup> Hence the Kyoto school has thought itself able to synthesize Eastern and Western perspectives, and thereby "to lay the foundations of thought for a world in the making, for a new world united beyond differences of East and West."<sup>3</sup> Perhaps the Kyoto school is in an especially advantageous position to pursue this ambitious work, since Japanese discursive philosophy is barely a century old, and since it was organized from the outset around the attempt to articulate Asian insights in Western philosophical categories.

If the first point about the Kyoto school has to do with the advantages of the location and previous experience of Japan as a laboratory for the future, the second has to do with content. Here the sense of superiority becomes explicit. Japan claims to have an answer that is appropriate to the conditions of all modernized societies, East and West, characterized as they are by technological rationalism, materialism, and implicit if not explicit atheism. What is this picture of a modernized society, and what is the Japanese answer?

The introduction of modern values to any society drives that society away from its traditional base. At first this movement away from tradition is unconscious and may even seem pleasant, as real or apparent gains in standards of living and public health develop, and as people orient themselves to modern values of consumption and production. It is only later that the problems are revealed: meaninglessness, alienation, "homelessness," diffuse anxiety—the well-documented horrors of post-traditional, secular, industrial-technological, consumer society. The Kyoto school understands these horrors in terms of encounter with Nothingness, and it holds that the experience of this encounter is unfamiliar to all traditional cultures *except* that of Japan.

The encounter with Nothingness that is induced by modernization disorients most societies, as is expressed in "anything goes" relativism, or in reactionary reassertions of what is supposed to have been lost, or in fascist attempts at delivering something new. But for Japanese culture the encounter with Nothingness is *not* new. In fact, it is at the very basis of traditional Japanese culture. For this reason it has been possible for Japan to modernize so successfully and without loss of its tradition. Here is the root of the feeling of superiority, and what Japan has to offer the world: a way of moving beyond the negativity of nihilism as an initial response to the encounter with Nothingness, into a positive understanding of Nothingness and thereby a "new world."

Eskimos have many different words for snow; so familiar and various is that stuff to them that distinction of its several types is required. Something similar is true in Japan—in Buddhism *per se*—with Nothingness, *sunyata*. Only a few of its many meanings, most of them preliminary at that, are negative. The other meanings are positive, so that the encounter with Nothingness can be the occasion for moving beyond the uncomfortable transitional quality of our period into an expansion of the human spirit and culture. But movement from the negative to the positive requires spiritual development, and hence the appropriate forms of support and guidance. This is what the Kyoto school claims to provide.