
RELIGION AS JAPANESE SEE IT

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When it comes to religion and the Japanese, the question may arise to what extent the Japanese are religious. Not only foreigners but also the Japanese themselves would give different answers to this question. Westerners who demonstrate strong faith in Christianity might accuse the contemporary Japanese as irreligious or taking little interest



in religion and even some Asian Buddhists, taking the standard of their own countries might also agree to some extent. Most Japanese, when ask to express their religious feelings, would come up with similar attitudes towards religion. Particularly in the modern age with its rapid industrialization and urbanization, increasing number of people commit themselves to no specific religion.

This paper examines the question of how Japanese view their religion as well as its characteristics. Then it probes into some underlying factors contributing to those characteristics. From the discussion, a synthesis of the Japanese approach to religion will be presented.

That Japanese are regarded as irreligious people raises the question of how one looks at or defines religion. To put it in

the simple way, Japanese actually are religions but somewhat different from the way people of other countries are. As a matter of fact, it appears that Japanese are religious, judging from the great number of religions groups, old and new, from the millions of people affiliated with one or more religions and from the throngs of worshipers who visit shrines and temples particularly on some occasions.

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There are perhaps two implicit aspects underlying Japanese views about religions which amaze the foreigners. One is that most Japanese would not say that they belong to any particular religious organization. In fact some Japanese would be extremely surprised when they are asked directly what their religion is. If it were among Japanese themselves such a question would seldom be asked unless the participants really had a certain degree of acquaintance. Another is that Japanese do not identify themselves with a particular creed. They do not attend weekly religious services, do not go to the shrine or temple regularly and do not emphasize belief in one god or show none of the single minded devotion to one—all powerful personified god which is the way that monotheistic religions do.

However, the matter one should consider is not whether or not the Japanese have religiosity but rather in what way are the Japanese religious. Country's difference in culture and standards should not lead one to conclude that the Japanese are not religious because of their different culture, beliefs, practices, way of life, socio-economic development as well as historical background.

Characteristics of Japanese religion, plurality : unity and diversity.

Religious is a complicated matter in Japan, to a considerable extent, perhaps more or so than in most countries. The most amazing thing to foreigners in the history of Japanese religion and its practices is their

plurality. To put it in a simple way, there are both unity and diversity in the Japanese religion. This is observed by the fact that all religions can coexist peacefully in the society.

To say that "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts" is very appropriate to understand the characteristic of Japanese religion.¹ At least 4 major faiths affect the lives of the Japanese : Shinto, Buddhism, Confucianism and Christianity.² Throughout Japanese history, each faith meeting, interacting and influencing one another, together have formed the religious life of the Japanese people. Japanese have experience their religions as a unified world-view rather than as separate alternatives or individual tradition. Even within the unity of a single faith, a great diversity of attitudes may be found.

Shinto³ is the national indigenous religion of Japan. Shinto gods or Kami are worshipped at shrine. All natural objects, phenomena and even human being are considered as having Kami, so the gods of Shinto were numerous. Gradually Shinto's practice extended to the worship of ancestors. Central to Shinto is a feeling of communion between human being and nature. Shinto expresses Japanese way of understanding the nature around them and their relationship to it and to one another. Shinto has no ethical precepts. Pollution is the greatest source of evil, ill-fortune and illness; therefore cleanliness is symbolized in Shinto worship. Due to the polytheistic nature of Shinto without either founder, dogma or

¹ H Byron Earhart, *Japanese Religion : Unity and Diversity* (California, 1982), p. 3

² Confucianism is considered essentially an ethical system or philosophy rather than a religious faith.

³ "Shinto" means "the way of gods or Kami". A term first used during the period when Buddhism was established in Japan in order to distinguish the native tradition from the new more sophisticated import.

system, it was easy for Japanese to accept religions coming in from foreign countries in her early history. Of all the religions imported to Japan, Buddhism has had the most profound impact. To the simple explanation of natural happening provided by Shinto, Buddhism has added a universal teaching of the unity of all being and the ideal of supreme enlightenment and salvation. The Japanese seems to have had little difficulty accepting the major premises of Buddhism, which maintain that all things are impermanent, suffering in the inevitable result of human desires, and humanity is caught in an endless cycle of death and rebirth from which we can escape only through moral conduct, meditation and prayer.

Buddhism in Japan had been assimilated along with Shinto and provided many sects. Whereas Buddhism has as its essential concept on other worldly after life, Confucianism is based primarily on affirmation of the present world concerning above all with the conduct of human being here and now. For this reason, Confucianism was relatively blended into the traditional Japanese value pattern represented by Shinto. Although Japanese Confucianism moral ideas and precepts underwent a radical change with the end of World War II, Confucian conceptions are deeply rooted in the spiritual structure of Japan.

While Shinto, Confucianism and Buddhism had melted into a single, reasonably harmonious viewpoint, Christianity has not been flourishing in Japan from the past to present. One of the reasons Christianity is not widely accepted is mostly because the Japanese religious consciousness has an orientation toward family as opposed to a religion of individual choice and commitment and an almost instinctive inclination to affirm an essential continuity between the gods and

human which is contrast to those of Christianity.

