

RELIGION

Native roots and foreign influence

The Aramatsuri no Miya sanctuary, Ise Shrine

The most important of all Shinto shrines, Ise is dedicated to the sun goddess Amaterasu, believed to be the ancestor of the Imperial family.



The history of religion in Japan is a long process of mutual influence between religious traditions. In contrast to Europe, where Christianity overwhelmed local pagan traditions, the indigenous religion Shinto has continued as a part of the lives of the people from the earliest days of an organized Japanese state up to modern times.

When Buddhism was introduced to Japan in the 6th century, Shinto and Buddhist beliefs began to interact. This is the defining characteristic of Japanese religion. The most striking example of this interaction is the theory of *honji suijaku*, in which Shinto *kami* were seen as the incarnations of Buddhist deities.

Confucianism and Taoism are two other religious “imports” that have played important

roles in Japanese society over a period of more than 1,000 years. Confucian precepts had a major influence on Japanese ethical and political philosophy in the formative period of the Japanese state (the 6th to 9th centuries), and again in the Edo period (1603–1868). Harder to trace than that of Confucianism, the influence of religious Taoism in Japan can be found in the use of the Chinese calendar and in popular beliefs such as those concerning fortune-telling and auspicious directions.

Shinto

Shinto wedding
The Shinto-style marriage ceremony is still common.



The word Shinto, which is often translated as “the way of the gods,” is written with two Chinese characters. The first character, which is pronounced *kami* when used alone, means “god,” “deity,” or “divine power,” and the second character means “way” or “path.” With the introduction of the paddy-field system during the Yayoi period (300 BC–AD 300), the agricultural rituals and festivals that later became part of Shinto began to develop.

Although the word *kami* can be used to refer to a single god, it is also used as the collective term for the myriad gods which have been the central objects of worship in Japan from as far back as the Yayoi period. The *kami* are part of all aspects of life and manifest themselves in various forms. There are nature *kami* that reside in sacred stones, trees, mountains, and other natural phenomena. There are clan *kami*, called *ujigami*, which were originally the tutelary deities of specific clans, often being the deified ancestor of the clan. There is the *ta no kami*, or god of the rice paddies, who is worshipped at rice-planting and harvest festivals. And there are *ikigami*, who are living human deities. The *kami* that most resemble gods in the Western sense are the heavenly divinities who reside on the Takamagahara (High Celestial Plain). They are led by Amaterasu Omikami, the goddess worshipped at the Ise Shrine, the central shrine of Shinto.

Partly in response to the arrival of highly structured Buddhist doctrines in Japan in the 6th century, pervasive but previously unorganized native beliefs and rituals were gradually systematized as Shinto. The desire to put the legitimacy of the imperial lineage on a firm mythological and religious foundation led to the compilation of the *Kojiki* (*Record of Ancient Matters*) and the *Nihon shoki* (*Chronicles of Japan*), in 712 and 720, respectively. In tracing the imperial line back to the mythical age of the gods, these books tell how the *kami* Izanagi and Izanami produced the Japanese islands and the central gods Amaterasu Omikami (sun

goddess), Tsukuyomi no Mikoto (moon god), and Susanoo no Mikoto (god of storms). The great-great-grandson of Amaterasu Omikami is said to be Emperor Jimmu, the legendary first sovereign of Japan.

The absence of official sacred scriptures in Shinto reflects the religion’s lack of moral commandments. Instead, Shinto emphasizes ritual purity and cleanliness in one’s dealings with the *kami*.

Buddhism

Originating in India around the 5th century BC, Buddhism spread through China in the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD, and finally reached Japan via Korea in the mid-6th century when the king of Paekche sent a Buddha statue and copies of sutras to the Japanese emperor. Buddhism spread quickly among the upper classes after the influential and pro-Buddhist Soga family crushed anti-Buddhist factions. Prince Shotoku (574–622), who gave imperial support to the building of major temples such as Horyuji (in present day Nara Prefecture), is considered the true founder of Buddhism in Japan.

The Emperor Shomu (701–756) adopted Buddhism as the official state religion and built the temple Todaiji at Nara and its huge statue of the Buddha. However, the coexistence of Buddhism and Shinto continued. Responsible for carrying out rituals to promote national welfare, the six Nara sects which dominated Buddhism at this time were primarily academic in nature and had little influence on the general population. Early in the Heian period (794–1185), the Tendai sect was introduced into Japan by the priest Saicho (767–822) and the Shingon sect was introduced by Kukai (774–835), who is also known as Kobo Daishi. These two esoteric sects came to be the most important Buddhist sects at the imperial court.

In the Kamakura period (1185–1333), two

major developments occurred in Japanese Buddhism. First, the Zen school was established in Japan by Eisai (1141–1215), founder of the Rinzai sect, and later modified by Dogen (1200–1253), founder of the Soto sect. Zen found a receptive audience in the warrior elite of the time because of its directness and its emphasis on self-discipline and meditation. Zen practice utilizes sitting meditation, called *zazen*, and irrational riddles, called *koan*, as means to reach enlightenment (*satori*). The primary difference between the two sects is that Rinzai Zen places much more importance on *koan* practice than Soto Zen.

The other important development was the rapid growth of popular Buddhist sects among the common people. These included the Pure Land sects, which taught that the chanting of Buddha Amida's name is the best way to achieve rebirth in Amida's Western Paradise, and also the Nichiren sect, which emphasized the chanting of the title of the Lotus Sutra.

