

# Religion and Conflict in Japan with Special Reference to Shinto and Yasukuni Shrine

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## Introduction

Japan today projects an external image in which harmonious coherence provides a basis for technical efficiency and cultural excellence. Indeed there is much justification for this image. At the same time there are significant internal tensions which have a long history. Politics and religion have been intertwined for centuries. Political need has often been a powerful motor for religious developments. For example, the major Buddhist denominations were used to register the population and provide stability during the Tokugawa period (1600–1867).<sup>1</sup> Subsequently, the political modernization of the Meiji Restoration (dating from 1868) set this aside and pushed up a new form of ideologized Shinto as a focus of national consciousness. Looking at it from the other side, religions themselves have often provided identities and loyalties, and therewith a motivation for political conflict. This applies to various forms of Buddhism, to Shinto, and to some of Japan's new religions. Thus while Japanese society in some respects appears to be very coherent, its history has frequently been one of internal tension and strife. Factionalism is strong even today, and takes both political and religious forms.

Rites for the protection of the state can be documented from the time of the introduction of Buddhism onwards. One of the reasons why Buddhism was attractive in Japan was that it was believed to provide a more or less magical protection against threats of all kind, including natural disasters and epidemics. The first Buddhist temple established in Japan was named the temple of the 'Four Heavenly Kings' (Shitennôji), after the guardian deities who provided protection in each of the four quarters. Beginning in the year 741 (during the Nara Period), each province of the recently politically unified country was provided with a state-sponsored Buddhist temple (*kokubunji*), or in some cases a convent (*kokubunniji*). This architectural and religious statement had the dual function of reassurance and domination. In this way the country was both 'pacified' and protected. The same idea is found in the name of

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a well-known Shingon Buddhist temple in Tokyo called Gokokuji, meaning 'Temple to Protect the Country', which dates from the Tokugawa period.

In 1939, the idea that religion could protect the state was transferred by the government into Shinto terminology when 'shrines to protect the country' (*gokoku-jinja*) were set up. Even after the end of the war a considerable number of shrines throughout the country retain this title. Theoretically there is one for each prefecture, but the list is not quite consistent. These shrines are listed, for example, in recent almanacs of Yasukuni Shrine, itself a focus of national sentiment as will be seen below. One of the cases of conflict in the post-war period occurred when a member of the Self Defence Forces<sup>2</sup> who died in service was interred in just such a shrine. Since he happened to be a Christian his widow protested against this act.

Of particular importance in recent times has been the debate over problems connected with the public role played by Shinto, and in particular by a major shrine in Tokyo which has just been mentioned, namely Yasukuni Jinja. In this shrine the spirits of the Japanese war dead are revered. However, while the great majority of Japanese people have a strong sense of identity with their nation, and with its fortunes in war and peace, there are serious conflicts concerning the role of this particular shrine. This is because the current Constitution of Japan, dating from 1946, provides for the complete separation of religion and the state. Opinions differ therefore as to whether, or in what sense, Yasukuni Shrine may be regarded as a 'national' shrine. The issue reflects deep-seated variations in the assessment of Shinto which, although it maintains its own honourable traditions, is regarded rather unfavourably by some major Buddhist denominations, by the Christian churches, which though small have well-articulated positions, and by some of the new religions which enjoy wide popularity in Japan.

### Some general features of Shinto

Shinto is usually presented by its priestly and academic representatives as the indigenous religion of the Japanese people which has roots in prehistoric times. While there is some truth in this presentation, it is nowadays widely recognized that Shinto as we know it today is the result of a series of constructions and reconstructions. The earliest major construction is to be found in the mythical narratives of the eighth century *Kojiki* and *Nihonshoki* (or *Nihongi*). This was followed by Watarai Shintô, Yoshida (or Yuiitsu) Shintô, the Kokugaku movement, and so on. The most recent constructions are the ideologically heightened form of Shinto related to the Tennô cult in the 19th and early 20th centuries, and the redefined form of Shinto which was created on the basis of the separation of religion and the state at the end of the Second World War. The second of these is defined largely by the guidelines of the Association of Shinto Shrines (Jinja Honchô), which is a religious corporation registered in law but independent of the state.