Whereas Buddhism and Confucianism dominated the Tokugawa period and Shinto dominated (as the state religion) the period from 1868-1945, since World War II the New Religions (originated before World War II) have captured and flourished in Japanese society in order to serve and respond the contemporary need since the high rapid of economic growth.

Underlying factors contributing to the plurality of Japanese religion.

1. Traditional Japanese world view.

The plurality and complexity of Japanese religion is related to how Japanese look at their world. The west lives in a world separated into dichotomies : subject and object, self and not self, yes and no, good and evil, right and wrong. It is therefore more logical or scientific, where yes cannot be no and no cannot be yes, where one is not two, where I and you are eternally parted and can never be merged. All in all, western minds emphasize the dualistic aspect of reality, whereas the Japanese mind basically tends to be non-dualistic. Japanese leave the question open and refuse to make any definite statement about reality. Japanese have a relativist mind contrary to westerner who tends to have an absolute mind. The Japanese world is the world of relativity. Everything in the world is dependent on and related to everything else. It is therefore, their mind are open to adopt something new from abroad. Moreover, Japanese are more interested in what they can see with their eyes, therefore, whatever beyond their visualization is beyond their mind. This is partly related to the sensitivity Japanese express toward the experience of nature.

It is interesting to learn that the Japanese mind mentioned above derives its underlying concept from the interpretation of the Japanese mythology.⁴ According to Japanese mythology, Japanese believe their land and themselves to be the divine of the two kami, Izanagi and Izanami: with their innocence and purity enjoy the fruits of love and procreate a series of divine beings including mountains, rivers, herbs, trees, animals etc, the greatest among which is the Sun Goddess called Amaterasu. It is her grandson Ninigi no mikoto who eventually becomes the first of the heavenly line to descend and rule Japan and later on Jimmu Tennesoo, taken by traditional Japanese historiography to have been the founder of the imperial family. The Japanese mythology suggests the notion that heaven and earth are closely connected and that communion between the two is possible. Therefore, gods, nature and human beings form a triangle of harmonious interrelationship.

2. A culture of creative adaptation.

The plurality of Japanese religion is related to an assimilative tendency in Japanese culture. Historically, Japan has shown an aptitude for assimilation of various cultural and religious tradition to its own tradition. This process carried on the characteristics that the new was absorbed, changed and simplified without leading to a loss of the old. The old still alongside the new. What stands out in this assimilative process is not value conflict or discord but continuity and harmony. The factors contributing to this cultural characteristic are partly from the culture of past orientation (Miren) and Japan's geographical location. For the past oriented view, Japanese carry a mind of empathy

toward something belong to the past. For geographical reason, Japan has had relatively few chances to come into direct contact with other nations. Even though Japan is close enough to China to accept Chinese cultural influence, yet it is far enough to be relatively safe from military invasion and the political control of the overwhelmingly powerful Chinese dynasties. Moreover, Japan remained isolated from the rest of the world for a long time. Therefore, the Japanese have for ages been freely adopting ideas from more advance countries. Obviously, the Japanese have never revered those ideas simply as ideas but selected from them on the basis of effective application to the life of the people.

Japanese approach to religion.

From the previous presentation we come to the point that for all the freedom with which the Japanese took over elements from foreign civilization and concept, and in their own way created new things of their own as well. In so doing, they have been guided from first to last by a profound concept of a harmonious union of the life of man with the life of nature. Emphasized by the Japanese mythology views all Japanese are the descent of the gods. Therefore, the most basic element of man's nature is his spirit—that bit of godhead wells in each Japanese.

After having some knowledge of what underlines Japanese mind, further discussion will concern how Japanese approach their religion. Obviously, all levels of society a great propensity toward religious tolerance and little concern for religious tradition has been shown. That is to say that individual belief and practice often combine aspects of all the religions in Japan.

⁴ Kojigi and Nihongi are regarded by Shintoist as their sacred books of Shinto. The early parts of both books give an account of the mythological beginning of Japan,

To make it easier in discussing, two points of how Japanese approach their religion will be presented here. The first one concerns the field of religious practices, rituals including prayer or worship. The second one deals with the Japanese attitude toward religion's value.

Concerning the field of religious practice and rituals.

If Japanese search for a deeper spiritual meaning off their life, most are contented with that they call chuto-hanpa (a bit of this, a bit of that). The following is one example of Japanese life span which involves the various rituals of different religions.

