

# Comparative Analysis of Life after Death in Folk Shinto and Christianity

David L. DOERNER

## INTRODUCTION

A problem which faces men of all ages and all cultures is the problem of death and life after death. It is a problem so fundamental to man that even in some of the most primitive cultures we find some very elaborate and philosophical expositions on death. Because this problem is so fundamental to man, this paper will devote itself to a treatment of life after death as it is found in folk Shinto.

I feel that if we hope to get any insight into this problem of life after death on the Japanese scene, it will only be to the extent that we understand the concept of ancestor. As for the exposition of ancestor, this paper leans heavily on the extensive research of Yanagita Kunio, who has engendered a resurgence of interest in this topic.

However, this paper is not merely an exposition of life after death and the concept of ancestor. This material was used to formulate a survey to determine to what extent the concepts of ancestor and life after death as found in folk Shinto are retained by a person who embraces the Catholic faith.

This survey was conducted through private interviews with one hundred church going Catholics of both sexes, from various age groups, social backgrounds and varying years of experience as Christians. That is to say, from those who come from a long line of Catholic heritage and those who have been more recently converted to Catholicism. Only one person was interviewed from a household. Thus some of the answers reflect the customs and attitudes of that particular household. The results of the survey, rather than a separate tabulation, will

be interwoven into the body of the paper under the various pertinent topics.

#### HYPOTHESIS

It is our hypothesis that in Japan it is necessary that any incompatible element in order to be accepted into the culture must become compatible with the already existing indigenous elements. To the extent that it becomes compatible, to that extent will it become acceptable. And the inverse is equally true, that if it remains incompatible it will not be accepted into the main stream of the indigenous customs or beliefs.

We hope to demonstrate the above through an analysis of the concepts of death and life after death as found in folk Shinto, the indigenous belief of Japan, and through an application of these to the Buddhist and Catholic traditions try to determine whether these exogenous traditions have become compatible or not. It is already held by many scholars that the success of Buddhism in Japan is due to its adaptation of the indigenous beliefs regarding ancestor worship. The Buddhists having had similar experiences in India, China and Korea were quick to adapt the already existing prayer services for the dead, at the time of the *higan* (the spring and fall equinox) and *bon* (the summer festival for honoring the dead), and gave a new dimension to the already existing Shinto concept which emphasized a close relation between this world and world of the dead in their teaching on reincarnation.

However, on the other hand, Christianity did not adopt this attitude of the Buddhists in beginning its proselytizing in Japan. And for this reason, I believe Christianity has not been successful on the grassroots level and even today is regarded by the majority of the Japanese people as a foreign religion. This is certainly not true of Buddhism, even though historically it too was a foreign religion when it first came to Japan. On the side of Christianity, there are possibly many reasons that could be posited for this phenomenon, but I feel that it is primarily due to the deep

and extremely exclusive position of Christianity. Coupled with this, the Church's highly developed Western cultural orientation misinterpreted many of the indigenous beliefs of the Japanese people and as a result thought it necessary for doctrinal integrity to expunge these beliefs and customs as incompatible with Christianity. Another mistake which was made on the part of Christianity when it first came to Japan was the fact that too much emphasis was put on the study of Buddhism rather than on the basic Japanese beliefs of the indigenous religion, Shinto.

Christianity, unlike Buddhism, came to Japan with a highly developed Western tradition. Almost forgetting the fact that the Church had adapted herself to other cultures in the past, she tried to impose on the Japanese a completely new and incompatible doctrine. Although the Catholic Church's attitude was one of no compromise, we will try to show in this paper that even in the Japanese Catholics today we can find very well determined and defined beliefs and customs of the indigenous religion. Christianity, on its part, made no attempt to become compatible with these indigenous beliefs. However, we will show through demonstration that these indigenous beliefs are very much in evidence in the minds and hearts of the people who have embraced the Catholic faith and many of them are not necessarily incompatible with Christianity.

#### THE WORLD OF THE DEAD

One of the questions to which the religions of all times had been expected to provide an answer to is the problem of death. What happens to man after death? Is there another life? Is there another world after death? Is death final? Shinto differs from Buddhism in that it is not otherworld orientated but rather emphasizes life in this world, which for the Shintoists is the best world. Shinto is basically an optimistic philosophy with a complete affirmation of reality (Muraoka 1964, p. 23).

*Japanese mythology.* There are various instances in the early

Japanese writings, the *Kojiki* and the *Nihongi*, where mention is made of some gods (*kami*) and their going and coming between different worlds. From these chronicles Jean Herbert lists four worlds: *Takama-no-hara*, the High Plain of Heaven, the residence of the *kami*; *Yomi-no-kuni*, the low and far away land, world of evil and suffering, sometimes referred to as the world to which the dead go; *Utsushi-yo*, the visible world in which we actually live during this life on earth; and finally, *Kakuri-yo*, the hidden world, the invisible world, the world of the gods, also interpreted as the world after death (Herbert 1967, p. 65). In ancient Shinto, the three transcendent worlds of *Takama-no-hara*, *Yomi-no-kuni*, and *Kakuri-yo*, had a "real world" quality. And these worlds had no value apart from this world.

As regards the problem of where a soul goes after death, in various books on Shinto we can find two theories. Some authors hold that the souls of the deceased go to *Yomi-no-kuni*, a place of suffering and unhappiness. Muraoka Tsunetsugu says: "*Yomi* was the hated, polluted place where souls went after death" (Muraoka 1964, p. 23). Jean Herbert's commentary seems somewhat unclear in that he speaks of *Yomi-no-kuni* as the land *par excellence* to which the dead go. But he qualifies this with a quote from Hirata Atsutane who says, "...the notion of *Yomi* being the abode of the dead is comparatively modern" (Herbert 1967, p. 65). Hirata wrote in his *Tama no mi-hashira* ("The true pillars of the soul", 1812): "It is quite wrong to think that the soul goes to *Yomi-no-kuni* after death. The ancient Japanese people never pondered over such matter" (Herbert 1967, p. 66).