Literally, Shinto means 'the way of the *kami*', that is, the way of the gods or spirits. The *kami* are mythical figures whose stories are told in the *Kojiki* and the *Nihongi*, various forces of nature found in the mountains, the forests, the springs and rivers, and so on, human figures who have a special place in the common memory

and, more vaguely, all the ancestors of the Japanese people. All of these different kinds of *kami* may be revered in the various shrines of Shinto, which provide a focus for their sacred power. In Shinto, therefore, the sacred is localized in a defined space. It is invisible, but felt to be present in particular places which are important to the people who live in the area. Many *kami* are of local or regional importance. Every village has at least one *kami* in its own shrine, which may be related notionally and ritually to other shrines elsewhere. The festivals centred on these shrines serve to reinforce the common identity of the people in the area. Some of the more prominent *kami* are of national importance, especially those named in the mythical narratives, previous emperors, and other widely respected heroes. Notable ancient shrines of this kind are Ise Jingû, the residence of Amaterasu Ômikami, and Izumo Taisha, the residence of Ôkuninushi. A more recent, very substantial foundation is Meiji Jingû in Tokyo, where the 19th-century Emperor Meiji and his consort Empress are revered. Such shrines contribute to a political narrative relating to the imperial line, which continues to be promoted by the Association of Shinto Shrines. Other shrines, such as the well-known Inari shrines at Fushimi in western Japan and Kasama in eastern Japan, are mainly visited in order to pray for commercial benefits.

Socially, Shinto is in the first instance understood to be the religion of the immediate group, then of the wider group, extending further afield until it covers the whole nation of Japanese people. The extension of Japanese power over Korea and Taiwan in earlier times led to an attempted extension of Shinto along the lines drawn by political control. Nowadays the overseas extension of Shinto is limited to the provision of a small number of shrines which serve the *émigré* and business communities.

The main rituals associated with Shinto are, on the one hand, purifications of the people and, on the other, offerings to the *kami*. The ritual of purification, performed by a Shinto priest, is understood to bring about a cancellation of impurity (*kegare*) which arises from the staining effect of daily life, and in a positive direction a clarification of the human spirit, that is, a cleansing of attitudes and motivations. This leads to a sharpened sense of resolve and increased loyalty to one's family, one's associates and the Japanese nation. The offerings to the *kami* usually consist of rice-cakes, rice-wine and citrus fruits, but traditionally they also include sea and mountain foods (*umi no sachi* and *yama no sachi*) and in some cases materials for clothing (e.g. for the goddess Amaterasu at Ise Jingû). These offerings express care for the needs of the *kami*. They are intended to ensure that the *kami* will be content and benevolent towards human beings. When members of the public take part in Shinto rites a small branch of the *sakaki* tree is usually offered in the presence of the Shinto priest. The correct way of performing this is described with illustrations, for example, in a booklet published by Yasukuni Shrine, which indirectly provides evidence that this shrine participates in the normal ritual patterns of Shinto. Since the ritual functions of Shinto are mainly social, the rites relating to the individual are the so-called 'life rites', following the passage of the individual through the various stages from infancy through marriage up until death. The provision of death rites, on the other hand, has largely been taken over by the various denominations of Buddhism. Other occasional rituals serve the this-worldly needs, such as safety at work and on journeys, success in examinations and commerce, and the assistance of the *kami* in

finding a marriage partner. These rites are essentially *transactional* and, together with the life-rites, meet the this-worldly needs which play a normal role in the *primal* religion of undifferentiated societies. We should remember, however, that Shinto has a long history and has been reconstructed several times in accordance with the political and economic development of Japan. For this reason I describe Shinto, as we know it today, as an *adapted primal religion*.

### Shinto, ideology and conflict

In the 19th century Japan entered into a phase of extremely rapid national development in response to the pressure of imperialist western powers. In brief, Japan's answer was to learn, to adopt, to adapt and to compete. In order to achieve this, major political changes took place which were focused on the so-called Meiji Restoration (*Meiji Ishin*). The Emperor (*tennô*) took up residence in Edo, which was renamed Tokyo ('eastern capital'). An intense devotion to the Tennô was demanded from the whole population, backed by a simple neo-Confucian ethic of loyalty to family and country and legitimized by the mythical narratives of Shinto. Thus the Shinto religion was harnessed for political and ideological purposes and granted a dominant position in the religious spectrum of the country. For a while it was declared to be a 'state religion'. When this caused problems it was declared to be not 'a religion', though obligatory for all Japanese subjects. Either way, conditions became very difficult for other religions including various forms of Buddhism, various new religions, and Christianity.

In a major governmental programme initiated in 1868, a policy of separating Buddhism and Shinto was enforced.<sup>3</sup> This included the destruction of many Buddhist buildings and images which were located in close association with Shinto shrines, and the removal of elements in Shinto shrines which might be reminiscent of Buddhism. Shinto shrines, for their part, were also reorganized in many cases, and divinities who figured in the mythological narratives were installed where they had previously been unknown. The intention was to have a unified system of Shinto shrines all over the country which would support the emperor system.<sup>4</sup> For Buddhist leaders, these were difficult times of conflict. While the parochial registration system of the previous period continued to be influential, informally, especially as regards funeral practices, Buddhism was edged away from the centre of national attention. Buddhist leaders such as Inoue Enryô and Kiyozawa Manshi debated the role of Buddhism in the modern world, and several denominations founded new educational institutions in an attempt to secure their position.

