

## **Japanese Religions: Multiple Religions and Affiliations**

Many people think that Japan is perhaps the most secular society on earth. That is to say, the society where religion has the least influence. A secular society is one where religion has very little influence or place in the public realm. However, if we add up the number of people who belong to all of the branches of Japanese religions in the country, we get at least twice the number of the total population. This has been true since the 1950s. Why is this so?

The reason is that, historically, the Japanese have been affiliated with a branch of Buddhism and have also been linked to Shinto. They may belong to a family temple in the case of Buddhism, and also be a member of a parish of a Shinto shrine in the neighborhood where they live.

Thus, for a very long time, the Japanese have had a pattern of belonging to at least two religious groups. That has been true since the Edo period, that is 1600 to 1868. A long time in which these patterns became very deeply entrenched. Added to that, Christianity came to Japan in modern times during the Meiji period, beginning in 1868, and it achieved a very strong social influence in the country.

## **Japanese Religions: Shinto**

### **Helen Hardacre:**

Shinto is an indigenous religion of Japan. Its deities are called *kami*. The *kami* may be deified human beings — that is, ancient heroes. They may be the gods of ancient myth. They may be natural phenomena, such as a striking tree, a huge boulder, a waterfall. In some eras of history, the Emperor has been considered a *kami*. Shinto is a religion that's restricted to Japan. It hasn't tried to proselytize or make converts in other places.

The institutions of Shinto are called shrines. There are hundreds, thousands of shrines in Japan today. Indeed, on every street corner of virtually every city, one can find a shrine.

A shrine is typically a place which is a little piece of nature. Even in the cities, they are liable to be a place with trees, even if the surrounding area is all concrete. Natural symbols, such as trees, boulders, waterfalls, and other things are very important to the shrines.

### **Theodore Bestor:**

Even in the biggest cities in Japan, there are shrines everywhere. A neighborhood where I did research some years ago had a large shrine easily identifiable by the distinctive gate — it's called a *torii* in Japanese, it's of two cross-beams erected on a couple of pillars — which marks the outer boundary of the shrine. And inside the shrine (are) trees, potted plants, some boulders that had been brought there years ago, things that were reminiscent of nature. I think that in some ways Shinto has a certain reverence for nature. It doesn't necessarily manifest itself throughout Japan, but at least in little enclaves of shrines,

people try (to) bring something natural and consider it worth revering, if not actually worshipping.

### **Japanese Religions: Buddhism**

#### **Theodore Bestor:**

Traditionally, most Japanese families have a long-standing affiliation with a particular Buddhist temple, and it's related in part to the family system that a traditional family, known in Japanese as an *ie*, would have a particular temple at which the funerals for their family would be performed, and where memorial services for the ancestors would also be performed. And one of the duties of the heir to a family — in a traditional family only one, usually the son, only one son would inherit the responsibilities of the family — among the responsibilities would be taking care of the memorial tablets that are kept in the family altar, called a *butsudan*, from generation to generation. So one of the ways in which you can sort of tell whether a family is inheriting the main line of a traditional family is whether they possess a *butsudan*, something to worship the ancestors. Other children who leave the family and have to establish their own households wouldn't necessarily have that.

#### **Helen Hardacre:**

During the Edo period, national law required every Japanese family to be affiliated with a Buddhist temple. At that time, the custom arose of families entrusting, so to speak, their ancestors to the care of a Buddhist temple. And for their part, the temples required each of those affiliated families to have funerals and periodic memorial rituals performed by the temples. Thus, in Japan, ancestor worship has, at least from the beginning of the Edo period, that is to say 1600, been almost exclusively a Buddhist observance.

Shinto funerals are not unknown, but nearly so. Thus, while in China, ancestor worship is more connected to Confucianism, in Japan, ancestor worship is almost exclusively a Buddhist phenomenon, based on this historical background.

### **Japanese Religions: Christianity**

The number of Christians in Japan has never exceeded about one percent of the population. However, during the Meiji period (1868-1912), Japanese Christianity was highly influential in promoting women's education and promoting the abolition of prostitution. Therefore, its social influence is much greater than the numbers of its members might suggest. This continues to be true in Japan today. There are many branches of Christianity represented there, including the Greek Orthodox Church, the Catholic Church, many Protestant denominations, as well as Evangelical Christianity and Christian new religions.

