

ARTICLES

Religious Syncretism: The Japanese Case

Syncretism is a worldwide phenomenon. Basically, it refers to the merger of elements of different religions. In that sense, no religion is free from syncretism. It can present itself in varying degrees with two extremes: either as a complete fusion into a new coherent reality or as a simple juxtaposition of different elements.¹ What regards the second extreme, in the field of Japanese religion, different modes of belief, conflicting with one another in their respective peculiarities, not only coexist in the community, but operate at the same time within the life of the selfsame individual person.² Therefore, I propose to see the encounter of different religions in Japan as moving along a continuum where mutual interpretation and fusion takes place.

In Japan, a lot of mutual transformations have taken place that have reshaped Shinto through Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Christianity and vice versa. Thus syncretism has firm roots in Japan.

This article intends to analyze briefly the historical process of the merger of originally Japanese elements with influences from abroad.

¹ Helmer Ringgren, "The Problem of Syncretism", Sven S. Hartman, ed., *Syncretism*, Stockholm, Almqvist & Wiksel, 1969, 7-14; E. M. Pye, "The Transplantation of Religion", *Leiden*, *Numen* 16 (1969), 234-239.

² Hajime Nakamura, *Ways of Thinking of Eastern Peoples. India — China — Tibet — Japan*, Honolulu, East-West Center Press, 1968, 401, 531-543.

1. *Shinbutsu-shugo* and *Honji-suijaku* theory

As one of the major themes of Japanese syncretism is the encounter of Shinto and Buddhism, I have to explain first of all two terms referring respectively to the *kami*-belief (Shinto) and Buddhism, namely *shinbutsu-shugo* and *honji-suijaku* theory. Matsunaga writes: "In Japanese Buddhism we can find two important related terms specifically dealing with the problem of assimilation: the first is *shinbutsu-shugo* (unification of gods and Buddhas) and the second is the *honji-suijaku* (true nature—trace manifestation theory). The former is a broad term encompassing all efforts to unite the indigenous faith with Buddhism, a process beginning with the inception of Buddhism in Japan and generally dealing with exterior phenomena brought together without systematization. On the other hand, the *honji-suijaku* theory is the culminating philosophy arising out of this initial exterior unification and although it can be classified under the general category of *shinbutsu-shugo*, it presents a systematic Buddhism philosophy of assimilation."³

Shinbutsu-shugo is thus rather pre-logical, while the *honji-suijaku* theory is more the result of philosophical reflection that resulted from *shinbutsu-shugo*. Finding its starting point in India and carried further in China, the Japanese formulation of the theory got its first shape in the Heian period (794-1185) and reached its full expression in the middle of the Kamakura period (1185-1333).

2. *Shinbutsu-shugo* — Unification of *kami* (gods) and Buddhas

The early Japanese *Kami-nagara no Michi* (the Way as it was practiced by the *kami* or gods) was a complex of beliefs and practices similar to early Korean religion: ancestor- and nature worship, shamanism, divination, magic, exorcisms, purification rituals, etc. It was a largely unorganized cluster of magico-reli-

³ Alicia Matsunaga, *The Buddhist Philosophy of Assimilation. The Historical Development of the Honji-Suijaku Theory*, Tokyo, Sophia Univ./Tuttle, 1969, 2.

gious views.⁴ The major difference with early Korean religion was that the beliefs of the Korean people were superficially flavored with the glitter of some Buddhist deities f.e. Miroku. Korean religion entered Japan in 522 but was only practiced in the circles of the immigrant under the leadership of Shiba Totto and went through an incubation period in Japanese soil. Through Korean ambassadors, it entered into contact with the powerful Soga-clan and the imperial clan. These contacts resulted in an unsystematic syncretic process that broadened up in ever widening waves. The Soga people and the imperial court accepted the Korean Buddhist deities as new *kami*. The latter ones became an extension of the old *kami*-belief.⁵ This is the beginning of the *shimbutsu-shugo*.