The national ideological programme also attempted to regulate the relationship between the national system of Shinto and a number of new religions which were supposedly derived from it. This was achieved by setting up an official category known as 'sect Shinto'. Any religions remaining within this category were required to observe a number of Shintoist forms. At the headquarters of a religion called Konkôkyô the shrine-like buildings erected for this purpose can still be seen. Religions which appeared to compete with Shinto by providing an undesired ideological alternative were suppressed, as in the case of Ômoto, whose buildings were

flattened by tanks. Nowadays the term 'sect Shinto' does not correspond to the self-understanding of the various new religions concerned, and it is not appropriate for the purpose of an academic classification of religions in Japan.

In sum, the Meiji Restoration and subsequent imperial reigns presented a newly constructed Shinto which had such political privileges that internal conflicts were unavoidable. The conflicts receded from general view only during times of war. The post-war Constitution of 1946 provided for the equality of all religions under the law and the separation of religion, in particular Shinto, from the state. Since then, however, there have been a series of politically controversial questions relating to Shinto. One of the most important has concerned the legal status of Yasukuni Shrine, at which the war dead are commemorated. This shrine has been at the centre of sharp controversy, even drawing critical comments by Chinese and Korean leaders as recently as 2001. To appraise this debate properly, however, it is necessary to have some understanding of the various forms of hero-worship and divination in Japan.

### Reverence for heroes and reverence for failures

The roots and patterns of Japanese war memorial culture are ancient and complex. Found in the wider culture of reverence for heroes, they include reverence for sincere failures, but for a proper understanding, the general role of ancestor veneration in Japanese religions must also be taken into account. Ancestor veneration in Japan is moulded by the concept of *descent*, which is so typical of the indigenous religion Shinto, as indeed of all 'primal' religions. Just as living families, especially important families, are descended from the *kami*, so the members of the family who die are presumed to become *kami* themselves. The Confucian emphasis on the family and on the virtue of filial piety, introduced from China, reinforced this perspective in an ethically rationalized manner. Buddhism, for its part, also introduced from the continent (that is, from the Korean peninsula, and later also directly from China), included its own contribution to care for the ancestors: instead of saying that the deceased become *kami* it was taught that they become buddhas. Since everybody (almost) was promoted in this way to join the ancestors, it really made little difference in practical religion whether they were regarded as *kami* or as buddhas. At the summer festival of *o-bon* they are all invited back for dancing and feasting. It is considered important that when this festival is over they return to their more senior abode among the spirits, hence the third day of the festival is the day of 'sending back' (*okuri-bon*). This gives a clue to one of the potential difficulties about the departed: it is most undesirable that they should wander about as *muenbotoke*, in an unaffiliated and dissatisfied state. The term *muenbotoke* means 'buddhas without affiliation', that is, deceased persons who lack karmic ties to anyone who would care for them. Hence pacification or even exorcism of spirits or ghosts plays a certain role, especially in cases where in normal life things have not worked out for the best. *The ancestors should be looked after.*

Hero-worship is of course in many cases positively demanded by those enjoying political power, and several important political figures have enjoyed this kind of

divination, the most dramatic examples being: Shôtoku Taishi, who introduced Buddhism to Japan at the same time as promulgating Confucian values (in the 7th century of the common era); Tokugawa Ieyasu, who established the Tokugawa shogunate which ruled from the 17th century until the middle of the 19th century; and the Emperor Meiji, who ruled from 1868 till 1912 and presided over the establishment of Japan as a modern state in the international arena. The first two are venerated in Buddhist temples, and the latter in his own shrine, Meiji Jingû, which attracts millions of visitors each year, especially at New Year.

The interesting thing is that there can be successful heroes and, in worldly terms, unsuccessful heroes. Both require to be installed in an appropriate manner, for otherwise unresolved problems will continue, quite literally, to haunt their survivors. Thus veneration can also include pacification, as for example in the case of the courtier Sugawara Michizane, who was unjustly banished for alleged disloyalty (in the Fujiwara Period) and spent the rest of his days composing poetry in exile. After his death he roared around the skies as a dissatisfied spirit, causing thunderclaps, until he was successfully exorcised by a Buddhist priest who chanted mantras in his direction. Thereafter he was installed as a god of calligraphy whose various shrines (known as Tenmangû) are eagerly visited even today by schoolchildren, students and academics desiring success. A much more modern example is Yoshida Shôin, a precocious but dissatisfied intellectual who, during the time of the later shoguns, founded his own school and inspired dissent. He was before his time. Executed during the last desperate purge before the Meiji Revolution of 1868, he was enshrined by his pupils in his home town of Hagi. Some of these pupils went on to become leading ministers in the new Meiji government. The shrine, popularly called Yoshida Jinja,<sup>5</sup> may be visited to this day in Hagi, in southern Japan.

