

# JAPANESE RELIGION

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## Overview

Religion has figured prominently throughout the history of Japan, and the contribution of religious institutions and beliefs to the rise of Japanese civilization virtually goes without saying. The indigenous Shinto faith has been a bedrock of Japanese society—and its politics—at every level; and Buddhism, which entered from China and Korea in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, developed deep and lasting roots. While not a religious faith per se, Confucianism, another import from China, has profoundly influenced the moral and social life of the Japanese, not to mention the political agenda of their leaders over the centuries. And of more recent vintage is Christianity, which for nearly five centuries has made an interesting and unusual contribution to Japan's religious history and the spiritual and intellectual life of its people.

Yet it has been widely observed that the Japanese people generally favor a pragmatic outlook on life and profess no religious belief. It may seem paradoxical that a people typically identified with Zen meditative solemnity and 'Eastern' spirituality should evidently express such indifference to religious faith. It is true that Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples draw large crowds for the various rituals and ceremonies that mark the calendar. But this speaks more to societal norms and 'family traditions' than to the expression of deeply-held religious beliefs.

Looked at in broad perspective, the religions of Japan have a history of mutual accommodation rather than conflict and exclusivity. This cultural syncretism is a defining quality of Japan's civilization. In particular, Shinto is predicated upon an intimate relationship between man and the *kami* deities, and between the human and natural realms. As with other societies, the local community has served as the site of religious rituals, festivals, and worship in Japan—be they Shinto, Buddhist, or folk in origin. Life cycle events have become subject to a religious 'division of labor,' whereby Shinto oversees ceremonies of birth, childhood, and marriage, and Buddhism cares for the dead and the world beyond. Shinto has long been associated with rituals of purification and the avoidance of defilement and pollution, and this has been said to have fostered a racist strain in the Japanese temper. But we should keep in mind that Japan's religious history—with its venerable priests, famous temples, and sacred texts and traditions—has little to say about the religious life of ordinary people, for whom local legends, rituals, and customs served as the bedrock of communal life.

## Backdrop

Shinto belief, legend, and ritual observance provided a native substrate upon which was built the more complex religious edifice that marked Japan's emergence as a civilization. Buddhism found a foothold among the leading clans as of the 6<sup>th</sup> century, and it flourished in tandem with the established Shinto faith in a mutual accommodation that reflects the syncretic propensity of Japanese civilization. Echoing earlier developments in China, the major Buddhist sects—salvationist and meditative, popular and elitist—took hold and gradually extended their reach. Following the heyday of Buddhist piety and power that marked the Nara period (8<sup>th</sup> century), the Heian period witnessed the rise of two very different sects—the Tendai sect, which held out the promise of Buddhahood and salvation to all people; and the esoteric Shingon sect, with its exclusivist rituals and monastic discipline.

With the medieval period, Buddhism spread from the elite center to the periphery, and Salvationist faith—as embodied, for instance, in the Pure Land (*Jōdo*) sect—gained prominence. The charismatic 13<sup>th</sup>-century religious leader Nichiren (1222-82), declaring all established Buddhist sects to be null and void, pioneered a new sect built upon the unique saving powers of the Lotus Sutra. Believers were to recite a formulaic prayer as testament to their faith and gateway to salvation. A modern version of Nichiren Buddhism has attracted a huge following in Japan and beyond.

For their part, the *bushi* elites—especially those in the Kamakura Shogunate—were drawn to the meditative Zen sect as a congenial outlet for their warrior credo of inner strength and self-control. As opposed to the Salvationist '*tarikī*' practice of seeking help from an external source (Amida Buddha, for instance), Zen is predicated upon discovering and maximizing one's inner strength (*jiriki*) through sustained meditative practice. Zen is also associated with the challenge of pondering and 'solving' certain conundrums and riddles (*kōan*)—the famous 'sound of one hand clapping,' for instance—as a means of transcending our habitual thought processes and attaining enlightenment (*satori*). The great Kamakura Zen temples—

Kenchôji and Enkakuji, for example— still attract those wanting to practice seated meditation (*zazen*) in a beautiful natural setting.

Japan's religious life was both enriched and complicated by the arrival of Christianity in the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century, in the form of Jesuit and Franciscan missionaries. This exotic Western faith, with its powerful Biblical accounts and rich symbolism, attracted thousands of converts. But it ran afoul of the nation's new leaders, who regarded it as an alien heresy that threatened to expand its insidious influence and ultimately challenge their own authority. With the advent of the Tokugawa regime, Christianity was banned and many who refused to renounce their faith were martyred. Communities of 'hidden Christians' preserved the faith, in secret, for several centuries, until the Meiji reforms freed them from their religious bondage.

