Abstract

Japan continues to mystify the West, especially because its culture and history contrast so sharply with that of many non-Asian nations. Yet there are more reasons than ever to achieve a better understanding of this nation that is both a military and economic partner of many western nations. This essay provides a window into Japanese culture through the diversity of its religious experience. Though the range of that diversity is huge, most Japanese are united by the fact that they care more about the practical applications of religion than they do about ideology. Toward that end, an individual may practice several different faiths for different purposes throughout her or his life. Of the types most frequently practiced, Shinto is the primary indigenous religion in Japan. Whereas Buddhism, Confucianism, and Christianity were imported, each was altered and “Japanized” by its adherents. For example, Mukyokai is a form of “non-western” Christianity that was started in Japan about 100 years ago. A more popular indigenous religious phenomenon in contemporary Japan is the so-called “new religion” movement. This essay includes my personal experience with one particular new religion, Mahikari, which reflects the religious inclinations of many members of Japan’s younger generations.

Once our enemy now our ally, Japan still remains a mystery to many. When I taught in China in 1988, the adjective sometimes used by outsiders to describe the Chinese was “inscrutable.” Although the word reflects a cultural bias, there were times in my travels in China and then later in Japan that it did seem to apply to those I
encountered—and I suspect they felt the same way about me. Almost by definition, highly contrasting cultures tend to be puzzling to each other. A premise of this essay is that we must move beyond easy adjectives like “inscrutable” to gain a deeper knowledge of other nations. Toward that end, I’ll provide a window into contemporary Japan by describing a few features of its religious history and culture.

When I was boy in a small Ohio town in the 1950s, Japan might just as well have been the moon for what I knew about it. In fact, I probably knew more about the moon. Although my uncle had been a naval officer in the Pacific in both World War II and Korea and showed up regularly at our home, he didn’t talk much about his wartime experience. So my main source of information was my Weekly Reader. I do recall that in the late 1950s the phrase “Made in Japan” was more a warning to the buyer than it was an indicator of high quality, as it would become decades later. Concerning Japanese culture in general, I found exotic pictures of rickshaws and other features of Japanese life in the John Stoddard Lectures in our home library. And as I looked back at that 1898 volume recently, this sentence struck me: “The most important drama of the coming century will probably be enacted on the shores of the Pacific.” That was written shortly after Japan won its war with China and a few years before it would win another against Russia in 1905, at the start of a military and nation-building period that ended with defeat in World War II. Little did the late 19th Century travel lecturer, John Stoddard, know just how prophetic his words would be.

Now, what should motivate all U.S. citizens to learn more about Japanese culture today, especially when other countries such as Russia, China, India, Iran, Israel, and Mexico appear more relevant to our global interests? Here are a few reasons it deserves attention. Japan is our fourth largest source of imports, fourth largest export market, second largest source of direct foreign investment, second largest foreign holder of U.S. Treasuries, and lately the source of a $70-80 billion trade imbalance. Also, we have a half-century old treaty with Japan that permits us to locate military bases there in return for our pledge to protect its security. This alliance has gained more attention lately with North Korea firing test missiles toward
Japan and engaging South Korea in a provocative fashion. Other current issues related to Japan include the ban on U.S. beef imports a few years ago, conflict over the sale of new generation F22s, concern over the conduct of U.S. military personnel stationed in the country, Japanese support in Iraq and Afghanistan, joint agreements on combating climate change, and remaining conflicts about Japan's revisionist history related to World War II—especially concerning these two issues, the so-called Korean “comfort women” during the War and the Nanjing Massacre before it. As well, the recent election in Japan unseated the conservative ruling party for only the second time in fifty years and installed a new prime minister, who favors a foreign policy less dependent on the United States and more closely tied to China and South Korea. In short, we have plenty of reasons to learn more about the culture of this nation.