A similar process can also be seen in some Buddhist temples. Visitors to Japan arriving at Narita International Airport near Tokyo, for example, could easily visit a truly ancient war memorial in the vicinity. This memorial is a Buddhist temple named Tôshôji.<sup>6</sup> This temple was originally built, it is said, for the pacification or appeasement of the spirits of those who died in ancient battles, in particular battles led by Sakanoue no Tamuramuro when he was commander-in-chief of a force sent by the Emperor Kanmu (ruled 781–806) against opponents in eastern Japan. Much later the temple also celebrated the memory of a popular hero who would now be called an anti-government demonstrator, executed for petitioning the shôgun against taxes in the 17th century. His wife and four children were executed with him. Though suppressed, he was enshrined. This is how a popular hero can be revered as a supernatural spirit or *kami* even when on the losing side. Sheer sincerity of intention, culminating in the person's death, is what is valued. This general principle goes some way to explaining how it is that Japan's most famous war memorial, Yasukuni Shrine, can incorporate the spirits not merely of those who fell in battle, but even of a certain number who were found guilty of war crimes.

A very famous case is that of the 47 *rônin* or leaderless samurai who were enshrined in the Zen Buddhist temple Chôsenji in Edo (now Tokyo). These samurai were the followers of a feudal lord who, angered by an insult, had offended against the etiquette of the shôgun's court. As a result he was ordered to commit ritual suicide (*seppuku* or *harakiri*). The leaderless samurai were expected to avenge this

death forthwith, but they cleverly bided their time until occasion allowed them to slay the powerful perpetrator of the insult. Triumphantly they bore the head of the villain to their master's tomb for report, only themselves to receive the order to commit ritual suicide. Thus they are now all enshrined, or entombed, in the same temple, and on the anniversary of this dramatic event (14 December) crowds of people come to pay their respects and honour their memory.

### **War memorials in Japan**

After defeat in 1945 Japan underwent radical changes in constitutional and institutional arrangements. These cannot all be reviewed here. Suffice it to mention the redefinition of the emperor system as a constitutional monarchy, the disestablishment of Shinto, and the corresponding freedom of all religions to organize themselves without interference from an essentially secular state. Since the postwar Japanese state was decreed to be secular and not religious the chief commemorations of the war are the Hiroshima and Nagasaki days in August and a civil ceremony held in the Martial Arts Building (Budôkan) once a year. The Budôkan is a civic auditorium which has no connection with any religious denomination, and religious personnel play no part in the memorial ceremony held there. The main symbolic feature is a large bank of splendid chrysanthemums. The chrysanthemum is a symbol of death and is often used, in the form of cut flowers, to adorn cemeteries. For this reason, smallholdings or large gardens in rural areas usually grow a stock of small-sized blooms in a convenient spot. The chrysanthemum, in stylized 16-petalled form, was also adopted as a symbol by the Emperor Meiji and therefore appears, among other places, on the buildings of Meiji Shrine. There is also a non-sectarian memorial park at Chidorigafuchi in Tokyo, but this is relatively little known compared with Yasukuni Shrine. The civil arrangements are serious and respectful, but they lack deep religious roots. They are more or less non-controversial, consisting of little more than an austere recollection of the dead and a generalized aspiration for peace in the future. It is Yasukuni Shrine which has attracted all the attention because of the *enshrinement of spirits* there. In other words, Yasukuni Shrine is a potent location for conflict precisely because it is religious.

It will have become evident by now that both Buddhism and Shinto have been major players in the Japanese ideological landscape. In some ways these two religions share in the common religious experience of the Japanese people, that is, in what nowadays may be called the new primal religion of Japan, a more or less pervasive set of assumptions and beliefs at the level of the lowest common denominator. At the same time Buddhism and Shinto do differ significantly at a more explicit and formal level, and we have seen that these differences were emphasized during the official programme of separation during the Meiji Period. These differences are of various kinds. One difference which affects our present subject is that Shinto is quite consciously directed towards the Japanese people alone, whereas Buddhism in principle has a universal message. It should therefore be pointed out that in some cases Buddhist memorial services for the war dead remember not only the fallen Japanese but those of other countries too. I understand from informants that this is

true for services held at the Higashi Honganji in Kyôto, the head temple of a leading denomination in the True Pure Land tradition (Jôdo Shinshû Ôtani-ha). On the other hand, there is a clear focus on Japanese war dead at a Buddhist memorial stupa on Mount Kôya, the sacred mountain of Shingon Buddhism. This memorial contains memorabilia from the Burmese campaign. The same is true for a major memorial stupa, in the form of a tall, tiered pagoda at the Zenkôji temple. This temple, in the city of Nagano, has for centuries been an important pilgrimage centre for Buddhists, especially of the Pure Land and the Tendai denominations. In general, therefore, although Buddhist memorials are in theory open to commemorating people of any nation, there is a *de facto* tendency to concentrate on the Japanese who died in the Second World War.

