

ARTICLE 28: AN ILLUSION OF RELIGIOUS TOLERATION AND SECULAR GOVERNMENT IN JAPAN

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Introduction

The late nineteenth century brought the decline of the Tokugawa Shogun and the increase in foreign pressures within Japan. The Meiji government, focused on restoring the Emperor, emerged and had to become accustomed to participating in an entangled, modernized, and westernized world. Studying European examples, the government created a Constitution that included new voting qualifications, a House of Representatives and a House of Peers, regulations to create a state budget, and importantly, freedom of religion.¹ Article 28 of the 1889 Constitution stated that “Japanese subjects shall, within limits not prejudicial to peace and order, and not antagonistic to their duties as subjects, enjoy freedom of religious belief.”² Like many Western countries at the time, Japan was claiming a new identity as a secular state.³

Though granted in the Japanese Constitution, the reality of a secular government, religious freedom, and toleration was quite different. Religion played a large, irreplaceable role in modern Japanese society, both politically and socially. Taking a deeper look into the development and use of State Shinto, the truth behind claims of religious toleration and protection, and people’s dependence on religion proves that Article 28 was

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¹Andrew Gordon, *A Modern History of Japan: From Tokugawa Times to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 93.

²The Constitution of the Empire of Japan (1889) accessed from “Hanover Historical Texts Project,” <http://history.hanover.edu/texts/1889con.html>.

³For the purposes of this paper, “secular” is defined as “not specifically relating to religion or to a religious body.” Definition from Dictionary.com, *The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition* (Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004).

granted for political reasons. Despite its promises, Japan was far from a secular society in the modern era, particularly in the Meiji, Taishō, and Shōwa eras, and wartime specifically.

State Shinto: Stability, Control, and National Unity

Established in 1868, the Meiji government was in place about twenty years before it enacted the Constitution that granted religious freedom. Originally, Meiji was created with traditional *saisei-itchi*, “unity of religion in government,” in mind, insisting Shinto become a “newly concocted religion of ethnocentric nationalism.”⁴ Shinto, as a native religion, originated from a Japanese national myth concerning the Sun Goddess Amaterasu, considering the Imperial family her descendants. In this religion, purity is important, giving specific focus on birth, life, and other sacred rituals that are important in expelling impure or bad luck. Being polytheistic, multiple gods or *kamis*, are worshiped at many different types of Shrines throughout the country, ranging from those for war veterans to exam success. In addition, it takes on an animistic approach, revering even mountains and rocks as valuable gods and spirits.⁵

Utilizing this national religion, the government immediately created the Department of Shinto and issued the “Separation Edict,” separating the Buddhism-Shinto co-existence that had been in place for hundreds of years. By 1870, the Shinto based “way of the kami” was introduced to guide all Japanese citizens.⁶ In 1872, *Kyodo-shoku*, an Administrative Office within the Religious Ministry, was set up to supervise religious Shinto teachings and other areas. This government control experienced many problems, protests, and changes, and by the late 1880s, the Administrative Office was dissolved and the Constitution written, separating church and state. However, in reality, state control of citizens’ devotion to Shinto was far from over. From

⁴Joseph Kitagawa, *Religion in Japanese History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966), 213.

⁵Lecture, Dr. Jinhee Lee, Eastern Illinois University, August 28, 2006.

⁶*Ibid.*, 201.

the 1880s on, the “national cult” of State Shinto was enforced in Japan with the government in control of over 200,000 Shrines and requiring all citizens to register, making Shinto a part of every Japanese life.⁷

Yet, the “secular” Japanese government used Shinto for far more than registration and population statistics. One of the first uses of state mandated Shinto was for the stabilization of government. Starting a new era in Japanese government, replacing a Shogun-centered *bakufu* system which was fairly peaceful for over two hundred years, the Meiji rulers knew that they needed a foundation to back up the restoration of the Emperor. They used the Shinto religion to add prestige, power, and sacredness to the position of Emperor, elevating him to the status of “living Kami,” god or deity.⁸ Only in the worship of the living kami, or Emperor, can Shinto reach its highest manifestation. This religious emphasis did not cease at the creation of the Constitution. Prince Ito, one of the main drafters of the Constitution, wrote in 1889:

The Emperor is Heaven descended, divine and sacred; He is preeminent above all his subjects. He must be revered and is inviolable. He had indeed to pay due respect to the law, but the law has no power to hold him accountable to it. Not only shall there be no irreverence for the Emperor’s person, but also He shall not be made a topic of derogatory comment nor one of discussion.⁹

This made the “kami’s will...the Emperor’s will,” and consequently, the will of the nation until the end of WWII.¹⁰ This emphasis on the Divine Will of the Emperor bears a striking resemblance to the Divine Right of Kings theory in seventeenth century Europe, stating the ruler receives divine guidance, therefore no one is worthy to challenge. This allows the

⁷William Bunce, *Religions in Japan: Buddhism, Shinto, and Christianity* (Rutland: Charles E. Tuttle Company), 28-31.

