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What is the meaning of studying the religious conceptions of Émile Guimet (1838-1918) ?

Frédéric GIRARD

It is well known that Émile Guimet (1838-1925), a prominent figure in the history of oriental art and museology in France, had founded the museum named with his patronyme, the Musée Guimet, situated in an elegant and « chic » quarter of Paris and a very popular place, near Trocadéro, Eiffel Tower and Champs-Élysées Avenue, so that it has been considered and assimilated to an important center of tourism in France. But, on another side, by its museological conception, it can be said to have given influence and shape to the sensibility of its visitors concerning the Oriental religions and thought, from at least one century and half, so that this museum has a very great importance to understand and grasp the vision and conception of oriental world conception among Western people, the general cultivated public and also scientific personalities.¹

What is less known is the fact that Guimet embraced a great ambition in the scientific field of humanities, fine arts and history of religions. His image is associated with the one of a businessman of Lyon's high bourgeoisie - he is the son of a President of a society, known by the invention of « Guimet Blue » (a kind of indigo), which charge he inherited during all his lifetime -, interested in Egyptian and Oriental religions and archeology as, some so not benevolent critics said, an « amateur » animated by a mind of curiosity but with no professionalism, so that he has never been so seriously taken into consideration by Western scholars in whatever scientific field. As an exception is the pioneer work of Bernard Frank, my regretted and beloved master in Japanese studies, who tried to hold concerning Guimet another image, as the initiator of serious studies in Oriental and more specifically Japanese religions through his Bouddhist-and shintō's pantheon elaboration and analysis. One great achievement of Frank is his major work on the Japanese Buddhist Pantheon, written while trying to organize as a whole the collection of Japanese Religious art pieces of Guimet museum, and parallel to another great work on his own Japanese O-fuda's collection, as reflecting the Japanese religiosity.

In the continuity of the work of Frank, let prematurely unfinished,² I have brought out a questioning on the work of Guimet on new basis.³³ I have tried to treat with attention the dialogues that Guimet had with the representatives of the Japanese Buddhist sects and Shintō priests, during his travel in Far East countries, from the summer to the winter of 1876, the ninth year of Meiji Era, with the financial assistance of French government, through the Ministry of Public Instruction (that is Ministry of Education). First of all, I have edited the Japanese texts of the Japanese religious men who answered to Guimet's questions, a work which had not been done, or only in parts, from the year 1877. What can be said of Guimet is that, as a cultivated man, he was interested in Egyptian archeology from his young years and that his curiosity in the field of Egyptian religion, namely in the Isiac cults, composed from association of Egyptian, Greco-Roman, Celtic, Gallic cults, did not abandon him till his death. In his analysis of Isiac cults he was well informed, as another specialist Georges Lafaye (1854-1927),⁴ - he wrote a « Isis romaine »⁵ and « Les Isiaques de la Gaule »⁶, and he knew very well the philosophical studies of Athanasius Kircher (1601-1680), as *La Chine Illustrée*, of 1670, possessed by Guimet himself, on his syncretic and neoplatonician pantheon⁷ who can be said the forerunner of compared religions. He was himself hoping that his religious studies could sow

some happiness in the society.

When he started to the Far East, he had the common ideals of a French intellectual man, non attached or weakly attached to the Catholic faith, with republican ideas near the socialism of Fourier, that the society was composed of phalansteries, spontaneous communities directed with justice. But like some of his friends and relations, as the political men Jean Jaurès or Georges Clémenceau, he was in search of a philosophical and moral system which founded its metaphysics and ethical norms without a Supreme Being or God, as in Christianity, and an equivalent of this Supreme Being in a religion without as Buddhism was said to be in European countries at the time. In a sceptic, agnostic and atheistic France, which had developed the concepts of laicity, with a comitant notion of separation of the Church and the State, and of freedom of faith, Buddhism appeared as a religion with interesting atheistic philosophical system which succeeded in having harmonious and developed societies in the Far East part of the world.

Guimet held dialogues with Buddhist monks and Shintō priest, that is Zen, Jōdo, Jōdoshin, Nichiren, Tendai, Shingon, and Shintō priests of Kitano tenmangū. What were the questions of the French scholar ?

1/ Is there a creator or a creation ?

2. What is is power and virtue as a hotoke, a judge and subject of ther retribution of acts (karman); in other words, if there is no creator, what or who is the supreme authority who decides what is good and bad ?

3/ Is there miracles ?

4/ Is there a life after the death ?

5/ What are the principles of morality ?