### Yasukuni Shrine: its foundation and history

War memorials in Japan first began to take on an international significance in the Meiji Period (1868–1912) with the establishment of the Yasukuni Shrine. The foundation of this shrine can be dated to 29 June 1869, shortly after the Tennô (Emperor) for the first time had taken up residence in Edo, now accordingly renamed Tokyo (meaning eastern capital). The new shrine was first called the Tôkyô Shôkonsha, which means in literal translation the ‘Tokyo shrine for welcoming the spirits’. A similar shrine had already been established in the former city of imperial residence, Kyôto. In this new shrine in Tokyo the spirits of the 3588 persons who had died during the restoration of imperial power were to be ‘welcomed’ and revered. These spirits were gradually ‘transferred’ from various other shrines (*shôkonsha*) in which they had previously been given their rest. The purpose of such enshrinement, religiously understood, was partly to express gratitude but also to ensure the peaceful location of the spirits.

Ten years later, in 1879, the shrine was renamed Yasukuni, which means ‘setting the country at peace’. The conscious political intent behind this establishment is obvious. The Emperor Meiji himself deposited a written message for the spirits, which ran as follows:

You have given your lives for your country. You sacrificed yourselves to make the country peaceful. This shrine was established to invoke your spirits. We name this shrine the Yasukuni Shrine. We will surely continue to offer prayers for ever for the sake of your spirits. (quoted in information leaflets at the shrine)

From that time onwards the spirits of those who fell in various wars in the service of the Emperor were enshrined at Yasukuni. These included:

- The Meiji Restoration (Meiji Ishin) 1868
- The Sino-Japanese war 1894–5
- The Russo-Japanese war 1904–5
- The First World War 1914–18
- The Manchurian Incident (occupation of Manchuria) 1931



- The Chinese Incident (major Japanese operations in China) 1937
- The Great East Asian War (1941–5)

The intention was that the spirits of all those who died in the service of the Emperor, which was understood to be the same thing as dying in the service of the country, would be officially enshrined here. Thus there are specific limits about *who* exactly is qualified for enshrinement at Yasukuni Shrine. First, it is necessary to be Japanese; second, one's death has to have been untimely and somehow related to the life of the nation. This could include civilians such as a number of schoolgirls on the island of Okinawa who threw themselves over a cliff near the end of the war, rather than face personal attacks by American invaders. Even after the end of the Pacific War in 1945, when the shrine was denationalized at the command of the Allied Powers, the spirits of soldiers who had died continued to be enshrined on the authority of the shrine itself. This even included some who were executed as war criminals, such as General Tōjō, who had been Prime Minister. In this respect the practice of memorialization in Japan has been clearly different from that of Germany, for example.

Nowadays the representatives of the shrine assert that the very name Yasukuni symbolizes peaceful intentions, in that the dead sacrificed their lives for the peace (*yasu*) of the land (*kuni*). It is also emphasized that this shrine is the only place where the war dead are honoured in this way. This assertion means that a conscious distinction is made between Yasukuni Shrine on the one hand and the secular memorial park of Chidorigafuchi and the annual memorial event in the Martial Arts Building (Budōkan) on the other hand. No representatives of religious bodies take part at the civil memorial, the implication being that the commemoration of war dead at Yasukuni Shrine has a more profound meaning, which can only be regarded by observers as being in some sense religious.

The total number of those enshrined by name (in writing) is said to be almost 2.5 million. This includes a considerable number who were registered after the end of the war, including some even who were executed as war criminals, as already mentioned. Regardless of their trial as war criminals, the point was that they died during, or as a result of, their service to Japan, focused on loyalty to the Emperor. This may be understood in the context of comprehending suicide in Japan. Suicides often take place when a perceived obligation cannot be fulfilled in any other way, or cannot be fulfilled at all, whether as a result of personal failure or because of external circumstances. Death is then regarded as an honourable conclusion. Thereafter the dead should rest in peace, for otherwise there might be further disturbance in the world of the living. The purpose of the enshrinement therefore, which goes beyond mere commemoration, is to ensure that the spirits of the fallen are revered with gratitude, so that they may rest in peace. All are given an equal status in this respect. The death of non-Japanese subjects is not regarded as relevant in this regard, however unnecessary, cruel and regrettable it may have been. The care of non-Japanese dead is a matter for their own descendants.

This line of thinking, it will be evident, is entirely in tune with the general assumption in the 'primal religion' of modern Japan that the dead who are our own ancestors should be cared for. This attitude is summed up in the common phrase

*senzo kuyô* meaning 'caring for ancestors'. This is part of a kind of generation contract<sup>7</sup> with the ancestors. We (that is, we Japanese, if we are Japanese) owe our existence to our ancestors, and we care for them because we feel that we owe our well-being to them. Whatever the details may be, we feel obliged to recognize that they did their best. It was in this sense that Prime Minister Koizumi (Koizumi Junichirô) was able to say, when interviewed about his visit to Yasukuni Shrine in 2001, that the current welfare of Japan was due to the sacrifice of those who had died. Viewed historically and economically, this statement is completely false. The historical effect of the actions of the war dead, in general, was to lead Japan to catastrophe, including complete economic destruction. However, viewed as a statement within the primal religion of Japan, it is easy to understand.

