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Japanese Religions

In contrast to the situation in many of the European countries and some other areas of the West, where we see relatively high levels of at least nominal religious affiliation and low levels of participation in religious rites, religion in Japan is marked by almost universal participation in certain rites and customs but low levels of self-acknowledged affiliation to a religious group. It has become commonplace to say that Japanese are born Shinto, marry as Christians, and die Buddhists, a phrase that indicates both the high level of participation in religious rites of passage as well as the eclectic nature of Japanese religiosity. Note is also often made of the fact that nearly ninety percent of the Japanese observe the custom of annual visits to ancestral graves, and seventy-five percent have either a Buddhist or Shinto altar in their home. However, surveys consistently show that only thirty percent of the population identify themselves as belonging to one of the religions active in Japan—this despite the fact that the religions

impacted on religious developments during this period. Government attempts to separate Buddhism from Shinto and establish Shinto as the moral and spiritual basis for Japanese nationalism provided the background against which religion as a concept was debated and understood.

In considering what "religion" means in Japan, we will first take a look at popular images of religion as reflected in recent surveys on the subject. From there we will turn to the history of the concept in Japan, and consider how that continues to influence popular and public discourse on the subject. In the wake of the Aum Affair, religion and its future have once again become a popular topic of debate by scholars and media commentators. We will take a look at two influential arguments, before returning to survey results to draw some of our own conclusions on the state of religion in Japan.

POPULAR IMAGE OF RELIGION

Since 1995, the Religious Awareness Project of the Japanese Association for the Study of Religion and Society has conducted an annual survey of university students' attitudes towards religion.¹ The results of this survey bring into stark relief the image-problem that religion suffers under in Japan. The number of respondents who profess belief in any particular religion hovers around seven percent, much lower than the thirty percent that most national surveys in Japan yield. Around sixty percent say that they have little or no interest in religion, but only three percent of these respondents attribute their negative feelings toward religion to a personal experience. The vast majority, usually around seventy percent, say they just don't see any need for religion.

These numbers indicate that very few university students have had a personal experience of "religion," with only seven percent saying they believe in a religion and three percent claiming to have had a negative experience of religion. The low degree of interest in religion would seem to be a result then of shared popular images. Another survey, conducted in the wake of the Aum Affair in 1995 by the *Yomiuri Shinbun*, a national newspaper, indicates what some of these images might be.² Offered the opportunity to make multiple choices regarding their opinion on religious groups, forty percent of the respondents said that religious groups "are just out to make money," and thirty-seven percent said that they "prey on people's fears" to encourage them to join the group. Other complaints were that religion was "only for show" (18%) or that religious groups are "too involved in politics" (20%).

A broader survey³ on contemporary values conducted by the Nanzan Institute for

1. *Shūkyō to shakai gakkai shūkyō ishiki chōsa purojekuto* 「宗教と社会」学会・宗教学識調査プロジェクト、1995-2000. While the survey does not use a random sample, the number of respondents range between four and eleven thousand, which should yield reliable results. The annual reports on the survey results are available from the author.

2. The results of this survey can be found in Ishii 1997, p. 180.

3. The survey was conducted in 1998 using a random sample of three hundred from the Tokyo and Osaka metropolitan areas, weighted for sex and age. Preliminary reports on the results of the survey can be found in Kisala 1999a and 1999b.

themselves claim an overall total membership that approaches twice the actual population of 126 million. This is mainly due to the fact that much of the population is automatically counted as parishioners of both the local Shinto shrine and the ancestral Buddhist temple.

Although identified today as the major religious traditions of Japan, Buddhism and Shinto have been so closely intertwined throughout much of Japanese history that the forced separation of the two at the beginning of the modern period in the mid-nineteenth century resulted in a great upheaval in Japanese religious practice, and continues to have repercussions today. In addition, these religious traditions have been combined with elements of Taoism and Confucianism from China, issuing in a kind of common or popular religiosity that is not easily contained in any one religious tradition. Christianity, introduced to Japan in the fifteenth century by the Catholic missionaries who accompanied the Spanish and Portuguese explorers, was actively persecuted throughout the early modern period (seventeenth century to mid-nineteenth century), and small groups of "hidden Christians" continue to preserve a secret faith tradition that they trace back to the time of persecution. Reintroduced in the modern period, Christianity has had little success in attracting members in Japan, with less than one percent of the population belonging to one of the Christian churches. Christian influence is generally acknowledged as greater than those membership numbers would indicate, however, especially in the fields of education and social welfare.