Japan consists of four main islands, about 127 million people, a mostly rugged landscape that creates population density on the coasts, more than its share of earthquakes and other natural disasters, a relatively homogeneous population (which is aging and actually decreasing), and a history of isolation from other cultures. That last fact, especially the nation’s self-imposed isolation from about 1600 to about 1850, led to a quick transition from medieval to modern culture in the late 1800s. This history of relative isolation also had a profound influence on Japan’s religious life. For example, Shinto developed as an indigenous faith found nowhere else in the world. Other religions—such as Buddhism and Christianity—were imported but then acquired a distinct Japanese identity.

Although religion is at the heart of Japanese culture, ironically most Japanese consider themselves to be non-religious. That's because when they are asked about religious identity, they assume the question refers to a particular faith or belief system. In fact, most Japanese care less about a specific belief system and more about practical benefits of faith and ritual. This feature contrasts dramatically with the western tradition, which emphasizes dogma over pragmatism, and it helps explain why traditional Christianity has been a “hard sell” in Japan.

A second feature of Japanese religious life flows directly from the
first and confounds many westerners. Because the Japanese are more interested in practical application of beliefs than doctrine, they often belong to or practice several different religions simultaneously, each of which satisfies different purposes and addresses different parts of their life such as births, weddings, and deaths. An apt metaphor might be a restaurant buffet, which they prefer over a set menu. Instead of inheriting or adopting a religion in youth that speaks to all needs throughout their life, many Japanese draw from diverse faiths and belief systems depending on the time of life and situation. In western terminology, they hedge their bets.

The following main strands, among others, are woven into the religious history of modern Japan: Shinto, Buddhism, Confucianism, Christianity, and New Religions. The rest of this essay briefly describes each, with emphasis on the last two.

The early inhabitants of Japan probably had no organized religion and instead performed rituals related to hunting and fishing. As family and village religious rituals acquired a national context, what we now call Shinto developed as Japan's first formal religion. Both it and Buddhism remain the nation's main religious traditions to this day. Shinto's many gods, called "kami," are manifested in nature and in people. Until recently, for example, Shinto considered the Japanese emperor himself to be a kami descended from the sun goddess. This merging of Shinto beliefs with emperor worship grew more pronounced in decades leading up to World War II, contributing to a hyper-nationalism that paved the way for war. It ended with surrender conditions that required Japan to consider its emperor to be only mortal. Today, sixty-five years after Japan's surrender, Shinto is far less political and instead emphasizes family life, a strong connection to nature, and a reverence for the nation's historical roots. As for the strong nationalistic spirit once associated with Shinto, it still exists but in a muted form. The "Japan, Inc." hubris that dominated the nation during the 1970s and 1980s was replaced by a massive loss in confidence during the economic debacle of the 1990s, from which Japan has by no means fully recovered.

Whereas Shinto is native to Japan, Buddhism was imported. It originated in India and came to Japan by way of China in the 500s.
Since that time, Japan has placed its own stamp on Buddhism—creating many forms including Zen, the one with which many non-Japanese are most familiar. Like Shinto, Buddhism satisfied the practical needs of its adherents, especially by providing rituals related to death and ancestor worship. According to Buddhism, the inevitable suffering of the world can only be addressed by restraining desire and seeking release through enlightenment. There’s a sort of fatalism in Buddhist teaching that has influenced the Japanese worldview for centuries. Relatedly, some forms of Buddhism (namely Zen) became associated with an artistic sensitivity evident in traditions such as the tea ceremony, poetry, meditation, and flower arranging. As reflected in Japanese films—from old “B” movies to the more recent The Last Samurai—even warriors embodied such an aesthetic. Today, one still finds it reflected in Japanese culture, though some would say it’s more an artifact than a rich part of contemporary life.