### Yasukuni Shrine: the post-war political conflict

With defeat in 1945 and the consequent disestablishment of Shinto, Yasukuni Shrine was denationalized and became in legal terms an independent 'religious juridical person' or religious corporation (*shukyôhôtejin*). Thereafter all visits to the shrine by prominent individuals were supposed to be made in their private capacity and not *ex officio*, but in practice, because of the importance of the shrine, there has been a gradual blurring of this distinction by ministers and, in particular, by prime ministers.

Since 1963, 15 August has been observed, semi-officially, as a commemoration day to mark the end of the war (known in Japanese as *Shûsenkinenbi*). This date has not been raised to the status of a national holiday, but it is listed among the yearly observances (*nenjûgyôji*) of Yasukuni Shrine. The prime ministers of Japan developed the practice of visiting the shrine on this date, at first privately. In 1975, for example, Prime Minister Miki (Miki Takeo) visited the shrine in his private car without any official attendants, made a financial offering out of his own pocket and entered his personal name into the visitors' book without adding his title as prime minister. Not long after, Prime Minister Suzuki (Suzuki Zenkô) caused a stir by leaving the interpretation open. Just after taking office in 1980 he simply refused to answer the question posed by journalists as to whether he had visited the shrine in a private or official capacity. This had the effect, perhaps unintended, of preparing the public for the next step. On 15 August 1983 a new, self-consciously right-wing prime minister, Nakasone Yasuhiro, visited the shrine in his official car and entered himself in the visitors' book as Prime Minister Nakasone. These steps encouraged the impression that the shrine could be closely associated with the state without there being any need to solve the problem of how it could be defined as 'non-religious'. Naturally, the developments have been watched closely in the media, and they called forth protests not only by the Socialist and Communist parties, but also by the Kômaitô (the political wing of the Buddhist movement Sôka Gakkai) and by the small but articulate Christian churches of Japan.

Note should also be taken of the formal attempt made to renationalize the shrine in legal terms, which was initiated in 1967 by a committee of the ruling Liberal

Democratic party. To date, this attempt has not been successful and it would seem that with the new coalition government (including Socialists and Kōmeitō) the matter is now indefinitely shelved.<sup>8</sup> The reason why renationalization would have been a very serious matter indeed is that it would have turned on the definition of the shrine not being 'religious'; that is, for the separation of state and religion to be maintained, the shrine's activities would have to be defined as 'national custom'. Had this been done, the way would have been opened for similar rulings to be re-applied to the 'shrines of national protection' (*gokoku jinja*) in various parts of the country, and even to major central shrines such as Ise Jingū and Atsuta Jingū. In other words a kind of state Shinto would have been re-established, without there being any way of determining what its limits should be.

### Yasukuni Shrine: its religious character

To assess the religious character of the shrine, a few words are needed about some of the relevant terminology. In the Shinto tradition the 'gods' or *kami*, as already explained, may be the indwelling forces of natural features, mythological beings, or heroes and other persons who are held in the corporate memory. A *kami* is thought to have a spirit, known in Japanese as *tama*. A living person also has a spirit, usually called *tamashii*, which is almost the same. When a person dies it is thought to be important that his or her spirit be brought to rest, so that the person may be numbered among the *kami*. Deceased persons are therefore divinized through being enshrined. Admittedly, in view of the high numbers involved at Yasukuni Shrine, this is divinization in a weak sense when compared with the erection of a special shrine for a particular hero. Nevertheless, when they have acquired the status of *kami*, living people have a generalized relationship to them. They are not only the ancestors of specific people but also members of a group which is much wider than their own family alone, namely the revered deceased of all Japan. They should be looked after by all, it is felt, since they lost their lives as Japanese in the service of the country. Moreover, like any other *kami* they may also, on occasion, be requested to care for the living. Hence there is on the one hand a need for the pacification of potentially troubled spirits, for whose trouble all Japanese share a corporate responsibility, and on the other hand an expectation that the living dead will yet care about those who care for them.<sup>9</sup> Groups of former soldiers who survived the war or, more recently, due to the passage of generations, of their dependents are therefore very much in evidence at Yasukuni Shrine, where there is also a large coach park to accommodate the necessary vehicles.

The 'religious' features of Yasukuni Shrine are easy to document by a visual assessment of the layout and appearance of the shrine which may be carried out in principle by any visitor who walks around the grounds and inspects the leaflets and other publications of the shrine.<sup>10</sup> The approach (*sandō*), the symbolic entrances (*torii* and *mon*), the worship hall (*haiden*) all provide a spatial invitation to perform the standard form of a shrine visit (*o-mairi*), whether as an individual or in groups.