The unification of the *kami* and the Buddhist deities can be very well illustrated through the casting of the statue of the Great Sun Buddha in Nara. The combined efforts of emperor Shomu (701-756), the leader of the mountain ascetics and Hosso monk Gyogi (670-749) and the common people made it possible to finish the construction in 749. This statue in fact represents the Ultimate Reality of Buddhism, the Sun Goddess Amaterasu and the ideal human being.⁶

The common people themselves always mixed up the many *kami* with the Buddhist deities. This mixture was stimulated by the former pre-buddhistic magicians, healers and shamanistic diviners who were living in the mountains and the valleys. They worshipped the mountains as *shintai* (*kami*-bodies). In the sixth and seventh centuries they had absorbed a nominal influence of Buddhism and Taoism. However, they had no formal training in the Buddhism doctrines and were not ordained priests.⁷ They were the embodiment and the sustainers of the beliefs of the

⁴ Joseph M. Kitagawa, "Paradigm Change in Japanese Buddhism", *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, Nagoya, Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture, nrs. 2-3 (1984), 127.

⁵ J. H. Kamstra, *Encounter or Syncretism. The Initial Growth of Japanese Buddhism*, Leiden, E. J. Brill, 1967, 186-470.

⁶ Charles Eliot, *Japanese Buddhism*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964, 219-223.

⁷ H. Byron Earhart, *A Religious Study of the Mount Haguro Sect of Shugendo. An Example of Japanese Mountain Religion*, Tokyo, Sophia Univ., 1970, 1-39, 153-158; Joseph M. Kitagawa, *Religion in Japanese History*, New York, Columbia Univ., 1966, 38-45.

common people during many centuries and the typical representative of a combination of Shinto and Buddhism. Because of the authority of Gyogi, they were instrumental in convincing the common people to contribute to the building of the great statue. Under their influence, the Buddha himself became a *marebito* (divine visitor), a traditional Shinto term for a *kami* who visits the villages during harvest time and at other important seasonal occasions. The Buddha became the great healer and holy man whose image was projected in the *ubasoku* or the mountain ascetics who, in their turn, helped the people in the name of the *kami* and the Buddha through their strange powers.

The existing tensions between the *ubasoku* and the ordained Buddhist priests of the Nara period (710-784) became partly overbridged through their collaboration with Shomu and Gyogi. This overbridging was consolidated through the formation of *shugendo* (the order of the mountain ascetics) roughly in between the tenth and the twelfth centuries, because they became affiliated respectively with Tendai- and Shingon Buddhism. *Shugendo* developed into established organizations with at their core mountain worship. The sacred mountains, considered to be *shintai* (*kami*-bodies), became now also Buddha-bodies, or Buddhist *shintai*, a curious transference of an original Shinto-concept into a Buddhist concept.

During the Tokugawa period (1603-1868) a number of the *ubasoku* moved to the growing towns, married shamanistic women and became very close to the religious life of the townspeople.

The separation of Shinto and Buddhism (*shimbutsu-bunri*) at the beginning of the Meiji Restoration was a serious blow to the *shugendo* organization, because they were neither fully Buddhist nor fully Shintoistic. It can be said, however, that the *ubasoku* were the incarnation of the *shimbutsu-shugo* mentality on the popular level. It is this mentality that continues today to determine the outlook of the larger masses with their belief in the *kami* and the Buddhas.

3. The *Honji-suijaku* theory

As said above, the *honji-suijaku* theory is a logical elaboration connected with pre-logical *shimbutsu-shugo*. It is thus a phi-

losophical development that became molded concretely in two systems, resulting respectively from Tendai and Shingon. The systems are called *Sanno-ichijitsu Shinto* (One Truth Mountain King Shinto) in the case of Tendai Buddhism and Ryobu Shinto in the case of Shingon Buddhism. In both system, *kami* and Buddhist deities became interchangeable. The formation of the *honji-suijaku* theory was a slow and gradual process, continually fed by *shimbutsu-shugo*. Its full elaboration was reached at the end of the Kamakura period.⁸