It seems to me that the reason for postulating the idea that the souls of the dead go to *Yomi-no-kuni* is due to a misapplication of the story about Izanami who after her "death" goes to *Yomi-no-kuni*. "At this time Izanagi wishing to meet again his spouse Izanami, went after her to the land of *Yomi*" (*Kojiki*: I, 9). However, I do not believe this death of Izanami is to be interpreted in the sense of a separation of the body and soul but should

be interpreted as a symbolic death of mother earth, just as things in this life must die to bring forth new fruits. And thus in the case of Izanami we see the subsequent creation of new deities that help overcome the bad influence of Kagutsuchi, the fire god, whom she previously brought into existence and the creation of which seems to have been the immediate cause of the death of Izanami as recorded in the *Kojiki*: I, 7. In speaking of the text about Izanami's passage to *Yomi no kuni*, Herbert remarks (1967, p. 269):

And as regards life and death, they should certainly not be understood here, in the case of *kami*, as identical to what they are for men. For Izanami, as well as for other *kami* who undergo a similar process, it is rather, as we noted previously, a change in the field or the base of their activity.

*The dead and pollution.* In early Shinto there is definite evidence of a belief that contact with the dead involved pollution. We find the text in the *Nihongi* where Izanagi after visiting Izanami in *Yomi* decided "to wash away the defilement" (*Nihongi*: I, 26), "to cleanse his body from its pollution" (*Nihongi*: I, 20) and thus performed various purifications. The process of purification resulted in the birth of a number of new gods who are of considerable importance in present day worship, the gods of purification. There are many practices in early Shinto which support the concept that contact with the dead involves pollution. However, from the practice of purification after contact with the dead to logically conclude that this stems from the fact that the dead go to *Yomi-no-kuni*, I believe untenable. To apply western logic in interpreting Shinto is a pitfall that should be avoided.

On the contrary, there is too much evidence that strongly favors the opinion that the souls of the dead become *kami* in varying degrees of excellence according to perfection the individual attained in this life. Jean Herbert's quote from Hirata on this point is significant (1967, p. 66):

After a man's death, the water and earth in him become his corpse, which is left behind, but the soul flies away with the air and fire..... The souls of the Japanese... when they die...remain eternally in Japan and serve in the realm of the dead governed by Ōkuninushi. This realm of the dead is not in any one particular place in the visible world, but being a realm of profoundness and dimness and separated from the present world, it cannot be seen....The actions of men can be perceived from the realm of the dead, but from the visible world it is not possible to see this realm of darkness.... People of this world, wherever they may live and however they may be employed, go to the realm of dimness when they are dead, and their souls become *kami*, differing in the degree of excellence, virtue and strength according to the individual. Those of superior powers are capable of feats in no way inferior to those of the *kami* of the Divine Age, and do not differ from those *kami* in their power to inform men of future events.

Jean Herbert goes on to say (p. 66, biographical data corrected):

According to Shinto classics, it should be said that the soul does usually return to *Takama-no-hara* after death and it should be remembered that there are many stages or grades in *Takama-no-hara*, and that a soul can become active more extensively.... This idea was stressed and elaborated by many authoritative writers of the nineteenth century Koku-gaku school: Ōkuni Takamasa (1792–1871), Mutobe Yoshika (1806–1863), Suzuki Shigetane (1812–1863), Yano Harumichi (1823–1887).

*Period of purification after death.* As to how a soul returns to its ancestor's spiritual residence, the Shinto classics provide no further information and there are any number of theories among the various Shinto scholars. According to some scholars the period of purification will differ according to the state of the soul at the time of death. The more refined souls will immediately go to *Takama-no-hara*, while the other less refined ones may take many years. And there are other schools which hold that the souls of the deceased reach the state of *kami* one year after death.

Yanagia Kunio in his book *About our ancestors* speaks of a time element of thirty-three years as a compromise between the native faith of Shinto and the foreign religion of Buddhism. He says the native faith tried to hasten the purification of the soul of the newly dead in order to establish as soon as possible communication between the soul and this world. Whereas, on the other hand, the Buddhists in taking up services for the dead in handling the problem of pollution, prolonged the period of purification even for one hundred years or more. Yanagita holds that the establishment of a period of thirty-three years was a compromise between these two ideas.

*Life after death, not otherworld orientated.* If there is any outstanding element in folk Shinto, it is the concept of closeness to the world of the dead. In speaking of the dead, Yanagita presents what he calls four conspicuously Japanese elements (Yanagita 1970, p. 146):

. . . the first would be the view that souls remain in their country after death instead of going off far away; the second would be the idea that there are goings and comings between the two worlds, the clear and the dark, and at other than fixed occasions of spring and autumn there were times when the living invited, could invite, the souls; the third would be the idea that the dying wish of the living could be carried out and he could make all sorts of plans for his descendants; and the fourth would be the idea that he could be reborn again and again to carry on in his same work.

The universally accepted doctrine among most Shinto scholars is that the ancestors remain eternally in this land and continue to work for the prosperity of the family and the land. The ancestors continually visit this land and more especially at particular times of the year such as at the *higan* and *bon*.

For the *bon* festival a path was cleared from the top of the mountain and the grass was cut around the grave which was to facilitate the spirits coming from the high place to the grave site. Mountain worship in folk Shinto is in no small way con-

nected with the belief that the mountains were the abodes of the ancestors. It was believed that the souls of the dead “gradually ascend from the base of the mountain to the summit and finally become *kami*” (Yanagita 1970, p. 150). There is an old burial custom in which the body used to be buried in the direction of the mountain.

Buddhist teachings aimed at persuading the people to strive for Buddhahood, giving up all hope of returning to this world and being conducted to a distant place, were never thoroughly accepted by the Japanese.