Another significant characteristic of religious institutions in Japan is the series of

ceremonial events or festivals which occur in the course of a year. Yasukuni Shrine has four festivals of particular importance which fall in the four main seasons of the year, namely:

- New Year Festival (*shinnensai*) (1.1)
- Great spring festival of the spirits (*shunki reitaisai*) (21.4–23.4)
- Festival of the revered souls (*mitamamatsuri*) (13.7–16.7)
- Great autumn festival of the spirits (*shûki reitaisai*) (17.10–19.10)<sup>11</sup>

During the ‘festival of revered souls’ a *bon* dance is announced. *O-bon*, mentioned earlier, is a widely liked folk festival of Buddhist derivation at which the souls of the departed are invited back home and treated to a gentle social dance by lantern-light. The two spring and autumn festivals coincide approximately with the Buddhist ancestor veneration seasons known as *higan*, which fall at the equinoxes. Thus the main festivals of Yasukuni Shrine are locked into the general assumptions, or the common language, of Japanese religion. Various ancillary events such as a chrysanthemum exhibition or performances of Nô theatre are provided within a general atmosphere which combines nostalgia and the glorification of the deceased.

Within the shrine buildings specific Shinto rituals are carried out by Shinto priests wearing the appropriate religious clothing. It is not reasonable to deny the religious character of these activities unless the whole of Shinto is defined once again as ‘non-religious’, which nowadays would be patently absurd. In fact it was the evidently religious character of the shrine buildings and the rituals performed which prevented the renationalization of the shrine in recent years. Representatives of religions other than Shinto were not willing to see state support provided for a specific Shinto shrine. The shrine authorities on their part were not prepared to accept that the shrine would have had to be de-religionized, that is, secularized. Politicians on the right of the political spectrum were concerned, or even afraid, that a de-religionized Yasukuni Shrine would no longer be able to assure the adequate care of the spirits, its main religious function.<sup>12</sup> In spite of these considerations there is always a danger that inadequately reflected or misleadingly intended concepts of ‘religion’ could provide an alibi for future changes. Sometimes it is argued, for example, that the prohibition of state support for religions applies to the spreading of religious *teachings*, but not to *rituals* which ‘merely’ provide reverence for the dead. However, no serious specialist in the study of religions today would accept such a distinction. Rituals are as much an aspect of ‘religion’ as teachings. The difference between the ritual activities at Yasukuni Shrine and the ceremonies at the secular commemoration in the Budôkan is easy to discern. Moreover, a few visits to other Shinto shrines will quickly make it clear, even to non-specialists, that Yasukuni Shrine is as much a religious institution as the others.

### **Beyond conflict: Japanese religions and peace perspectives**

It would not be right to leave this subject without looking at some very positive elements in the religious situation of contemporary Japan. The country is, after all, not currently engaged in warfare and internally it is relatively stable. Shinto, while

ethnically based and oriented, has a number of interesting features which do not threaten others. Most evident is the celebration of particularity, for which a summary code-word at the conceptual level could be 'polytheism'.<sup>13</sup> Many of its leaders accept the present legal arrangements in Japan, even though some display nostalgia for the past. Moderate representatives regard Shinto festivals as a legitimate celebration of Japanese customs and culture, and at the same time they seek international dialogue on subjects such as bio-ethics and environmental issues.<sup>14</sup> What is apparently lacking so far in the Shinto world, it must be said, is a sustained attempt to analyse the war responsibility of the past, and this in turn means that an ultra-nationalist potential remains which could be mobilized again under difficult circumstances. By contrast, the international activities and cultural contributions of various Shinto organizations (such as the International Shinto Foundation) are greatly to be welcomed insofar as they go beyond narrowly conceived apologetics.

Political self-examination has not been common in the Buddhist world either, it should be noted. Where some kind of universalism might be expected, a simplistic nationalism is often displayed. An exception is the previously mentioned denomination known as Jōdo Shinshū (Ōtani-ha), which recently published a significant declaration about the war responsibility of its leaders and members.<sup>15</sup> Some of the new religions were deeply compromised in the nationalist-led wars of the first half of the 20th century, while others were themselves persecuted. During the war period, the small Christian churches were mainly organized into groups loyal to the state, while those who resisted were persecuted for non-conformity. The Sōka Gakkai, which is a very large lay Buddhist movement, regrouped following persecution and continues to sustain a critical political voice. At the same time its own internal structures are highly disciplined, indeed authoritarian, though this has been obscured by some leading western sociologists with little knowledge of Japan. While it contributes to a welcome plurality in the political spectrum, the group is a striking example of the factionalist principle within the Buddhist world, with a continuing potential for conflict. On the other hand, since the end of the Pacific War, various new religions with considerable numbers of members have emphasized internationalism and peace work of various kinds. The Sōka Gakkai has contributed here, while other important examples are Ōmoto, Risshō Kōseikai and Byakkō Shinkōkai. In part such activities serve to develop a positive profile which impresses the membership and, paradoxically, creates a very Japanese identity within the international perspective.<sup>16</sup> However, it is surely a positive and hopeful sign for the rest of humanity when religious leaders seek to impress their membership by well-reported and lavishly photographed peace work, rather than by obscurantist nationalism.