It started with the elevation of Japanese Buddhist saints. As such, the earliest forms of the theory did not deal with the relationship between *kami* and Buddhas, but with the relationship between the Buddha himself and the *bosatsu* (*bodhisattvas*). Famous Japanese Buddhist saints became considered to be reincarnations of other famous Buddhists. But, before the real formulation of the theory itself could begin, changes had to come about what regards the Buddhist viewpoint and the acceptance of the *kami*. The way these changes took place is interesting and shows clearly how the *honji-suijaku* theory was being prepared by the *shimbutsu-shugo* process. The harmonization of the Buddhist deities as new *kami* with the Japanese *kami* themselves occurred during Japan's first contact with Korea, as pointed out above. In the Nara period it was thought that the *kami* accepted and protected the Buddhist doctrine. Then the *kami* become considered as suffering sentient beings because of their *karma*. Consequently, the *kami* expressed the desire to be saved by the Buddha. A further step was then to accept the possibility of the enlightenment of the *kami* and their elevation to the rank of *bosatsu*. A very clear example is *kami* Hachiman who received the title of *bosatsu*. The last step is then the belief that the *kami* are manifestations of various Buddhas and *bosatsu*. They became thus *suijaku* (trace — manifestations), left on earth by the *honji* (true nature — original substance) of the Buddha and the various Buddhist deities and *bosatsu*. At first sight, the *kami* seem to end up in occupying a second rank position and seem to be inferior

⁸ Eliot, *o.c.*, 240-244; Daigan & Alicia Matsunaga, *Foundation of Japanese Buddhism*, Los Angeles/Tokyo, Buddhist Books Int., 1978, Vol. I, 238-241 and Vol. II, 294-301; Alicia Matsunaga, *The Buddhist Philosophy of Assimilation*, 214-230.

to the Buddhas. However, this is not in line with the Buddhist philosophy that states that the Absolute Reality or the cosmic Buddha compenetrates the relative and vice versa. There exists only oneness in differentiation and differentiation in oneness. There is no ontological difference between the *honji* and the *suijaku*. To see the one is to see the other.⁹

Generally speaking, the weaker side in this process was Shinto. It was not accustomed to formulate clearly its doctrine, the nature of the *kami* that are mostly powers of nature, and the nature of the shrines. In short, the weakness of Shinto consisted in its vagueness. But this does not mean at all that the process was moving only from the all-absorbing Buddhist philosophy towards a powerless Shinto. The Shinto priests themselves were conscious of the strong philosophical and political position of Buddhism. The official, intellectual and artistic side of life at the imperial court and in the palaces of the aristocracy was deeply permeated by Chinese cultural factors. Consequently, the Shinto priests did not oppose the influence of Buddhism on the Shinto cult. This explains how many Buddhist deities found their way into the Shinto pantheon. The shrines adopted the incantations, the ritual fire ceremonies and many magical cults of Tendai- and Shingon Buddhism. But also the Buddhist leaders realized that the life of the common people was and remained deeply Shintoistic; these simple people were living and laboring on the land estates of the monasteries; they remained very much attached to their *ujigami* or their village *kami*. Thus the monks had reasons enough to foster the propagation of the *honji-suijaku* theory. In this sense the assimilation process was pushed *and* from the Buddhistic *and* from the Shintoistic side.

In the lapse of time, a kind of anti-Buddhist *honji-suijaku* theory was emerging as a reaction against the overpowering philosophical Buddhist influence. This reaction is embodied f.e. in the person and the writings of Yoshida Kanetomo (1435-1511) who developed his famous *Yui-itsu* Shinto (Unique Shinto) which was as syncretic as the *honji-suijaku* theory itself. He turned upside down the Buddhist philosophy of assimilation, contending

⁹ Matsunaga, o.c., 227.

that the *kami* were the *honji* (true nature) and the Buddhist deities the *suijaku* (trace manifestation). Yoshida's system is not very original. His goal was to advance the cause of Shinto by trying to prove its superiority over both Buddhism and Confucianism. He did not hesitate to incorporate them into his *Yui-Itsu Shinto*. He was one of the first Shinto authorities to formulate a Shinto position and was followed in the Tokugawa period by many others who started reaching out for a more pure form of Shinto.¹⁰

