

A LOOK AT RELIGION IN JAPAN

Abstract

Seen in terms of culture, the theme of religion and politics in Japan, as everywhere else, is complicated, the more so because religion in this country is highly complicated. This essay—the aim of which is descriptive, not analytic—is an attempt at drawing a concrete picture of Shinto and Buddhism, both of which incorporate multiple strands of traditional religion. It is these that have shaped Japanese religiosity and culture. Politically prominent features are put up in front so to speak: that is, impressions of a visit to the Yasukuni Shrine and a note on Yasukuni as a religious institution. An account of religious pluralism and the ‘religious division of labor’ constitute the central part, followed by a section on the characteristics of religion in Japan. Further, because religiously and politically momentous, an additional note is included about the popular image of Japan’s imperial throne. Finally, to emphasize the significance of religion, the essay ends with a word of hope for the future of religion.

Key words: The Yasukuni Shrine, Japanese religiosity, Shinto religious practices, Buddhist religious practices, ancestor worship, religious pluralism, imperial throne, latent value conflict.

Visiting Yasukuni Shrine

At the occasion of writing the introductory essay for this series on religion and politics in Japan, I visited the Yasukuni Shrine in November 2009. Even though I have been living in Japan for forty-five years, this was the first time for me to travel to Tokyo for that purpose. I feel excused for this neglect since my study and work from the beginning started and continued in the Kansai area, centering on Kyoto, the cultural capital of the country, located five hundred kilometers west of Tokyo. Besides, Japanese religion was not a central topic of my study of the sociology of religion. Certainly, the idea of taking a look at that famous and controversial shrine has often crossed my mind. During the last decade, the Yasukuni Shrine was intermittently in the news, due to official visits by former Prime Minister Koizumi, invariably followed by serious objections from countries like China and Korea (described by Okuyama Michio in PRJ 2/2009: 240-49). However, these occasional incidents looked like insignificant interruptions in the daily reporting of domestic and international news on television, which, like the daily weather forecast, is repeated endlessly: fretful interpellations in the Diet, political scandals, and corporate misbehavior, followed by news about

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accidents and crimes. As in other modern, democratic societies, individual and corporate interests have become dominant values in Japan.

Religion in Japan is minimally reported about in the mass media. Traditional religious events are reported favorably, but the latest new religions usually get negative script. This is an indication that religion in general is not valued highly (Shinya 2008: 3), and suggests that it plays no visible role on the public stage. However, religion is present everywhere in Japan. Religion, particularly Shinto, is an important factor of Japanese religious culture, of what is specifically Japanese. The Yasukuni Shrine certainly is a case in point, if also a stage in its own right.

My first and only visit to this national shrine was quite impressive. The south and north entrance gates are close to the shrine, but just by chance, I approached it from the east entrance, which is farther away. This entry to a straight, wide, walkway, leading to the shrine, is marked by a giant torii gate. At famous Shinto shrines torii gates are not higher than ten meters, but this one is twenty-five meters in height, as tall as the over one-hundred-years old ginkgo trees that, in densely planted green zones, line the walkway. It spans the nicely paved walkway that is two city blocks long and as broad as a six-lane road.

Though not crowded on a weekday afternoon, many people, individually or in little groups of two or three or more, stroll towards the Shrine or are returning from it. As soon as you enter this walkway to the shrine beckoning from afar, you feel that the atmosphere here is quite different from the crowded Tokyo streets. After stepping quite a stretch, you approach an impressive statue on top of an iron column, planted on solid round granite foundation. Getting near, you learn it is a statue of Omura Masujiro (1812-69), who was instrumental in organizing Japan's military system. Among other things, he fought the Tokugawa troops but was murdered by their henchmen. His statue, a western style bronze, dates from 1893. Significantly, the man wears a samurai kimono, with two swords in his sash. On his double pedestal, the samurai-general stands twelve meters tall. Passing this statue, you further walk towards the heavy, triple entrance gate of the inner precincts, which is closed at night. A large group of sightseers are listening to a guide. Proceeding again, you pass a common wooden torii, and soon you get in front of the main shrine, where casual visitors worship. Standing here, and peering from under a horizontally suspended long white cloth, imprinted with imperial chrysanthemum symbols and draped-up in the middle, one can look straight through two more interconnected shrine buildings. The middle one is the oldest shrine building completed in 1872. A religious service for special guests was conducted over there. Thirty or so people were lining up.

Respect for culture

One can try to describe the scene objectively, but, when it comes to impressions and feelings, subjectivity takes over. More to the point, neutrality with respect to culture and religion, one is involved in, is hardly possible. While studying in Japan and later becoming a staff member of a local university, I have become accustomed to the ways of living in this country, identifying consciously with Japanese culture and obtaining Japanese citizenship. Due to my involvement, I may lapse into a 'cultural bias,' but if so, it certainly is not a political or ideological one. Traditional culture merits

respect. It is my intention to evaluate Japanese culture from within, trying to describe everyday realities as I feel they are lived. In other words, I am attempting here cultural 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973: 10-28).