Many well-established new religions have been quite unfairly embarrassed by the criminal activities of Aum Shinrikyō (notable for the poisoned gas attack in the Tokyo underground railway, and for a number of specific murders). Apparently these crimes were the responsibility of an inner leadership circle in search of a fanatically conceived, wildly political mission. These activities have led to a flurry of publications by academics anxious to meet public demand, while other new religions (such as Byakkō Shinkōkai) remain relatively ignored. Given the lack of any general programmes of religious education, which might help young people to develop mature attitudes, it may be feared that there will continue to be a reservoir

of naïve followers who are ready to offer their loyalty, and with that their lives, for dubious and criminal ends.

No secular programmes of religious education are found in Japan, as in some other countries, partly because there never have been any, and partly because of the constitutional separation of state and religion. Religious education along confessional lines is permitted in the private sector. However, the Aum Shinrikyô case shows how important it is to overcome confessionalism in religious education. Some kind of general education concerning religion is necessary, if only in consideration of the fact that various religions continue to be so influential in society. Such education should not be confused with the programme of any specific religion. In fact there could be a sound basis for the development of such programmes in Japan, if the need were to be widely recognized, although there is also considerable scope for misunderstanding. A positive basis for the future development of any such programmes lies in the fact that religious plurality is recognized both as a cultural reality and in law.

The possibility of religious plurality is secured in the constitution by the guarantee of religious freedom for individuals and groups on the one hand, and the separation of religion and the state on the other. The main anomaly is the hereditary position of the emperor and his special relation to the divinities of Shinto. However, the management of the first post-war enthronement ceremonies (*daijôsai*) in 1990 showed that it is possible to find ways of combining the symbolic role of a monarchy (if such is desired) in the context of a secular and religiously neutral state.

In general, therefore, the situation in contemporary Japan continues to be relatively stable. At the same time public policies regarding religion, and of course the various religious activities themselves, should be observed with care. Mistaken policies in these areas, or sudden new religious enthusiasms in what is, after all, the second strongest economic power in the world, could easily have a serious impact both within and beyond Japan. Various forms of religion have the potential to provoke and to deepen conflicts but, if their leaders so wish, they may also contribute to the moderation and resolution of conflicts. We must hope that wise counsels on these matters will prevail in future.

Michael Pye  
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### Notes

1. Or 1603–1867. The precise dating of the various periods of Japanese history varies between authoritative authors because the transition between different forms of government is often marked by temporary instability and lack of definition.
2. The Japanese armed forces are called Self Defence Forces (Jieitai) in deference to Article 9 of the Constitution, which bans the country from waging war.
3. Known in Japanese as *shinbutsu bunri*, which literally means the separation of *kami* and buddhas.
4. For many interesting details see Fridell (1973).
5. Not to be confused with Yoshida Jinja in Kyôto, the home of 'Yoshida Shintô'.
6. The full name is Narukaneyama Tôshôji.

7. The phrase 'generation contract' draws on the German concept of *Generationsvertrag*. This concerns the financing of pensions, but the necessary statistics are based on the assumption that while some people may live a long time, everybody will die at some point in time. At the same time, the elderly receive their pensions not only because they previously paid into the system, for others who have since died, but also in recognition of the fact that their earlier work provided the basis for the nurture and education of the younger generation which follows. In the Japanese way of thinking, the mutual responsibilities of the generations transcend death.
8. For details see Lokowandt (1981: 20–1; 173–98).
9. Klaus Antoni has presented a similar explanation in his (1991) essay 'Yasukuni und der "Schlimme Tod" des Kriegers'.
10. Also frequently documented by the author with slides in public lectures.
11. The terminological elements *-sai* and *-matsuri* are alternative ways of reading the same Chinese character, which means 'festival'.
12. Cf. passages quoted by Lokowandt (1981).
13. 'Polytheism' is a convenient modern label, but since it was coined in opposition to 'monotheism' it does not correspond precisely to the conceptual orientation typical of Shintô in pre-modern times, or indeed today. It should therefore be used with care.
14. The activities and publications of Sonoda Minoru, the chief priest of Chichibu Shrine, are a fine example of this.
15. The case was documented in detail by Richard Böhme in an unpublished thesis (Böhme, 2000).
16. For a discussion of these dynamics in relation to the example of Byakkô Shinkôkai see Pye (1986).

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