4. *The role of Taoism*

Assessing the role of Taoism in the syncretic process of Japan is rather difficult. In China, it appears in two forms. Philosophical Taoism with a whole range of popular beliefs and practices. It combines data from earlier cosmological systems, the quest for long life, alchemistic practices, divination, magic and a lot of deities.¹¹

It was this second kind of Taoism that came into contact with early Japan. Its general line is rather similar to the early *kami*-belief and that is why it is difficult to delineate clearly how and to what degree it blended with the Japanese religious practices. The picture becomes clearer in the early eight century when it was organized as the *Onmyo-ryo* (Bureau of Divination). Its task was to make sure that governmental and societal order were in accordance with the cosmic order. Its officials interpreted unusual phenomena, regulated the calendar and also acted as diviners. Through this religious Taoism, many of the popular Chinese divinities found their way to Japan. The activities of the *Onmyo-ryo* affected the popular shamans so that religious Taoism merged with the Shinto-Buddhistic beliefs of the common people.

¹⁰ Matsunaga, o.c., 282-283; "Yui-Itsu Shinto Myobo Yoshu. Lehrabris des Yui-Itsu Shinto", text and explanation by T. Itabashi — H. Dumoulin, *Monumenta Nipponica*, Tokyo, Sophia Univ., Vol. III (1940), nr. 1, 184-241; Ryusaku Tsunoda, e.a., *Sources of Japanese Tradition*, New York, Columbia Univ., 1963, Vol. I, 265-266.

¹¹ Holmes Welch, *Taoism. The Parting of the Way*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1972, 88-141.

Furthermore, during the Heien period (794-1191), Taoism penetrated into Shinto and Buddhism through an ever greater assimilation of magical charms and magical formulas and the belief in lucky and unlucky days. In this period also, the Chinese divinities practically lost their original Taoist identity. Taoist festivals and cults became part of Japanese popular religion. All in all, the Taoist influence was more indirect because of its overlappings with more or less coinciding Shinto elements. These overlappings went on throughout the sixteenth century, especially because of the activities of the shamanistic *hijiri*, the popular successors of the officials of the *Onmyo-ryo*. These *hijiri* drew on Shinto and Buddhist customs as well as on those of religious Taoism so that the common people themselves completely forgot its non-Japanese original character.¹²

The inroads of philosophical Taoism in Japan must be seen mainly in the context of Zen Buddhism. Zen is a Chinese product with roots in India and in the Taoist philosophy. Chinese Ch'an (Zen) has similarities with Taoism that praises the natural spontaneous cosmic order, seeking a total unification of man and cosmos. This unification ends up in a kind of enlightenment. Other points of similarity are: the existence of an impersonal cosmic principle that escapes our faculty of rational understanding and that cannot be described in words, the rejection of the intellect as an instrument cutting the reality into parts and the use of paradoxes; one has to "lose himself" in the undescribable cosmic reality and this suggests the Buddhist rejection of the superficial "self" in order to come to the mystical experience of "Universal Emptiness".

The first traces of Zen in Japan are visible in the Nara schools and Tendai- and Shingon Buddhism but it made its major impact through the efforts of respectively Eisai (1141-1215) and Dogen (1200-1253), the originators of Rinzaï- and Soto Zen. Both Zen schools have known their own development and have had an immense impact on Japanese culture. Because of their

¹² H. Byron Earnhart, *Japanese Religion. Unity and Diversity*, Belmont, Dickenson Publ. Co., 1969, 29-31; 66-67.

Chinese background, they contributed to the implicit presence of philosophical Taoism in Japan.¹³

5. *Confucian influences on Shinto*

The impact of Chinese Confucianism is basically conservative, political, social and ethical.¹⁴ Its first contact with Japan provided a kind of ethics for ruler and subjects, recommending loyalty and filial piety. The so-called Seventeen Articles Constitution, attributed to Shotoku Taishi (575-621), finds its real expression in the decades after the Great Reformation (*Taika no Kaishin* — 645), when Japan turned away from Korea and directed itself to China where it discovered the ideals of the Confucian centralized state.¹⁵

There is no doubt that the Confucian morality deepened out the rather superficial Shinto ethics that were simply based on external factors. This is clear from the ideas, expressed in the ninety two *semmyo* (imperial edicts) that appear in the *Shoku Nihongi* (Continuation of the *Nihongi* — 791); they represent the ideals of the moral principles of Shinto.¹⁶ However, these ideals refer no longer exclusively to external and physical impurity but to attitudes of the mind and the heart.