The modern period has seen the proliferation of new religious movements in Japan, leading at times to widely exaggerated estimates of their number and strength. To varying degrees these groups often incorporate folk religious practices, Buddhist doctrinal elements, and, more recently, ideas and practices from a wide range of religions and independent spiritualist practices. Given this religious ferment, it is hard to describe Japan as a secular society. However, many Japanese would prefer to see themselves as secular or unconcerned with religion. In a recent survey, for example, only twenty-six percent of the respondents in Japan described themselves as religious. In part this is due to the controversy surrounding some religious groups, particularly the new religions that have become so prominent in the modern period. The already poor image of these groups was further damaged by the terrorist activities of Aum Shinrikyō in the mid-1990s, contributing to the rise of an anticult movement in Japan. However, the attitude towards religion in Japan is also influenced by differences in the understanding of "religion" as compared to the West, differences that arise from the history of the use of the term *shūkyō* 宗教, or religion, in that country.

Modernity, as it is understood in Japan, is closely associated with the country's contact with the West. What is commonly referred to as the early modern period followed the arrival of Portuguese and Spanish explorers in the sixteenth century, and was marked by the attempt to limit contact with the West during the two-and-a-half-century Tokugawa Shogunate (1603-1867). The modern period was ushered in by the collapse of that regime in the face of the forced opening of the country by American and other Western powers, leading to a mad rush to catch up with the West economically, technologically, and militarily. The desire to build a nation strong enough to avoid Western colonization contributed greatly to emergence of Japanese nationalism and Japanese colonialism, and

Religion and Culture also yielded interesting results regarding the meanings assigned to religion in Japan. Twenty-nine percent of the respondents to this survey acknowledged that they belong to some religious group, consistent with the results of surveys conducted throughout much of the postwar period. Despite this rather low level of religious affiliation, however, one-half the respondents said that they believe in the existence of gods or buddhas, and nearly two-thirds professed that they believe in an "unseen higher power." Perhaps the most startling result was that one-quarter of those who described themselves as atheists (*mushinronisha* 無神論者, 19% of the total respondents) also professed some belief in God. It would appear that "atheist" has different connotations in Japan, identified more with a rejection of "religion" than a lack of belief in the divine.

The Nanzan study also confirmed the low popular image of religion in Japan, in a most definitive manner. A question was included in the survey regarding the level of trust afforded certain social institutions. While respondents gave high marks to the police (69%), the legal system (63%), and the military (52%), religion came in dead last, with only thirteen percent finding it trustworthy, considerably lower than the twenty-percent level given to politicians in the national parliament.

What these survey results clearly indicate is that "religion" is associated with religious institutions in Japan today, and the vast majority of people have a very low opinion of these institutions. What might normally be conceived as religious beliefs, practices, and feelings have been divorced from the concept of religion in Japan, as illustrated by the case of professed atheists acknowledging a belief in God. Although the surveys we have looked at here were conducted in the years following the Aum Affair, which led to a further erosion of religion's place in Japanese society, the meanings assigned to religion in Japan have a longer history, going back at least to the final determination of a translation for the term in the 1870s. We turn to these historical issues next.

THE CONCEPT OF "RELIGION" IN MODERN JAPAN

As Shimazono Susumu points out, it was around 1873 that the Japanese word *shūkyō* was fixed as the translation for "religion" (SHIMAZONO 1998). The meanings attached to the term religion and its Japanese counterpart were profoundly influenced by debates in the emerging Science of Religion in the West, as well as the particular institutional and political situation in Japan.