*The Catholic tradition and the people's response.* Traditional Catholic doctrine teaches a belief in the existence of heaven, the place where the redeemed go after death; hell, the place of the condemned; and purgatory, an intermediate state of purification for those who still have sins to atone for before going to heaven. According to traditional Catholic thought this place is another world or state separate from the present world in which we live. This otherworldliness of life after death of the Catholic tradition is somewhat similar to the Buddhist concept of *gokuraku* (“paradise”). Buddhism never emphatically denied the basic tenet that the world of the dead is separate from the world we live in nor did it emphasize it. Rather than making itself contradictory to the indigenous belief that the dead remain forever in this land it made itself complimentary to this tradition. On the less compromising Catholic side, the doctrine of life in another world was preserved intact but in the minds of the Japanese Catholics thisworldliness of the deceased seems strongly prevalent. In the survey, to the question, “Where do you think your ancestors are?” only three people responded “*tengoku*” (*tengoku* is the Catholic term for heaven). These three people, one woman and two men, were baptized at birth and brought up in a Catholic family. Sixty-one people, thirty-three women and twenty-eight men, responded: “They are near”, “They are around us”, “They are always guarding and helping us.” Of these

sixty-one people, ten were Catholic from birth. Sixteen people answered; "We don't know". Even the young people who in some cases denied the immortality of their own souls gave very similar answers to that of their elders in responding to this same question.

As to the effect the ancestors have on those remaining, the response to the question, "Does the dying wish of a person effect those remaining?" was practically an unanimous "Yes." Forty-three women and forty men responded in the affirmative. Of those eighty-three who answered in the affirmative, fifty-nine people (thirty women and twenty-nine men) felt a strong sense of responsibility in fulfilling these dying wishes. And the remaining twenty-four people felt that in some indescribable way the deceased exercised an influence in their lives. From these responses we see in the Catholics an almost complete unanimity with what Yanagita calls conspicuous Japanese elements about the dead.

In Shinto belief this world and the world of the dead are spiritually connected in a very real sense. A human being is united, through his body, with his ancestors and his descendants, representing both in the present. The deceased, just as he once lived in unity with his ancestors, now lives on in unity with his descendants. There are mutual obligations between the living and the dead.

The descendants and neighbors of the deceased perform in sadness and remembrance, the burial ceremonies designed to return them to joy; and by *matsuri* for the soul of the deceased, the souls of the deceased ancestors are enabled to escape from the dark world of death and visit this world. Thus the ancestors watch their descendants with their spirit eyes and bestow blessings; their spirits become catharized and turn into high, exalted spirits and finally come to belong to the world of the gods, the world of the noble ancestors (Ono 1958, p. 24).

As L. Hearn points out, ancestor worship contains a profound truth regarding the influence of the dead on the world of the

living, a truth that has come to be better understood in terms of the scientific facts of heredity and culture. For the Japanese this truth has been expressed in the belief that the dead are not less real than the living, they take part in the daily life of the people and look after their welfare. It is of prime importance, then, that men maintain good relations with their ancestors (Hearn 1966, p. 273).

#### BECOMING AN ANCESTOR

Just as life in this world is directed to growth to adulthood, so life in the other world, life after death, is directed to growth to ancestorhood. The soul grows in both of these worlds, ascending towards its final perfection which is ancestorhood. Thus we find in the various rites which are performed for the dead a certain similarity to the various rites of passage for the living. As birth causes pollution to the mother and child, so death brings pollution to the household. The first forty-nine days are the most precarious for the soul; the life of the new born child is in doubt and the place of the soul of the newly deceased is likewise uncertain. The soul of the deceased is neither here nor there, it has not completely separated itself from the house, nor has it gone to the grave but is in a condition of hovering between the grave and house. It is also believed that the soul might return to the place of death which is even evident today in the practice of putting a marker or bouquet of flowers on the roadside where a relative met his death in a traffic accident. At the end of this period of forty-nine days, both the newborn child and the soul of the deceased are purified but not the mother nor the bereaved family. On the one hundredth day the mother and the bereaved family are freed from pollution.

At death the first ceremony which is conducted by the Shinto priest is called the *mitama-utsushi*, separation of the soul. During this ceremony today a new name, *kaimyō*, posthumous name, is given to the deceased. This practice, according to Yanagita, is definitely of Buddhist origin and incompatible with the Japa-

nese concept of a unified ancestral spirit. After a certain number of years, it is commonly held "that the soul of the ancestor casts off its individuality and merges into the single form" (Yanagita 1970, p. 119). Ordinarily in the thirty-third year after a man's death, in some locals it is the forty-ninth or fiftieth year, a final ceremony called *tomurai-age* or *toi-kiri* is held. It is with the conclusion of this final memorial service that the soul is considered to become an ancestor.

While the memory of the deceased is still vivid in the minds of the remaining relatives it is incomprehensible to refer to the deceased as an ancestor. It is also incorrect to think of the soul of the deceased as wandering for a long period of time and depending on the memorial services for attainment of ancestorhood. With more certitude than in the case of a child reaching adulthood, for death may intervene, the soul of the deceased is assured of becoming an ancestor. Yanagita holds the view that in former times everybody became an ancestor. After the memory of the deceased has faded, which later became a set number of years, becoming an ancestor is for all practical purposes an automatic thing.

*Merging into a single form.* When we speak of the soul of the deceased merging into a single form it is important that we are not mistaken to believe the ancestors of the various households become one. Each household still maintains its individuality and each household has its own ancestors. Origuchi Shinobu points out that when a person dies he joins the ancestors of the village; when they come back, they come back as the ancestors of the village and each one also goes to his own family as its ancestors (Origuchi 1965, p. 20). This is still evident in the *ta no matsuri*, a festival which is observed even today in some rural areas, for example, Noto Peninsula. On the occasion of this festival each family erects some pillar or traditional mark so the ancestors know where to visit. This prevents the ancestor from going to the wrong house. Yanagita also points out that

this practice is also true in the observance of New Year's and the spring and fall equinox festivals.

However, a slight aberration crept into this practice of honoring only one's own ancestors. If the *kami* or ancestors of a neighboring household do well for that household and one's own household does not fair so well, the not so prosperous household can honor the ancestors of the neighbor. This *kami* is referred to as *kyakujin* ("guest god"). Compared to the vast but unified concept of All Souls in the West, the Japanese idea of honoring outside spirits, guest gods, has no unity and there is no clear explanation for many of them entering each house to be revered. Yanagita attributes this attitude on the part of the people as possibly contributing in some way to the willingness of the people to accept other gods and other beliefs, namely, Buddhism and Confucianism.