Into this Shinto/Buddhist mix came Confucianism, brought from China about the same time Buddhism arrived. As much a philosophy as a religion, Confucianism was based on the tenets of its founder who lived almost 1000 years earlier in China. While Confucianism reinforced some features already evident in Japanese culture, such as a reverence for ancestors and family elders, it brought new ones that help us understand Japanese culture to this day. What most resonated with the Japanese people was the need to achieve and maintain harmony in family, social, and business relationships. The five main Confucian relationships were between father and son, ruler and ruled, husband and wife, elder brother and younger brother, and friend and friend. In each case, respect for authority and hierarchy is paramount, as is the goal of seeking cooperation and agreement at all costs—even at the expense of saying what one really means. In other words, how one says something in Japan is usually more important than the content of the message. To avoid offense and to permit face-saving, shades of gray are tolerated, versus the more absolute right/wrong thinking and directness generally associated with the West. The example that most quickly comes to mind from my experience in China and Japan is the extreme to
which friends and colleagues will go to avoid giving bad news or saying “no.”

These three religions/philosophies—Shinto, Buddhism, and Confucianism—were the main religious currents in Japan until the mid 1500s. About that time the Jesuit Francis Xavier brought Christianity to Japan. As the nation was enduring epic struggles that would lead to its unification, Catholicism made modest gains among educated classes such as the Samurai. That faith stayed a part of the country for almost 100 years, until feudal shoguns unifying the country saw Christianity as an external threat to their efforts. Those believers who didn’t leave or repudiate their faith were executed, and what followed was a period of self-imposed isolation like no other in modern history. For the better part of 250 years—from the early 1600s to the mid 1850s—Japan allowed few people in or out and banned Christianity under penalty of death. Interestingly, some so-called “underground” Christian communities did endure, though secrecy across many generations led them to adapt a hybrid form of Christianity quite different from the Catholicism they had left behind.

Shortly after Japan opened to the West in 1853—or, rather, was opened by Commander Perry and the Black Ships—missionaries (mostly Protestant) arrived and began seeking converts. They were an ambitious group, to be sure. Christianity slowly gained a foothold, mainly among the sons of Samurai. These educated young men ultimately became some of the most successful leaders in the Meiji Period (1868-1926), during which time an infusion of Western ideas, learning, and technology helped Japan make the transition from feudalism to a modern state. Most of the Protestant teachers provided a significant service to the newly opened nation by educating their converts who, in some cases, finished their education in America.

Although Christianity achieved some initial success and would continue to grow during a few periods between then and now, the fact is no more than one or two percent of the Japanese population has ever been Christian, for these reasons. First, although Christianity resonated with the educated Samurai—who saw similarities between
learning and discipline taught by Protestant missionaries and the Confucian emphasis on same—it never found a home among the middle class, as it did in Korea. Second, Christianity required adherents to renounce other religious beliefs, a stipulation that did not fit well with Japanese pluralistic inclinations already noted. Third, the Protestant groups represented in Japan—such as the Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Methodists, Baptists, and Dutch Reformed—worked against their own best interests by stressing denominational difference rather than similarities, a competitive tendency that contrasted with the ecumenical inclinations of the Japanese people. Even worse, many missionaries shunned Shinto and Buddhist practice, which had been part of the culture for over 1,000 years. That made it extraordinarily difficult for people to convert, for they would have to abandon culture, families, and ancestor worship. Though conversions did take place, Christianity has only a minor place in Japanese religious history—at least in terms of numbers.

Any discussion of Christianity in Japan must include a reference to indigenous groups. They reflect an effort to avoid problems just noted and to root Christianity in local culture. Viewing Christianity as a world religion rather than a western one, these groups adapted their faith to life in Japan. Perhaps the best known indigenous Christian sect is Mukyokai, or “non-church Christianity,” established by Uchimura Kanzo. Son of a Samurai, Uchimura was educated by a missionary, then traveled across the American West in the 1880s to attend Amherst College, and finally returned to Japan and became a famous, or perhaps infamous, figure. His infamy arose from the fact that, as a young teacher, he failed to bow low enough before a copy of an important new imperial document being distributed to all schools. For that he became somewhat of a pariah and was barred from educational positions. Undeterred, he launched a successful career in journalism and caused controversy once again when he took a pacifistic stance in the Russo-Japanese War of 1894-95. Shortly thereafter he founded Mukyokai in 1901.

