

# Religious Tolerance and Secularization in Japan

## -From the Perspective of Three Models of Japan-

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### 1. Japanese Tolerance for Religious Views

Some feel that the Japanese are tolerant toward religion. Though the Japanese have repeatedly emphasized this attribute, I cannot accept this idea, to which non-Japanese have more or less nodded their assent, at face value. When the evidence provided of this "tolerance" is the example of a single person who is married in a Christian church, visits a Shinto shrine when she has a child, and is buried according to Buddhist funeral rites when she dies, it begs the question: what does religion mean to the Japanese?

Even if we grant that there is religious tolerance, of what are the Japanese being tolerant? First we need to resolve the question of what religion means to the Japanese. The question of what religion means to the Japanese must be posed before the question of whether the Japanese are tolerant of religion because implicit in the former is the uniqueness, or in other words, the most interesting aspects of Japanese religion. This raises a new question: where does the very word *shukyo* (the Japanese word typically translated as "religion") converge with the English word "religion," and where does it depart from it?

To prevent this essay from starting and ending in confusion, I would like to establish now that the word "religion" will be used in a very broad sense. The word "religion"

encompasses Japan's various indigenous religions, Christianity, and Islam alike. In Japan today, there are three main religious movements, Shinto, Buddhism and Christianity, as well as what are called the "new religions," like Tenri and Soka

Gakkai, which have developed since the end of the Edo period under the influence of the three main movements. The array of even newer new religions that have appeared more recently will simply be referred to as the "newest new religions."

Let us look at the changes that took place in the three main movements, Shinto, Buddhism, and Christianity, prior to the mid-17th century. This point in time has been chosen because events of the mid-17th century determined how religion would be approached in Japan thereafter.

Shinto is a religion deeply imbued with hues of animism. Unlike Christianity and Buddhism, Shinto has no sacred scriptures or theology that must be studied, nor does it have any clear precepts or established notion of an afterworld. In it, innumerable gods exist, and their number is even growing (for example, the shrine where the soul of the Meiji emperor is enshrined is one of the most famous shrines in Japan, and near it is the shrine to two of the great generals that served that emperor in the Russo-Japanese War). Festivals are held frequently at shrines throughout Japan. At first glance it appears that this should be called a "religious custom" that delves no deeper than the realm of everyday life, but it is also true that the Japanese cultivate an internal spirituality through this institution. As has already been suggested, the imma-



*Tokugawa Ieyasu was the founder of the Tokugawa bakufu (shogunate)*



turity of the Shinto doctrine and institutions may be explained by their having been strongly overwhelmed when Buddhist doctrine and institutions arrived in Japan. On the other hand, however, it may be said that because of its underdevelopment, Shinto did not have a head-on collision with Buddhism, and thus was not completely annihilated. Instead, its longevity was extended by its ability to fuse with Buddhism (a syncretism wherein Shinto gods were understood to be local manifestations of Buddhist deities). Even though this religious custom known as Shinto does not have overarching institutions or doctrines, it has been collectively held by the Japanese as a shared view of nature and the world, namely religion. At its heart lie myths and legends that tell the tale of the origins of the Imperial family, and it has maintained intermingled connections with the Imperial family even in spite of the Imperial family members' deep devotion to Buddhism.

As stated above, after its initial arrival in Japan in the 6th century, Buddhism continued to be imported from China, and high priests that made pilgrimages abroad brought back a wide array of sects that competed for power in Japan. However, in the Kamakura period (1185-1333), as a rebellion against the established Buddhism, several indigenous Japanese Buddhist sects were initiated by Japanese monks, and new Buddhist concepts were born. The new ideas born out of the agony of those Buddhists came to form the conceptual framework of Japanese Buddhism from that time until today. The Zen Buddhism that had already arrived from China flourished in the Muromachi period, facilitating conceptual developments by the Japanese.

The arrival of Christianity in the mid-16th century into a religious world shaped by Shinto and Buddhism caused a great stir. Christianity differed from those religions in two major ways.

First, Christianity preached the superiority of religious authority over

secular authority. The superiority-inferiority relationship had been disputed between the religious and political authorities in Europe and had always undergone significant change, but to Christian missionaries, the superiority of the church over secular authorities was rooted in the very foundation of their beliefs, and that perception had to be introduced in a fitting way to the political situation of Japan. During Japan's Warring States period, missionary activities could not be conducted without the patronage of a local warlord, and missionaries were unable to stand against the secular authorities from the kind of position of power they held in Europe. Still, this tenet always existed in Christian doctrine, and was announced publicly.

