

# **Two Approaches toward the Understanding of Japanese Religions<sup>1</sup>**

**By Hideo Watanabe**

There are two major questions that non-Japanese often ask regarding the nature of the religious beliefs and behaviors of the Japanese.

- (1) How can Japanese be simultaneously engaged in more than one religion? For example, it seems difficult for them to understand how the majority of Japanese can be born and married Shinto but cremated as Buddhists.
- (2) Are Japanese religious or not? Japanese claim that they are not religious, yet a variety of personal behaviors and social activities such as the use of amulets and visiting ancestors' graves to commemorate them, are observed in Japan.

The answers to these questions lie in how one looks at Japanese religions, that is to say, whether Japanese religions are viewed and practiced as separate cultural systems or as a combination that forms one cultural system.<sup>2</sup>

The concept of Japanese religions as separate cultural systems is based on the institutional-organizational frameworks and their orthodox doctrinal structures. Shinto and Buddhism are typical examples of institutional-organizational frameworks. Consideration of Japanese religion as one religion is based on an ideational view, that is to say, the way people view and practice Japanese religions outside of the boundaries of the traditional academic categories.

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<sup>2</sup> Ohnuki, *Illness and Culture in Contemporary Japan: An Anthropological View*, p. 148.

This paper aims to explore the institutional-organizational frameworks and the ideational view and clarify how those positions are related to multiple affiliation and Japanese religiosity respectively. Further the paper refers to the role of each academic position in Japanese religious studies, concluding that respect for the ideational view should help to solve the puzzle of Japanese religions.

### **Dual or Multiple Affiliation**

The annual statistics on Japanese religious affiliation consistently show multiple memberships in various religions. The population of Japan in 2003 was 127 million, while the total religious affiliation is reported as 216 million. This apparently shows that a very large number of people are registered as affiliated to more than one religion.

**Figure 1. Japanese Religious Affiliation**

Shinto	Buddhist	Christian	Other Religions	Total
84.9%	75.3%	1.5%	8.4%	170.1%
107.8 million	95.6 million	1.9 million	10.7 million	216 million

David Raid saw a similar phenomenon.

In 1988 the total number of adherents claimed for the major classes of religious tradition was 191 million, a figure about 55 percent larger than the total population of Japan. This “discrepancy” is generally accounted for by two facts: dual or multiple affiliation, and inflated membership reports.<sup>3</sup>

Byron Earhart gives details about inflated membership. “Because in theory, all the families

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<sup>3</sup> Raid, *New Wine*, p. 20.

living in the vicinity of a local Shinto shrine may be considered ‘parishioners’ of that shrine, and because most families have some ties to a parish Buddhist temple, a family may be counted as members of both Shinto and Buddhism.’<sup>4</sup>

The simultaneous subscription to multiple religions is a reflection of the individual’s belief system, which is a mass of beliefs and rituals without formal, institutional organizations. Individuals are unaware of scholarly distinctions such as Shinto and Buddhism, but the religious registration data are based on the institutional-organizational framework. So when Japanese are requested to profess religious faiths within the limits of the traditional academic categories, they simultaneously affirm themselves as Shintoists on one hand and Buddhists on the other. In fact, each individual’s faith is a unique combination of religious practices and participation which cuts across the boundaries of the traditional academic categories. So the multiple affiliation is due to the gap between the institutional-organizational framework and the ideational view.

### **Japanese Religiosity**

The second question is whether Japanese should be understood as religious or not. Frankly, it is not easy to answer this question because the term “religious” is complex and its meaning has to be clarified before the question is answered. Further when we ask Japanese people about their religiosity in Japanese, we have to note that their answer is largely affected by how the term is translated. “Religion” is “*shūkyō*” in Japanese and “religious” is often translated into “*shinjin bukai*.” I feel there is a slight difference in nuance between English and Japanese, which Kasulis elaborates as follows.

