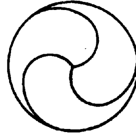
JAPANESE RELIGION IN FAMILY LIFE



In recent years, communities of Japanese people have become established in Britain, particularly in places where Japanese firms have invested in the local economy. Their life and culture, particularly within the family, is often felt to be difficult to understand, particularly in its religious aspects. The spiritual dimension of Japanese life is nevertheless very important, though it may seem unobtrusive and rather restrained. To appreciate Japan's spiritual inheritance, we must recognise both the complexity of its traditional patterns and the transformation that modernisation has brought.

Traditional Japanese religion

The indigenous religion of Japan is *Shinto,* the 'way of the gods'. The Japanese word here translated 'gods', *kami,* has a rather general meaning of 'superior beings'. The *kami* can include spirits of sacred mountains, trees, rivers, and so on, as well as mythological figures conceived in human form. Particularly important men and women can also be enrolled among the *kami* after death – their veneration has some features parallel to the Catholic cult of the saints. Shinto has an appreciation of natural beauty, simple rituals of purification and protection, and little doctrinal or philosophical elaboration.

Doctrine and philosophy have largely been supplied in Japan by the various schools of the Buddhism which was introduced from mainland Asia since the seventh century. Buddhist beliefs in the destiny of the self have been particularly important in providing a basis for funeral rituals.

A third strand, alongside Shinto and Buddhism, is the ethical system of Confucian values which traditionally governed relationships both in the home and in wider society in feudal times.

These various traditions were not usually in competition with one another; they were mutually complementary, together making up a synthesis known as *shinbutsu* (from *shin-to,* 'way of the gods', plus *butsu-do,* 'way of the Buddha'). Up to the mid-nineteenth century, Japan was a largely agrarian, rice-growing society, with a pattern of religion incorporating quite diverse elements. Each household was assigned to, and financially supported, a neighbourhood Buddhist temple. Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples often stood side by side, served by the same priests; they were foci of local community and educational activities.

Underlying official beliefs was a vast undercurrent of popular folk-religion, marked especially by rituals designed to ensure material benefits or to avert dangers. The home itself constantly reminded family members of the need to express gratitude to the ances-

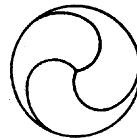
tors, for it was surrounded by the precious terraces which they had planted to ensure a constant supply of life-giving rice. These ancestors were spiritually present with their descendants who were fed by the nourishment given by their work.

The modern transformation

Japan's first encounter with the west was in the sixteenth century, when Portuguese traders and Jesuit missionaries reached the Far East at the same time. The Catholic faith spread rapidly through the preaching of St Francis Xavier and his successors, particularly in the southern island of Kyushu. However, in the next century fear of foreign subversion caused the Shogun's government to prohibit Christianity and to close the country to overseas contact for two hundred and fifty years. A fierce persecution was unleashed against the Church, which apparently disappeared from the scene; in fact, small numbers of faithful 'hidden Christians' managed to maintain an underground presence in remote parts, cherishing through six generations the hope that 'the Fathers' would one day return.

Then, in 1854, American ships sailed into Tokyo Bay, demanding the right to trade with Japan, and precipitating a radical transformation of Japanese society which had particularly dramatic consequences for traditional religion. The new government of the Meiji Emperor was anxious to provide a modern focus of national unity to replace the outmoded feudal order built around *shinbutsu.* It therefore promoted a nationalistic Shinto revival built around the cult of the Emperor, and insisted on the complete legal and ritual separation of the indigenous faith from the foreign 'adulterations' of Buddhism.

At the same time, the opening of the country to foreigners inevitably led to an influx of new ideas. At first, Christian missions of every denomination hailed this as a great evangelistic opportunity. The newly planted churches in fact grew rather slowly, though their educational institutions were to exercise a significant influence in Japanese society. However, western influence also contributed to a growing atmosphere of secularism, which had already sprung from the sophisticated urban culture of eighteenth-century Edo (Tokyo), and which fitted comfortably with gradually rising living standards.



Leading up to and during the Second World War, the military government ever more vigorously insisted on Shinto as a compulsory system of belief in the unique destiny of the Japanese race as a family united around the divine figure of the Emperor. The catastrophic defeat of 1945 therefore led to a spiritual crisis as this account of national identity was discredited. Alongside this, the intense urbanisation of modern Japan has also led to a sense of rootlessness and *anomie* among many city-dwellers. Some twelve million people commute into Tokyo every day, to work long and stressful hours, often with little contact with their families. Children are likely to be under pressure from an extremely competitive education system.

It is perhaps this background which has contributed to the remarkable growth in post-war Japan of the so-called *shinko shukyo,* 'new religions'. Typically, these are well-organised, tightly-disciplined groups, generally owing their inspiration to a charismatic indi-

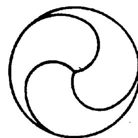
vidual, yet often incorporating traditional elements from a Buddhist, Shinto, or folk-religious background. Some – notably the group *Om Shinrikyo* – have acquired notoriety; others, like the neo-Buddhist *Rissho Koseikai*, are widely respected for their contributions to social welfare and international reconciliation; a few, such as *Nichiren Shoshu*, have begun to recruit membership overseas among non-Japanese.