Another way that Christianity differed from Japanese religions at the time was that it was not a religion invited or brought back to Japan by traveling priests, and instead was something pushed into Japan from the outside. The Christianity that came to Japan amidst the global-scale missionary contest between Catholicism and Protestantism was an extremely active and organized force aimed at expanding its sphere of influence.

The gradual shift that occurred in the political policies on Christianity of military leaders known as Nobunaga, Hideyoshi, and Ieyasu, in the 16th and 17th centuries, from tolerance to expulsion, came out of their fear of a doctrine that undermined their authority, but also out of the perception of Christianity with the



*Oda Nobunaga represents the model of International Japan*

political threat posed by the West at the time. Though we cannot know whether Japan would have become a colony of the West had the prohibition against Christianity and the seclusion policy completed in the mid-17th century as a result of these fears not been instituted, it is certain that the Tokugawa *bakufu's* (shogunate) policies toward religion had a significant impact on the religious views held by the Japanese. That is, *bakufu* policies that exerted political control over the religious world and control over the people through institutionalized religion, consequently



led to the secularization of religion. To explain this, and to analyze how the religious views propagated in the Tokugawa period have come to shape the "tolerance" toward religion held by the Japanese today, I present here three models of Japan as were being shaped prior to the 17th century.

## 2. Three Models of Japan

In this essay, the term "model of Japan" refers to a paradigm that explains the shape Japan has taken as well as aimed to achieve as an independent state within East Asia and within the global context. For Japan to be able to follow these models, the nation had to have relative political independence within the region.

It is well known that since Japan was established as a nation, it was included within the Chinese imperial system. In ancient times, a golden stamp was sent to a king from Han dynasty China to enhance his authority, and even in the Muromachi period the shogun of the Ashikaga *bakufu* was regarded as the "king of Japan" appointed by China. However, the Muromachi period was also the time when bands of Japanese pirates that engaged in robbery and secret trade laid waste to China. In the following Warring States period and over the course of Japan's wars for unification, Japanese military groups drastically improved their organizational skills and military technologies, especially with the guns imported from the West, and increased their economic power within their spheres of control. Japan's military presence increased the nation's power relative to the East Asian region.

In this political climate, contact with the West, which brought guns and Christianity, reduced the importance of the relationship with China and inspired Japan to start acting as an independent political player in the region. The three major warlords, Oda Nobunaga, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, and Tokugawa Ieyasu each held hegemonic power successively during the wars for unification, but the

models of Japan held by each of these leaders were very different, and formed the foundation for later models of the Japanese state.

Nobunaga is known as the leader who most quickly and actively incorporated guns into his military strategies, and who, being tolerant of Christianity, encouraged missionary activities. He expressed interest in "trade with the southern barbarians" in the West. By contrast, Nobunaga sometimes strictly suppressed Buddhism, which had become a hindrance to his domestic policies. His inherent inclination toward things that were new and different, as well as his innovativeness, which sometimes took an extreme form, were manifested as an embryonic tendency for Japan to reach toward the world beyond East Asia during this period. I call this first model of Japan "International Japan."

Following Nobunaga was Hideyoshi, who exiled missionaries as a means of reducing the potential ability of Christianity to exert political influence from the West, and tried instead to monopolize under his own management the "trade with the southern barbarians" which had served as a means for Christian missionaries to conduct their work. The most famous of his East Asia policies were his military expeditions to the Korean peninsula, considered aggression against the Ming dynasty. It is hard to deny the impact of the megalomania of Hideyoshi's later years on his expeditionary plan, but that plan is not believed today to have been completed unfounded. The plan was based on the knowledge that the 16th century Ming dynasty was constantly threatened and weakened by the Mongols from the north and Japanese pirates and the Portuguese from the south. In fact, the force that would later become the Q'ing dynasty would several decades later carry out the Ming offensive that Hideyoshi had been unable to complete. Japan's inclination toward advancing onto the continent and expanding its influence in Southeast Asia through trade may

be regarded as having begun with Hideyoshi. I will call this model of Japan "Great Japan."