⁸Kitagawa, *Religion in Japanese History*, 203.

⁹D.C. Holtom, *Modern Japan and Shinto Nationalism: A Study of Present Day Trends in Japanese Religions* (New York: Paragon Book Reprint Corp., 1963), 9.

¹⁰Ibid., 10.

government to achieve stability and legitimacy over their new form of government by keeping everyone in their societal rank or place, reducing the risk of protest or unrest.¹¹

Similarly, the Japanese government used religion to stabilize their colonies. For example, Japanese officials supported the creation of Confucian temples and institutions in Taiwan and Korea to promote themselves as “benevolent and enlightened masters who had the divine commission to emancipate the inhabitants...from its state of chaos, ignorance, and misery.”¹² In other words, subjugated peoples should follow the Japanese rule without challenge because it is divinely inspired and will help bring them out of their inherent misery.¹³

In addition to using State Shinto to create a feeling of stability in Japan, the government also utilized State Shinto to create further governmental control over the people. For instance, all people, no matter what their self-claimed religion, had to register with a Shinto Shrine.¹⁴ The government continued to condense all the national shrines into one system, and used legal enactments to regulate the “organization, priesthood, and ceremony...and limited celebration [to] ceremonies and festivals considered appropriate to fostering national characteristics.” Any desire to deviate or make changes to this organization had to receive the approval of the prefectural governor.¹⁵ Most deviations were met with harsh conflict.

The governmental use of religion to control the people only increased as the society crawled closer to the Second World War. In fact, many religious institutions and decisions were then handled by the military. Pushing for support of the “holy war,” the government told Shinto priests that they are to “take appropriate steps regarding conditions in your respective jurisdictions in order to make people pray for the conquest of the enemy, feel the august virtue of the deities, entertain strong faith

¹¹Ibid., 12.

¹²Kitagawa, *Religion in Japanese History*, 259.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid., 201.

¹⁵Bunce, *Religions in Japan*, 31-34.

in our victory, and affirm still more their resolution to guard the imperial country."¹⁶ The government continued to stir up the war as a religious experience, "based on a sense of national destiny centering in the divine nature of the emperor and the sacred 'national structure.'"¹⁷ As seen in the film, Yasukuni Shrine,¹⁸ the ultimate honor was to serve Japan as an ultimately suicidal *kamikaze*, "divine wind," pilot. It is apparent, no matter if the masses supported it or not, "subservience to 'the way of the gods' and 'imperial way' was inevitable" because of governmental controls.¹⁹

Nonetheless, it must not be implied that the only function of State Shinto was perceived as a stabilizing and controlling institution. The use of a state wide cult or religion served to unify Japan in a time when many were asking, "Who are 'we Japanese?'"²⁰ And, countless were chanting, "Down with frivolous Europeanization!" "Keep to our national heritage!" and "Japan for the Japanese!"²¹ Shinto ideas as moral and national codes promoted by the state allowed Japan to emerge, at least in some light, to put "Western Technology, Japanese Spirit" into practice.²² This was idealized in the 1890 "Imperial Rescript on Education." This document was recited daily by school children and by all at special occasions. Although its promotion of State Shinto was not direct, it promoted the state through many religious references. It stated that its subjects would be "ever united in loyalty and filial piety" and required, the "guard and maintain the prosperity of Our Imperial Throne coeval with heaven and earth."²³ The document served as a form of national anthem and was treated as a "holy writ."²⁴

¹⁶Ibid., 40.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸John elson, *Spirits of the State: Japan's Yasukuni Shrine*, DVD. 2004.

¹⁹Bunce, *Religions in Japan*, 42.

²⁰Gordon, *A Modern History of Japan*, 111.

²¹Masuharu Anesaki, *History of Japanese Religion: With Special Reference to the Social and Moral Life of the Nation* (Rutland: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1963), 360.

²²Dr. Lee, Lecture, October 6, 2006.

²³Emperor Meiji, *Imperial Rescript of Education*, October 30, 1890.

²⁴Bunce, *Religions in Japan*, 39.

The use of Shinto ideas to promote nationalism only increased as militarism increased on the brink of World War II. Shrines took on "added prestige," and worshiping at them became more than a religious act, rather "a test of being a true Japanese subject."²⁵ Many times, religious practice was even overshadowed by nationalistic victory celebrations, fundraising for war supplies, and other patriotic activities at the Shrines.²⁶

Clearly, the government was using State Shinto and its practices to promote the stability and control of the nation, but at the same time, providing many Japanese with some much needed feelings of national unity, illustrating "Keep to our national heritage!," and "Japan for the Japanese!"²⁷ Either way, the government was far from secular, using Shinto to achieve their political goals.

