

History of Thought & Religion in Japan

– Part 1: Up to Pre-modern Times –

By Kurozumi Makoto

What Is Japan's History of Thought & Religion?

I have been studying philosophy and ethics and the history of thought in Japan at a university. I would like to briefly describe what has become clear out of these studies – the thoughts of Japanese people and their history, combined with the development of religion in Japan – by referring to their framework as a whole rather than by citing individual names. Surprisingly, the whole picture and holistic flow of Japanese thought and religion are largely unknown, aside from individual examples. I hope to grasp the whole to the extent possible. This article deals with the pre-modern era.

First, I would like to briefly define various concepts. “Thought” refers to the structure of the mind, comprising human thinking, emotion and imagination. It has a “history,” or a flow from the past, and the element of time. It is also pregnant with the “religiosity” that relates to “limits,” such as origins and the past/future of people and things. I hope to look into these in connection with “Japan.” This “Japan,” of course, is neither identical to others nor fixed as an “element of space” that has its position and relations within itself and with the outside world. This poses another question, however.

The reason I used the term “history of thought and religion” is that “religiosity” exists not only within a group of people, within an individual, and in their language or text, but also in others. This has been true of the history of Japanese thought in the past, but it is more pronounced in the present social and political trends. It is necessary to touch upon this aspect. Also, the reason that “history” is necessary is that the pre-

sent situation exists not out of context but in the context of the past, which is also associated with the present and future.

“Thing” as Animism

The characteristic religious undercurrent in the Japanese history of thought is animism or polytheism. Religiosity is also related to the perception of real existence. The Japanese word for something that has substance is *mono* (thing). With respect to perceiving substance, the distinction between idealism and materialism is often made in the Western history of thought. However, in the Japanese history of perceiving *mono*, the two are not distinct and apart. Both of them are tied to various concrete *mono* with which people come into contact. “*Mono*” does not simply mean substance or material, but is something that has a spiritual nature [e.g., “*mono-no-ke*” (evil spirit) and “*mono-no-aware*” (pathos of nature)]. *Mono* is various things – animals, plants, minerals, etc. – and people.

There was and there still is a broad undercurrent of animism as religiosity in the history of thought in various regions of the world, though its extent varies from region to region. However, in the process of modernization, this way of perceiving *mono*/real existence has often been eliminated, creating a more artificial world. Nevertheless, in an “insular nation” called “Japan,” animism has survived in nature and in the life of people, and, by forming connections with the language and community of each region, it has created the world of people. The people’s behavior under the influence of animism has not only formed Japanese thought and religion but also products in the “industry” to this day. Such

products are varied. At present, they exist not only culturally and artistically but also as products of natural sciences and are even “exported.” Although structures and flows of various *mono* relating to animism are not often observed today, their existence needs to be pointed out.

Production in an Insular Nation

I have mentioned the terms “insular nation” and “production.” The characteristics of thought and religion in Japan are related to these terms. Aside from globalization progressing today, Japan was an “insular nation” before the modern era, that is, prior to its opening to the world, especially during the period of its national seclusion, despite the fact there were some exchanges with the outside world and the nation comprised numerous regions. This means that always Japan long had the structure of importing something from outside and using it internally in numerous ways, though to varying extents. The practice manifests itself best in the fact that Japan has “imported” various languages and translated them for sustained, common use within the country. This was also true of numerous thoughts and religions. They were imported for internal use and restructuring.

The structures of languages and various thoughts and religions and their internal and external relationships vary from one place to another. Thus, in East Asia, their social positions and their final shapes in insular Japan, continental China and peninsular Korea are different despite the fact they share the same elements. The manners of their exits and entries are also different, and at the same time interrelated. Here, I will focus on insular Japan.

Shaman & Establishment of Order

When we look back on the Japanese history of thought and religion, animism per se manifested itself most clearly in the *Jomon* culture. In different parts of the country, the fusion of multiple layers of *Jomon* culture produced the *Yayoi* culture (which flourished up to the 3rd century A.D.). In *Yayoi* culture, people were mostly agrarian, producing rice and other crops. Against the background of its natural environment, *Yayoi* culture created the dual aspects of (1) supernatural faith spurred by Shamanism and (2) politics and wars. It is important that the religiosity in *Yayoi* culture tended to be more polytheistic than monotheistic like Judaism. Needless to say, monotheism and polytheism are not totally unrelated, even though people's experiences and expressions are different between the two. Still, at present, the two religious beliefs are tending to fuse.

The relationship between religiosity and the establishment of order is always a major theme in the world history. In the case of Japan, at least from around the 3rd century A.D., the person that dealt with religiosity, which was expressed as the "heaven" [Shaman and *Amaterasu* (the Sun Goddess)], was strongly identified with femininity and motherhood. Eventually, this role was succeeded by *Tenno* (Descendant of *Amaterasu*). By contrast, a person who had strong masculinity and fatherhood established order. This order of dual monarchy, that is, a dual structure of *Tenno* with religiosity and government with power, has lasted in this insular nation until today. This is a major characteristic of Japan. It was in Japan's imperial era, which was long after the Meiji Restoration (1868), that *Tenno* resembled an emperor who controls religion and government.

Buddhism & Shinto Against Backdrop of Polytheism

Within the insular nation, further polytheistic structuring has taken place in relation to numerous thoughts and religions.



Illustration: Iwasawa Akio

From the 7th century A.D. onward, legal codes were established under the influence of China. During this process, Buddhism encountered Confucianism, and the two were syncretized into Japanese culture. At the same time, Shinto was gradually shaped into a religion.

When Buddhism came to Japan, there was conflict initially as it was being accepted and woven into order. But it eventually gained wide acceptance and spread throughout the country. Although the study of Buddhism became deeper, a major trend in the religious nature of Buddhism in Japan was that rather than rejecting this world as Buddha had done, it became a kind of Shamanism which had deep connection with animism and which practiced magic. However, in the 13th century (the Kamakura period), there appeared types of Buddhism that were inclined toward monotheism or which had the aspect of Christian-like suffering. Against these backgrounds, Buddhism generally developed into a religion praying for the repose of the souls of the dead and angry spirits, conducting funerals

and having temples. By the 16th century, it had spread widely among the public.

Against the major background of animism as practiced in various places, and the encounter with Buddhism and others, large sects of Shinto developed into "shrines." Before the Meiji era (1868-1912), many shrines/Shinto sects were mixed with Buddhism. However, unlike Buddhism which deals with the death and passing to the other world of people, the major inclination of Shinto was to deal with the life of the living. As a result, Shinto became a religion that prays for the birth, good health, growth, long life and victory of the living. By around the 17th century, the faith in Shinto gods had spread, with these gods residing in various regions and homes in the country. These developments of Shinto and Buddhism in Japan are referred to as the "formation of national religion" by academic experts. **J.S**

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