6/ History and doctrines of the sect.

7/ What are the relations between Buddha and Deities.

8/ What are the sacred texts of the sect ?

(9/ The mudrā of Shingon sect).

What is the meaning of these questions, which are the same whatever was the sect concerned ? At the first, it seems that we have a dialogue Christianity-Buddhism, as in the Christian Century. But as Guimet was not a convinced Catholic, this hypothesis is too weak and non reliable. In his report to the French Ministry, Guimet asserted that the translation of the answers he received was a priority work.

But in fact, he only published the dialogues with the Nishihonganji representatives, Shimaji Mokurai (1838-1911), Akamatsu Renjō (1841-1919) and Atsumi Enkai (1840-1906)).⁸ What was the reason of this restrictive limitation has to be inquired on. It is wellknown that Mokurai visited Europe and introduced in Japan the decisive concepts of separation of Religion and State and of Freedom of Faith which had a determining influence at the time, but they are not discussed in these dialogues.

If we consider these facts, the best hypothesis is not it that, considering the inconciliable variety of the answers of Japanese religious men, he resigned his project because he had not an only one answer from his interlocutors to the questions.

For instance, the shintō had the God Master in the Middle of the Heaven (Amenominakanushi no kami) as a creator, but the Buddhist spoke mostly of Causality (*innen, inga, engi*), or of the manifestation of things by the mind-only (*yuishin*), or the principle of things (*shinnyo*), besides the Indian demiurges (Brahmā, and so on). The conclusion of Guimet, if there was one, was that the shintō had an answer but not clearly the Buddhist : nethertheless, the Buddhists held, through causality, a kind of Fatum or Destiny, as an overwhelming principle of the universe, a non-personal causative principle identified with innermost part of human mind (*yuishin, isshin, shinnyo*), and *karman*... In this case, the Buddhist had a kind of causal law as a principle of universe, like the occidental notion cosmic law, without the embarrassing hypothesis of a Personal God. From this point of view, the norm of good and bad has to be inquired in something else than the mind of man himself. And if, as Buddhists states, there are no

exception to this law (the miracles), this law is purely natural and universal. From this point, it can be asserted that the moral and ethical principles are in human mind only and not in an extrinsic authority as a personal deity. In the last question on the relationship between Buddhas and deities, there were no allusion to the actual situation of persecution of Buddhism and the answer were very quiet, stressing the superiority of Buddhas and bodhisattvas and the accessory role of Indian, Chinese and Japanese deities, where Guimet maybe hoped to have treated the relationship of Amenominakanushi no kami with the Buddhas and bodhisattvas. The very confused and muddled answers to his questions were there not the motivation of the non-publication of these dialogues, from which he could not extract any consistant conclusion on the matters he had in mind ? This matter was : instead of the Christian God, what principle Buddhists have you to suggest to us ? As he obtained no clear conclusion, he only had to make suppositions, that we can find in the publications of his collaborators, Félix Régamey (1844-1907)⁹ or Léon de Milloué (1842), but scarcely in the works of Guimet himself. That is also the reason why he had the *Summary of the Twelve Sects* of Fujishima Ryōon and the *Summary of the Eight Sects of Buddhism (Hasshū kōyō)* of Gyōnen (1240-1321) translated into French.¹⁰

Along the same lines of concerns of Kircher view of comparative religions, as all born from Egyptian religion and being ramifications of it, Guimet and some of his contemporary scholars in this field, developed on the model of the *Periodical Classification of elements* (1869) by Dmitri Mendeleïev (1834-1907), a kind of Classification Table of Religions of the world, as Maurice Vernes (1845-1923), with a philological methodology, in his « Introduction » of the first volume of the newly appeared review, the *Review of History of Religions*, that he co-founded with Guimet, the Maurice Vernes (1845-1923), in 1880. A methodology associated historical evolution, by gathering “positive” materials, and structural and philosophical schemes going beyond the past opposition of an evolved judeo-christianism and a primitive paganism : it was current at this time dominated by the “positivism” of Auguste Comte (1798-1857), Eugène Burnouf (1801-1852) and Émile Littré (1801-1881) or the spiritualist positivisist Félix Ravaisson (1813-1900), inherited by the Orientalist and Japonologist Léon de Rosny (1837-1914).