"Bundled in colorful silk, the newborn Keiko Shirato was taken by her parents to a neighborhood Shinto shrine, where a white-gowned priest pronounced blessing for a long and healthy life. On three childhood birthday she also visited Shinto shrine, clapping her hands and clanging bell to awaken the gods so she could pray to them. She used Buddhist omens to select a propitious wedding day. But she exchanged Christian vows with her fiance in a small chapel at one of Tokyo's elegant hotel. When she became a mother she expects that some day her ashes will be interred in a Buddhist cemetery; where her descendants will annually return with a Buddhist priest to pray in her honor. To her, such religious eclecticism is perfectly natural. As she said, "I owe respect to my ancestors and show it through Buddhism. I am a Japanese, so I do all the little Shinto rituals, and I thought a Christian marriage would be real pritty. It's a contradiction, but so what?" (Quote from *Time* August 1, 1983)

Most Japanese still observe the venerable rituals which are part of the life of their nation and they still carry on their firm belief in Kami. The religious harmony is

seen most clearly by observing Shinto shrine and Buddhist temples side by side everywhere. Both kamidana and butsudan are found in one house and even the religious buildings themselves combine element from more than one religion. People participate traditional festivals or pilgrimages to local and national shrine. Their religious ceremony embodies the view of man and nature that is held in the festivals on the purpose of thanking the kami for the benefit already bestowed and to request for a fulfillment of their wishes. Moreover, it is believed that by attending the festivals, man can somehow come close to the Kami. Thus after the ritual is over it is expected that one carries back with him into ordinary life the mind of kami. Generally, the traditional Japanese festivals are so important that they serve as the important time of the year. For example, The Spring festival when rice is planted, people pray for a rich harvest and The Autumn festival when rice is harvested, they give thanks for their crops. People participate in the festival not only for the religious value but also to enjoy themselves as one would enjoy some popular or traditional entertainments. By and large these ceremonies are valued more as a community gathering which identifies the consolidation of the group in society.

Concerning the Japanese attitude toward religion's value.

Before going into the discussion about the Japanese attitude toward religion's value, one should keep in mind that there is not just one way to value religion because it may vary according to individual's interpretation. In one aspect people realize religion's value as serving them when engulfed with bad luck or misery. All men are undeniably weak in some ways and look for some kind of support. When man comes to the feeling of the lack of strength and strong isolation

or having troubles he will turn to religion. In this sense, religion's value is nothing more than a mean for man to escape from his own personal loneliness. Therefore, for a person who is satisfied with his life, religion may not be really necessary. Truly, it is impossible that man will be happy all through his life. Let now procede with the question of what Japanese do when they come to face problem. In the first place, most Japanese agree with or at least do not oppose the thought that although all religions differ one from another they are basically all the same. Consequently, it does not matter whether a person belongs to one religion or more or together. The selection of religion is simply a matter of personal task. This opintion widely spread in Japanese society.

Nevertheless Japanese basically think that religion is the world, it is on human being as well as on nature. In reality, human being can rely on one another to solve problem, the fact that Japanese society is groupism strengthens the feeling of dependency to one another. Additionally due to this dependency, Japanese learns to be sensitive to other feeling as well as to concern how they look to people of their own in group. To conclude, one's appropriate role behavior is guided by people and this result is called guilt and shame culture.

In the case of nature as already mentioned, there is a unity of nature and man; man feels akin to nature. Japanese poets say that the aim of poetry is nothing more than to explain life and death, happiness and suffering of man through the medium of natural phenomena. To observe the blossom of withering of flowers and to witness the changing of season in a year and to see the river and stream that flow in successive movement of endless renewal, are happening

to individual life which enable man to understand his fate. Every event is simply nature's unchanging development. For Japanese, man should not conquer nature but seek to marge with it and respect it. This expresses a spirit of religiousness toward nature and the fate which man should accept.

Conclusion

From the discussion, one can say that the Japanese view of religion reflects the syncretism and pragmatism of the Japanese minds. This is not applicable only in Japanese religion, but also in the fields of Japanese Politics Economics, society as well as way of life. Japan is a very homogeneous nation. The harmony and togetherness permeate Japanese culture through out her history. The Japanese mentality avoids all clearcut idea. As a result, Japanese has never accepted religions for their "content" but rather for their "form". In Japanese society, religion is conceived as "ways" or "manners" of life which is in no way absolute and which all more or less leads to the same goal. The doctrinal content is entirely secondary. Therefore, the peculiarities in the concept of divinity (living gods) and religious functions combined with the idea of Genze Riyaku (benefits in the present world) contribute the Japanese the ability to take care of various practical human problems caused under the particular socio-economic and political circumstance at a time.

For Japanese, gods are human being and nature. Religion is something related to man. There is even no religion per se apart from human life. Such an attitude affirms that the Japanese soul possesses a

deep religious sentiment. Actually, this spirit has its roots in Shinto which has been carried down to modern Japanese by their ancestors who taught them to live in unity with nature and in harmony with one another. Also this concept of life is what is behind their religious in difference. Most Japanese, especially in contemporary period, seem to cling to the idea that there is no need for faith but at the same time they never deny

that faith can console man nor they refute any of the religious values. Anyway this does not mean that most Japanese remain totally indifferent to religion through out their lives. In the troubled days of youth, many demonstrate an interest in religion. In maturity, they tend to drift away from religion as they busy themselves with the work of making a living. In old age, they may once again return to religion.



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