

CONTEMPORARY JAPANESE RELIGIOSITY

In a country where even popular response to new brands of soap is systematically investigated, it comes as little surprise to find regular inquiries into the state of religious sentiments. To be sure, many of these inquiries are done on a rather small scale and remain confined to the arcana of specialized journals, accessible only to those given to focusing on numbers and constructing large-scale theories likely to be upset in the near future. Other surveys are made public and confront the nation as a whole with innermost—and not so innermost—feelings, sometimes revealing facts that scientists claim to have known for a long time but that the general populace was presumedly unaware of or refused to acknowledge.

Japan's big newspaper companies regularly offer just such a service. On August 20, 1979, for example, the Yomiuri Shinbun published the results of a nation-wide survey of Japanese religious beliefs. In the morning edition of May 5, 1981, the Asahi Shinbun in turn presented to the nation its own findings on the religious beliefs and practices of the Japanese people. In the Yomiuri survey, conducted in July of 1979, 2176 people from across the country, representing a variety of age groups (above 20 years old), responded. The Asahi survey, conducted in April of 1981, numbered 2524 respondents.

In the following pages the main results of the Asahi survey are given as they appeared in the newspaper. Wherever possible, results from the Yomiuri survey to similar questions will also be added.

*1. Personal Religion*

QUESTION: Apart from the religion of your household, do you believe in any particular religion? Dividing religions into Shinto, Buddhism, Christianity, and Other Religions, to what category does your religion belong?

ANSWER: (Yomiuri survey results given in parentheses):

Buddhism 27% (26.3%) - Shinto 4% (1.1%) - Both Shinto and Buddhism 2%  
 Christianity 2% (1.6%) - Other Religions 1% (1.8%) - No religion 62%  
 (59.4%) - No answer 2% (6.9%)

The number of "unbelievers" (62%) exceeds 70% among those in their twenties

and reaches 80% with those in their early twenties, while it decreases with age and decreases to nearly 30% among those over 60 years of age. However, as the answers to the next questions point out, more than half of the self-styled unbelievers believe in an after-life or perform religion-related practices (see Figure 1). Among the "believers," half of the Buddhists are over 50 years old, while among the 2% of those who claimed to be Christians, a good number belong to the younger age bracket.

## 2. Beliefs

QUESTION A: Do you believe that, if you do something bad, something will happen to you (*bachi ga ataru*)?

ANSWER: Yes 72% - No 22% - No answer 6%

QUESTION B: Do you think that the soul survives after death?

ANSWER: Yes 60% - No 30% - No answer 10%

(The Yomiuri survey gave 29.9% of people expressing a belief in spirits—including spirits of the dead—and 22.7% answering that there is an after-life.)

QUESTION C: Have you ever felt the existence of something greater that transcends human beings and nature?

ANSWER: Yes 54% - No 40% - No answer 6%

As Figure 2 shows, the rate of positive answers to Questions B and C is particularly high among the younger generation. As to belief in an after-life, the percentage of believers drops for the 30-40 age bracket (especially males), and rises again for the older generation. The "feeling" of supernatural beings is highest with the young and, in general, more marked among people living in the cities than those living in the countryside.

## 3. Science vs. Religion

QUESTION: Do you think that the mysteries of the world will all be explained as science develops further?

ANSWER: Yes 21% - No 71% - No answer 8%

Scepticism over the capacity of science is especially strong among the young (see Figure 2). Interestingly enough, it is particularly city dwellers and those in administration and office work, who are supposed to be more scientific, that express such scepticism toward science.

(The Yomiuri survey gave the following results:

- A. If science develops further, people will be able to lead a happy life and religion will become unnecessary: 11.3%
- B. In order to lead a happy life, religion is needed regardless of the development of science: 41.7%
- C. Neither A nor B can be affirmed: 42.2%
- D. No answer: 4.8%.)