Under the influence of the evolutionary paradigm, many of the early theorists of the modern study of religion in the West worked under the assumption that there was one "elementary" form of religion, and all past and present religious expressions could be placed on a spectrum from least developed to most advanced as that elementary form evolved throughout human history. Occasionally this advanced form of religion was identified with morality or ethics, cleansed of magical, superstitious, or irrational elements found in lower religious forms. Often contained in this evolutionary view of religious forms was the assumption, either explicit or implicit, that religion itself would ultimately give way to the rational, scientific methods that these researchers themselves employed. Under the influence of romanticism, however, the situation was further complicated by the desire to

reappraise the value of the irrational, frequently identified with folk or popular religious forms. Finally, the question of the definition of religion itself was a perennial problem for religious researchers, with differing views regarding the importance of beliefs in God or the presence of organizational structures as necessary elements of that definition.

Modern religious studies in Japan emerged at the end of the nineteenth century, as one result of the interest in the Parliament of Religions held in Chicago in 1893. A Comparative Religions Society was founded in 1896, and a course in Religious Studies was begun at Tokyo Imperial University in 1898, with a chair in Religious Studies established at the same university in 1905. Public and intellectual discourse on religion, however, preceded the founding of the academic discipline, since it was seen as crucial to the establishment of a modern state after the collapse of the Tokugawa political system.

From early in the nineteenth century the presence of foreign ships off the coast of Japan was seen as a threat to the enforced isolation of the country imposed at the beginning of the Tokugawa period. Aizawa Seishisai, a retainer of the Mito domain, composed in 1825 the *Shimron* 新論, or *New Theses*, as a kind of manifesto calling on the regime to defend the nation from this threat.⁴ Aizawa proposed that in addition to a military defense the times called for a spiritual defense as well, and, indeed, the latter would ultimately be more important. Drawing heavily on the arguments of the Kokugaku movement, he called for the propagation of beliefs based on Japanese mythology, centered on the emperor, in order to unite the nation against its enemies. These beliefs were to be combined with national rites to constitute a national religion that would play a role in society comparable to that of Christianity in the West.

Aizawa's proposals were adopted by the Meiji reformers, and from the earliest days of the modern period *saisei itchi* 祭政一致, or the unification of rites and government, was promoted as official government policy. While the implementation of this policy took various forms as the government adapted to the changing situation and engaged in a kind of trial-and-error strategy, its unifying purpose was the promotion of Shinto, both *jinja shintō* 神社神道, or Shrine Shinto, and what later came to be called *kokka shintō* 国家神道, or State Shinto.⁵

In the early Meiji period, the prohibition against Christianity, instituted prior to the establishment of the Tokugawa regime and enforced vigorously throughout the early modern period, remained in force. This became a problem, however, as the government tried to renegotiate the treaties forced on Japan by the Western powers in the final years of the Tokugawa government. These powers demanded that the prohibition be lifted under the principle of religious freedom, a principle that was eventually enshrined in the Imperial Constitution promulgated in 1889. To preserve Shinto's favored position under

4. On Aizawa and the *Shimron* see WAKABAYASHI 1986.

5. Shimazono Susumu has pointed out that the term *kokka shintō* appears in the records of parliamentary debates in 1908, and that the English translation State Shinto was used by the religious scholar Kato Genchi in his *A Study of Shinto*, published in 1926. This information is taken from a presentation by Shimazono at the 59th Annual Conference of the Japanese Association for Religious Studies held in September 2000.

these circumstances, there was a movement toward the redefinition of Shinto as a non-religious set of native beliefs and customs, a distinction that was reflected institutionally in the reorganization of the religious affairs office of the Interior Ministry into the Agency for Shrine Affairs (Jinjakyoku 神社局) and the Agency for Religious Affairs (Shūkyōkyoku 宗教局) in 1900.

Public and scholarly discourse on the non-religious nature of Shinto reached a climax of sorts in the aftermath of the promulgation of the Imperial Rescript on Education in 1890 and the controversy surrounding the refusal of Uchimura Kanzō and other Christians to reverence the Rescript. In focusing on one of the Shinto proponents in this debate, Inoue Tetsujirō, Shimazono points out that although the Rescript takes on the character of a "sacred text" in Inoue's attacks on Christianity, the terms of debate for Inoue are always the opposition of religion (Christianity) to education, morality, the state, or the "teaching of the East" (SHIMAZONO 1998). In Inoue's argument all of these are equated with Shinto.