This means that until a little over a century ago, it was literally impossible for a Japanese to say she or he was affiliated with a

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<sup>4</sup> Earhart, *Japanese Religion: Unity and Diversity*, pp.192-193.

religion. There simply was no established word for expressing or even thinking the notion. This suggests that the context for a Japanese person's statement that she or he is 'not religious' is quite different from that of a Westerner who is seemingly making the same statement. Westerners who claim to be 'not religious' would likely also imply they are not the way most people have been in the history of their culture. When a Japanese says seemingly the same thing, however, the statement does not necessarily carry the same weight since "*shūkyō*" is a modern, not traditional, Japanese idea.

The second point about "*shūkyō*" is the word's etymology. The nineteenth-century Japanese intellectuals who coined the term must have believed there had been no ordinary word in the Japanese language corresponding to the Western noun "religion." Here we find some cultural dissonance, however. When Westerners came to Japan, whether in the nineteenth century or back in the sixteenth (before being expelled), they thought of Buddhism, Shinto, and even Confucianism as religions in the same category as Christianity (or Judaism or Islam, for that matter). Coming from the opposite direction, though, the Japanese intellectuals obviously did not see the similarity. Why not?<sup>5</sup>

Although the analysis of the meaning of "religious" is important, my primary concern is how Japanese religiosity is connected with the institutional-organizational and the ideational positions. For this purpose I am going to examine Japanese religious beliefs and practices, and the relationship between them.

In a 1981 NHK survey, only 33 percent of Japanese respondents affirmed religious beliefs, while 65 percent stated that they "had no religious belief(s)."<sup>6</sup> To the question, "Are you religious?" in a 2000 survey, only 16 percent answered "yes," while 55 percent answered "No,"

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<sup>5</sup> Kasulis, *Shinto: The Way Home*, p. 29.

<sup>6</sup> Reader, *Religion in Contemporary Japan*, p. 5.

and 29 percent answered “I don’t know.”<sup>7</sup>

These data indicate that Japanese are not religious and support lack of religious belief claimed by the institutional-organizational group. Reischauer, who represents the institutional-organizational group, says,

Popular religious customs are derived mostly from traditional Shinto and Buddhism, in which few really believe. And most religious life among the few who are religiously active is devoted to folk religious beliefs or new religions that have little prestige or general influence. Clearly religion in contemporary Japan is not central to society and culture.<sup>8</sup>

As opposed to the institutional-organizational position, the ideational group asserts that Japanese are religious. The reasons for their assertion are “lack of belief does not mean lack of action, lack of concern or lack of relationship with religious issues”<sup>9</sup>; it is impossible to generalize Japanese religious beliefs and behaviors because of diversity of individual religious practices.

The ideational group stresses that although Japanese practices are not strongly backed up by “expressed belief,” individual belief systems are present. When the Japanese are asked whether they consider religious feelings to be important, 70 percent or more answer “yes” and somewhere between 10 or 15 percent deny their importance.<sup>10</sup>

The institutional-organizational people identify religion as only those beliefs and practices which they themselves have defined. Indeed, many Japanese claim that they don’t believe in Shinto and Buddhism, but this does not mean that they are not religious. This simply means

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.japan-guide.com/topic/0002.html> japan-guide.com. Religion in Japan. The survey received 241 valid responses from Japanese people.

<sup>8</sup> Reischauer, *The Japanese Today: Change and Continuity*, p. 215.

<sup>9</sup> Reader, *Religion in Contemporary Japan*, p. 6.

<sup>10</sup> Reader, *Religion in Contemporary Japan*, p. 6.

that their belief system does not fall into the religious categories defined by the institutional-organizational group.

The ideational group asserts that many religious practices exist in Japan, which is evidence that Japanese do have strong beliefs. For example, Figure 2 indicates high participation in the New Year's visit to shrines and temples, and visits to ancestors' graves to commemorate them.<sup>11</sup>

**Figure 2. Participation in Religious Practices**

The New Year's visit to shrines and temples	80% take part either regularly or occasionally.
Visit to ancestors' graves to commemorate them	89% take part either regularly or occasionally.