To repeat, my impressions of Yasukuni Shrine were weighty. Following other strolling 'pilgrims' and treading solitarily along that long walking avenue, my mind was free to roam through vivid allays of Japanese history that came to mind from the many historical dramas I have watched on the NHK national television, ending up as it were in the abyss of World War II, whose 2,460,000 Japanese war dead are commemorated at this shrine. With that frame of mind and filled with a sense of awe, I stood in front of Yasukuni Shrine, together with ten to fifteen other persons, mostly men, doing their ceremonial prayer, under the watchful eyes of a tall security guard in a navy blue uniform standing at a respectful distance, at the extreme left. At one moment, he did a few steps towards the worshippers and sternly told a young tourist not to take pictures—there is no problem though clicking your camera from a distance.

The worshipping act is similar at all Shinto shrines. People throw a coin into a lattice-covered large offertory box, bow their heads, clap their hands twice, and bow once more to remain a minute or so in that position, eyes closed. Then they silently retreat. In front of me, a little to the right, stands a relatively young Caucasian male, his hands joined in prayer before his chest and his gaze firmly fixed on the inner shrine. As for myself, a vague longing to visit this shrine has finally been realized. After hesitating for quite a while and before continuing my inspection of this sanctuary, I too performed the prescribed little ritual, an expression of my gratitude to my adopted country.

Among other facilities within the large precincts, a war-history museum appears to be an ominous presence that draws strong attention. It is built close to the religious shrine. A Zero Fighter warplane faces you directly from behind the large windowpane of the entrance hall. Having not expected this scene, I immediately passed through the glass door and bought an entrance ticket. But, for the purpose of this introduction, in order to grasp the implications of Yasukuni's religious and cultural background, it is better to first describe the other features of this national shrine park.

Leaving the war-history museum to the right and walking to the rear of the precincts, you pass by a life-size statue of an elegant and proud officer's horse on top of a two-meter high pedestal. It is dedicated to the spirits of tens of thousands of horses that 'served' in war expeditions in the first half of the 20th century—this statue was erected in 1958. Two much smaller statues stand nearby, one of a German shepherd and one of a pigeon. These were added still later. They placate the spirits of these animals that also served the army. Quite differently, nearer to the museum stands the statue of a woman, entitled: the Mother. It is a woman in kimono, standing on a reddish-brown block, having a little child on her right arm; a little girl and a taller boy at her left and right look up to her.

A typical Japanese garden occupies the rear of the precincts. There is a little river, a little waterfall, a pond with rocks of various sizes. Three relatively small, classic pavilions are partly hidden in the heavily wooded rear area. Here, Urasenke tea ceremonial is practiced regularly. A signpost, at the pavilion to the right, mentions that it originally housed a workshop for forging swords. The text tells that 8100 officer's swords were crafted here, using fifty tons of high-grade steel. Further to the right you come to a stage for Sumo ceremonial that is performed every New Year. Nearer to the

main shrine you find a building where Noh plays are performed as well as traditional Japanese buyo dancing.

The variety of facilities clearly shows that Yasukuni represents quite a repertoire of Japanese traditional culture. As in every other Shinto shrine, a link with the non-human environment, nature, is very much in evidence, too. Among the many kinds of arboreal vegetation, cherry trees merit explicit mentioning. Six hundred pieces adorn the compound, particularly when they blossom in early spring—cherry-blossom petals fluttering like snowflakes in the wind had significant symbolic meaning for Japanese troops. They might fall in the same way in service to their emperor and country. However, it is good to note that cherry trees abound everywhere in Japan, in city parks, along railway tracks at certain places, along rivers, on the hilly slopes of city outskirts as well as in Buddhist temple compounds.

The war-history museum

Yasukuni's museum was established as early as 1882, ten years after the Yasukuni Shrine itself. Presently, it stores over one hundred thousand articles, including works of art, paintings, armor, swords and rifles from the time of the feudal warlords up to weaponry from the World War II. The bigger items include two planes, a steam locomotive that ran the Thai-Burma railroad, a small armored vehicle, several ship-torpedoes and anti-aircraft guns. The smaller items in other halls consist of a large number of personal things, costumes, ceremonial portraits, family pictures, letters and many items recollecting from what was left on battle fields. The exit hall is a gallery of photographs that represent the tragic public-personal dimension of the reality of war. Thousands and thousands of postcard-size pictures of young men in arms are arranged in large panels as long as the walls. All have fallen. I count twelve rows in vertical position.

In Japanese, this two-story building complex is called thoughtfully *yu-shu-kan*. Two of the three characters of this name are taken from a Chinese classic that praises learning. Broadly translated, it refers to a building (*kan*) where one can learn from eminent predecessors (Yasukuni Shrine 2009: 2-3).