New Religions

In addition to Shinto, Buddhism, and Christianity, Japan is home to a number of new religious movements. The term "new religions" in Japan can be a little bit confusing, because it refers to lay-peoples' movements founded from around 1900 to the present. Thus there are some of them which have nearly 200 years of history, and it's hard to think of them as "new" in the same sense as a group that may have been founded as recently as 1985.

A recent encyclopedic dictionary of new religious movements in Japan lists over 600 new religious movements. This is, however, only one subsection of Japanese religious life.

New religious movements may be Buddhist, Shinto, Christian, or entirely independent movements which originate in revelations to a founder. Many founders of new religious movements are women. Some of the most important would be Tenrikyo, founded in 1838 and still today having about 250,000 members. This group is a rural new religion, but it also has branches all over the country.

There are many Buddhist new religious movements. They tend to prosper more in the cities and to be influential in community life, and also at a grassroots level in political life. Sometimes new religious movements function as a surrogate family or a surrogate community for people in the cities who may be cut off from deeper ties to their family of birth, which may be back in the countryside.

New religious movements are active in society in a number of ways. The 1964 founding of the Clean Government Party by Soka Gakkai (*Soka Gakkai is a lay organization for believers in a branch of Japanese Buddhism called Nichiren Shosho or orthodox Nichiren sect*) is the most visible aspect of new religion's political activities, but in many areas they are active in a less visible way, not necessarily endorsing candidates, but perhaps going door to door for candidates who may be members. Sometimes they do endorse candidates. In other ways, they may be active in social welfare activities, founding hospitals, clinics, activities for the aged and other types of social welfare activities.

Rissho Kosei-kai is a Buddhist new religion founded in 1938. It is active in Japanese politics in a very distinctive way. It doesn't sponsor a particular political party, but while it provides sponsorship and funds for some politicians, it nevertheless has a litmus test about who it will support. It refuses to support politicians who have been linked to corruption of any kind, and it also puts a premium on maintaining the separation between religion and state, so that politicians who use their office, for example, to sponsor the pre-war shrine to the war dead, called the *yasukuni* shrine, are also excluded from its political support.

### **Japanese Religions: Old vs. New Religions**

#### **Helen Hardacre:**

New religious movements represent the most vital sector of Japanese religions today. By contrast, temple Buddhism and shrine Shinto have been in decline since the end of the

World War II. While the membership in Japanese new religions has been rising since 1945, the ties between the people and their temples and traditional shrines are tending to weaken since 1945.

**Theodore Bestor:**

If you think about the social context of Japanese religion, in some senses Buddhism is about the family and about the ancestors, and Shinto is about the community. Shinto shrines are organized around a geographical place, around a community. And so, people in their religious lives may be celebrating different aspects of their social world in different religious settings. Now because Shinto has a complicated history ideologically, it means that the link between the community and Shinto can also be controversial.

So, for example, many new religions which are very popular in urban areas are at best antagonistic, in some cases hostile, to Shinto. So, people who live in a community but are hostile to Shinto may find themselves outside of many community institutions that feed back into the Shinto shrine at the heart of the traditional community.

Similarly, people who, for political reasons, see Shinto as extremely conservative or linked to the pre-war and wartime governmental political military structure, may be reluctant to participate in community events if they think that by doing that they would be endorsing Shinto in this sort of old-fashioned ideological sense.

**Japanese Religions: Women and New Religions**

Many new religious movements have been founded by women, and in fact, the majority of the membership in new religious movements tends to be female. That is to say that women find many important and fulfilling outlets for their talents in new religious movements. Not only the aspects of faith and belief, which of course attract many people of both sexes, but it's also the case that women can participate in new religious movements' activities outside the home without giving up their primary roles as wives and mothers. This means that they are prominent as grassroots organizers in the new religions, and as proselytizers — as people who bring in new members to the new religious movements.

**Japanese Religions: Comparative Influence of Religion**

Many people believe that one of the characteristics of the modern world is the decreasing influence of religion. If we look at the industrialized nations today, we find that, with one great exception, they are very much alike in their rates of religious participation, membership in religious organizations, and so on. Japan is very much like the nations of Western Europe. The great exception in world-wide terms is the United States, where levels of expressed religious belief, the level of religious influence in politics, and so on, is in fact much greater than we see elsewhere in the world. Japan is much more like the nations of Western Europe and other industrialized societies in the area of religion than it is like the United States.