The model initiated and institutionalized by Ieyasu, and which would come to form the core tendency of Japan from that time until today, is what I call the model of "Small Japan." The Tokugawa *bakuhan* (shogunate and domain) system is said to have been an extension of the system for governing Ieyasu's small home region to the entire country, but it was actually an elaborate domestic-oriented system whose network of control stretched even to the smallest units of organized society. This is not to say, however, that Ieyasu had a model of "Small Japan" in mind from the start. Whether he or Hideyoshi actually started it, Ieyasu encouraged shogunate-licensed trade and had set the table for the emergence of a "Great Japan" that would make it possible for towns of Japanese people to become established throughout Southeast Asia. Ieyasu, who had maintained a stand of intolerance toward Christianity while still instituting trade policies that followed the model of an outward-looking "Great Japan," later established a seclusion policy, fully implemented in 1641 after the massacre of Christians in the Shimabara Rebellion, that prohibited contact with foreign lands. This was a result of the conclusion that the country would not be able to effectively resist either the power of Christianity, or the political power of the West, as long as the country remained open to the world.

To summarize, the foreign policies adopted by Nobunaga, Hideyoshi, and Ieyasu during the 100 years from the mid-16th to the mid-17th centuries shifted from Nobunaga's receptiveness to the West and acceptance of Christianity, to Hideyoshi's policies prohibiting Christianity while attempting to maximize gains from trade, and finally to the complete suppression of Christianity and a policy limiting trade with the West to trade only with the Dutch at Nagasaki. The nation shifted from the model of



International Japan, to Great Japan, and finally to Small Japan.

Because the purpose of this paper is not to discuss these three models, I will not provide any additional explanation of them here, but it is well known that when the *bakuhau* system which institutionalized "Small Japan" was destroyed by the Meiji Restoration, the model of "Great Japan" was once again adopted in the form of a delayed imperialism set up to resist the imperialism of the West. At the same time, however, the model of International Japan reemerged, and was pursued in the course of following the global trend toward internationalization that occurred between the two world wars when Japan had participated in and become a major player in the League of Nations. The people whose portraits are printed on Japan's present currency, Fukuzawa Yukichi (¥10,000), Nitobe Inazo (¥5,000), and Natsume Soseki (¥1,000), may be regarded as advocates of, respectively, the Great Japan, International Japan, and Small Japan models. This interpretation is a small example of how these three models have come to explain modern Japan, and how these models, each of which has its own value, have always been used, consciously or unconsciously, as a basis for conceptualizing Japan, even today. It is not hard to see that Japan's postwar foreign policy, exemplified by Article 9 of the Constitution (renunciation of the right to wage war and maintain a military), for example, has been conducted amidst a constant shifting back and forth between models of Small Japan, Great Japan, and International Japan.

### 3. Japan's Secularization of Religion

The model of "Small Japan" propagated by Ieyasu is not only of a smaller scale than the model of "Great Japan," but it has an inward-looking dynamic in contrast to the outward-looking dynamic of "Great Japan." This means that in terms of religion, it tends not to look beyond its national borders, but instead focuses on its internal institutions.

The Tokugawa *bakufu* instituted a thorough system of managing and monitoring domestic Buddhism and Shinto through its commissioners of shrines and temples, and there were no conflicts on the scale of the military disputes that arose from the Jodo-shin sect's opposition to Nobunaga or the Christians' Shimabara Rebellion. At the same time, the thorough registration of people's religious affiliations implemented to prove that people were not Christians meant that every Japanese person officially belonged to one of the Buddhist sects. This virtually promised every Buddhist sect some measure of stability. Even today, when asked about their religious affiliation, most Japanese say, "We consider ourselves ... Buddhists," inserting a name of one of the Buddhist sects, but virtually all of them follow that up by saying, "But the only time that really matters is when holding funerals." More than pointing to a religious devotion to Buddhism, this shows how the official family registration process implemented hundreds of years ago by the Tokugawa *bakufu* is still having an effect today.

This stability, however, is a synonym for stagnation. From the great Heian-period Buddhists, Kukai and Saicho, to the radical Buddhist philosophers of the Kamakura period, Shinran and Nichiren, the lineage of Japan's great intellectuals who emerged out of the Buddhist tradition ended abruptly in the Edo period. Surprisingly, the only Edo-period Buddhist known by the average Japanese person is a mere kindhearted monk, Ryokan, a calligrapher and a writer of traditional Japanese songs. This means that Buddhism, like Shinto, did not produce new ideas or provide spiritual insights into newly emerging conditions, but instead served only as a traditional institution that performed funerals, death anniversary ceremonies, and other annual religious rites. Buddhist teachings and the Shinto worldview continued to dominate people's lives,

and aesthetics, but they offered only a this-worldly balm without fostering a spirituality focused on otherworldly dimensions.