Called a “Japanese Puritan” by some, Uchimura was proud of that title because it implied a Puritan ethic that associated him with Confucian discipline. Yet he rejected the trappings of western
Christianity and wanted Mukyokai to be independent. As such, it replaced services led by ministers with meetings led by lay members, simplified services by focusing on Bible readings mixed with some hymns and explication, used no foreign clergy, and kept no membership rolls. Uchimura viewed the movement he was leading as the continuation of the Reformation that had begun in Europe and migrated to America. Yet he was careful not to define his form of Christianity as exotic. Instead, he wrote that "Japanese Christianity . . . is Christianity received by [the] Japanese directly from God without any foreign intermediary; no more, no less" (written in 1920 and included in The Complete Works of Uchimura Kanzo, Volume 3, Tokyo, Kyobunkwan, 1972, p. 132). He continued that God might very well have intended "to begin Christianity anew in the Land of the Rising Sun" (p. 232). That one sentence speaks volumes about the indigenous Christian movement in Japan and the desire of its founder to see his movement as both a fresh take on Christianity and also a continuation of a tradition that did not privilege any particular nation or region. After all, Christianity had once been a "new religion" in America, as it had once been in Europe.

Before leaving the subject of Christianity in Japan, I'll mention a few curiosities about the prevalence of Christian traditions there. Despite the low number of believers, tens of millions of non-Christian Japanese celebrate Christmas with trees, gift exchanges, mistletoe, and manger scenes—without any religious attachment. (A cynic might add that the United States is not immune from this syndrome.) There's even a Japanese equivalent of Santa Claus, a monk-like fellow who carries a sack of gifts and cards over his shoulder. Another example is the popularity of Christian weddings among the Japanese, probably as a result of media attention given to high-profile weddings of western movie stars and wedding shows on television. As such, Christianity has become infused into folk religion, even though the demands of the faith have kept it from becoming a popular religion in and of itself. Again, Japan imports religions and then fashions them into a "Japanized" model. Perhaps the most bizarre example is the folklore belief among some that Jesus escaped death on the cross and traveled to Japan with his brother,
where he married, had children, died, and was buried in northern Japan. A little internet research will lead you to information about the reputed burial site, which attracts thousands of tourists each year. As outrageous as this lore may seem to some, Japan probably is no more absorbed in pseudo-history than our own country—judging by conspiracy theories, apocalyptic predictions, and twisted interpretations of history found in our own popular culture.

I'll end this overview of a few Japanese religions by describing a cultural force to reckon with in contemporary Japan, in other nonwestern countries, and—for that matter—in the United States. Sometimes called cults, these new and quite popular forms of religious life are more appropriately labeled "new religions," for that is just what they are. Though certainly there a few groups that brainwash vulnerable adherents, have evil intent or methods, and deserve the "cult" title—such as Aum Shinrikyo, which perpetrated the deadly gas attack in a Japanese subway in 1995—the vast majority of the 300-plus new religions in Japan want nothing more than to provide new types of religious experience not available in traditional religions. By some estimates, over one-third of the Japanese population is involved with them. Here I'll outline a few features and then describe one particular example I encountered on several trips to Japan.

Though some new religions started as early as the nineteenth century, the term usually refers to groups formed after World War II, when many younger Japanese began abandoning traditional religions that they believed had failed the nation. Generally, these forms combined new features with borrowings from traditional religions, to form an original amalgam of belief, symbolism, and practice. Here are some typical features of new religions:

1. A charismatic founder who continued to lead the group after founding it
2. Belief in the power of mind to overcome daily problems
3. Belief that a paradise on earth will follow an apocalyptic period
4. Importance of common bonds and close-knit groups within the sect
5. Emphasis on using religious practices to cure diseases and to heal
6. Use of magic
7. Focus on purification of the environment

As different as these groups may appear to be from some mainline faiths, the fact is they respond to common human needs—that is, to address daily challenges, to focus on pragmatic results, and to fill a void left by the loss of traditional religions.

