

THE RELIGIOUS WORLD IN JAPAN

Understanding Contemporary Japanese Religions (1)

“The last time I saw you I said that I was a Shintoist, but I should have said that I am a Buddhist,” exclaimed an eager young Japanese to his foreign friend. Then he added with a somewhat embarrassed smile, “I really don’t know what I am; I guess I’m both.”

This situation is not in the least unusual. In fact, it is very general throughout Japan. Probably every foreigner interested in things Japanese has at some time or other had a similar experience. Indeed, it is not at all uncommon for a Japanese to say, when asked about his religion, “I don’t know,” or “I have none.” Consequently, it is not surprising that the Japanese people are often regarded as very indifferent to religion. Yet the facts would seem to indicate otherwise.

According to the Ministry of Education’s “1959 Religions Year Book,” as of December 31, 1957, approximately 80 million people

were adherents of Shinto, 44 million of Buddhist, 600,000 of Christian, and 4 million of other religious denominations. In other words, in a population of 92 million a total of 135 million people were affiliated in some manner with one or more religious denominations! What does this mean?

Setting aside questions regarding the accuracy of these statistics and the validity of the categories, the fact remains that from an Occidental point of view this is a strange, not to say an incomprehensible situation. It is only natural that it should cause confusion in the minds of foreigners.

There are, to be sure, two simple explanations of the statistics. In the first place, Buddhist and Shinto denominations and Shinto Shrines are not as a rule dogmatic and exclusive. In the second place, generally speaking, local shrines and temples do not have an individual membership system such

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as is common in the Occident. But the question is much more involved than this, and further explanation is required. First, however, comment of a more general nature is called for.

Understanding Japanese religious life is really not as difficult as it seems. Certainly it need not be as difficult as it is. A great deal of the present difficulty arises solely because, in attempting to study religious phenomena in this country or anywhere else in the Orient, for that matter, the Occidental utilizes his traditional "tools" without any re-adjustment. This is not the case, of course, with the trained scholar — the historian, anthropologist, sociologist, and philosopher, for example, who is scientifically equipped for his task — but it is all too true for the general student and others who attempt to understand the religions of Japan without specialized training. Their "instruments" are not calibrated for the situation in the Orient. Their definitions and categories are definitely Occidental. Consequently, their observations are often

very inaccurate, and when carefully analyzed mean little or nothing.

For example, a primary category in Occidental religious inquiry is that of theism. The Occidental scholar in examining Oriental religions generally seeks to discover whether they are monotheistic, polytheistic, atheistic, etc., without first determining whether his definitions are satisfactory, and whether or not a religion of necessity must be theistic or atheistic, as he understands these terms.

When, therefore, he comes into contact with a religion that has no special concern about the existence or non-existence of a god, or has a concept of deity that does not fit his god-concept, or that neither affirms nor denies, or may both affirm and deny the existence of God, he is indeed confused. Again, when he brings up the question of ethics to test a religion by the quality of its ethical teachings, and learns that religion and ethics are regarded as separate categories, he is at loss as to how to proceed. If so, he need not be too discouraged. It may even happen to a Japanese. One of the Chris-

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tian participants in an Institute-sponsored roundtable conference once reported that for the first time in his life he had learned that there was a "religion without either ethics or god!"

Very obviously, the basic problem is, "What is Religion?" And, here again, the difficulty is generally considerable because the student invariably applies his own definition without regard to the actual conditions in this part of the world. How many people have been told, for example, that "Buddhism is not a religion," or that "Shinto is not a religion!"

What is religion? This is a very interesting and important question, but further discussion of it would involve an incursion into the area reserved for the contributors, so the temptation to digress must be resisted. This year the International Institute for the Study of Religions in sponsoring a roundtable conference on this subject. When completed, a report of the conference will be published in this journal. In the meantime, by way of preparation, an early issue will present a thought-provoking article in this

area. Suffice it to say, as one eminent scholar said recently on the radio, "If religion is only what Christians think it is, then neither Buddhism nor Shinto can properly be called religions."

Under these circumstances it should be apparent that to ask about a person's religion, or to ask specifically whether a person is a Buddhist or Shintoist, may very likely pose a real question which cannot be answered as simply as an Occidental is usually inclined to think. He very likely may wonder why anyone should ask such a strange question? To a foreigner the individual Japanese may appear to be confused and he may be; but the real confusion probably lies elsewhere.