To summarize my impressions, they are threefold. Firstly, war-history is a complex matter about which an objective view has been attempted in the many texts displayed in showcases and written on the walls of every hall. Among other things, there are observations on vexing international relations of Japan as well as other nations that, in their drive towards expansion throughout the world, engaged in colonialization of other countries. Secondly, the many personal items seem intended to convey the lofty spirit and sincerity of all those war dead—again 2.46 million are enshrined. They are praised for willingly sacrificing their lives for their country, as is jotted down in some of the exhibited greeting cards and letters—some ominously mentioned: “we will meet at Yasukuni.” This spirit of sacrifice perhaps is a continuation of the earlier spirit of loyalty of retainers to the highest local authority of the Daimyo overlord, which was directed towards the Emperor in prewar Japan. Surely, the personal items also communicate a subdued sense of historical tragedy. Thirdly, war itself certainly is not glorified, but neither is contrition expressed toward foreign victims of the war, except that, to the left of the main shrine building, there stands a little shrine that

was dedicated to foreign war dead in 1965. As is well known, several Japanese Prime Ministers as well as the Emperor have apologized frequently when visiting victimized Asian countries. Also, Japanese multinationals have contributed a great deal to the postwar development of these countries. The Yasukuni Shrine and the Japanese in general do not denounce the so-called war criminals. They too are enshrined and 'worshipped' here. By the way, one national flag, picturing a red sun on a white field, is a special treasure of the museum. The yellowy faded white field bears the autographs of all twenty-five alleged class-A war criminals—a longtime it was in the possession of U.S. military guard, who presented it later to Yasukuni.

War-history is a sore for many nations that they do not want to touch. Even though Japan's prewar policy of expansion and aggression is an issue that remains in a state of suspense in Japan itself, military authorities involved in the war are mostly positively evaluated for having been wholeheartedly devoted to their country. Implicitly they are seen as having contributed to the present wellbeing of Japan. We can add perhaps, for fairness' sake, that countries or those in command, who decided to resort to war, have never admitted any guilt or responsibility for excessive war atrocities, not even for the utter horror of Atomic bombs. But then, again, war responsibility is a highly exasperating social, moral, and religious issue. In its consequences, war is violation of human rights on a massive scale. No more war! No more Hiroshima! This should be the only meaningful thought that could redeem history.

Yasukuni Shrine as a religious institution

A notable characteristic of Yasukuni nevertheless is a more or less implicit connection with the phenomenon of war. Other countries have their war museums, but, visibly, they are not closely linked to religious institutions. Though not war as such, the consequences of war are part and parcel of Shinto religious beliefs. As mentioned already, Yasukuni built a little shrine that commemorates foreign war dead. It is not sure though whether this attention for the souls of the enemy originates from a universal religious impulse. Its roots extend to ancient religious beliefs according to which the spirits of the slain enemy had to be feared and placated so that they would not take revenge after their death.

Shinto religious culture is rooted in animism, shamanism, and nature worship. For Shinto, the divine and the holy manifest themselves in nature. That even spirits of animals are included in Shinto worship testifies to that ancient thought that is still there. As mentioned by some Japanese authors, the nature-focus has an aspect that is meaningful also today, particularly because the present-day acute consciousness of global warming and destruction of ecosystems, which according to the experts, have to be countered in order to save Planet Earth (Sonada 2000: 45).

Thus, reverence for nature is an important part of the Shinto cultural core but so is an animist/shamanist belief in the spirits of the dead. This is illustrated by the following examples. Though much less numerous than diviners, in Japan as well as in Korea, there are shamanistic practitioners, whose service is invoked by people who want to know what deceased family members, e.g., those fallen in the fields of war, did think about their misfortune and whether they might be discontented with the

living (Iida 2002: 41-103 [Korean shaman ritual in Japan]; cf. also Tsushiro in this series). Those shamans, often women, induce a kind of trance, getting possessed as it were by a particular spirit that talks to the kindred. Influence of this kind of religion is clearly present in some patterns of leadership of cult leaders. Asahara Shoko, for example, who headed Omu Shinrikyo, presented himself as a reincarnation of the Buddha and acted as a charismatic shaman who allegedly mastered levitation as well as prophecy. Less ostentatious, Okawa Ryuho, founder and leader of the Science of Happiness, a recent new religious association, is well known for his 'channeling' of the spirits of religious personalities, now in the Other World, on whom he wrote a score of books.

Such belief in the spirits of the dead probably interconnects also with ancestor worship, which, as commented on below, is a core feature of Japanese Buddhism. Further, it cannot be belabored here, but the belief in spirits and ancestor worship may have occasioned the nation-focus of state Shinto as well as the idea of the divine status of the emperor in the ideology of state-Shinto.

A conclusion of the present section is that, like popular Shinto that shaped Japanese religious culture, the Yasukuni Shrine is a specific institution, firmly imbedded in this culture. It has no parallel in other countries. Yasukuni, as a cultural entity, is above criticism as long as its religious thought and symbolism is not sufficiently understood. Moreover, the past is nothing to be fought over. The future is a different matter. Every nation, including Japan, has to renew itself and work for a better future. As we will note in the last section, critical thought by social scientists as well as by representatives of religious organizations should be highly relevant for the future.