As State Shinto and Shrine Shinto thus became identified with national morality, customs, and patriotic duties, religion was characterized by the presence of an individual founder and denominational organization. In addition to Christianity and the Buddhist sects, so-called Sect Shinto, the new religious movements that were able to gain government recognition by incorporating officially sanctioned beliefs, were included in the latter category. As Isomae Jun'ichi points out, this was a convenient way to both account for the "religious" elements of Shinto, as well as to at least implicitly denigrate these elements as magical or superstitious beliefs inferior to the national morality promoted by the government.⁶

While some of the leading scholars of Religious Studies in Japan argued for the religious nature of Shinto, Shinto Studies emerged as an independent discipline early in the twentieth century, and argued forcefully for the government's position. The profound impact that non-religious theories of Shinto have had on modern Japanese society is reflected in the fact that they have been recognized by the courts in the postwar period as justification for the use of Shinto rites in groundbreaking ceremonies for government buildings and visits by government officials to Shinto shrines.

TWO RECENT VIEWS OF "RELIGION" IN JAPANESE SOCIETY

Ama Toshimaro is a lecturer in Japanese intellectual history, particularly respected for his views on the development of the idea of religion in Japan. In a popular book published in 1996, *Nihonjin wa naze mushūkyō na no ka* [Why are the Japanese "non-religious"?], he argues that the self-conception of the Japanese as non-religious has its roots in a distinction between "founded religions" (*sōshō shūkyō* 創唱宗教) and "folk (natural) religions" (*shizen shūkyō* 自然宗教).⁷ Largely under the influence of the historical

6. From a presentation at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Asian Studies, held in Washington D.C., March 1998.

7. *Shizen* would normally be translated as "nature," but AMA himself points out that he is not referring to the worship of nature, but rather religions that emerge "naturally," without any distinguishable founder (1996, p. 11). Folk religion seems to be a better conveyor of this meaning.

developments outlined above, "religion" in Japan has come to mean the founded religions of Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, and the New Religions, while the practices of folk religion that the vast majority of the population engage in—New Year's visits to shrines and temples, funeral rites, visits to ancestral graves—are viewed as social customs, devoid of "religious" meaning. For this reason, seventy percent of the population considers itself non-religious, because they don't belong to one of the founded religions, while seventy-five percent of these "non-religious" Japanese say that being "religious" is important (*shūkyōshūin wa taisetsu*) (AMA 1996, p. 8).

Expanding the argument beyond the question of the definition of religion in the modern period, Ama finds the roots of Japanese non-religiosity in several trends evident in the early modern period. He claims that the spread of Confucian ideas, with its emphasis on the cultivation of morals, led to an emphasis on life in this world and a consequent decrease in concern in the Buddhist concept of the afterlife. This trend was further aided by the establishment of "funeral Buddhism" (*sōshūiki Bukkyō* 葬式仏教), the parochial system eventually enforced by the Tokugawa government that mandated registration with a Buddhist temple to perform the funeral and later veneration rites. Ama argues that the reassurance of prayers after death, guaranteeing the achievement of Buddhahood—as seen in the spread of the practice of calling all the dead *hotoke*, or Buddha—also served to alleviate concern with the afterlife. This lack of concern in the afterlife is illustrated by the spread of the concept of *ukiyo*, or the transitory nature of life, and especially its accompanying interest in the pleasures of life, as seen in the life of Ihara Saikaku, a poet and popular fiction writer of the late seventeenth century. Here Ama makes mention of *Kōshoku ichidai otoko* [Life of an Amorous Man], a popular novel written by Saikaku in 1682 that details, in its first chapter, the sexual conquests of the hero Yonosuke, amounting to 3,724 women and 725 boys. Ama concludes that "funeral Buddhism is Japanese folk religion in Buddhist clothing" (AMA 1996, p. 66) and its development in the early modern period is yet another reason why contemporary Japanese have little interest in founded religion, and identify themselves as non-religious.