Of the hundreds of new religions in Japan, the one with which I've had some experience is Mahikari. In 1994 I took part in a three-week trip to Japan sponsored by the East-West Center at the University of Hawaii and designed for professors who were not Japan experts. While my group was visiting the city of Takayama in the Japanese Alps, three or four of us looked to the skyline high above the city and spotted a massive structure with a curved golden roof punctuated by a large red orb. Feeling compelled to find out just what it was, we wove our way up streets outside the city center to what we later learned was the Main World Shrine of Sukyo Mahikari. There we were met by security officers who made it clear we had ventured beyond the usual tourist zones. Eventually we were permitted to enter the grand hall, which could accommodate almost 5,000 people and included a solid gold altar (or so I read later) with a huge fish as a backdrop, emblematic of a portion of Mahikari cosmology.

After leaving the shrine that afternoon and then returning to the U.S., I was curious enough to do some research. For example, I learned Mahikari was founded in 1960 by a shamansitic leader and at his death in 1974 was divided into two organizations, each claiming to be the “real” Mahikari. As well, the sect spread beyond Japan with centers in the United States, including one in Atlanta that I've visited. Today the web site of one of the two groups mentions activity in the United States, includes testimonials from Americans who have been cured of their ills, offers the assistance of a “traveling
minister” to remote locations, and makes reference to the fine old American tradition of a “free first lesson.”

Clearly, web exposure is critical to new religions trying to expand their markets, just as it is to many mainline religions in the United States. When I found a similar Mahikari web site over ten years ago, I read that the group was anticipating an apocalyptic event on August 1, 1999. On that date, so the web site stated, the planets would align in the shape of a cross to trigger a shift from a material to a spiritual civilization on earth. Well, August 1, 1999 came and went without a change in civilizations. Recently I consulted a similar Mahikari web site, which now refers to a festival that occurred on that date but no accompanying apocalypse. This is reminiscent of a prediction by the Millerites in our country (precursor of the Adventists) that the world as we know it would end on October 22, 1844, a date later referred to as “The Great Disappointment” in that the world survived. In his 1997 book entitled Questioning the Millennium, Stephen Jay Gould noted that “Nothing dulls enthusiasm quite so effectively as the spectacular failure of a central prediction.” Yet he added that “nothing can shake the faith of a true believer either.” Just as most Millerites kept the faith and adjusted their cosmic clocks to the fact that they were still on earth, I suspect most Mahikari adherents postponed the millennium and focused more on what can be done in this world.

Like other new religions, Mahikari offers its members a methodology for curing themselves, healing others, and even addressing problems with animals and inanimate objects like cars and washing machines. The mechanism is to direct “true light” from God through the believer’s open palm, either inward toward themselves or outward toward other people or objects. After a brief three-day training course, members are properly credentialed to give and take light, demonstrating again that most Japanese religions have high expectations for achieving practical results.

Among other characteristics of Mahikari, a noteworthy one is the tendency to use features and symbols from diverse religions to create a hybrid faith with a Japan-centered identity. Although Japanocentric themes are understandably downplayed at locations
outside the country, the fact is that Mahikari has its own cosmology
that starts and ends in Japan, similar to Shinto. Indeed, writings of
the founder suggest that all the world's great religions started in
Japan—and even that religious leaders such as Jesus, Mohammed,
Moses, Confucius, and Buddha visited Japan for spiritual training.
This Japanocentric vision became even more apparent when I visited
Takayama for the second time in 2002. After arriving in town, I
contacted the Mahikari headquarters, mentioned I wanted to do
some research, requested a tour, and was picked up at my hotel by
a friendly Mahikari adherent, who gave me a guided tour of the
Mahikari shrine, history museum, and other centers. And what a
tour it proved to be.