#### ROLE OF THE ANCESTOR

Probably one of the most distinguishing elements in the Japanese concept of ancestor is the fact that upon death a member of the household does not lose his membership in that household. It is not so much a question of afterlife as it is rather a continuation of life in one's own household. There is no other community besides the family of the living and the dead. This is quite different from the Catholic concept in which heaven, a far away place, is not the reunion place for the family but of the entire Christian community. In instructing older people in Christian doctrine I have had a number of cases in which the surviving spouse was deeply distressed that if she or he were baptized and since the deceased spouse was not a Christian, the possibility of being united in a real sense with the deceased spouse would be unattainable.

Since the deceased members never cease to lose their membership in the household, they are expected to continue to work for the prosperity of the household and the land. Yanagita is very emphatic in maintaining, "the eternal existence of souls within

our land and not in a distant place (Yanagita 1970, p. 61).

According to his master's dissertation, "The religion of the household," Herman Ooms states that the most obvious function of the ancestors is the one of integrating the members of the household (Ooms 1967, p. 266):

. . . the members of the household are united among themselves and with the ancestors. . . . They are all their descendants, and even the bride who is not a descendant, enjoys the same position. . . . The daily offerings occur when the whole family is united in the morning at breakfast. Thus integration is not such that everybody feels united *around* the ancestors. Instead they share the meal with everybody, and hardly any more attention is paid to the dead than to any other living member of the family.

The ancestors are the unifying element in the household and assure the continuity of that particular household. Hence the obligation to carry on memorial services for the ancestors is concomitant with the obligation to carry on the work or occupation of one's predecessors. This obligation is instilled in the first son who is the legitimate heir and successor through various functions. On the occasion of the festival called *mairi-no-hotoke*, a festival honoring the ancestors, which is held on the fifteenth day of the tenth month, a type of white dumplings or cakes (*dango*) are offered. After having been removed from the family altar, only the head of the family and his first son may eat them, the other members of the family are forbidden to partake of them. "There is a tradition that those who receive the *dango* must go to worship on that same feast day every year for life or they will incur a curse, and that is why the others may not eat the offering" (Yanagita 1970, p. 109). Yanagita goes on to state another example in Aomori Prefecture where the heir to the family is called *hotoke-mochi*, one who possesses the ability of becoming a *hotoke* or ancestor. This is applied to the one who is to succeed to the family headship.

This obligation is certainly more prevalent in rural areas

where the first son is expected to carry on the occupation of one's predecessor, and as successor is assured of the title of ancestor. Even in cases where the first son may move to the city, to the extent that he has been indoctrinated with the obligation to the ancestors that custom will be preserved. However, in an urban society where the children may be separated from the family for a period of years and one's livelihood would be dependent more on the independent judgment of the child concerned and there is no question of continuing the occupation of one's father, one could easily foresee a dulling of the successors consciousness of caring for the ancestors. Although this may seem to be a threat by some authors, the fact still remains to be proven.

*Ancestor veneration, a unifying element in the family.* I feel that a more threatening element would be adherence to a religion which opposes so called "ancestor worship". Because of the possibility of misinterpretation, I believe a better phraseology would be ancestor veneration or reverence. It is not difficult to imagine the havoc which would be engendered if a member of the household refused to respect the ancestors because of a difference of belief. In some of the interviews made while conducting the survey there were several cases which blatantly pointed this out.

One case was a family in which the father was deceased and only the mother and two daughters remained. The two daughters were fervent Catholics who set up their own small Christian altar in the house and conducted their private prayers there. They refused to give even the slightest recognition to the family ancestral altar (*butsudan*) where the mother made offerings every day to her deceased husband and ancestors. This disunity caused a great deal of hard feelings and discontent between the mother and the children. Finally, the children compromised and placed their religious images on the family altar and began praying there everyday with their mother. With this, harmony returned to the family and after several years the mother even

embraced the faith of her two daughters.

There were other cases in which the parents vehemently opposed the first son's conversion to Christianity. It was only when the son agreed to carry on the family rituals for the ancestors that the parents gave their consent.

It is also interesting to note from the survey that in the cases where a Catholic woman married the first son but one who had no obligation to carry on the rituals for the ancestors, that is, there was no *butsudan*, these men embraced the faith of their wife. However, on the other hand, where the husband had this obligation and the family altar was in the home, none of these men converted to Christianity. Out of a total of fifty women, twenty-one of the spouses were first sons. Eight of these men did not have the obligation to the ancestors and all of them converted. The other thirteen men had the obligation to the family ancestors and none of these converted.

Ooms speaks of a similar case where the household can be split not so evidently on the grounds of the necessity of venerating the ancestors which we find in Christianity, but on the grounds of the way of venerating which would differ according to sect. Especially he refers to the Nichiren Shōshū Sect. He says that in such a case, the opposing factions will not meet in the performance of the same rites, which by this very fact lose their community-shaping effect. "People who are thought of as not venerating their ancestors, are believed to have broken with the community" (Ooms 1967, p. 267).

In view of the above facts, I think that the custom of venerating the ancestors is more a question of social integration in the family than one of the supernatural. Hence for any religion to oppose it, one of the fundamental unifying elements of the household or family structure would be destroyed. And if ancestor veneration is more an integrating element than supernatural, the question of the necessity of opposition to it is brought into question.

*The on and kō relationship to one's ancestors.* It is important here that we briefly consider the traditional Japanese family structure, for it sheds a significant insight into the role of the ancestors in the family. According to Kawashima Takeyoshi (1957, pp. 30-35), the word household traditionally includes two elements: the same name and veneration of the same ancestors, that is, the same ancestor, therefore the same household. In the household the interplay of *on* (often translated as "obligation" or "indebtedness") and *kō* ("filial piety" or "gratitude") are basic but here we would like to consider them as they are related to the concept of ancestor. It is interesting to note that in most books written about ancestor worship, the element of *on* and *kō* are totally neglected but I feel that they are an important key in understanding the role of ancestor veneration. Probably the best explanation of *on* in English, although it has its limitations, is Ruth Benedict's (1954, p. 99-100):

The word for "obligations" which covers a person's indebtedness from greatest to least is *on*. In Japanese usage it is translated into English by a whole series of words from "obligations" and "loyalty" to "kindness" and "love", but these words distort its meaning. If it really meant love or even obligation the Japanese would certainly be able to speak of *on* to their children, but that is an impossible usage of the word. Nor does it mean loyalty, which is expressed by other Japanese words, which are in no way synonymous with *on*. *On* is in all its uses a load, an indebtedness, a burden, which one carries as best one may. A man receives *on* from a superior and the act of accepting an *on* from any man not definitely one's superior or at least one's equal gives one an uncomfortable sense of inferiority. When they say, "I wear an *on* to him," they are saying, "I carry a load of obligations to him," and they call this creditor, this benefactor, their "*on* man".