The religion of the ancestral home

While public life in modern Japan is almost entirely secular, customs and attitudes derived ultimately from religion continue to play an important part in the lives of Japanese families. These may be associated with no particular faith commitment, but such an apparent paradox is actually consistent with a very traditional Japanese approach to religion, which sees it primarily as a way of organising life to ensure maximum social cohesion, and thus guarantee material as well as spiritual well-being. Central to this outlook is a real, if undefined, sense of the importance of the ancestors, expressed in a number of ways.

For example, most Japanese houses or flats will include a room, or at least a small area, furnished in the traditional way with *tatami* mats and centring on the *butsudan*, a small shelf with religious images symbolically enshrining the spirits of family members who have gone before. A customary reverence may be made when passing this shelf, and in some families the usual expression *itadakimasu* ('We gratefully receive') at the start of a meal may be accompanied by an elevation of the bowl of rice towards the *butsudan* as a gesture of gratitude to those whose beneficence ensures that food is available for their descendants.

Again, the great August festival of *o-bon* celebrates the temporary return of the ancestors, whose souls are greeted by a performance of the entrancing *bon-odori* dance. This is a time when the great conurbations are deserted as families travel home to their ancestral villages to tend their forebears' graves. *O-bon is* sometimes referred to as the 'Buddhist All Souls' Day'; Japanese Catholics have compared the cult of the ancestors to their own commemoration of the faithful departed. It is the almost universal custom among non-Christians to mark significant anniversaries of the deaths of family members by ceremonies involving the recitation of Buddhist scriptures. Interestingly, this practice is described as 'comforting the souls' of the departed - the ancient belief being that, if this is not performed, the dead may cause mischief out of resentment.



Spaces and times

Shinto involves the demarcation by sacred boundaries of particular areas as zones of especial purification. These are usually represented by ropes tied with white paper. This deeply-seated Japanese attitude pervades the home also: on entering, shoes are removed at the *genkan* or step; the slippers provided for guests there are in turn to be removed before stepping into a tatami-matted room, and so on. Limited land means that Japanese houses are typically small. Not built to impress by outward appearances, the home is the family's *uchi* – an expressive word conveying the sense of an intimate, interior, and hidden place.

Within the home, too, family members share life together in rooms separated only by thin paper or bamboo partitions. It may be this enforced togetherness which has led to the creation of the extraordinarily elaborate system of Japanese etiquette. The effect of this certainly is to create and safeguard for each individual an 'inner space' of privacy, an area of authentic emotion and sensibility known as the *kokoro* or 'heart'. Purity of *kokoro is* one of the values most admired in both traditional and contemporary Japanese culture; the roots of such an attitude lie deep in the religious values of Japan.

As in other cultures, Japanese religion distinguishes specially significant times as well as spaces. The *matsuri*, 'festival', of today has become a significant commercial opportunity as well as an occasion for communal celebration. Indeed, the increasingly consumer-oriented character of the Japanese festival year is shown by the fact that these celebrations derive their inspiration from a number of different religious backgrounds. This includes Christianity, two of the most widely celebrated, and most commercially lucrative, days in modern Japan being Christmas and St Valentine's Day.

Because people share in festivals with a remarkable sense of common purpose, they serve to build up an awareness of corporate identity alongside the fostering of interior personal space. For example, there are a number of annual children's group festivals – the '3-5-7' day for all who reach those ages in that calendar year, the girls' *hina-matsuri* doll celebration in March, the Boys' Day in May when *kòi* carp banners are flown from houses – and these are regarded as being far more important than individual children's birthdays.

The greatest of all festivals is New Year, which typically involves a visit to a Buddhist temple or a Shinto shrine (or a Christian church) to pay respects to the spiritual powers which lie behind the passing on of the year. Like so much Japanese reflection on human involvement in time, this is shot through with the distinctive note of *hakanai*, 'impermanence'. As one year passes into another amid the falling snowflakes, the temple bell reverberates 108 times to call to mind the countless defilements to which mortal flesh is subject, for nothing abides in this passing world. It is that deep-seated spiritual awareness, derived from the teaching of the Buddha, married to a sense of natural beauty inspired by Shinto, which has lain at the heart of Japanese culture, and which still profoundly influences the lives of ordinary Japanese people and families.

Questions for Discussion

1. As Christians living in a modern western secular society, do we experience some of the same pressures as Japanese families? How can our faith be a resource for helping us to cope with these?
2. What can Christians learn from the traditional Japanese awareness of sacred space, communal celebration, and reverence for ancestors?
3. The gospels speak of the blessing of those who are 'pure in heart'. How is this important idea in Christian spirituality similar to the Japanese emphasis on *kokoro*, and how is it different?

Suggestions for Further Reading

Rysusaku Tsunoda, William Theodore de Bary, and Donald Keene, ed. *Sources of Japanese Tradition.* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2 vols. 1958).

Chie Nakane. *Japanese Society.* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981).

Ian Reader. *Religion in Contemporary Japan.* (Basingstoke: Macmillan 1991)

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The family is the original cell of social life where people first learn to talk and listen to each other. The health of society depends on the health of family life. It is hoped that this series will promote the value of family life and help families of different Faith traditions to become better acquainted for the good of society.

The Committee is grateful to the Revd Canon Michael Ipgrave for this contribution.

+ Charles Henderson
Chairman

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