Figure 1

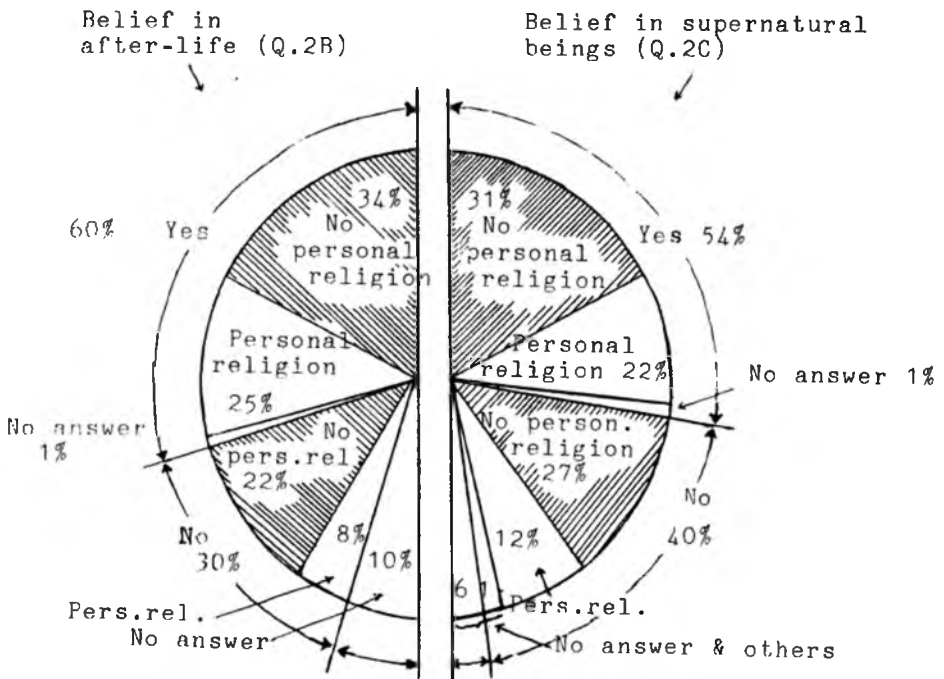
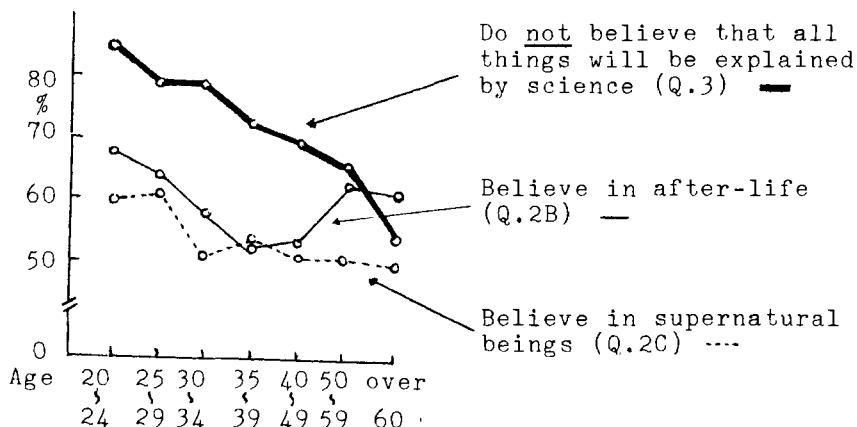


Figure 2



#### 4. Religion-related Practices

QUESTION A: Do you carry a charm (*o-mamori*)?

ANSWER: Yes 55% (Yomiuri: 24.3%) - No 45%

QUESTION B: Have you ever had your fortune told by oracle-lots (*o-mikuji*)?

ANSWER: Yes 76% - No 24%

(Yomiuri: 13.7% confessed to *rely* on oracle-lots)

QUESTION C: Did you pay a New Year visit (*hatsumōde*) to a shrine or temple this year?

ANSWER: Yes 56% (Y. 56%) - No 44%

With regard to these practices involving a visit to a shrine or temple, again the young excel in their "devotion" (see Figure 3). Among those who carry charms and regularly have their fortune told, young women in their early twenties figure prominently. (On the other hand, 80% of the people supporting the *Kōmeitō*, the political arm of the *Sōka Gakkai*, do *not* carry a charm!) As for *hatsumōde* itself, it seems to be increasingly a practice

of big-city dwellers.

QUESTION D: Is there a Shinto shelf (*kamidana*) in your home?

ANSWER: Yes 62% - No 38%

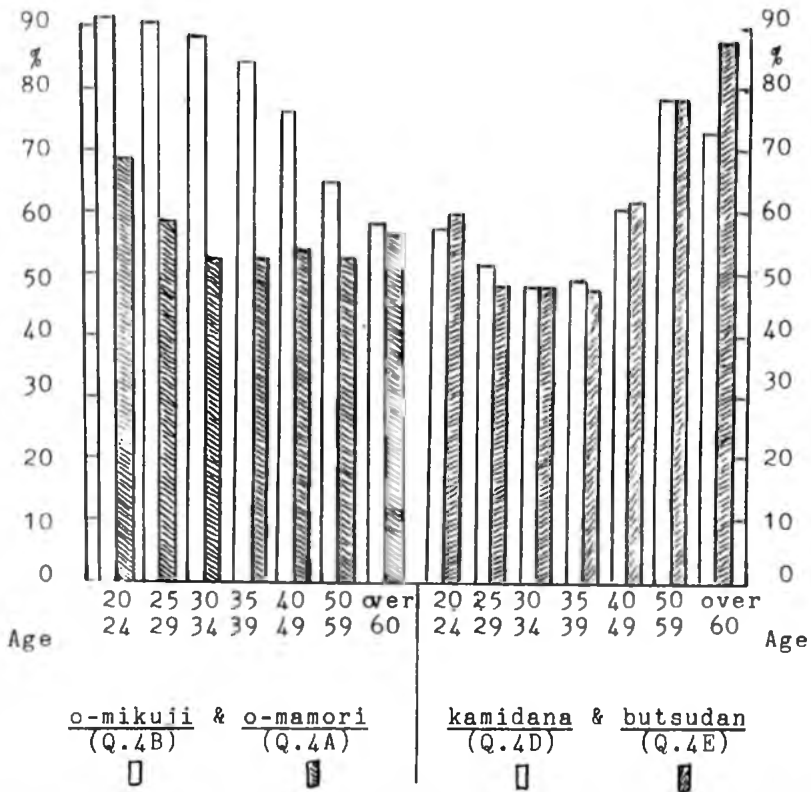
QUESTION E: Is there a Buddhist altar (*butsudan*) in your home?