It is the Tokugawa period that shows the most interesting aspect of a syncretic process between Shinto and Confucianism. The Japanese Confucian scholars reacted rather violently against state-sponsored Buddhism that had become corrupt and fossilized, and also against the forbidden *Kirishitan* (Christianity).

Neo-Confucianism was being taught in the Zen monasteries that were the only centers of learning at that time. The parallel teaching of Confucianism and Buddhism turned many students away from Buddhism. Their main objection against Buddhism

¹³ Heinrich Dumoulin, *A History of Zen Buddhism*, New York, McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1963, 264-270; *Zen Enlightenment. Origins and Means*, New York, Weatherhill, 1979, 28-34.

¹⁴ Joseph J. Spae, *Ito Jinsai. A Philosopher, Educator and Sinologist of the Tokugawa Period*, Peiping, Catholic Univ., 1948, 11-80.

¹⁵ W. G. Aston, *Nihongi. Chronicles of Japan from the Earliest Times to A.D. 697*, Tokyo, Tuttle, 1972, Vol. II, 129-133; Kamstra, *o.c.*, 224-470.

¹⁶ Tsunetsugu Muraoka, *Studies in Shinto Thought*, Tokyo, Ministry of Education, 1964, 31.

was its deep yearning towards the unseen, the unreal and its desire to seek the solution of human problems in the after life. This other-worldliness became a constant objection against Buddhism. According to the Japanese Confucian philosophers, the only standard of the values of a philosophical system is its practicality in actual life. Confucianism provided this standard. Thus the Confucian scholars turned their attention to the social, educational and economic aspects of life for which they held Buddhism inadequate.¹⁷

The Chinese philosophers of the Sung period (960-1279) interpreted *Li* (Ri) as the Ultimate Reality as inherent in all the phenomena. *Li* is transcendental and immanent at the same time. The Japanese philosophers made *Li* the foundation of Shinto, thus giving it a kind of a pantheistic structure. Even when they wrote of the *kami* in anthropomorphic terms, they conceived them as continuous with the impersonal *Li*.¹⁸

When rejecting Buddhism, the Japanese Confucian philosophers naturally turned to Shinto that became heavily dependent on Confucianism. They did not contradict Shinto mythology as such. They rather explained it in the framework of a Confucian terminology and thus created a kind of syncretism.

Hayashi Razan (1583-1657) envisaged a union of Shinto and Confucianism on a large scale. For him, they are one in principle. He wrote: "Some people ask what is the difference between Shinto and Confucianism? My reply would be that they are one in principle. They only differ in effect... The Way of the Kings in another form is the Way of the Gods (Shinto) and the Way of the Gods in another form is the Way, that is, the Confucian Way. It is not the heretical Way. Buddhism is the heretical Way," and, "Shinto is *Li*. Nothing can exist outside *Li*. *Li* constitutes truth in nature."¹⁹

Yamazaki Ansai (1618-1682) created *Suika* Shinto (Grace and Blessings — Shinto) through a combination of Shinto mythology, the Chinese principles of Yin and Yang and emphasis on

¹⁷ Spae. o.c., 58-59.

¹⁸ Masao Maruyama, *Studies in the Intellectual History of Tokugawa Japan*, Tokyo, Univ. of Tokyo Press, 1974, 154-155.

¹⁹ Quoted by Maruyama, o.c., 151.

reverence for the emperor as identified with Heaven. His Shinto system consisted of the ethical principles of Confucianism, especially devotion, with the religious doctrines of Shinto.²⁰

The result of Japanese Confucian studies ended up in a deepening of the Shinto ethics. Shinto in the Tokugawa times can rightly be called Confucian Shinto.