As for religion in Japan, Shinto is only one part. The following sections try to complete the highly composite picture of religion in this island nation. On the whole, it can be said that the traditions conditioning Japanese religiosity are fourfold: besides Shinto, there is Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism. The Shinto tradition is culturally the more influential strand of religion, but, while originative of Japan, Shinto stood under the influence of Chinese Taoism, particularly yang and yin thought (Philippi 1968: 37 – 44), fortune telling is based on. On the other hand, Buddhism is religiously the stronger part, while at the same time Confucian ideas of social relations have greatly impacted ethics in Japan.

Shinto and Buddhist Religious pluralism

How these traditions combine in fashioning Japanese religiosity is not easy to see for outside observers—later we will return to this point. These traditions certainly codetermine one important characteristic of religion in Japan: mutual tolerance, better still, religious pluralism. Due to the variety of traditions, which in order to exist one next to the other, religious tolerance is a requisite, but it also follows from the nature of both Shinto and Buddhism. Shinto mainly concerns ritual observances and ways of living (Berthon 1991). Similar to Hinduism, Shinto is polytheistic, allowing many gods to 'live' side by side so to speak. Shinto has inspired some intellectuals to formulate religious thought in early Tokugawa and in later Tokugawa (Breen and Teeuwen 1996), but did not develop normative doctrines. Buddhism, as 'corporate' religion, is much more complex in terms of religious thought that has been produced by many denominations (briefly introduced in the section below), but the various traditions are

virtual textbook examples of religious pluralism. A dogmatic type of religious thought is exceptional.

Thus, Shinto is inherently a non-doctrinal religion. As suggested earlier, popular Shinto shrines merely provide occasion for worship, offer a simple, purifying ritual that is performed on request, while neighborhood communities organize celebrations (*matsuri*) that function as one more kind of Shinto activities. Also, the visible features of Shinto shrines suggest that Shinto has not much substance in terms of beliefs. Like the meditation gardens of Zen Buddhism, these shrines have no solid center. Most shrines are open at the front and also partly at the rear end. Certainly, the *gohei* have central significance. *Gohei* are two strips of paper folded in zigzag fashion, which hang from a polished stick or rod, more or less one meter tall. These sticks are placed on a Shinto-style high altar that stands in the middle of the hind end of the shrine. The *gohei* represent either the presence of the gods (*kami*) or offerings to them, but as religious objects, they are just made of paper or possibly cut from gilded thin metal plates. At the rear of the shrine there are usually a few other smaller altar-like shrines, next to the central altar, with open spaces between them, only partially fenced off from its natural environment. As a sympathetic outsider, you may get the impression you look into a numinous space with few religious objects to guide your attention, an open space under interconnecting roofs that rest on several wooden pillars—much of the wooden parts as well as the torii of popular shrines are painted in vermilion red but not those closely related to state-Shinto. The red color represents yang substance.

The main traditional Buddhist denominations are the following. The oldest one is Nara Buddhism of the 8th century—Nara city, which is close to Kyoto, is a sightseeing Mecca. Tendai and Shingon Buddhism originated in the Heian Period (794-1185) and are located in Kansai mountain areas east of Kyoto and south of Osaka. The Kamakura Period (1185-1333) produced major developments: the Pure Land Denomination and Shin Buddhism (the New Pure Land faction) that are known as Amida Buddhism; the Nichiren denomination and two strands of Zen monasteries: Rinzai and Soto Zen.

It is these denominations that have produced the bulk of Buddhist religious thought. They all have their own revered founders and their sutras or sacred scriptures that they more or less consider to be their exclusive possession. However, as religious thought, all appear to be inclusive, all going back to the original inspiration of Shakamuni, the Indian founder of Buddhism in 6th century BC. It is remarkable that all of these denominations are still active and vigorous today, providing religious services and activities in the field of education as well as welfare. Most of them have institutions of higher learning.

The religious situation stabilized in the Edo period (1600-1868) when Japan became a politically unified country under the hegemony the Tokugawa shogunate. Outlawing Christianity led to the isolation of Japan. It was meant to avoid all foreign influence (Aoyama, 1986: 53-56). As briefly described in the following section, government policy led to the religious supremacy of traditional Buddhism that, however, began to be reversed in favor of Shinto during the Meiji era (1868-1912). In other words, the conductors in the political orchestras of the shogunate and the Meiji government orchestrated the greater influence of either Buddhism or Shinto.

A religious awakening occurred in the middle of the 19th century that sprouted many new religious groups. Aoyama Nakaba lists and describes ninety-six religious

associations that emerged since that time, generally called 'the New Religions' (Aoyama, 1986: 149-258). Except for a few that are well-known and have large groups of faithful, such as Tenri, Konko-kyo, Soka Gakkai, and Risshokoseikai (the latter two grew fast after World War II), most of those new religions have no mainstream status. A few more sprang up in the 1970s, such as Omu Shinri-kyo and The Science of Happiness mentioned above. These are called the New-New Religions in Japanese.