Obsessed with maintaining order and staving off any opposition, the Tokugawa leaders instituted an official Confucianist ideology, which bolstered the authority of the *bushi* elites. The major Buddhist sects retained their place in the nation's religious life. But a new secular spirit emerged, reflecting the rise of cities and the down-to-earth interests of a wealthy merchant class. With the late-18<sup>th</sup> century, though, a reactionary movement centering on affirmations of native roots came to the fore, in part as a counter to the looming threat of Western colonial expansion. An important outgrowth of this movement was a kind of nationalist revival based on Shinto piety and unquestioned faith in the divinity of the Emperor. This mix of nationalism and native religiosity had major political implications, eventually contributing to the overthrow of the outmoded shogunal regime and the creation of a modern Japanese nation.

### **Religion in Meiji and Imperial Japan**

The Meiji period and its Westernization program called for a new openness regarding religion. For one thing, Christianity was re-introduced, and a number of Protestant missions became established. They opened mission schools, which taught the Bible and theology in addition to secular subjects, and some went on to become leading universities. However, the number of actual converts to Christianity remained very small— around 1% of the population— as opposed to Korea, whose people embraced Christianity with great enthusiasm. The Meiji leaders were principally interested in elevating Shinto to the status of a state religion, with the aim of reinforcing ties to native tradition and molding a strong collective identity. The Emperor was officially designated as a Shinto divinity, to be duly venerated by his subjects. The major Buddhist sects, now relegated to a marginal status, had to accommodate themselves to their reduced circumstance. Eventually new sects were formed, which would meet the demands of an increasingly dispersed and uprooted urban citizenry. In short, the gap between religion at the state level and the 'street' level was significant.

### **The Postwar and Beyond**

The defeat of the Japanese Empire dealt a major blow to the efficacy of the imperial mythology and its underlying dogma. The Emperor was in effect 'demoted' as a deity, and Shinto no longer had the status of a state religion. Japan's postwar constitution, drafted by the Occupation authorities in 1947, prescribed freedom of religion as part of its larger agenda of demilitarizing and democratizing the nation. Yet Shinto would retain its role in the observance of life-cycle events, the celebration of local rituals and festivals, and as a touchstone of national identity. Indeed, its symbolic role in Japan's nationalist movement may be likened to the status of Hinduism in Indian nationalism.

As for Buddhism— the old, established sects have been challenged by the many 'new religions' (*shin shûkyô*)— large and small, mainstream and cultish— that have appeared since the 1930s. These sects have largely appealed to disaffected and alienated city dwellers seeking a congenial faith community and a surrogate family. They offer a *mélange* of credos and practices that cobble together elements of Buddhism, Shinto, folk religion, and humanist philosophy. The most prominent is the Sôka Gakkai, with over ten million members. An offshoot of the medieval Nichiren sect, Sôka Gakkai venerates the Lotus Sutra and has expanded its outreach internationally, in the form of SGI— Sôka Gakkai International. It is also the driving force behind one of Japan's major political parties, the Kômaitô.

At the opposite end of the new-religion spectrum are fringe movements and cults that center on charismatic leaders and often bizarre beliefs and practices. The most egregious example is the Aum Shinrikyô sect, led by Asahara Shôkô, which in March 1995 unleashed a sarin nerve gas attack on the Tokyo subway system, killing thirteen and injuring hundreds— the purported aim of which was to cleanse the world and pave the way for Asahara's enlightened rule. Then there is the doomsday Pana-Wave cult, which warned of electromagnetic radiation that would destroy the earth's environment and all life. Its members dressed exclusively in white, so as to fend off the radiation and survive the impending catastrophe. Lest we attribute some malignant social pathology to the Japanese, we must keep in mind that they have no monopoly on cult extremism.

Zen Buddhism, despite its original appeal among the samurai elite, has had a profound impact both in Japan and among foreigners. It ranks among Japan's great cultural/ spiritual exports, on a par with yoga in the case of India. Zen has attracted spiritual seekers, counter-culture types, and those drawn to the Zen arts. Thanks in part to its chief English-language promoters— Suzuki Daisetsu (1870-1966) and his disciple Alan Watts (1915-73)— Zen study and practice found an enthusiastic audience in the U.S., especially among those in the counterculture movements of the 1960s and 70s. Today, Zen centers can be found all over the world. Aside from its meditation practices, Zen has inspired a meditative aesthetic— embodied in the tea ceremony, martial arts, calligraphy, among others— that has taken on its own religious and spiritual dimension.

In the final analysis, though, all indications are that the Japanese are not a religious people. Most do not belong to a faith community or profess belief in a god. But these same 'atheists' will dutifully observe Japan's two quasi-religious national rituals— the New Year's holiday (Oshōgatsu) and the summer Obon festival, which welcomes home the ancestral spirits. As much as anything, these holidays are occasions for returning home and renewing family ties— Japan's version of Thanksgiving, one might say.