In the Edo period (1603–1868), the Tokugawa shogunate requested that every person be affiliated with a Buddhist temple as part of its effort to control the population and wipe out Christianity. This insured a large base of temple members, but it did not contribute to the vitality of Buddhism as a living religion. At the beginning of the Meiji

period (1868–1912), this system collapsed in a wave of anti-Buddhist sentiment spurred by the government's desire to eliminate Buddhist influence from Shinto shrines and make Shinto the state religion. In response to this and the changing social environment of the modern era, Buddhism has been striving to redefine its role in Japan.

Christianity

Christianity in Japan can be clearly divided into three periods: the initial encounter with Christianity beginning in the mid-16th century; the reintroduction of Christianity, after more than 200 years of national seclusion ended in the mid-19th century; and the post-World War II period.

Introduction and Persecution

The Jesuit missionary Francis Xavier arrived in Kagoshima in August, 1549. Jesuit missionary activities were centered in Kyushu, the southernmost of the four major Japanese islands, and by 1579 six *daimyo* (regional military lords) had been converted and there were an estimated 100,000 Christians. The efforts of the Jesuits were treated benignly by military leader Oda Nobunaga and also initially by military ruler Toyotomi Hideyoshi. Probably in reaction to their growing influence in Kyushu, however, Hideyoshi later turned against the Christians and had 26 crucified at Nagasaki in 1597. After he became the de facto ruler of Japan, in 1600, Tokugawa Ieyasu initially tolerated the missionaries but, in 1614, the Tokugawa government proscribed Christianity and expelled the missionaries from Japan. At this point there were more than 300,000 Japanese Christians. It is estimated that about 3,000 were executed, and a great number renounced their faith as a result of persecution. Many others concealed their beliefs and continued to practice Christianity in secret.

Reintroduction

After Japan had abandoned its policy of seclusion, foreign missionaries returned in

Buddhist memorial service

A Buddhist ceremony is held to pray for the repose of the soul.



A Buddhist priest performs ascetic training
A priest in a straw hat sits in meditation as he begs for alms. (Photo courtesy of AFLO)



1859, although they were not able to evangelize openly until 1873. During this period over 30,000 “hidden” Christians came forward; they belonged to groups that had worshipped clandestinely during the more than 200 years of persecution.

Both Catholic and Protestant missionaries were active from this time, and although the number of converts was relatively small, Christians were influential in education and the trade union movement. Increasing nationalism and the promotion of Shinto shrine attendance as a patriotic duty made the 1930s a difficult time for many Christians.

After World War II

Christian activity in the immediate postwar period had the support of Occupation authorities but only minor gains were made. In 2006, Christians, numbering 2.36 million individuals, made up less than 1.2 percent of the population.

Despite the increasing popularity of superficially Christian wedding ceremonies, Christianity as a religion is probably still regarded as foreign by many Japanese. As knowledge of and interest in Christianity has grown over the years, people are certainly not unfamiliar with the religion. This familiarity, however, has not translated into a large increase in the number of believers. One possible reason for the lack of growth is that the emphasis on exclusive belief in the Christian God requires a strong commitment in rejecting the more relaxed polytheism of Shinto and Japanese Buddhism.

Religion in Japan Today

Mainstream Shinto and Buddhism

Urbanization has cut many Japanese off from their family ties to a specific Buddhist temple and Shinto shrine. Still, many people consider themselves both Shintoist and Buddhist. The

Agency for Cultural Affairs statistics for 2006 show the combined membership of both religions at approximately 196 million, about 53 percent more than the total population of Japan. In the religious feelings of most Japanese, Shinto and Buddhism peacefully coexist rather than conflict. For the average person, however, religious affiliation does not translate into regular worship or attendance. Most people visit shrines and temples as part of annual events and special rituals marking life passages.

Such annual events include shrine and temple festivals, the first shrine or temple visit of the new year (*hatsumode*), and a visit to the family grave during the Bon Festival. Rituals commemorating the stages in an individual’s life include the first shrine visit of a newborn baby (*miyamairi*), the Shichi-go-san Festival shrine visit of three- and five-year-old boys and three- and seven-year-old girls, a Shinto wedding ceremony, and a Buddhist funeral.

New Religions

The most conspicuous development in religion in Japan in the 20th century was the spread of a number of new religions. The teachings of these new religions draw on a wide range of previous traditions, including aspects of Shinto, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, folk religion, and shamanism. The founders of new religions are often revered as living deities (*ikigami*).

One of the attractions of the new religions is said to be the sense of community they give to people who lack the mental and spiritual support historically provided by the extended family, the local community, and the traditional religions.

Kamidana

A miniature shrine for worshipping the gods within the home.



The dangerous aspects of the strong control that some new religions exercise over their adherents has come under greater scrutiny since the sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway in March 1995. Killing 12 people and injuring more than a thousand, the attack was carried out by the religious cult Aum Shinrikyo.

Religious Institutions in Japan

	Shinto	Buddhism	Christianity	Other
Shrines, temples, churches, other organizations	88,812	85,802	9,275	38,834
Clergy (priests, ministers, etc)	76,479	344,044	39,443	217,180
Members	108,427,100	87,506,504	2,369,484	8,880,135

Note: These statistics are based on estimates provided by the various religious organizations. There can be considerable fluctuation between years.

Source: Agency for Cultural Affairs, December 31, 2008.