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RELIGION IN JAPAN: A (VERY) BASIC OVERVIEW



31 JANUARY 2017LANCE GILES

TRADITIONAL CULTURE

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Japan is absolutely filled with shrines and temples. But of what two religions, and what exactly is the relationship dynamic between them? Are these two belief systems in competition with each other or what? Why are they so prevalent when most Japanese people claim to have no religion? Naturally, the (partial) answer to this lies in the meaning of the word "religion" (宗教; *shūkyō*) in Japanese.

Basically, it means "organized religion", as opposed to "spirituality" in and of itself. It implies that there is a specific doctrine being followed and that some form of group membership exists. Japanese and English are very different languages, sprung forth from very different cultures, and it makes talking about culturally-embedded ideas quite difficult. Tie in the long history of syncretism ("merging of different beliefs") in Japan, and you have yourself a confusing situation. Ask the average Japanese person their religion, and they will likely say they have none—but ask the last time they visited a shrine or temple, and it's probably been less than a year. And with this same hypothetical person, it's also quite likely that they see nothing strange about visiting a shrine from one religion and a temple of another in the same day. In the West, we see visiting a sacred space as an inherently religious action, but that's just because the term has a broader meaning in our language(s). However, in the West, while the meaning of "religion" might cast a wider net, it also assumes that only one religion can be practiced by a single individual. While there are obviously theological problems with simultaneously being, say both Jewish and Christian, this just isn't true for the common religions of Japan.



Image source

With that said, beginning with the more specific Japanese meaning of "religion" and expanding into the Western meaning, let's take a look into what religions are practiced in Japan.

Christianity, while not very common in Japan, fits the meaning of *shūkyō* pretty perfectly. Christianity isn't too popular in Japan, with only about 1% of the population (inclusive of all denominations) claiming to be Christian. However, some Christian traditions have become very popular, although they have been changed fairly drastically. Christmas is a great example of this, as it has become almost entirely secular while also being very popular.

Buddhism is the religion to which the highest number of people in Japan claim membership, with about 34% of the population describing themselves as being of Buddhist faith. One of the most common is Pure Land Buddhism (浄土教; *jūdokyō*) and its variants, characterized (in very simplified terms) by the belief that Amida will bring all people to the pure land, or "Heaven". This is achieved with a simple mantra. However, many, many more Japanese people observe Buddhist customs than those who identify as Buddhists. While many people visit temples on New Years or have Buddhist funerals as part of "being Japanese" (more on that in a moment), there is a lot of history to these traditions and they trace back to the belief that these activities will be beneficial to the practitioner. While people may have a hard time explaining why the bell is rung 108 times (or why any number of other traditions are done, simply as a part of Japanese culture), it doesn't change the fact that these are Buddhist customs and that Buddhism has deeply affected Japanese culture, much in the same way that Christianity has influenced the West. This is how most people can say that they are not religious, yet a Buddhist holiday, like Obon, is a national holiday when people take their time off work and school to observe the rituals associated with the holiday. Many people say they go and pray/give thanks to their ancestors not because of their religion, but because it's a part of their culture; it's a part of being Japanese.



Image source

Shinto, the native Japanese "folk religion", is most difficult to get a hold on. While about 4% of people claim to be affiliated with some Shinto organization, nearly everyone (roughly 80%) observes Shinto traditions without being affiliated with any organization at all. This is because "folk" Shinto has no official membership process; it is not an organized religion. Shinto is where we get *kami* (神), *omamori* (お守り; magical amulets to help students pass exams), shrines, and a lot of holidays. *Kami* is generally translated as "deity" or "god", but is more complex than that. Motori Norinaga's 18<sup>th</sup>-century hermeneutical study of the *Kojiki* (古事記), one of the two official records of ancient Japanese myths, exemplifies this complexity:

*"Speaking in general it may be said that kami signifies (...) the deities of Heaven and Earth that appear in the ancient records and also the spirits of the shrines where they are worshiped. It is hardly necessary to say that it includes human beings. It also includes such things as birds, beasts, trees, plants, seas, mountains, and so forth. Anything whatsoever which was outside of the ordinary, which possessed superior power, or which was awe-inspiring, was called kami..."*

Thomas P. Kasulis, in his text, *Shinto: The Way Home*, provides another look into Shinto in modern Japan and what it seems to mean to people:

*"Suppose we are sitting on a hill in a Tokyo park, not far from one of the commuter train stations used by literally millions of Japanese every day. We overlook a Shinto shrine located in the middle of the most direct path from one sector of the park to the train station. In the morning rush, our gray-suited businessmen rush through the park to catch their trains and we observe a curious behavior. Some go many yards out of their way to avoid cutting through the shrine precincts. Others take the shortcut through the grounds, but many of this group slow to a walk as they traverse the graveled area of the shrine. Once they hit the grassy region outside the shrine, they again break into a run. A third group behaves differently yet. They reach the grounds and not only slow down but walk up to the shrine building, stop at the trough to wash their hands and mouth, then go up to the shrine, clap their hands, bow formally with hands held together in prayer-like form, clap again, and then leave the shrine grounds. As soon as they leave the precincts, they again break into a run."*

He goes on to state that many of these people claim to stop and do this every day on their way to work, with no particular reason, and sometimes without even knowing which *kami* the shrine is for. He likens the entire experience to walking past your friend's house, seeing that your friend is home, and stopping by to say hello before you go on your way. In this same light, *matsuri* (祭), or festivals, which are largely seen as secular events, are almost like birthday parties for *kami*, and there's really not a distinct line drawn between the sacred and the secular. This barely scratches the surface of what is known as Shinto.

I hear ambiguity is pretty common in Japan, though.

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