ANSWER: Yes 63% - No 36% - No answer 1%

(According to the Yomiuri survey, 87.7% answered that in their youth there was either a Shinto shelf or a Buddhist altar in their home.)

The presence of a *kamidana* or *butsudan* is almost equal for all age groups (see Figure 3). It reaches the highest percentage with older people, and the lowest with those around 30 ("just married"). About half of all the respondents had *both* religious objects, while a little more than 20% did not possess either.

Figure 3



QUESTION F: There are quite a number of people in Japan who participate in activities of different religions. They visit Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples, and also celebrate Christmas. Do you find this strange from a religious point of view?

ANSWER: Yes 19% - No 77% - No answer 4%

The famous "multi-layered" faith-structure of the Japanese comes once again to the fore in the answers to this question. Only 19% expressed doubt about this "syncretism." The percentage rises to nearly 40% among the Christian respondents, however. But this still leaves 60% of Christians who see no problem with such behavior.

#### 5. Divination and Similar Practices

QUESTION A: Do you pay any attention to lucky and unlucky days?

ANSWER: Yes 47% - No 52% - No answer 1%

QUESTION B: Do you pay any attention to evil years (*yakudoshi*)?

ANSWER: Yes 51% - No 48% - No answer 1%

QUESTION C: Do you pay any attention to omens (*engi*) or jinxes?

ANSWER: Yes 46% - No 52% - No answer 2%

QUESTION D: Do you pay any attention to divination and fortune-telling?

ANSWER: Yes 25% - No 71% - No answer 4%

QUESTION E: Do you find fortune-telling entertaining?

ANSWER: Yes 49% - No 42% - No answer 9%

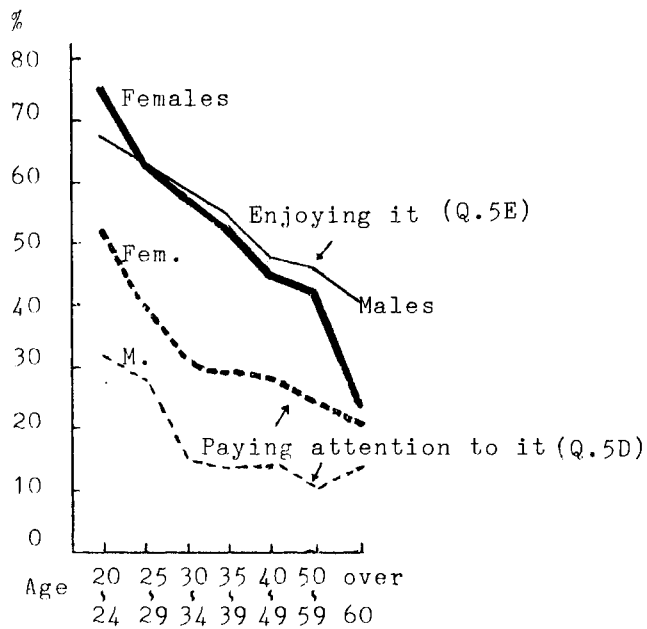
(According to the Yomiuri survey, 54.2% claimed that they did not rely on any form of fortune-telling, but 19.4% confessed to have regular recourse to palm-reading.)

Women are much more preoccupied with these things than their male counterparts. As for divination and fortune-telling (Q.D.), the attitude seems to be rather that it is, after all, a hit-and-miss business, so that the percentage of positive answers does not reach the level it does in Questions A to C. But when it comes to the enjoyment (Q.E), the percentage rises again, and the contrast between younger and older people becomes conspicuous.

Except for those in their early twenties, this time the women are in the minority (see Figure 4).

Figure 4

Attitudes towards  
divination and fortune-telling



#### 6. Religion and Politics

QUESTION: Some religious organizations support or recommend candidates in political elections. Do you think this is good?

ANSWER: Yes 15% - No 71% - No answer 14%

Critical voices are rather many, although at election-time political parties, particularly those of the right and the middle, expect much in the way of so-called religious votes. Even among the supporters of the Kōmeitō, 38%

responded in the negative.

A last series of questions dealt with items not directly related to the realm of religion. For example, more than half of the respondents (54%) stated that the place where they could best feel "peace of mind" was "in a happy family circle," and only 5% found it "while working," suggesting perhaps a reversal of the notorious Japanese workaholism.

Another interesting item has to do with interpersonal relationships. To the question "Which do you think more important, *giri-ninjō* (sense of duty and human feelings) or your personal convictions?", those opting for the traditional *giri-ninjō* numbered 69%, while 22% favored self-affirmation (No answer 9%). As is to be expected, the "individualistic" group consisted mainly of younger people, especially males of about 30 years of age. But this is also the group that, somewhat contrary to the trend among most of their peers, expressed scepticism regarding traditional religious practices, after-life, divination, and the like.

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