For all the variation and complexity of Japan's religious history, Japanese religiosity has definite points of convergence, as can be seen from the 'religious division of labor' that Shinto and Buddhism somehow have developed. They relate to different aspects of life and perform different social functions, which suggests that they are fundamentally different religions.

Division of 'religious labor'

Still today, when touching on religion in conversation, many Japanese will tell you without any hesitation that their family is formally associated with a specific Buddhist denomination. This situation is a consequence of the household-registry system that the Tokugawa regime installed in the Edo period (1600-1868). In order to thoroughly eliminate Christianity, the shogunate entrusted domicile administration to Buddhist temples in every locality. That is, all households had to be registered by a temple. This was a deft political move of the Shogun and his Council that was based on a religious rationale. In a nutshell, Buddhist religious thought is much concerned with problems of the mind and spiritual life. It explains what reality (ho) and the relations of human existence (engi-setsu) consist of. Its goal is to liberate people from vices (bonno), enlightening them in the eightfold path of virtues and wisdom (hasshodo) that might lead them to a happy afterlife. As a result, funerals and caring for the dead became a practical concern of Buddhism that was politically reinforced. Performing funerals and related services (hoji) became the main socio-religious functions as well as the main source of income for Buddhist temples in Japan, to the extent that, in vernacular expression, Buddhism is often referred to as 'funeral Buddhism.' Another interesting point is that funeral services, consisting mainly of sutra reciting by a priest, were conducted in people's houses, the center of which used to be the house altar-shrine. In that way, the temple priests were able to check the religious practices of the people. They had to report eventual Christian believers to shogunate authorities.

Lately, more and more funerals are held at public funeral parlors in the cities, but the tablets of the deceased (ihai) are kept on the house altar. They bear a posthumous Buddhist name that is suggested by a temple priest. The house altars together with the tombs are the focus of 'ancestor worship.' Traditionally, this worship concerned patrilineal ancestors but recently both paternal and maternal deceased are object of 'memorial veneration.' Due to the increase of conjugal, small-scale families, many living in relatively small apartments, patterns of veneration are said to be diversifying and deteriorating. However, religious attitudes remain strong in that the majority of people see this practice as an important custom. The main characteristic of this 'household religion' is that the deceased, particularly parents and grandparents, are related to as if they were still among the living. That is, they are talked to and communicated with. Expression of gratitude is its core. The following are typical practices.

Devout faithful will always keep the main room of the house clean and spotless as an expression of reverence for its built-in altar (*butsudan*: a piece of furniture, heavy with religious symbolism)—similarly, the precincts of shrines and temples are always kept clean and tidy. Now and then they will bring in a flower from their garden patch, particularly on the monthly anniversary day of the most beloved deceased—little bunches of ‘memorial’ flowers are available in supermarkets year-round. Early in the morning the father may recite the well-known and very short *Han’nya* sutra, and the mother will offer a cup of water or tea and a cup of boiled rice (that she will eat herself a little later—many Japanese still have rice for breakfast). Important family news is verbally communicated before the house altar: A marriage engagement, becoming pregnant, and giving birth. Adult children will ‘deposit’ their first salary on the altar shelf. Received presents, before being eaten or used, will be put in front of the altar. The very devout will end the day, sitting for a few moments before the little shrine in praying position.

This form of family religion can be seen as a significant religious custom that defines Japanese religiosity. While Buddhism and Shinto have a distinct religious symbolism and culture, religious thought concerning ancestors is quite similar. Part of the population, particularly those in rural areas, has a stronger tie with Shinto. Instead of a Buddhist altar, they keep an altar-shrine at home (*kamidana*). The spirits of the departed gradually acquire either a Buddha nature (and become *hotoke*) or a god-like nature (and become *kami*).

Popular Shinto is associated with the happier events of life: birth, special birthdays at three, five, and seven years of age as well as reaching adulthood at twenty. Most parents will take their young children, clad in *kimonos*, to a Shinto shrine when they reach those three typical birthdays of an odd number, and have a simple rite of purification performed. Further, a typical Japanese wedding, with the newlyweds wearing special *kimonos*, is held at a Shinto shrine or little Shinto ‘chapel’ set up in hotels that cater to wedding parties. It is noteworthy, however, that Shinto has no monopoly in this area. ‘Western’ weddings, where the bridal apparel consists of white wedding gowns and fancy costumes, have become very popular, too. They are performed in regular Christian churches and in ad hoc chapels built and used only for wedding ceremonies.

The most outstanding event of Shinto shrines is the New Year. From midnight at New Year’s Eve until at least the third of January or the fifth, depending on the place, two-thirds of the country’s population pays a visit to a local shrine to pray for good luck during the New Year. This is the time that the most famous shrines in the cities draw enormous crowds of worshippers. They proceed massively, but quite orderly, in rows and rows and rows towards the shrine, where they will perform a similar ritual as at Yasukuni shrine, but the mood at New Year’s is much more festive. As in the case of other large festivals, *matsuri*-merchants set up their stalls at both sides of the walkway within the precincts, where on the spot they prepare and sell popular foodstuff, from baked cuttlefish, scallops, to turbo cooked in their own shell, to fried and cooked potatoes, hotdogs, cookies and the like.