First he drove me to a structure built on the edge of a Mahikari
holy mountain and dedicated to the memory the religion's founder.
This remarkable pyramid symbolizes the Mahikari belief that the
religion is connected to Mayan culture as well as all other ancient
civilizations. Surrounded by manicured gardens, man-made streams
and waterfalls, and gated security, it could only be viewed from a
distance and could not be photographed. I was told only the founder
(now long dead) and the Mahikari gods were permitted to enter the
pyramid area. My guide said the pyramid stood 43 meters high, with
a middle set of 88 steps that were built on a 66-degree slope so that
mere mortals could not climb it. (Of course, I remember wondering
who maintained it.) Near the top were carved insignias of several
clans, along with what can only be described as a giant “happy face”
on a golden orb, representing the ever-jovial disposition of the
founder. The sun-like figure had sixteen gold rays radiating from
it, representing the major world civilizations with which Mahikari
claims connections in its view of world history.

Besides this visit to the founder's memorial, I was driven to
several other sites including the Mahikari History Museum, which
opened in 1998. My trip there was memorable. The main feature
was a huge atrium around which were exhibit halls at three or four
levels. We arrived in time to witness an atrium light show scheduled
for that afternoon. At the appointed time, automatic shades came
down on all 365 windows around the pyramid-shaped atrium, after
which a red laser-like beam shone down from the top of the hall to a 500 kilogram-marble ball in a fountain at the center of the floor. The now red ball (representing the sun, so important to Mahikari dogma) was kept rotating in place by a water stream. Adding to the atmosphere was Wagnerian-like background music. My guide pointed out that the floor of the atrium can be disengaged and lowered into an amphitheater arrangement.

Most reflective of the Mahikari belief system was the World History Hall in another part of the building. It focused on a description of what Mahikari considers the world’s great ancient civilizations and their connections with Japan. One display noted that Japanese-like pottery was found overseas and included the following: “One can imagine that in ancient times a global network was established with Japan as its center.” My sense is that Mahikari officials tried to produce a museum that would pass muster with an international audience and moves beyond propaganda. In fact, the museum curator proudly told me that the museum had been visited by Smithsonian representatives, and I can only imagine their amazement at viewing this massive structure dedicated to an alternative history of the world. Clearly, the museum’s main purpose was to glorify Mahikari and its founder.

1. This description of one so-called new religion ends my brief outline of the varieties of religious experience in Japan. To summarize:

2. Japan’s religious history includes three main religions—native Shinto and imported Buddhism and Confucianism—that have been practiced in Japan for over 1,000 years.

3. The tradition also includes two relatively new religions to Japan—the imported Christianity and native New Religions—that have added variety to the Japanese religious climate.

4. The Japanese people are less concerned with absolute belief systems than they are with practical application of religion to their everyday life.
In light of their preference for pragmatism, many Japanese—while considering themselves nonreligious because they don't subscribe to one set of beliefs—have infused many religious traditions, ancient and otherwise, into their daily lives.

Clearly, the religious life of any nation is an important key to understanding its people, culture, and aspirations. That fact has never been more important than it is today, when on every front we face cultures different from our own. While it's naïve to think cultural understanding alone would have prevented past wars or will prevent future ones, nevertheless it can go a long way toward opening minds to the diversity of human experience. Maybe, just maybe, such exposure will help mankind privilege peace over conflict. One can only hope.

Note: This article is an edited version of a January 2010 presentation given to the Pen and Plate Club in Asheville, North Carolina. Some parts are drawn from my previous work on Japanese religions published in the Japan Studies Association Journal, East-West Connections, and Journal of Popular Culture, as well as a 2002 JSA annual conference presentation on my second visit to the Mahikari world headquarters in Takayama.