In spite of such breadth of religious practices, many Japanese are not willing to identify themselves as religious. Eishō Omura wrote “Japanese like religious events and activities but dislike organized and belief-centered religion.”<sup>12</sup> This is due to the general image that organized religion has acquired: Buddhism has a rather dark and gloomy image because of its association with the death process; Shinto had its image colored by the nationalistic fascism of the World War II era.

Japanese religious activities are not uniform in depth and breadth, and this is another reason the ideational group disagrees with the institutional-organizational frameworks. The 2003 NHK survey<sup>13</sup> gives us a systematic data analysis of individual religious variation and clarifies that not every Japanese is uniform in his/her belief in *kami* (Shinto deities) and *hotoke* (Buddha).

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<sup>11</sup> Reader, *Religion in Contemporary Japan*, p. 10

<sup>12</sup> Reader, *Religion in Contemporary Japan*, p. 14

<sup>13</sup> NHK Seron chōsabu (ed.), *Gendai nihonjin no ishiki kōzō* (6<sup>th</sup> edition), p. 137.

It reports that ten percent of the nation's people believe in only *kami*; 17 percent believes in only *hotoke*; as much as 21 per cent believe in both *kami* and *hotoke*. This analysis also clarifies that while the many in the older generation (60 years old and over) believe in *hotkoke* (58%) and *kami* (42%), a much smaller percentage of the younger generation (16-29 years old) believe in *hotkoke* (15%) and *kami* (18%).

It is also possible to show the variety of types of religion. The established religions and new religions serve different groups of people. The established religions are applicable to people in general, being concerned with the world after death, while new religions are fanatically supported by a particular part of society, which is interested in benefits in this present life. Features of new religion are easy initiation, easy doctrines, and charisma. It serves those who want the realization of business prosperity, family happiness, and heart to heart communication and has become prevalent particularly among shopkeepers, housewives, and students. The 1988 NHK survey<sup>14</sup> reports that the majority of people, who use amulets, practice divination, etc, are young, and there are more females than males.

Thus these detailed investigations of behavior reveal that people's involvement in religious activities varies depending on kind of deity, type of religion, age, gender, etc. Each individual chooses his/her unique combination of gods and practices and participation cuts across the boundaries of the traditional academic categories. Therefore the ideational group emphasizes the importance of looking at individual religious activities from a viewpoint free from the orthodox doctrines.

A group at Kokugakuin University in Japan made a nationwide survey regarding Japanese

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<sup>14</sup> NHK Seron chōsabu (ed.), *Gendai nihonjin no ishiki kōzō*, (3<sup>rd</sup> edition), pp. 91-92.

religiosity in 2003.<sup>15</sup> One of the questions was “What do you think about *kami* and *hotoke*?” The division between “*kami*” and “*hotoke*” is based on the institutional-organizational framework, and the result is as follows.

**Figure 3. Differences between “*Kami*” and “*Hotoke*”**

1. “ <i>kami</i> ” and “ <i>hotoke</i> ” are almost the same.	22.8%
2. “ <i>kami</i> ” and “ <i>hotoke</i> ” are totally different.	23.9%
3. “ <i>kami</i> ” and “ <i>hotoke</i> ” are different deities but have a similar function.	23.7%
4. I have never thought about differences between “ <i>kami</i> ” and “ <i>hotoke</i> .”	21.0%
5. I don’t know.	8.5%

What is important here is that No. 1 and No. 2 are very close in percentage. In other words, some Japanese find differences between “*kami*” and “*hotoke*”, while nearly the same percentage of Japanese think that “*kami*” and “*hotoke*” are almost the same. This indicates that “*kami*” and “*hotoke*” are considered as one cultural system and supports the ideational view.