6. *From the study of Japanese literature to nationalistic Shinto and State Shinto*

The anti-Buddhist attitude of the Confucian scholars brought Shinto more and more into focus. By the late eighteenth century, the Japanese intellectuals, connected with *Kokugaku* (National Learning), were prepared to reject not only Chinese Buddhism but also Chinese Confucianism and even Chinese culture.²¹ A strong desire to rediscover the true Japan of ancient times, free from subsequent foreign assimilation, had originated. The means to reach this goal was the philological, historical and critical study of the ancient Japanese texts. Their efforts brought about a kind of return to ancient Shinto, that developed in nationalistic Shinto and finally in *Kokka* Shinto (State Shinto).

I will deal only with two scholars and examine whether their attempts to return to Pure Shinto succeeded or not.

Motoori Norinaga (1730-1801) dedicated himself to literary study; he concentrated especially on the *Kojiki* (Records of Ancient Matters — 712), the *Genji Monogatari* (Tales of Genji (1000-1010) and the *Shin Kokin Wakashu* (New Collection of Old and Recent Waka Poems — 1205). The selection of these works, especially the *Kojiki*, represents his rejection of Confucian rationalism and ethics in favor of emotional expression in order to restore the pure spirit of Ancient Shinto.²²

His famous *Kojiki-den* (Commentary on the *Kojiki*) and other writings are a glorification of life in early Japan as the purest

²⁰ Herman Ooms, *Tokugawa Ideology. Early Contacts, 1570-1680*, Princeton, N.J., Princeton Univ. Press, 1985, 228-230, 282-284.

²¹ Marius B. Jansen, *Japan and Its World. Two Centuries of Change*, Princeton, N.J., Princeton Univ. Press, 1980, 24-28.

²² Muraoka, *o.c.*, 74; Shigeru Matsumoto, *Motoori Norinaga (1730-1801)*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard Univ. Press, 1970, 68-119.

expression of human kind. The spontaneous feelings traceable in early Shinto, the mythology and the poetry are the best acts of worship. There is only one religion to be followed: the Way of the *nami* or *Kami no Michi*. Japan is the product of Amaterasu, the Sun Goddess; hence, it is superior to all other nations. The Japanese nation was established when the Sun Goddess commanded Ninigi to descend to the Japanese islands and to rule them. His rulership has continued in his divine descendants, the emperors, to whom the Japanese must show the utmost reverence. Japan is also the center of the world and has a messianic destination: all nations are bound to bring homage to Japan and its emperor. The divine origin of the nation also affects the quality of its people. All human acts of the Japanese rest ultimately upon the will of the *kami* who implanted morality in the Japanese heart as a kind of instinct. Morality is obedience to the *kami*, to the emperor, the divine offspring of Amaterasu.

However, Motoori Norinaga's rediscovery of ancient Shinto was not free from syncretism.²³ He was influenced by the above mentioned *Suika* Shinto, the Confucian Shinto system of Yamazaki Ansai. There are also numerous likenesses to the Buddhist Pure Land tradition, his family religion. In his childhood, he had read several books associated with this kind of Buddhism that stresses faith in Amida Buddha. Reacting against Chinese rationalism, he stresses precisely faith in the wondrous facts of the *Kojiki*. But the typical Pure Land Buddhist concept of sin cannot be found in his writings.

It was then Hirata Atsutane (1776-1843) who brought Motoori's thought to completion.²⁴ He put Motoori's ideas into a very strong nationalistic framework and gave much support to the undercutting of the shogunate. That made him a forerunner of the Meiji restoration in 1868. He was convinced that the Japanese people, when adopting Buddhism and Confucianism, had forgotten the real significance of the emperor and the *kodo* (the Way of the Emperor), connected with the original Shinto ethics. The

²³ Muraoka, *o.c.*, 163-165.

²⁴ Horst Hammitzsch, *Hirata Atsutane. Ein Geistiger Kämpfer Japans*, Tokyo/Leipzig, Mitteilungen der Deutsche Gesellschaft für Natur- und Völkerkunde Ostasiens, Band 27, Teil E.; Muraoka, *o.c.*, 203-229.