A parent gives life and raises a child. Thus the child incurs *on* to his parents. Because of this *on* a child is expected to be dutiful, perform *kō*, to one's parents. However, this *on* incurred

by a child is not limited solely to one's parents but includes one's ancestors as well. A child is begotten by one's parents who in turn were begotten by their parents and so on back from generation to generation. Thus the *on* incurred by a child goes back to his ancestors. The child is expected to show the same filial piety to one's parents and one's ancestors. In this way a child is taught in the family structure to venerate his ancestors.

Ruth Benedict seems to have made a slight oversight when she remarks on the "Japanese limitation of ancestor veneration to recent and remembered forebears" (Benedict 1954, p. 102). I do not think there is a Japanese scholar who would agree with this.

In the survey, when I asked the people "To whom they pay their respect?", sixty-four people (thirty-four women and thirty men) responded "their ancestors". And in pursuing that further, all sixty-four felt a sense of gratitude to their ancestors. The people used the word *kansha* ("gratitude") in their responses. However, I feel that this word is a more modern term which has its roots in *on*.

We discover in the household, intrinsically connected with the concept of ancestor, what might be called the primary social or moral value of gratitude. Through the repeated remembrances of one's ancestors one is constantly reminded of the toil, perseverance and tolerance of one's predecessors in continuing and developing the household and one is forever indebted to the ancestors for the present existence of the household. There should be no religion which would oppose such values of gratitude and we might even question those societies in which personal independence is so strong that any recognition of the labors of one's predecessors is almost non-existent. Let us hope that Christianity in Japan will find some way of integrating this esteemed moral value of gratitude which is found so deep in the Japanese family structure and culture.

REINCARNATION

The question of the presence of the concept of reincarnation in Japanese folk religion is a difficult one and possibly one which will never fully be explained. Yanagita argues in favor of the belief in reincarnation in Japanese folk religion from the position which he calls "negative denials" (Yanagita 1970, p. 131). That is to say, he demonstrates how the Japanese did not fully accept the traditional Buddhist concept of rebirth and hence had its already existing beliefs. For if there were no already existing concept of rebirth in Japan when Buddhism was first introduced there would seem to be no reason why the Buddhist concept was not accepted in its entirety (Yanagita 1970, p. 171):

One point [according to Buddhism] was that the transmigration of the soul, the theory that human souls fall into the world of demons or animals according to what they did in former lives, did not exist in old Japan, and it seems to have been imported from China. In our country a spirit can occupy a tree or a stone only at the times of a *matsuri*, and we recognize that there is a soul in various things, but there is scarcely anybody who thinks that a man transfers into an object.

One point which seems to be strongly evident in the Japanese tradition on reincarnation is the belief in the rebirth of a child. Yanagita says: "It is well known that parents or grandparents who lose a beloved child want to learn where it is going to be reborn" (Yanagita 1970, p. 74). And he goes on to explain that rebirth is generally believed to occur in the same kin group and to the same blood relative. However, he later qualifies this by stating that there are also other cases which indicate the possibility of rebirth into another family in the neighborhood. This could possibly be a later development but there is no definite evidence to prove its historical placement.

In the survey it is interesting to note that six women and one man answered "Yes" to the question, "Do you believe in reincarnation?" None of these people believed in the possibility

of rebirth into an animal, but rather rebirth into another human form. Three women stated that they had been taught this during childhood, before becoming a Christian, and still believed it today. These three women came from a very strong non-Christian background.

In four of the cases, three women and one man, there was a loss of a son or grandson. The women in two of these cases had lost their first son at an early age and when the next child was born, they believed very strongly that this son was the reincarnation of their first son who had died. In the case of the other woman, her son was in his twenties when he was killed in an accident while mountain climbing. The probability of her having another child was very slim but she hoped that the deceased son would be born again.

In the case of the man, he was the grandfather and felt a very close attachment to the grandson who died. He could not foresee another child being born to his son's wife but believed that since his grandson had been deprived of so much by an untimely death, somehow he would be born again to enjoy life to its fullest.

Although Christianity would not admit the possibility of reincarnation, these seven Catholics felt no sense of incompatibility with Christianity in maintaining a strong belief in reincarnation. Certainly out of a hundred people the number seven is quite small. But from among the other people interviewed none of them had experienced the loss of a child. Even if we disregard the three women who came from a strong non-Christian background, I feel the remaining four is still significant. These four people actually experienced the loss of a child and the indigenous belief played an important role in providing an answer for this heart-rending experience. And we might logically expect such a belief in reincarnation to only come to the forefront where such a death actually occurs.

In conjunction with a belief in rebirth for children, it is interesting to note that the souls of the family members who died

without marrying are called *muen-botoke*, (“forgotten or wandering souls”). By the word itself we can recognize its Buddhist origin. But if we were true to the word’s original meaning, it would hardly seem appropriate for a child since we would expect the remaining family to pray for the soul of the child. In the case of a wayfarer, who dies while traveling and is buried in a place unknown to any of his family, we can more easily see the appropriateness of such a title.

*Ancestorhood excludes the possibility of rebirth.* Another element which seems to be peculiar to the Japanese tradition of rebirth is the fact that once a soul has reached the state of ancestorhood, there is no longer present the possibility of rebirth.

I can not guarantee, with my power, that it is true, but by the time they [souls] have attained the position where they can be worshipped, there is no longer an occasion by which they can be reborn (Yanagita 1970, p. 171).