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Returning now to our explanation of the statistics, we noted that generally speaking Buddhism and Shinto are neither dogmatic nor exclusive and that they do not have a membership system. Japanese shrines, temples, churches, denominations, etc., as a rule are not dogmatic. There are no creedal statements that must be accepted

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as a condition for affiliation with Buddhist temples or Shinto Shrines. The idea that there might be, or should be, would shock many Japanese. True, the great schools of Buddhism, such as Shingon, Tendai, Pure Land, Nichiren, and Zen have their own unique doctrines which distinguish one from the other, and the same is true to a lesser extent of most of the great Buddhist denomination within these schools; but none of these have creedal statements the acceptance of which constitute a test for affiliation or, in case of denial, a cause for dismissal.

Irrespective of what Buddhism and Shinto may be historically, temples and shrines in Japan are regarded more or less in a functional manner. In general, they complement each other. The average Japanese individual is brought up in a community where as a child on certain occasions he is taken to a shrine, and on others to a temple. To all intents and purposes, Shinto shrines celebrate the events of life, personal and communal. Buddhist temples are preoccupied with the performance of funeral and ancestral

ceremonies. In most cases, the individual's Buddhist affiliation is with the temple which traditionally has performed the funeral and ancestral rites for the family. Shrine affiliation will depend primarily on the guardian kami* of one's ancestral home and one's present residence.

Thus, regardless of a person's faith, assuming that each individual either consciously or unconsciously has some kind of religious faith, he is by the fact of birth in a certain family and residence in a given community an adherent of some temple and a parishioner of some one or more shrines. He may or may not participate in or contribute to these institutions. Probably he will do so as a matter of custom, or to avoid argument. But at no time in his life is he ever expected to affirm his faith in any creed or set of doctrines, or to "join" a temple or shrine. His affiliation is assumed. It is not a question of *Buddhism or Shinto*: both play a part in his life. If he wishes to sever a tradi-

* 神, The principal term for deity in Shinto.

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tional affiliation, he must take the initiative. This rarely happens.

Since religious institutions are primarily functional, that which brings satisfaction is cultivated; that which contributes nothing is as far as possible avoided. Therefore, if an individual finds satisfaction in joining some other religious organization, such as one of the newer religious movements, or if he feels enriched by Christian hymns, Bible reading, or listening to sermons; this need not necessarily disturb his traditional affiliations. The shrines take it for granted that their parishioners will be connected with some temple or Shinto church. They have no objections if any of them become Christians, as long as the relationship with the shrines remains undisturbed. Buddhist temples usually expect, but may not always encourage, their adherents to fulfill their duties as parishioners of shrines. Certainly very few oppose it; and probably few ever object if any parishioners become Christians, provided again that relations with the temple continue to be respected.

This multiple religious relationship is generally referred to in Japan and abroad as "dual-faith," as if a kind of spiritual bifurcation exists which compartmentalizes the religious life of an individual. Such is not the case. The term "dual-faith" is a misnomer. Insofar as any individual is a unified personality, his religious faith is also unified. Except for those that have come in contact with the different point of view of the Occident, the situation already described is taken as a matter of course. Few, if any, are aware of any inconsistency, much less conflict. The Japanese people as a whole are neither *simply* Buddhist, Shinto, nor anything else. They have only *one* faith: a faith that has evolved from the streams of various faiths which have merged to form the "religious life and faith of the Japanese people."

There are, of course, exceptions. A few Buddhist as well as all Christian denominations are dogmatic and exclusive. Each of these expects its members to confine their religious experiences to the tenets and observances of one

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denomination or doctrinal system. Moreover, just as Christians do not hesitate to call themselves "Christians," so there are some individuals who definitely say they are "Buddhists" or "Shintoists;" but careful observation of the religious life of the country reveals that most people are neither Buddhists nor Shintoists in the strict meaning of

these terms. They are Shintoistic Buddhists or Buddhist Shintoists. In other words, they are for the most part adherents of the unique faith of the Japanese people. An understanding of this situation is the first step toward understanding the religious life of the Japanese people.

(W. P. W.)

Questions and Problems

This section is for your use. Send in your questions or problems.



Here's a simple one to start with.

Are the Imperial Regalia at Ise ?

In two English volumes on world religions currently being used as college textbooks, the authors state that the "divine Imperial regalia" are at Ise. This is incorrect. The mirror is at the Grand Shrine of Ise; the sword, which incidentally is not the original sword, is at the Ausuta Shrine in Nagoya, and the jewels are at the Imperial palace in Tokyo.