Way of the Emperor is in fact the Way of the *Kami*. In order to walk along this way, two conditions are necessary: one has to study the traditions as they were before any Buddhist and Confucian influence and one has to have a *Yamatogokoro*, a Yamato heart or the mentality of the true ancient Japan. This Japan is the country of the *kami*, the place where everything begins; it is the foundation of all laws.

Kami, emperors, ancestors; living people and nation are one entity. Consequently, Shinto is the same as ancestor- and emperor worship. Hirata wanted to restore Shinto in its pure form (called Restoration Shinto), but in reality he depended on Taoism, Confucianism and Christianity. Taoist influences can be found in his conviction that the creator is living somewhere near the polar star and that Japan is nearest to that same star. Confucianism comes to the fore in his emphasis on *chuko*, loyalty and fidelity to the emperor (*chu*) and filial piety (*ko*). He picked up Christian ideas from works, written in Chinese by the Jesuit missionaries Matteo Ricci, Didacus de Pantoja and Giulio Aleni that had found their way to Japan. Hirata taught a doctrine of a creator God and life hereafter, concepts completely absent in early Shinto.²⁵ The human soul is immortal and there will be a reward in heaven or a punishment in hell after death.

Hirata's convictions and those of his disciples were without doubt important for the restoration of imperial power.

The Meiji restoration itself was partly the result of this revival of Shinto together with other internal and external factors that cannot be touched upon in this article. The Meiji restoration focussed on the person of the emperor and Shinto, following the model of early Japan under the slogan *saisei-itchi* (unity of religion and government). As early as 1868, the famous separation of Shinto and Buddhism (*Shimbutsu-hanzenrei*) was issued. In 1882 Shinto institutions were classified by law under two categories: *Kokka* Shinto (State Shinto) and *Shuha* Shinto (Sect Shinto). The government declared that *Kokka* Shinto was not a religion, that Shinto shrines were national institutions of an official and historical character and that all Japanese should par-

²⁵ Muraoka, *o.c.*, 10, 28-29, 212-216; Tsunoda, *o.c.*, Vol. II, 36.

ticipate in its ceremonies as part of their patriotic duty. Although based on the historical tradition and framework of Shinto, Kokka Shinto was essentially a newly concocted religion of ethnocentric nationalism.²⁶ It was disestablished only in 1945.

7. *The attitude of Christianity towards the Japanese religions*

The first contact of Christianity in its Catholic form with Japan was in 1549. Christianity was called *Kirishitan*, a corruption of the Latin word Christianus. It was tolerated for some time and even favored by some local lords. But it became suspected of being an instrument of European colonialism. It was accused of undermining Confucian loyalty and of attacking Shinto and Buddhism. It ended up in being persecuted by the Tokugawa Shogunate that closed the country in 1634. Everybody had to be registered at a Buddhist temple; the Christians had to hide their faith and became *kakure-kirishitan* (hidden Christians). They had to accept an external compromise with Buddhism and Shinto. This external compromise turned gradually into an internal compromise so that at the end of the Tokugawa period, there existed different groups of *Kirishitan*. Their beliefs ranged from a sometimes rather pure Catholicism to a syncretism of sixteenth century Catholicism, Shinto, Buddhism and other elements of folk religion.²⁷

The second contact of Christianity, this time in its Catholic and Protestant forms, took place in 1859, while the first Orthodox missionary arrived in 1861. Today, Christianity knows a very moderate success, due to its lack of inculturation.

Christianity needs a reassessment. Apart from some extreme examples of Shinto-Christian syncretism, there is little evidence that it has derived many elements from the Japanese religions.

²⁶ Shunzo Sakamaki, "Shinto: Japanese Ethnocentrism", Charles A. Moore, ed., *The Japanese Mind. Essentials of Japanese Philosophy and Culture*, Honolulu, Univ. of Hawaii Press, 1967, 29-31; Kitagawa, *o.c.*, 213.