I can not help but ponder on the strong predominance of attributing rebirth primarily to those who die before marriage or begetting a progeny. And I wonder if there is not an exigency for this in the concept of ancestor. The point at which one seems to embark on the way to ancestorhood is marriage. Once the heir of the family marries he is in the direct line of joining the ancestors. For by this marriage he will perpetuate the household. For any child who is expected to move out and start a new family, he would become the ancestor for the new household, indirectly linked to the ancestors of the main household. However, in the case of a child who dies before marriage, there would be no way of becoming numbered among the ancestors. My opinion is that rebirth is postulated for those who die before marriage to give them another chance by which in their new existence they would eventually become a householder and thereby achieve ancestorhood. Perhaps this was the original idea of rebirth, and later extended to anybody, dying young or old, married or unmarried, who die without their aspirations

achieved. This is only an hypothesis and much further study is necessary before any definite conclusion can be drawn.

#### SERVICES FOR THE DEAD

In Japan today remembrances for the dead are conducted four times a year: New Year, *higan*, the spring and fall equinox, and the *bon*, an ancestral festival in mid-summer.

It is Yanagita's opinion that the remembrance of the dead on New Year's and *bon* was once more clearly related than at present. He sees a similarity between the customs that are observed at New Year's and at *bon*. At New Year's, which was held on the evening of the full moon exactly half a year after the *bon*, there was a custom of going to the mountain to select a suitable pine tree. There were certain restrictions on the selection of a pine tree, such as, selecting a pine from a mountain facing the right direction and that it should not be taken from land lower than the house. This was so, because the people believed the spirits of the dead resided in the mountains. There was a ceremony called *matsu-mukae*, ("going to meet the pine"). When the pine was brought to the home it was laid on its side to let it rest and *sake* rice wine was offered it. When the pine was finally ready to be set up, the stem was scraped to a point and this was referred to as "washing the pine's feet." The pine was so treated because the people believed the spirits of the dead used the medium of the pine to come again into their respective households. This tradition bears strong resemblances to other ancestor cults, especially those of the *bon*.

*The bon and higan festivals.* During the *bon* festival, usually celebrated around the middle of August, the people go to the mountains to gather wild flowers, bush clover and bellflowers. These are brought to the family altars and are regarded, like the pine at New Year's, as a medium for the spirits of the deceased ancestors.

The greetings used on New Year's and *bon* festivals are very

similar. At a home in which there had not been any recent death, a typical greeting at *bon* which resembles the New Year's greeting would be, "A good, quiet *bon* to you," or "We offer you best wishes for the health of all of you." In a home where a recent death had occurred the greeting at New Year's was similar to that at the *bon*, "You must be lonely to have such an unusual year," or "This is a lonely year for you."

As regards the custom of visiting the family graves at *higan*, Yanagita points out that these were days of imperial ancestral observances. As the number of ancestors to be remembered in each household increased, especially in old families that had continued for nearly twenty generations, it became a difficult task to give a proper remembrance to each of the ancestors. Combined with this and the traditional belief that members of a family without distinction would merge into one sacred ancestral spirit, the practice of remembering the ancestors at these two seasonally convenient times of the year became an accepted practice. And the Imperial Court recognized this folk custom by making it a national holiday. Yanagita goes on to say that regions where people began to feel uneasy about performing rites for souls at *bon* because of its Buddhist flavor, transferred the rites for the ancestors from *bon* to *higan*, the vernal and autumnal equinoxes.

Yanagita thus concludes that these four customs of remembering the dead pre-dated Buddhism. To corroborate this I would like to quote from an article on Japanese Shinto which states (Hirai 1966, pp. 19-20):

*Obon* Festival or Festival of the Dead on July 15 (in some areas on August 15th) and thereabouts is mostly observed according to Buddhist rites. However, as suggested by Theravad Buddhism practiced in Burma, Ceylon and Thailand original Buddhism stressed transmigration of the soul and did not teach the ancestor worship through periodical services for the departed souls of the dead. This idea of celebrating the *Obon* Festival in a grand style can be traced back to the common practice observed before the introduc-

tion of Buddhism. At that time people welcomed the return of the souls of their ancestors probably twice a year in January and July and held memorial services in their honor, according to scholars of folklore. Japan also has a ceremony to console the souls of the ancestors during the week around the Vernal Equinox and Autumnal Equinox. The name of this custom stemmed from a Sanskrit word, *Paramita*, but it is unknown in India and China. Just as in the case of the *Obon* Festival this practice originated in the old tradition of ancestor worship in the Japanese people.

In Japan from very early times, certainly pre-dating Buddhism, there was the custom of honoring the dead four times a year. Buddhism very quickly adopted these same days and today very few people avert to the fact that these days are from the Shinto tradition when they go to the Buddhist temples to remember their dead and have services performed for them on these days.

*The traditional Catholic day for the dead.* According to the Catholic tradition, November 2nd is designated "All Souls Day" and on this day special services are conducted for the deceased. On this day, traditionally, each priest could offer three masses for the dead. On ordinary days unless there is a special reason, a priest can only offer one mass. One November 2nd the faithful are encouraged to visit the graves of their deceased relatives and at Catholic cemeteries, especially in Western countries, special services are conducted. The remainder of the month is set aside for praying for the dead. In the survey to the question,

"When do you especially remember your dead?" out of the one hundred Catholics only two people answered "November 2nd," and in these cases it was more of an after thought. Forty-four people said on "*higan* and *bon*" and twenty-nine people answered: "When we return to our native countries." These twenty-nine people were unable to return to the native place of their ancestral graves on these traditional days and had to wait for a convenient time due to occupation, distance and so

forth. Thus we can clearly conclude that the Catholic tradition of remembering the dead on November 2nd has never become a tradition among the Japanese Catholics. Despite the fact that they are exposed to a different tradition, they continue to remember their dead according to the early custom which comes from Shinto and later adopted by Buddhism.

Of the one hundred Catholics, almost half of them, forty-seven, have Buddhist services and twenty-eight have Catholic services performed and some twenty-five do nothing. Since one quarter do nothing for their dead, one wonders whether something in Christianity is responsible for the negligence towards the dead in a country where respect for the dead is so much a part of their cultural heritage.