In the *Encyclopédie des sciences religieuses* of Frédéric Lichtenberger (1832-1899),¹¹ at the article « Religions (Classement et filiation des) » (1880), the same Maurice Vernes describes the conceptions of religious sciences at the time when Guimet returned from Orient. He alludes in particular to the classification of religions established by the Dutch G.P. Tiele inherited by Albert Réville (1826-1906), also a co-founder of the same *Revue*, and the first to hold the Chair in History of Religions at the Collège de France (1880) and the first president of the Section of Religious Sciences at the École pratique des hautes études (1886). The most important originality of Réville has been to establish a partitioning between, on one hand, “polytheistic religions”, with (1) the primitive religion of nature, (2) the animism distinguishing body and soul - in Africa, Eskimo countries, Finland, Tartar populations, Indians of America, Polynesia -, (3) the national mythologies - Indo-European and Semitic populations, China, Egypt, Babylonia, Germany, Gaul, Italy, Greece, Mexico, the Vedic mythology védique being the more achieved and the Japanese mythology being unknown -, (4) the polytheistic-legalist religions - Taoïsm, Confucianism, Mosaïsm, Judaïsm, Brahmanism, Mazdeïsm -, (5) Buddhism, and, on the other hand, the “monotheistic religion”, with (1) Judaïsm, issued from Mosaïsm, legalist and national, (2) Islamism, legalist and international, (3) Christianity, a redemptive religion of international nature. Bouddhism is, belonging to Réville, at the turning junction of the two groups : it is a universal redemptive religion, opposed to polytheism but in reality integrating local polytheisms.

This classification is supposed to supplant and replace the hierarchical classification prevalent in Catholic middles, by evacuating the surnatural elements done by protestant criticism, as the one proposed by the Abbot Bertrand in 1848, in his *Dictionnaire Universel, historique et comparatiste de toutes les Religions du Monde*. Bertrand hold a so-called exhaustive typology : 1/ primitive or natural religion revealed by God to humankind without texts mais, 2/ Mosaïsm or Judaïsm with prescriptions preparing Redemption, 3/ Christianity as the achievement of Judaïsm, 4/

Sabeism, a heresy with an astral cult, 5/ Dualism or Magism explaining the good and the bad, 6/ Brahmanism or Trithemism, 7/ Ancient Greco-Roman Paganism, 8/ Buddhism, a kind of pantheism negating the Divinity and extending it in everything, 9/ Tao-sse [sic], a philosophism based on rituals, 10/ Fétichism, 11/ Chamanism, fusioning Sabeism, Bouddhism et Fetichism in Central and Septentrional Asia, 12/ Islamism.

The classification of Réville was criticized by Vernes for its artificial philosophical distinctions without link with the natural environment and social evolution where religions had grown.¹² A national character never disappear in a universal religion and even a monotheism has an evolution towards a polytheism inasmuch it has to adapt itself to local religions. Vernes has in view a indo-european group and a egypto-semitic group which evolved from the origins till modern times, combined in symbiosis with other populations initiating new syncretic shapes of religions. Religions reduced to their simplest forms of developpementt, with the progress of civilisation, in dogms and cults, but also with declines, so that it is impossible to establish a general evolution of religions, in a strict chronological and typological parallelism. It is illusory to trace a linear evolution from a rough and primitive state, a initial Revelation and the further elaboration of the higher concepts of theologians. The new *Revue de l'histoire des religions*, under the auspices of the musée Guimet, had a tendency to make an equal view of all the religions, though it recognized differences in the levels of civilizations : the tendency towards an integral equalization became more patent with Lévy-Bruhl (1857-1939), who used the epithet of “primitive” as to better abolish it, but had, maby, to wait till Claude Lévi-Strauss to become completely achieved (Lévi-Strauss started his investigations from South American populations which could not be said to be linked with a possible egyptian origin, as in other cases).

The new science was also called “hiérogaphy”, and was concomitant with the scientific works edited in journals as the *Revue historique*, founded four years before, and wanted to concentrate the scattered articles in journals as the *Journal Asiatique* or the *Revue critique*. But the new journal and therefore the new science had not the name of “sciences of religions” but of “history of religions” : it aimed to inquire into the ancient and modern oriental religions and into the ancient, but not modern, occidental religions, as to avoid unsefull polemics and to open the door to a progressive enrichment and increase in the field of a fecond production of the human mind, not with a sole and unic key : « The *Journal* is purely *historical*, it excludes any work having a *polemical* or *dogmatic* character. » The role palyed by Guimet was precisely to open the door towards the observation of these Oriental religions, without any dogmatic presupposition, in a complete intellectual autonomy.