This kind of religion was well suited to a Small Japan. Christianity, of course, and even Buddhism, could be expected to generate some kind of ties with the world outside Japan. That possibility was eliminated, however, as organizations and doctrines were completely shut off from the outside and forced to focus inward into a place where the power held by religion was placed under the control of the very this-worldly power of the *bakufu*. The original elements of religion that looked beyond the limits of the tangible world were tossed aside, and religion became enveloped by the powers of this world, which served to weaken religion's transcendentalism and make it into something that served as a spiritual lubricant for the present world. It is the process by which these things occurred that I refer to here as the secularization of religion. I have given many examples from Buddhism, but Shinto, the indigenous Japanese religion that developed a syncretism with Buddhism, has in the same way become embedded as a secular institution among the Japanese.

If we return to the problem posed at the beginning of this essay, we will find that it has already been resolved. That is, the nature of the Japanese tolerance for religion can be understood from the two points discussed above.

First, tolerance toward other religions can be understood to operate at the level of the official register of religious affiliation. Whether your own family's affiliation is to the Jodo-shin sect or the Tendai sect of Buddhism, having an affiliation with a particular sect is necessary for conducting funerals and other annual rites. Similarly religious tolerance exists insofar as there is no significance to or interest in other people's affiliations. To put this in the contemporary context, the fact that people of other societies are Islam or



Christian stimulates no more interest in the Japanese beyond an interest in what kind of funerals, weddings, and other religious rites those religions involve. It is not very difficult to be "tolerant" towards such differences. This is why I pointed out at the beginning of this essay that the question of what religion means to the Japanese must be addressed before we can approach the question of whether the Japanese are tolerant towards religion. Before we can determine whether the Japanese are tolerant, we have to recognize that religion to the Japanese is a matter of social record, much like one's place of birth, of one's "affiliation" on the official register of religious affiliation.

However, tolerance is granted only to the extent that outside religion does not conflict with the material comforts of the Japanese. This is the second aspect of Japanese tolerance towards religion. That is, because the Japanese discount the transcendental value of religion itself, they are not bothered by different religions opposing "in principle" their own religions at the transcendental level. Even though Christianity and Islam come from the same origins, they hold fundamentally conflicting beliefs that form the basis of a longstanding opposition. Likewise, the differences in Christian doctrine held by Catholics and Protestants are hidden within the roots of their social opposition. Such conflicts do not exist in Japan. However, tolerance disappears when outside religions touch actual problems. The number of foreign workers who subscribe to the Islamic faith is increasing in Japan, and when their different customs begin to cause discomfort, there is likely to be a huge turning away from tolerance toward hostility. Conversely, because the secular value of religion and its promotion of mutual aid and harmonious living in this world is high, the Japanese cannot understand why people dedicate their lives to otherworldly values, even to the extent of forsaking this-worldly comforts.

Some readers are likely to be very suspicious of this assertion. After all, it is until recently that the Japanese have been willing to sacrifice themselves for the sake of the emperor and the nation, and even today, because of the sects which conduct violent religious activities such as murders committed by Aum Shinrikyo, one may question the truth of the assertion that religion in Japan is being secularized and that the nation has an extremely weak transcendental awareness. Answering these doubts may well explain the status of religion in Japan today.

The first example comes from World War II, when the fanatical nationalistic activities of the Japanese, exemplified in the extreme by the

special corps of suicide pilots, were often explained as religious activities based on a belief in the emperor as a god. This came from a rivalry between the Small Japan and Great Japan models. Imperialistic Japan was clearly based on the model of Great Japan, but it lacked a dogmatic basis, such as that provided by Christianity to western colonialism, for striving toward worldwide expansion. Having long lived under a model of Small Japan as was manifested in the Edo period, the Japanese had no ideology for sustaining a Great Japan that would expand outward beyond its own borders. The emperor system was an institution strictly for "Japanese" in the narrow sense, and the religious expression of that system, Shinto, did