Yamaori Tetsuo, a scholar specializing in the history of religion, argues that two events in 1995 will lead to the death of religion in Japan, or, more accurately, that they have revealed that religion in Japan is already dead. These events were the Kobe Earthquake in January of that year, and, of course, the release of poison gas on the Tokyo subways by members of Aum Shinrikyō in March. Yamaori says that in the first incident religious believers showed the bankruptcy of their own faith by failing to offer a specifically religious response to the catastrophe, content to provide the same aid as non-religious volunteers and counselors. And the Aum case only served to confirm popular suspicion of religion in general, leading to calls to restrict the activities of religious groups and reform the law governing officially registered religious corporations.

Yamaori identifies three factors that have contributed to the perilous position of religion in Japanese society: the hollowing out of Buddhism, the "dereligionization" of Shinto, and widespread disdain for religion among the intelligentsia and media. Buddhism has been hollowed out by the development of "funeral" Buddhism, and Shinto dereligionized in an attempt to preserve its privileged place in the modern state, both processes discussed

above. Intellectual and media contempt for religion is traced to Western rationalism, and a knee-jerk reaction on the part of Japanese elites to conform to Western trends.

These three trends have been exacerbated by two modern "separation policies": the separation of Shinto and Buddhism at the beginning of the modern period, and the separation of religion and state in the postwar period. Yamaori argues that the coexistence of the kami and buddhas throughout Japanese history led to a popular religiosity based on both Shinto and Buddhism, and the forced question of either-or, based on an exclusivity found in the Christian concept of religion foreign to the Japanese, leaves many wondering how they should respond. The Japanese have been forced to "examine their own psyches through Christian eyes... they have observed the innermost Japanese soul through the lens of a foreign concept of religion,"⁸ and so they respond that they have no belief corresponding to that image of religion. The second separation, that of religion and state in the postwar period, likewise forced Western distinctions of private (religious belief) and public (government), sacred and secular—distinctions that are themselves rarely rigorously enforced in the West, where the British monarch is officially titled the Defender of the Faith, Western European countries provide financial support to churches, and the U. S. president takes his oath of office on a Bible—a culture that is not used to making these distinctions, and thus has enforced them to a ridiculous, or perhaps dangerous, degree. Yamaori cites the case of Doi Takako, the former head of Japan's Socialist Party, whose Christian belief was concealed by the media and by Doi herself, presumably in the interest of preserving this separation, and observes that it illustrates a "strange mélange of unconscious contempt of religion and credulous susceptibility to the ambience of Western civilization" (YAMAORI 2000, p. 236).

One gets the feeling that Yamaori is swept up in his own arguments, dramatically proclaiming the death of religion in Japan and placing the blame on an ill-fitting Western concept of what the term means. Recent studies on the history of religious conflict in Japan temper the supposed religious plurality that premises his arguments, and court cases in Japan and the United States indicate that the separation of religion and state is a developing concept, in both the East and the West. His arguments are provocative, however, in pointing out, once again, the poor image of religion in Japan, and how this image even affects the activities of religious groups and believers themselves. While the roots of this problem seem to lie in the cultural clash in the concept of religion, as Yamaori maintains, Ama's more nuanced argument, focusing on the difference between "founded" religion and folk religion seems closer to the point, while raising questions of its own regarding the characteristics that make folk religion "religious" and its future in a modern society (see also Ian Reader's essay in this *Guide*). Ama's *shizen shūkyō* does not remain on the level of amorphous religious sentiments, but is expressed in concrete actions: shrine visits, weddings and funerals, veneration of the ancestors at the household altar, participation in local festivals. All of these acts involve some degree of participation in religious institutions,

8. YAMAORI, 2000, p. 231. The article was first published in Japanese (*Omumi jiken to Nihon no shūkyō no shūten*) in *Shokun*, June 1995. An English translation was published by Japan Echo the same year and is reprinted in the volume cited here.

and without these institutions Ama's folk religion would be an empty concept. We turn, finally, to a consideration of the state of institutional religion in Japan.

THE STATE OF RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS IN JAPAN

The Agency for Cultural Affairs of the Ministry of Education and Science publishes annual statistics on the number of officially registered religious groups and the number of believers claimed by these groups. The numbers, especially those regarding membership, can be misleading, since there are no uniform criteria for membership and it is assumed that at least some groups will inflate their numbers to give added weight to their importance. On the other hand, the numbers can be taken as revealing the differing meanings assigned to religion that we have been discussing here, and in that sense they need to be considered alongside the survey data introduced at the beginning of this article. At the very least they indicate the relative strength of the various religious groups active in Japan.