*Butsudan, the family altar.* Besides the traditional days of visiting the graves, at least in the household of the eldest son, you will find what is called a *butsudan*, where today the family ancestors are frequently remembered, if not daily. The offerings may vary from a bowl of rice to a cup of *sake*, flowers, some other food, or incense. The *butsudan* is definitely of Buddhist origin and because of the government support of it, an official decree in 655, approximately one hundred years after Japan's first encounter with Buddhism, ordered the construction of these small Buddhist altars, where an image of the Buddha was venerated, in all households throughout the nation. Somewhere in the merging of Shinto and Buddhism, the *butsudan* became the altar where the dead were also venerated. And in some parts of Japan even today, it is customary to take the *ihai* (small wooden tablet with the name of the deceased inscribed on it) from the *butsudan*, remove the person's name from the *ihai* and place it on the *kamidana* ("family Shinto altar"). In some places, for example, the main island of Okinawa, this would be done on the thirty-third year after the person's death and would signify that the departed is now numbered among the ancestors. According to the survey, the number of Catholics who have a *butsu-*

*dan* is better than one quarter, twenty-seven households out of one hundred. Ten households have a quasi-*butsudan*, that is one which has been converted to include Christian symbols as well. And only twenty-three households have a Christian altar, but in these cases it is more for devotional purposes than the traditional altar for the venerating one's ancestors.

#### CONCLUSION

The mixture of Buddhism with local Japanese religion is not unique in the history of Buddhism. In both India and China, the Buddhist pantheon became closely associated with other deities. In Japan its successful integration is due not only to the fact that it supplied a profound philosophy where one was lacking and enriched the religious realm with its art and ritual; most important was the fact that it accepted and elaborated on what many scholars consider to be the core of the indigenous belief of the people, ancestor veneration. And "ancestor worship has been the main current in forming the whole development of Japanese religion" (Doi 1967, p. 51). Buddhism had learned in India, China, Korea and elsewhere how to meet the spiritual needs of people maintaining a persistent ancestor worship. In Japan the promulgation of any religion essentially opposed to the indigenous Shinto would have been an attack upon the whole system of society, for family and community were strongly connected with ancestor worship and the emperor was both high priest and divine descendant of an ancestral cult which united all other cults in one common tradition. Hozumi, in complete agreement with Yanagita, says that the primary reason for the acceptance of Buddhism by the Japanese was its adaptation to ancestor worship (Hozumi 1940, p. 88).

I feel that our original hypothesis has been sufficiently proven from the data of the survey. The reason why Christianity has not been successful on the grass roots level is that it has not made itself compatible with the indigenous beliefs of the Japanese. Professor Doi Masatoshi says, "Western cultures, howev-

er, cannot be accepted as they are as media for communicating the Gospel. They must first be translated into the indigenous culture” (Doi 1966, p. 7). This of course includes the whole gamut of Japanese culture, and I strongly believe the veneration of one’s ancestors is so fundamental to the religious and social structures of Japan that the Catholic Church must make these customs compatible with itself. Today in America and some parts of Europe, Christian countries, you see homes for the aged being built one after another—the elderly have no place to go. It would be a sad thing to see this happen in Japan, but if Western social family structures replace the Japanese concept of family, the *on-kō* relationship, the loyalty and gratitude to one’s parents and ancestors, it could become a reality. I do not say that Christian doctrine, as regards life after death, has to change but if the Church wants to teach this doctrine, she will never be successful unless she adopts the customs and mentality of the Japanese people in conveying this doctrine.

As the survey has shown, the Catholic people have maintained their traditional practices towards their dead. And even in some cases the concept of reincarnation which is contrary to Christian doctrine. If Christianity had accepted the Japanese mentality and developed itself along these oriental lines, perhaps these difficulties could have been avoided and the state of the Church in Japan today would be quite different.

*Christian adaptation of ancestor veneration.* A Christian adaptation to Japanese ancestor veneration is very much something possible. It is not too late for the Church in Japan to develop a tract on death and afterlife which incorporates the traditional practices of the people and is compatible with the indigenous beliefs of the Japanese.

However in making itself compatible with these beliefs, the Church must be aware of two pitfalls. She must avoid the various shamanistic overtones and be careful that she does not develop like the Buddhist into a *sōshiki* religion, or funeral Chris-

tianity, a criticism which is often leveled at the Buddhists. Since Christianity depends on the personal faith commitment of the individual, the likelihood of a mere funeral Christianity developing is inconceivable.

Only a few years ago, the bishops of Taiwan decided to grant permission to the Chinese Catholics to participate in the Ching Ming Festival, a day when all the Chinese traditionally go to the graves of their ancestors to sweep and tidy them up and make various offerings. Until now the Catholics were barred from participating in this festival and thus had been constantly criticized by their fellow countrymen for neglecting their dead. November 2nd was the traditional Catholic day for remembering the dead, but it had no significance for the non-Christians and was difficult for new Catholics to adjust to.

This controversy goes back to the 17th century when the famous Jesuit, Father Matthew Ricci, requested from Rome permission for the Catholics to participate in the Ching Ming Festival. The controversy went on for over one hundred years and in 1792 the Propagation of the Faith in Rome refused to allow the Christians to observe that traditional day. It was only in recent years that this refusal was over-ridden by the local bishops.

Possibly the first step that should be taken by the Catholic Church in Japan is an adaptation of the traditional days of remembering the dead in Japan, the *higan* and *bon*. And then a gradual incorporation of the other customs, such as, the establishment of family altars for the dead and stronger encouragement of respect for the dead with emphasis on gratitude.

If Christianity expects the Japanese people to take on Western logic, morals and culture, a whole new social structure, Christianity will never reach the grass roots level in Japan. Furthermore, this is a denial of what the Catholic Church maintains and strongly advocates in "The Constitution on the Church in the Modern World" namely, that the manifestation of God is

given to the cultures of different ages, and that through communion with various cultural modes, the Church and the indigenous cultures will be enriched. Genuine witness to the teachings of Christ demands that its members come to grips with the world and the worlds in which they live. It entails their appropriation of Christian tradition but appropriation in the light of their own experience as people living in a particular age and culture. There are many aspects of Japanese culture and society that far surpass those of the West. It is the mission of the Church in Japan to incorporate these into itself and present them to the world.