The concept of “a total religious person” proposed by Keith Brown responds to this variability of Japanese religion.<sup>16</sup> He made many observations which challenged the conventional academic view in his field. For example, he heard the term *kamisama* (deity) used often, but seldom the term Shinto. *Kamisama* does not fall into folk Shinto or state Shinto. Also, villages call some sacred places *odoo*, which are neither shrines nor temples. Further,

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<sup>15</sup> <http://21coe.kokugakuin.ac.jp/> “Nihonjin no shukyō ishiki, shinkan ni kansuru seron chōsa.” (“A public poll on Japanese Attitudes toward Religion and Shinto.”) The survey was made in Oct. 2003 with 1,417 responses.

<sup>16</sup> Dr. Keith Brown is an anthropologist at University of Pittsburgh. He conducted fieldwork in Mizusawa, Iwate Prefecture (a northern part of Honshu) for many years.

there are many supernaturals, such as foxes, rabbits, and tortoises, which don't neatly fall into the traditional academic categories. Based on these findings, Brown emphasizes that definitions should be formed using local categories, not the traditional academic categories. Since varied religious practices don't necessarily fall into the traditional categories, it is essential to regard the individual as a total entity who has various religious components, that is, as "a total religious person."

The purpose of this section is to explore whether Japanese are religious or not. The previous discussion reveals that the answer depends on whether you take the institutional-organizational position or the ideational position. Earhart says,

The heart of the matter, then, is not whether the Japanese are religious but in what way are the Japanese religious. We should never conclude that the Japanese (or any other people) are not religious because their beliefs and practices differ from those of our culture.<sup>17</sup>

### **Summary**

Let me summarize my argument and mention my personal view here. I am concerned with the two questions: Japanese multiple religious affiliation and their religiosity. Dual or multiple affiliation is a reflection of the individual's belief system, a mass of beliefs and rituals, which are outside of Shinto and Buddhism. Although the single individual's belief system exists apart from the traditional academic categories, in reality the Japanese are affected by the religious categories when asked to identify their religion, and this forms simultaneous religious affiliation.

As for the discussion of Japanese religiosity, the institutional-organizational position is based on data citing a lack of belief by Japanese in the institutional based or taught religious

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<sup>17</sup> Earhart, H. Byron. *Japanese Religion: Unity and Diversity*, p. 195.

systems or entities, which leads to the assertion that Japanese are not religious. Reischauer, who speaks from the standpoint of the institutional-organizational position, says, “in modern Japan it (religion) plays a lesser and more peripheral role.”<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, the ideational position is supported by the numerous religious practices and the variations of individual involvement in those practices. Reader, who represents the ideational view, says, “Japanese people in general exhibit extremely high levels of religious activity and behaviour, and Japanese society and culture are intricately interwoven with religious themes.”<sup>19</sup> Brown emphasizes individual variability of religious beliefs and behaviors, and his “total religious person” is helpful in clarifying the ideational view.

So the two positions are opposed to each other, but I think that both approaches are necessary for the understanding of Japanese religions. The macro approach of the institutional-organizational group helps us grasp the framework of Japanese religions, mainly through their historical and organizational aspects. The micro approach of the ideational group enables us to look at individual and cultural aspects. Each position has its importance in its own area.

Personally I believe that the ideational view should be more respected. The institutional-organizational frameworks have largely influenced Japanese people through national statistics, school textbooks, and historical books. Hence people have become so used to the traditional academic categories that they tend to be blind to the religious meanings behind numerous common Japanese practices. In order to understand fully the scope and dimensions of Japanese religions, we should analyze them not only from the angle of beliefs and doctrines

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<sup>18</sup> Reischauer, Edwin O, *The Japanese Today: Change and Continuity*, p. 203.

<sup>19</sup> Reader, *Religion in Contemporary Japan*, p. 5.

but also from the viewpoint of practices and rituals. The ideational view frees people from stereotypical ideas and serves to better account for Japanese religion, which has long appeared to be complex, mysterious, and even incomprehensible.

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