Guimet knew very well all these theories for they had been elucidated and stressed by scholars who were also his colleagues and friends. But in Guimet’s views, the Japanese religions had as a particularity to have a very elaborated theoretical system of thought, with a pantheon where the divinities had, each one, a definite function, an attribute symbolizing his function, and a clergy who concretized the role of these functions in ceremonies and rituals, where in China or in India that he visited there were nothing similar to observe : the functions were concepts and the attributes symbolizations or concrete images of these concepts, in a way rather similar to Kircher’s views. The Japanese religions were the most complete systems of symbols and representations, and this was the reason why he attached importance to study them. He was probably, on this point, not in accordance with his colleague Vernes who dissociated theological elaborations of concepts from ritual and symbolic representations. And the system of thought that he found in the Shingon pantheon concretised by the Shingon maṇḍalas had many reasons to please to his opinions : it had Buddhism as its focus, a religion being at the intersection of all the religions, in the schemes and classifications that we have described ; it gave a synthetic representation of the evolution of all the religions of Asia, from Brahmanism, Taoism, Confucianism, Shintō, and even Atheism, till all forms of Buddhism. The reason why Guimet was fascinated by the Maṇḍala of Tōji, that he reproduced in his museum may have been this holistic conception of religions of Asia, on one hand, and the fact that it offered evident similarities, for him, with the Isiac or Bembine Table, as it had been interpreted in three levels by Kircher : the level of the Absolute Deity (Isis), the level of deities governed by Reason, and the level of deities and beings (including men) dominated by Passions. These

levels are the three states of being or hypostasis of the Neo-Platonism, and it is exactly in the same terminology that Guimet interpreted the Maṇḍala of Tōji, in the Exposition Universelle in Paris, in 1878.¹³ The Isiac Table and the Tōji's Maṇḍala have almost the same number of deities, an orientation, a hierarchy, and double course upward and downward movement, with religious and metaphysical signification. His table of the religions of the world was complete, as the *Repertory* of Mendeliev. His defect was the fact that the Japanese deities, the kami, were put in a rather low level, which did not tallied with the reality of the cults and believes of Japanese people he discribed in his *Promenades Japonaises* (1876).¹⁴ Here is one of the limits of Guimet's investigations in religions but his merits have to be reappreciated in a very much higher dimension that in the past.