*The policy of Toyotomi Hideyoshi was oriented towards Great Japan*



not have a universalism applicable beyond the Japanese state. In addition, Japanese Buddhism, with the exception of the Nichiren sect, was not a globally oriented belief system. Consequently, the nation was striving to become Great Japan, even though it was not fitted with an ideology that would take it beyond Small Japan. Incidentally, after the Meiji Restoration, re-imported Christianity served not as an ideology for Great Japan, but for International Japan, and many intellectuals, such as the aforementioned Nitobe Inazo, either became Christians or were strongly influenced by Christian concepts. Christianity, however, was a Western religion that was fundamentally contradictory to the emperor system, and it could not be adopted as an ideology of a Great Japan whose goals included resistance against the West.

Toward the end of World War II, Great Japan, which had found power in its outward-looking dynamism, ultimately came under the pressure of the scale and nature of Small Japan. At this time, the weakness of doctrine and theology in Shinto, the religion of the Small Japan model that would not be expected to have ideological strength, was substituted by the rise of a this-worldly focus on the emperor as the embodiment of the unity of the state, and behaviors that could be regarded as fanatical began to appear.

The example of Aum Shinrikyo raises the question of where occultist inclinations and deviant behaviors originate. One of the characteristics of the new religions that have emerged in Japan since the late Edo period is their worldly perspective. At first they seek to improve life in this world. They draw a line between themselves and belief systems like Buddhism and Christianity that embrace the idea that the difficulties of this world will be repaid by happiness in the next. Many of Aum Shinrikyo's activities as well started out by providing relief in this world. The newest new religions which have become a problem in society today also offer events that are referred to

as "seminars," as well as events that are really no different from self-enlightenment gatherings. I will not address the issue of the fraudulent aims of the leaders of these groups, but I will raise this question: how do their this-worldly activities suddenly and irrationally fall into non-this-worldly behaviors?

For the answer we must return once again to the Edo period. Under Small Japan's *bakuhau* system, it was the political system that suppressed religion. For example, an incident occurred that brought Tachikawaryu, a sect of esoteric Buddhist teaching, into the limelight, but it was suppressed by the *bakufu*. That suppression was carried out through political, not religious, mechanisms. Actions that the religious community would otherwise have to undertake amidst opposition to its doctrine and organization were handled instead through the political power of the *bakufu*. This reveals that the people's understanding of and enthusiasm for religion itself had declined. In spite of the benefits of having eliminated religious disputes through the secularization of religion, and having strengthened the ability of the religious community to function as an aid provider in this world, there is the potential danger that the Japanese will be spiritually weak and easily deceivable in a world characterized by this kind of religion.

Even if not in an essential sense, there can be found in every human group, in every society, a strong desire for a transcendental explanation of the inevitable challenges that life brings, such as old age, sickness, and death. Japan differs from societies that have been reformed by the doctrines and organization of existing religions, even amidst their disputes, as well as societies that have reached a point of equilibrium of such desire and reality at the end of long negotiations with science. The problem with the newest new religions, including Aum Shinrikyo, is that they originate from religious secularization among the Japanese,

and the weakening it causes. So, in Japan, ideas that penetrate the surface of weak doctrine and organization, and that ask people to think transcendently, tend, unless controlled by political power, to blow up into deviant forms.

I think it is possible to clearly differentiate between two categories of religions: mode 1 religions, which include the world's classic religions such as Christianity and Islam, and mode 2 religions, or the secularized religions, which include Japan's religions, especially its new religions. Lacking the exclusivity of mode 1 religions, mode 2 religions avoid conflicts with science and consist of a way of life that reflects their main belief that this-worldly efforts will also be rewarded in this world. In Japan, systems that aim at the acquisition of a single technique, from flower arranging (*kado*), to calligraphy (*shodo*), tea ceremony (*sado*) and even judo, are all referred to with terms that incorporate the character meaning "way" or "path" (*do*). Insofar as these learning systems are open to everyone, and incorporate elements of this-worldly comfort and some degree of mutual assistance and harmonious living, they may be classified under the mode 2 religions.

I know of no other examples in which such mode 2 religions have become so deeply ingrained in people's lives on such a wide scale as they have in Japan. More than in the commonly emphasized Japanese tolerance toward religion, I believe that the potential for the Japanese view of religion to contribute something to the world lies in the inclusivity and aspiration toward this-worldly harmony that characterize the activities of these mode 2 religions.

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