#### APPENDIX

The survey which is quoted in this paper was taken for the most part from the parishioners of the Tsurumi Catholic Church located in the city of Yokohama, Japan. I interviewed one hundred people, fifty men and fifty women, taking ten people from both sexes according to the following age groupings: 20-29, 30-39, 40-49, 50-59, 60 and over. The people for the survey were selected from the church register for the most part at random, taking only one person from each household. The only condition was that the people had to be steady churchgoers, that is, those who attend Sunday services regularly. In establishing this norm, it was presumed that these parishioners because of their regular attendance would have a deeper exposure to Catholic doctrine.

After the questionnaire, consisting of thirty-five questions, was drawn up, three people were interviewed to determine whether the wording of the questions was sufficiently clear and to determine the best way of conducting the survey. These three sample cases were interviewed at the person's home but because of the size and construction of the average home privacy in conducting the interview was almost impossible and the people

did not respond candidly but at times called upon the other members of the household for help in responding. I then decided to conduct all of the interviews at the church, interviewing each person privately. The one hundred people were contacted by phone and a time was set at the person's convenience. The interviews were conducted over a period of two months, during July and August of 1972, allowing an average of one hour for each interview. There was a one hundred percent response from the people who were selected for the interview.

The people interviewed were all middle classed people, some of whom were professional people, that is, doctors, lawyers, and educators, while others had their own small businesses. The women, with the exception of those in the 20 year age level, were all housewives. About one third of the total had a college education while the other two-thirds had an education equivalent to high school.

In the questionnaire the individual's number of years as a Catholic was ascertained. About thirty-five of the people were baptized Catholic at birth and came from strong Catholic backgrounds mostly from the Nagasaki area, a place which might be called a Catholic stronghold since the first missionaries evangelized in that area and there is a relatively high percent of Catholics in that area. However, in the overall responses there was no appreciable difference between them and those who were baptized later in life. For that reason no distinction was made in tabulating the results as recorded in the text of this thesis.

The majority of the people interviewed were pre-war, that would include all those over thirty. Those born after the war would include the men and women in the twenty year range, a total of only twenty people. Since this sample is so small, no distinction was made in the text between pre-war and after the war.

However, in looking through the responses again, it was interesting to note that the women of the twenty age level held

the same opinions as their elders, whereas the responses from the men of this same age level were more ambiguous and tended to respond they did not know. However, as I stated before, this is too small of a sample to make any definite conclusions. I hope to make another survey, at a later date, putting emphasis on those born after the war to determine if there is any marked difference from that of their elders. At present, I doubt if there is actually that much of a difference.

### GLOSSARY

<i>bon</i> 盆	<i>mitama-utsushi</i> 御霊遷
<i>butsudan</i> 仏壇	<i>muen-botoke</i> 無縁仏
<i>dango</i> 団子	Mutobe Koreyoshi 六人部是香
<i>gokuraku</i> 極楽	Nichiren Shōshū 日蓮正宗
<i>higan</i> 彼岸	<i>Nihongi</i> 日本紀
Hirata Atsutane 平田篤胤	Ōkuni Takamasa 大国隆正
<i>hotoke-mochi</i> 仏持ち	Ōkununushi 大国主
<i>ihai</i> 位牌	<i>on</i> 恩
Izanagi 伊邪那岐	<i>sake</i> 酒
Izanami 伊邪那美	<i>sōshiki</i> 葬式
Kagutsuchi 迦具土	Suzuki Shigetane 鈴木重胤
<i>kaimyō</i> 戒名	<i>Takama-no-hara</i> 高天原
<i>Kakuri-yo</i> 隠世	<i>Tama no mi-hashira</i> 靈能真柱
<i>kamidana</i> 神棚	<i>ta no matsuri</i> 田の祭り
<i>kansha</i> 感謝	<i>tengoku</i> 天国
<i>kō</i> 孝	<i>toi-kiri</i> 訪切
<i>Kojiki</i> 古事記	<i>tomurai-age</i> 甲い上げ
<i>kyakujin</i> 客神	<i>Utsushi-yo</i> 現世
<i>mairi-no-hotoke</i> 詣りの仏	Yano Harumichi 矢野玄道
<i>matsu-mukae</i> 松迎え	<i>Yomi-no-kuni</i> 黄泉国
<i>matsuri</i> 祭り	

## REFERENCES

- ASTON, W. G., transl.  
1956 *Nihongi*. London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd.
- BENEDICT, Ruth  
1954 *The chrysanthemum and the sword: Patterns of Japanese culture*. Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle.
- DOI Masatoshi 土居真俊  
1966 Confessing the faith in Asia today. *Japanese religions* 4: 1-30.  
1967 Religion and the social structure of Japan. *Japanese religions* 5: 48-62.
- HEARN, Lafcadio  
1966 *Japan's religions*. New Hyde Park, N. Y.: University Books Inc.
- HERBERT, Jean  
1967 *Shintō: At the fountain-head of Japan*. London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd.
- HIRAI Naofusa 平井直房  
1966 *Understanding Japan: Japanese Shinto*. Tokyo: International Society for Educational Information.
- HOZUMI Nobushige 穂積陳重  
1940 *Ancestor-worship and Japanese law*. Tokyo: The Hokuseido Press.
- KAWASHIMA Takeyoshi 川島武宜  
1957 *Ideorogi to shite no kazoku seido* イデオロギーとしての家族制度 [The ideology of the family system]. Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten.
- MURAOKA Tsunetsugu 村岡典嗣  
1964 *Studies in Shinto thought*. Delmer M. Brown and James T. Araki, transl. Tokyo: Ministry of Education.
- ONO Sokyō 小野祖教  
1958 *An outline of Shinto teachings*. Tokyo: The Association of Shinto Shrines.
- OOMS, Herman  
1967 The religion of the household: A case study of ancestor worship in Japan. *Contemporary religions*

- in Japan* 8: 201-333.
- ORIGUCHI Shinobu 折口信夫  
1965 *Minzokugaku ni tsuite* 民俗学について [Concerning  
the study of folklore]. Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō.
- PHILIPPI, Donald L., transl.  
1968 *Kojiki*. Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press.
- YANAGITA Kunio 柳田国男  
1970 *About our ancestors*. Fanny Hagin Mayer and  
Ishiwara Yasuyo, transl. Tokyo: Japan Society  
for the Promotion of Science.