At the end of 1998 there were more than 183,000 officially registered religious corporations in Japan. However, the vast majority of these are individual Shinto shrines (86,000) or Buddhist temples (78,000). In addition there were four thousand Christian corporations, including individual dioceses and Catholic religious orders, and sixteen thousand corporations were classified as "other." In addition to the statistics on registered corporations, the agency gives numbers of individual groups; in some instances the corporation will represent a number of groups. Among the Buddhist groups, the largest representation is found in the Pure Land sects (30,000), followed by the Zen sects (21,000), Shingon (15,000), Nichiren sects (12,000), Tendai (5,000), and Nara Buddhism (500), giving some indication of the relative number of temples affiliated with various schools of Buddhism in Japan.

In terms of membership, the Shinto shrines claim a following of over 106,000,000, and the Buddhist temples over 96,000,000. The Shinto membership reflects the number of those considered *ujiko* 氏子, or parishioners, by the shrines, usually including all the residents in the area of the shrine. The Buddhist membership is based on the number of *danka* 檀家, or families registered with the individual temples, usually for funeral and memorial rites. Clearly most of the population is considered as belonging to both of these categories. Christian groups, based on their own definition of membership through individual choice, report a total of almost 1.8 million believers, and the groups classified as "other" claim over eleven million adherents.

The above statistics are inclusive of all religious corporations registered either with the Minister for Education and Science or with the local prefecture office. Under a revision of the Religious Corporations Law following the Aum Affair, all groups active in more than one prefecture must register with the central government, while local groups have the option of registering either with the prefecture or the central government. In a separate set of numbers reflecting the membership of only those groups registered with the central government, a breakdown given by sect is a further indication of the relative strength of these groups. Here, out of a total Buddhist membership of almost 58,000,000, the largest

group is once again the Pure Land sects (19,000,000), followed closely by the Nichiren sects (18,000,000),⁹ Shingon (13,000,000), and Zen and Tendai with over 3,000,000 apiece.

In a sense it can be said that these numbers, yielding a total religious membership of almost twice the population of Japan, reflect the differing meaning of religion in the country that Ama and Yamaori have pointed out: shrines and temples claim the same people as members, in accordance with Amas' idea of folk religion and Yamaori's claims for religious pluralism. Neither group seems wanting for participants in its religious functions, with the shrines bustling during the New Year holiday, in mid-November for traditional blessings of young children, and a steady stream of young couples coming for marriage ceremonies or to mark the birth of children, and the Buddhist clergy particularly busy at the spring and fall equinoxes and at the end of the year with memorial rites. Neither group, moreover, seems to lack for financial support, an observation that can be extended to new religious groups and Christian churches as well. On these terms, institutional religion seems to be at least holding its own, if not, indeed, prospering, despite the professed lack of interest in "religion" by a large majority of Japanese.

The problem of the image of these religious institutions, however, continues to have a profound effect on how "religion" is perceived in Japan today. Religious institutions have made some attempts to address the issue, or at least have given indications that they are aware of the presence of a problem. Perhaps the best example of this is the discussions in some Buddhist groups on how to reform the practice of *kaimiyō* 戒名, or the charging of substantial amounts of money for the granting of a posthumous Buddhist name. In general, however, religious groups have shied away from the problem, choosing to remain anonymous in their activities, as Yamaori points out in the case of the Kobe Earthquake, refraining from engaging in public discourse on current problems, even the problem of religion itself, as in the case of Aum Shinrikyō.¹⁰ There are indications that the public expects religious institutions to play a more active role in such discourse, and that the image of religion would improve if it were seen as more engaged (see KISALA 1999c, pp. 184–86). Despite the ambiguities reflected in survey data on religion, it would appear that reports on its death are still premature.

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9. Some of the large new religious groups, such as Risshō Kōseikai, are included in this number.

10. On the general lack of religious responses to the Aum Affair, see KISALA 2001.

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