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- 1 See Omoto, Keiko et Macouin, Francis : *Quand le Japon s'ouvrit au monde*, Gallimard, « Découvertes », 1990, rééd. 2001; *Idem : Nihon no kaikoku 日本の開国 : Emīru Gime aru furansujin no mita Meiji* エミール・ギメ あるフランス人の見た明治, Omoto Keiko, Furanshisu Makuwan 尾本圭子, フランス・マクワン著 ; Trad. Omoto Keiko 尾本圭子訳, Sōgensha 創元社, Ōsaka 大阪, 1996. ; for a brief presentation, see Jean-François Jarrige, « Émile Guimet (1836-1917) : Un novateur et un visionnaire », *Comptes rendus de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres*, fascicule IV, novembre-décembre 2000; Sueki Fumihiko 末本文美士, « Shiiboruto/Hofuman to Nihon shūkyō » 「シーボルト／ホフマンと日本宗教」, *Kikan Nihonshisōshi* 『季刊日本思想史』, n° 55, 1999. German translation, Sieblod, « Hoffmann und die japanischen Religionen »... *Bochumer Jahrbuch zur Ostasien-forschung*, Bd. 26, 2002.
 - 2 Bernard Frank, *L'Intérêt pour les religions japonaises dans la France du XIXe siècle et les collections d'Émile Guimet*, Paris : PUF, 1986. *Idem : Le panthéon bouddhique au Japon : Collection d'Emile Guimet*, Musée National des Arts Asiatiques Guimet, Réunion des musées nationaux, Paris, 1991, 335 pages, 272 illustrations. *Idem : « L'image du bodhisattva Seishi du Kondō du Hōryūji retrouvée au musée Guimet – Le dossier documentaire »*, *Arts asiatiques*, XLVII, 1992. Furanku, Berunaru フランク、ベルナル : *Yomigaeru Banpaku to rittai mandara-ten zuroku - Emīru Gime ga mita Nihon no hotoke shinkō* - 甦るパリ万博と立体マンダラ展 図録－エミール・ギメが見た日本のほとけ信仰 - *Furansu kokuritu Gime bijutsukan sōritsu hyakushūnen kinen* フランス国立ギメ美術館創立100周年記念, Seibu hyakkaten 西武百貨店, Tōkyō, 1989.
 - 3 *The Approach of a European towards Japanese Religions: The Dialogues of Emile Guimet with Japanese Monks and Priests, Yoroppajin no Nihon shūkyō heno apurōchi - Emīru Gime to Nihon no sōryo kannushi tonō mondō* ヨロッパ人の日本宗教へのアプローチ－エミール・ギメと日本の僧侶、神主との問答, *Kokusai Nihon bunka kenkyū sentā* 国際日本文化研究センター, Kyōto, 2010, 48 pages. (in Japanese).
 - 4 *Histoire du culte des divinités d'Alexandrie hors d'Égypte*, 1883. Georges Lafaye, *Histoire du culte des divinités d'Alexandrie, Sérapis, Isis, Harpocrate et Anubis, hors d'Égypte : depuis les origines jusqu'à la naissance de l'école néo-platonicienne*, Paris, Thorin, 1883.
 - 5 *Comptes rendus de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres*, 1896.
 - 6 *Revue archéologique*, t. 36, 1900, et t. II, 1912, t. XX, 1914, et t. V, 1916.
 - 7 *True and natural interpretation of the Isiac Table (Vera & genuina mensa Isiaca, sive tabulae Bembinae interpretatio)*.
 - 8 *Montai ryakki* 『問對略記』, *Shimaji Mokurai zenshū* 島地黙雷全集、daigokan 第五卷、Honganji shuppanbu 本願寺出版部、Kyōto 京都、1976, pp. 818-849. *Annales du Musée Guimet*, 1880, tome I ; *Montai ryakki : Fu Kyōgi ryakutō*, Tōkyō et Kyōto 1877.
 - 9 Félix Régamey, *Japon*, Paul Paclot & Cie, Éditeurs, Paris, 1907. *Idem, Le Japon en Images*, Dessins d'après nature et documents originaux, Librairie Paul Paclot & Cie, 1904. *Idem, Japan in Art and Industry, With a Glance at Japanese Manners and Customs*, by F.R., Authorized Translation by M. French-Sheldon and Eli Lemon Sheldon, New York and London, Frederick A. Stokes Company Publishers, 1892. « Ru•mondo•iryusutore » *Nihon kankei sashie-shū* 『ル・モンド・イリュストレ』 日本関係さし繪集, *Yokohama kaikō shiryōkan* 横浜開港資料館, Yokohama, 1988.
 - 10 Millioud, Alfred : « Esquisse des huit sectes bouddhistes du Japon par Gyau-nen », *Revue de l'histoire des religions*, 13^e année, tomes XXV, XXVI, Paris, 1892. Fujishima, Ryaon [Ryōon] : *Le bouddhisme japonais, doctrine et histoire des douze grandes sectes bouddhiques du Japon*, Paris, Maisonneuve et Leclerc, 1889. Reedited by Bernard Frank with a Postface and notes: *Les douze sectes bouddhiques du Japon...* Paris, Éditions Trismégiste, 1982, XLIII + 189 pages.
 - 11 « Esquisse des huit sectes bouddhistes du Japon par Gyau-nen » [Gyōnen (1240-1321): *Hasshū-kōyō*], *Revue de l'histoire des religions*, 13^e année (Paris, 1892), tome XXV, pp. 219-243, 337-360 ; tome XXVI, pp. 201-219, 279-315..

- 12 Vernes, Maurice : « Introduction », Revue de l'Histoire des Religions, Annales du Musée Guimet, Première Année, Tome Premier, Paris, Ernest Leroux, Éditeur, 1880.
- 13 *Exposition Universelle, Galeries historiques – Trocadéro. Religions de l'Extrême-Orient. : NOTICE EXPLICATIVE sur les objets exposés par M. Émile Guimet et sur les peintures et dessins faits par M. Félix Régamey.* Paris, Ernest Leroux, Editeur, 1878
- 14 *Promenades japonaises*, Illustrations de Félix Régamey, G. Charpentier, Paris, 1878, 212 pages. Also *Promenades japonaises : Tokio-Nikko.* Illustrations de Félix Régamey, Paris, G. Charpentier, 1880, 288 pages.. See Asahina, Michiko 朝比奈美知子 (compilé et traduit par) : *Furansu kara mita Bakumatsu ishin - « Iryusutorashion Nihon kankei kijishū » - フランスから見た幕末維新イリュストラシオン日本関係記事集*, Tōshindō 東信堂, Tōkyō, 2004.