Another aspect of religion that characterizes Shinto belief, influenced by Taoism, is reliance on amulets and divination (*o-mamori*; *o-fuda*, cf. Berthon 1991: 9-10). Amulets and talismans being effective only for half a year or one year at most, the people

bring back their old ones to the shrine and throw them into a large container placed at the rear of the shrine compound. At stalls near to the shrine they buy new ones—that come in many kinds and prices—but their goal is similar: preventing family misfortune of all sorts, effecting good luck in passing exams, etc. Younger people take a horoscope (o-mikujji) to check their chances for the New Year. Having read the divining message, they fold the strap of white paper and tie it elegantly to a twig of a tree near to the shrine, where it will be left as a silent prayer until the New Year is over.

The religious practices, described above, are uncomplicated. The meaning of these customs and practices is internalized through participation from childhood on. Nothing is problematic in any way, not even the various traditions taken individually, but these Shinto and Buddhist strands of belief can hardly be integrated into one conceptual frame. As a matter of culture, they need not be integrated in order for individuals to find various parts meaningful. In life as in culture, simplicity and complexity can exist side by side. Nor is anything is complex, except if we insist on integrating the various strands. Shinto reveals a three-fold focus: nature, the spirits of the dead, and the nation, to which a fourth one has to be added: belief in the fortune-misfortune happenstance of astrology. Buddhism too has multiple focuses: Belief in enlightenment by means of ascetic practices; belief in salvation through the grace of a divine being (the eternal Buddha, or Amida) or through intercession of divinized human beings (boddhisatvas) or protection in daily life by the beloved deceased. How could these various religious traditions work together for the betterment of Japanese society?

Social characteristics of religion in Japan

Firstly, organized religion in Japan could be characterized as 'corporate religion.' Diversity of religious inspiration, the religious division of labor, and perhaps lingering feudal attitudes may be responsible for this characteristic. Like most organizations in Japan, religious organizations are much more clannish than similar Christian denominations. Even though federations of religious groupings exist, all manage their own associations without looking for outside cooperation. The two Honganji factions of Shin Buddhism (East and West Honganji) are good examples. Being founded in the 13th century, Shin Buddhism spread throughout Japan and became the strongest denomination. In order to check their influence, Ieyasu (the first Tokugawa shogun) playing the divide-et-impera political game, induced them to become two organizations. Both have their headquarters in Kyoto. Revering the same founder, they are very close to each other in matters of religious thought but one is more traditional and less secular than the other. Each has its own university that reflects their individual characteristics.

Secondly, due to the diversity of practices, Japanese religious consciousness is weak. Similar to un-churched Catholicism in Europe, cultural religious consciousness is by no means thin. According to longitudinal and recent survey data, private beliefs concerning Shinto kami and Buddhist hotoke stands at 32.5% and 42.2% respectively, while private practices of keeping magical amulets and turning to astrological practices is reported to be 34.9% and 25.3% respectively. Evidently, there is overlapping in these statistics: many Japanese both believe in Shinto and Buddhist deities, while many

others include magical beliefs. However, when it comes to organizational religious practices, the percentages of those who regularly or occasionally engage in religious behavior stands at 12.3% and 12.4% respectively. It is these who are members of religious organizations, totaling 24.7%.

According to the same data, 23.5% of the Japanese do not believe in anything, and 8.7% do not engage in any religious practice (NHK Hosho bunka kenkyusho 2010: Appendix: 20-21). Even though an additional half of the population engage in various religious practices, the afore mentioned massive praying at Shinto shrines on the New Year days, wide-spread 'household religion,' and well observed 'rites de passage,' all these forms of religious behavior are seen as mere custom, not as a form of adherence to a specific faith. Thus, the great majority of the Japanese do not see themselves as preoccupied with religion, meaning that Japanese religion is socially weak, both privately and publicly. This thinness of religious consciousness may also have to do with the Constitution that prohibits the teaching of religion in public schools, but then again, interest in religion is great in academic institutions. The Japanese Association for Religious Studies (JARS, established in 1930) has 2,100 members. Its yearly conference has over 300 presentations. The Japanese Association for the Study of Religion and Society (JASRS, established in 1993) has 555 members, mainly sociologists. Most of those scholars are not affiliated with any religious organization (cf. <http://www.jasrs.org> and <http://www.jars.or.jp>).