As for the role of religion in the Japanese life cycle, it is still the case that Shinto oversees rituals for birth, key birthdays (3<sup>rd</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, and 7<sup>th</sup>), coming of age (20<sup>th</sup> birthday), and marriage. Buddhism, on the other hand, oversees death, burial, and the afterlife. Visits to shrines and temples typically involve the purchase of assorted amulets, trinkets, and good-luck charms. Depending on the 'brand' of the particular temple, prayers may be made for successful college entrance, good health, the repose of the soul of an aborted child, luck in love, or a winning lottery ticket— 'superstition religiosity,' in other words. One hastens to add that parallels with Christianity and other faiths are not hard to find.

Finally, there is the status of Japan's 'National Shrines'— the Ise Grand Shrine, which marks the birthplace, so to speak, of the Shinto faith; and the Yasukuni Shrine in central Tokyo, which enshrines the souls of Japan's war dead— including over a thousand convicted war criminals. Yasukuni has been a political powder keg of sorts, the site of a heated debate regarding Japan's identity as a nation and the memorialization of its imperial past. Official visits made by Japan's leaders and other dignitaries have garnered the praise of neo-conservatives and the condemnation of those who revile the nation's legacy of militarism and oppression. Again, Shinto inevitably figures in the politics of Japanese nationalism.

As for religious belief on the personal level among ordinary Japanese— this is another matter entirely.

### **Readings**

DuBois, Thomas, *Religion and the Making of Modern East Asia* (Cambridge, 2011)

Earhart, Byron, *Japanese Religion: Unity and Diversity* (Thomson Wadsworth, 2004, 4<sup>th</sup> edition)

Reader, Ian *et al*, *Japanese Religions: Past and Present* (Hawaii, 1993)

Suzuki, Daisetz, *Zen Buddhism and its Influence on Japanese Culture* (Princeton, 1970)

Varley, Paul, *Japanese Culture* (Hawaii, 2000)

### **Discussion Questions and Topics**

In one sense, religion taps into the deepest recesses of our being; in another sense, it represents a powerful institution with grandiose buildings, professional clergy, esoteric rituals, and the exchange of money for services rendered. In this respect, Japan is no different from any other developed nation. Yet we have long attributed a unique spiritual quality to the Japanese and their civilization. What might account for this, and how do you view the question of Japanese religiosity— especially in view of data pointing to their fundamentally secular orientation?

What might account for the great disparity between the reception of Christianity by Koreans and Japanese— notwithstanding the similarity of their respective societies and cultures?

Arguably, Confucianism has had a more profound impact on the Japanese and their society than either Buddhism or Shinto. Do you agree with this claim? What arguments could be made, pro and con? If Confucianism is not strictly speaking a 'religion,' with is it?

How would you assess the difference between Japan's 'old' Buddhist establishment and the new sects that have appeared in recent years? What parallels can you suggest with Christianity, Judaism, and Islam? Does the quality of modern civilization itself affect religious institutions in predictable ways and condition the way we choose to 'be spiritual'?

Among Japan's sacred texts, the Lotus Sutra has played a particularly important role for well over a millennium. What might account for this?

### **Concerning the Lotus Sutra:**

The Lotus Sutra is an attempt to teach this truth—that each of us had always been a Buddha from the eternal past and will always be a Buddha into the eternal future—to all, in an easily comprehensible fashion. The great Nichiren, the votary of the Lotus Sutra in the Latter Day of the Law, made it possible for all to embody this truth in their daily lives. The Lotus Sutra teaches of the great hidden treasure of the heart, as vast as the universe itself, which dispels any feelings of powerlessness. It teaches a dynamic way of living in which we breathe the immense life of the universe itself. It teaches the true great adventure of self-reformation. The Lotus Sutra has the breadth and scope to embrace all people on the way to peace. It has the fragrance of magnificent culture and art. It leads us to an unsurpassed state of mind imbued with the qualities of eternity, happiness, true self and purity, so that wherever we are, we may say, "This, my land, remains safe and tranquil."

Source: Daisaku Ikeda, *The Wisdom of the Lotus Sutra* (Vol I, pp 14-15)

### **A Cup of Tea (Zen Parable)**

Nan-in, a Zen master during the Meiji era (1868-1912), received a university professor who came to inquire about Zen.

Nan-in served tea. He poured his visitor's cup full, and then kept on pouring.

The professor watched the overflow until he no longer could restrain himself. "It is spilling over. No more will go in!"

"Like this cup," Nan-in said, "you are full of your own opinions and speculations. How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup?"

Source: Nyogen Senzaki, *101 Zen Stories* (1919), cited in Wikipedia.

## Images



Seated Zen meditation— *zazen* (Wikipedia)



Chion-in— Pure Land Buddhist temple in Kyoto (Wikipedia)



Ōura Cathedral, Nagasaki



Yasukuni Shrine (Tokyo), Hall of Worship