²⁷ Kiyomi Morioka, "Development of Sociology of Religion in Japan", Kiyomi Morioka & William H. Newell, eds., *The Sociology of Japanese Religion*, Leiden. E. J. Brill, 1968, 9; Tokutaro Sakurai, "The Major Features and Characteristics of Japanese Folk Beliefs", *Ibid.*, 15-16.

Generally speaking, Christianity has always presented itself in its Western garb. As such, it remains a religion foreign to Japan. It has failed to take seriously the values of the Japanese religions and culture. It has to pay more attention to areas hitherto largely neglected by Christian theologians, Japanese and foreigners, namely the study of the religious in-depth dimensions of Japan, its spirituality and social structures.²⁸ There is also no doubt that the Christian Churches have to overcome the rigid institutional structures built up during the last century.

Christianity has made certainly a great contribution to Japan's modernization in the Meiji period, because it was part and parcel of Western culture itself. Today, a renewed positive theological approach of the totality of Japan is needed.

8. *The New Religions*

Most of the New Religions (*Shinko Shukyo*) of Japan move along the line of the historical continuum where mutual interpretation and fusion takes place. Some of them are fully syncretic, because they stand fully in the *Ryobu* Shinto tradition or in the *shimbutsu-shugo* faith. Other ones show influences of different sources.²⁹ I think that it is necessary to emphasize three criteria, needed for a correct understanding of these new religious groups. First: they are not new in themselves, but new combinations of factors deeply embedded in the heart of the Japanese people since many ages and remolded into new coherent or sometimes incoherent sets of beliefs, creeds, rituals and practices; their newness is mainly due to the fact that they are new socio-religious movements, that make the Japanese religious content relevant today. Second: they have to be understood from within the Japanese context which makes clear the syncretic character of their constitutive parts, namely folk religion, shamanism; ancestor worship, mountain worship, popular reactions against petrified traditional religions, changes in Japanese society, etc. Third: a judgment of these New Religions according to Western,

²⁸ Suzuki Norihisa, "Christianity", Hori Ichiro, ed., *Japanese Religion. A Survey by the Agency for Cultural Affairs*, Tokyo, Kodansha Int. Ltd., 1981, 86.

²⁹ Ernest D. Piryns, "Formative Elements in the Emergence and Growth of the New Religions of Japan", *Philippiniana Sacra*, Manila, Univ. of Santo Tomas, Vol. XIX (1984), nr. 55, 5-24.

especially Christian patterns and dogmatic categories, leads to distorted conclusions, as if Christianity's influence is preponderant.

Exception made for some groups that move along the line of the Lotus-tradition like *Rissho Kosei-kai* and *Soka Gakkai*, a classification as Shintoist, Buddhist, etc. is not helpful. Their doctrinal content often remains vague, heavily mythological, and, at least for Westerners, incoherent when it comes to theologizing. Their multi-varied character appeals strongly to the lower classes of society.

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The analysis of the historical process of the merger of originally Japanese religious elements with those coming from abroad is very complicate. The true main actors in this process seem to be Shinto and Buddhism. On the one hand, Shinto is the soft soil, the filter through which foreign religions are received. The reason why is that Shinto, at least in its unorganized or unsystematized forms, is a kind of bedrock or in-depth dimension, present in the Japanese heart since early times up to now. The vagueness of Shinto certainly contributes to its receptivity to non-Japanese religious influences. This in-depth dimension can be compared to a pre-logical and non-reflected consciousness. On the other hand, Buddhism has developed an all-embracing philosophico-theological system during its long wanderings from India through Southeast and East Asia. Its all embracing character is the result of reflection on the experience of the historical Buddha. Especially its formulation of the *Three Bodies of the Buddha* is an expression of its immense flexibility and capacity of assimilation. When Buddhism, together with Taoism and Confucianism, entered Japan, its expansion towards the East was brought to a kind of stop, because it had reached the utmost Eastern edge of Asia. The various foreign traditions entering Japan in ever new waves, accumulated layer upon layer. These layers interacted continuously among each other, all of them passing through the absorbing soft soil and filter of Shinto. The result is the extraordinary outlook of what we call "Japanese Religion".

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