Thirdly, I argue that latent value conflict is the most problematic characteristic of religion in Japan. In daily life, generally identifying with the various thought constellations of their culture, people simplify their view of life and otherwise fabricate their own set of values. As touched upon at the outset, like in all postmodern societies, individual and corporate interests have become socially dominant. That is, work, family, loyalty to the corporation (important in Japan), and enjoyment of life are the main staple from which people fashion a personal value perspective, which contains religious values as well in the case of those who are committed to a specific faith and those who engage in the above mentioned practices. Except in criminal cases and other ways of overstepping limits, serious value conflict does not occur. I have argued elsewhere that values derive from need-dispositions that somehow have to be fulfilled. Values therefore are complementary (Bachika 2002a; 2002b; 2008). However, due to fundamental differences in needs and values, individuals, consciously or unconsciously, tend to develop a hierarchy (Scheler 1992) in such a way that specific value-attitudes become an inner force, which motivates people from within. This is easily understood in the case of extreme examples. A portion of the people everywhere seems to live either for material gratification or spiritual fulfillment, identifying matter-of-factly with a set of values that are predominantly materialistic or spiritual. Both categories of people apparently do not experience unease with their set of values, but these sets tend to conflict with each other. It is the implications of hierarchy that imply conflict. The more fundamental the values concerned, the more severe an ensuing conflict may grow.

One such fundamental value is life itself (Featherstone, 2011: forthcoming) together with interpretations of suffering and death. The religious traditions discussed above are much concerned with this core value—religion per definition envisions enhancement of the meaning of life. It appears to me that the controversy of state-

Shinto is understandable on this level of 'underlying' values. In the heyday of wartime Japan, the ultimate meaning of life was linked to that of the nation. To fuse patriotism and nationalism into a Shinto belief—or an ideology—must have been seen as thoroughly logical and natural by state-Shinto ideologists. However, in the context of the just mentioned value perspective, state-Shinto appears to be a Pandora box that is far from being sorted out.

Japan's imperial throne

Since this PRJ Issue is concerned with religion and politics in Japan, a few words are in order about the cultural significance of Japan's imperial throne as a government and Shinto-related institution. This is important particularly because the throne was occupied by the same dynasty from the beginning of this country's history. Its almost unbroken succession is unparalleled in the world. How was this possible?

For sure, the present emperor does not exert any influence on politics, but he nevertheless is the ceremonial Head of the State, fulfilling many functions. It is the emperor who announces the appointments of the prime minister and the chief judge of the supreme court after they are appointed by the Diet or the Cabinet. He receives Heads or representatives of other states. Among his many other duties, the emperor every year awards honors to especially meritorious citizens in various fields (Nippon Steel Corporation, 1984: 61-63).

In the official language of the Constitution, the emperor's imperial role is defined as "the symbol of the State and the unity of the people, deriving his position from the will of the people with whom resides sovereign power" (Kodansha Ltd, 1993: 336). After his enthronement ceremony in 1990, Emperor Akihito explicitly stated that he would make those words of the Constitution his ideal as monarch (Kodansha Ltd, 1993: 338). The attitude that he has been showing to the public is outright exemplary. At whatever public appearance, he exudes dignity in personality, demeanor, and verbal expression. Be it at his New Year's well-wishing address to the nation, or his attendance at dinners for state guests, or during a visit to people that met a calamity like a severe earthquake, or again during his seasonal rice planting in the paddy field of the castle and when he simply watches a sumo game, he is always his dignified and gentle self, just as is Empress Michiko. The emperor's imperial countenance is met with similarly dignified attitudes of the government officials dignitaries, and occasional guests. The Imperial Household has much more to it than being Japan's formal First Family. According to the latest survey data, 24.7% of the population expresses positive respect and 33.5% confirm that they are favorably impressed, while 38.6% mention they are indifferent. Only 1% of the population voices dislike (NHK Hoso bunka kenkyusho 2010: Appendix: 24).

The common title in Japan to address to the emperor is Tenno Heika. This Japanese term has religious overtones that are lost in its rendering into the English: His Majesty the Emperor. The religious meaning stems from its initial religious-mythological legitimation recorded in the Kojiki, Japan's earliest book of history, dating from the 8th century, and from its later use in the past, particularly when Japan as an emerging country sought relations with China, the Middle Kingdom. The meaning of tenno in those times could be rendered as 'heavenly ruler.' According to recent research, tenno

probably was the Japanese version of the Taoist tianhuang (heavenly august one) or tianwang (heavenly king) that might have been used in order not to sound too highhandedly imperial to the already secularized Chinese emperor, who would honor that title tongue in cheek (Baret, 1996: 22-27). However, this religious connection is overridden by the postwar Constitution.

Nothing in the public functions of the emperor suggests a religious character. Even though the emperor still performs some Shinto rituals—there are three Shinto shrines in the Tokyo castle compound—of which the religious enthronement ceremony (daijosai) and visits to the Grand Ise Shrine are prime examples. However, it is questionable whether these functions are public or private. They appear to be dictated by age-long family traditions, similar to the practices of so-called ancestor worship that still today determine family religiosity in Japan. As has been talked about on television last year, a telling anecdote with respect to his religious performances is that the present Tenno Heika often watches television while seated on the floor, Japanese-style, in formal seiza position, sitting on his legs in order to remain in shape for a religious ritual in that position for as long as two hours.

Praying for the people's wellbeing appears to have been one of the emperors' religious duties. This may have carried considerable weight, intensifying the historical gravity of the Throne, assuring peoples' trust, high and low, and ensuring its unbroken succession. Further, a political low-key profile seems to have been dominant during its long history. "For a period of about one thousand years, beginning in the ninth century, the country was under the control of the nobility and their successors, the warrior class" (Nippon Steel Corporation, 1984: 59). Again, a sign of 'civil decency' supposedly is that Japan's tennos had never much interest in building gorgeous palaces like their European counterparts, particularly the French and the Russian monarchs. As it stands today, the old Kyoto Imperial Palace (gosho in Japanese: venerable place) where the emperors resided until Meiji, is a quite modest palatial residence as compared e.g., with the scale and splendor of Beijing's Forbidden City. The present Tokyo Castle was taken over from the shogunate.

The significance of religion in future societies

The interweaving of politics and religion is as old as human history. Its fabrics have taken numerous forms in many countries throughout the ages, but its typical polar patterns invariably have been the supremacy of either politics or religion. In other words, both politics and religion had authoritarian tendencies. The end of this type of history has become a fact in political democracies that espouse liberal social thought. Like political dictatorship, the total demise of intolerant fundamentalism could be materialized before entering the 22nd century. Concomitant sociocultural change may imply further weakening of religion—particularly its monotheist versions—but in other ways, it may signal a new revival of religions as social and political actors.

How religious organizations and the political enterprise might change may prove to be an interesting exercise in sociological imagination. Questions could be raised as to how political institutions should be modified, whether political parties based on religion are desirable, whether representatives of religious organizations should vie for political office, and so on, but no space is left for such speculations. What can be

added here is that, for a start, encouraging religious organizations to raise their political awareness should be highly meaningful. It seems desirable that these organizations formulate views of 'the good society' and discuss them with their companions in the religious arena in order to arrive at a common view of the good society. If the major religious organizations were to come up with a manifest on common social values, that would be a step in the direction of a future development as foreseen by Zygmunt Bauman who, discussing 'the uncertainty of ends' in postmodern societies, maintains that "[c]ontrary to its predecessors, light capitalism is bound to be value-obsessed" (Bauman, 2000: 61). Much earlier Bauman forcefully argued that reason alone is no match for articulating moral issues and moral responsibility (Bauman, 1993: 245-50). Not being inherently rational undertakings, religions come to mind. Any religion in Japan could play its part. Shinto as the original religious orientation of Japan with its 'nature-focus' should be a privileged actor. The various strands of Buddhism that have produced profound religious thought concerning the human dimension should have much potential for future development. And, in this age of globalization, ethically strong Christian denominations could raise their voices on the religious-political stage as relative newcomers on the scene, even though less than 1% of the population has joined Christian churches.

The above scenario implies that the theme of politics and religion concerns more than just discussing patterns of their relationship. Admittedly, empirical research is fundamental just as proper understanding of situations and circumstances is fundamental in all social science. As for that matter, sociology in recent decades has been moving away from positivist but also from merely objective empirical enquiries. As I have discussed elsewhere (Bachika 2011: forthcoming) the following terms are indicative of new approaches to the study of societies and religion: Life politics, utopian realism (Giddens 1990), risk society, reflexive modernization (Beck 1986-1992; 1997), public religion (Cassanova 1994), public sociologies (The International Sociological Association 2007), and critical theory of religion, which is not a recent newcomer in social science (Siebert 2002, 2007).

One word to finish this introductory essay on religion in Japan: Its main intention was to highlight Japan's multi-religious tradition. The religious scene in Japan can hardly be compared with the settings of Christianity and Islam. Its notions of the sacred and the spiritual world are vastly different. The culture and religion anywhere do not exist separately. They are intertwined all the way up and down the layers of human consciousness. As antagonisms in the Yasukuni controversy and in other forms of religious conflict throughout the world endure without abetting, one would wish that the day will come when 'believing' people would worship in one another's temples while remaining faithful to their own religious inspiration and ideals.

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Реимон Баћика

ПОГЛЕД НА РЕЛИГИЈУ У ЈАПАНУ

Резиме

Гледано из угла културе, тема религије и политике у Јапану је, као и свуда, компликована, утолико више јер је у овој земљи религија врло компликована. Овај есеј – чији је циљ дескриптиван, не аналитички – је покушај конкретног осликавања шинтоизма и будизма, који и један и други садрже више елемената традиционалне религије. Управо су они обликовали јапанску религиозност и културу. Стављен је акценат на политички значајне аспекте, то јест на утиске о посети храму Јасукуни, те на његово сврставање у религијске институције. Опис религијског плурализма и религијске подељености радништва чине централни део, док за њим следи део о карактеристикама религије у Јапану. Даље, будући верски и политички значајан, додатна напомена односи се на популарну представу о јапанском империјалном трону. На крају, како би се нагласио њен значај, есеј се завршава речју наде за будућност религије.

Кључне речи: храм Јасукуни, јапанска религиозност, шинтоистичка религијска пракса, будистичка религијска пракса, предачко обожавање, религијски плурализам, царски трон, латентни сукоб вредности.

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