Reality of Religious Toleration and Protection: Christianity and Buddhism

Keeping the above in mind, it is true that the Japanese 1889 Constitution did grant a degree of freedom of religion to its citizens. On paper, Buddhism and Christianity were allowed as long as the citizens were concurrently worshiping and registering with Shinto Shrines, but the government offered little in the way of religious toleration and protection.

From the beginning of Meiji Era, government officials viewed religious toleration not as a right that is owed to their citizens, rather a political strategy. Many Western powers had encouraged this openness concerning religion since the mid nineteenth century in order to establish a relationship, then unequal, with Japan. In the 1850s, President Fillmore, knowing that the Japanese disliked missionaries, told Commodore Perry to relay that "the United States was not like other Christian countries, since it did not interfere in religion at home, much less

²⁵Ibid., 40.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Dr. Lee, Lecture, October 6, 2006.

abroad.”²⁸ Japan quickly realized that the fastest way to reverse unequal treaties was with the same “modernization” and “Westernization” of their own culture, and this included adopting common legal and political practices, i.e. secular society. Though the government removed of the edict against Christianity in 1873, it was obvious the Japanese government still had “no love [or tolerance] for Christianity.”²⁹ This is evident through the examples of discrimination instead of toleration and protection that continued to plague Japan.

Of all the religions present in Japan during the modern era, Christianity was considered the worst of all evils. Ironically, government officials, former Buddhist priests, and citizens alike were coming together to use “their hard won religious freedom...to attack Christianity,” and in many respects, they were successful.³⁰ Anti-Christian feelings, dating back to time of unequal treaties and rough international relations with the West during the mid nineteenth century, only increased when a Western power would do something unfavorable, i.e. the United States passage of the Oriental Exclusion Act.³¹ In the 1890s, Inouye Tetsujiro, then professor of philosophy at Tokyo Imperial University, led an anti-Christian campaign stressing that the “Christian doctrine of universal love was incompatible with national virtues...and the Imperial Rescript on Education,” and institutions, like the University of Tokyo, were even gaining positive reputations as “anti-Christian.”³² As late as 1938, popular publications were claiming that Christianity brought an unwanted “measure of encroachment, anxiety and coercion.”³³

In addition, Christianity’s very foundations teach the worship of only one god, making it hard to worship polytheistic Shinto simultaneously. Those who refused to worship Shinto were imprisoned, and many died in prison or soon after being

²⁸Kitagawa, *Religion in Japanese History*, 236.

²⁹Ibid., 190.

³⁰Ibid., 231.

³¹Ibid., 243-245.

³²Anesaki, *History of Japanese Religion*, 360.

³³Holtom, *Modern Japan and Shinto Nationalism*, 93.

freed.³⁴ During the first three years of the Meiji era alone over three thousand Catholics were arrested or sent into exile.³⁵ Though violence and death was rare, discrimination in community, work places, and more was not, and over 60,000 hidden Christians suffered as the Meiji “secular” government often encouraged discrimination and gave no protection over religious activities.³⁶

On the other end of the spectrum, Buddhism was considered the other major religion in Japan. Before the Meiji, Buddhism, in combination with Shinto, had been a praised religion of Japan, including the requirement that every family register with a Buddhist temple. However, in modern Japan, Buddhists faced persecution that escalated rather quickly.³⁷ For example, in the Toyama district the number of temples was reduced from 1,730 to seven overnight.³⁸ All over the country demolished temples and monasteries sent priests and nuns back into secular life, and lands were sold or taken by the government. Although some was the result of consolidation for better control and oversight, many government officials and Shinto priests joined to raise anti-Buddhist feelings among the masses. Buddhists did fight back against the anti-Buddhist campaigns by, in some cases, staging riots and insurrections. For instance, Buddhists of three counties of Echizen (Fukui prefecture) marched together to a local government office demanding changes to allow Buddhist teachings. The government, instead of listening or allowing religious toleration, quickly put down this riot with government troops.³⁹ Those Buddhist priests who further refused to cooperate were often jailed or “intimidated into silence.”⁴⁰

Overall, by the late 1930s and 1940s, all “liberal” or “Western” thinking, including freedom of religion, was

³⁴Bunce, *Religions in Japan*, 41.

³⁵Kitagawa, *Religion in Japanese History*, 238.

³⁶Gordon, *A Modern History of Japan*, 110.

³⁷Ibid., 111.

³⁸Kitagawa, *Religion in Japanese History*, 202.

³⁹Ibid., 226.

⁴⁰Bunce, *Religions in Japan*, 42

“condemned under suspicion of being a threat to the Japanese way of life,” and “freedom of press, thought...assembly... conscience and belief, was violated.” People developed a sense of “fear” that denied them the right to express their thoughts to even their closest friends.⁴¹ Clearly, the government provided for a secular society by granting Constitutional freedom of religion, but in actuality, religions other than State Shinto were barely tolerated and rarely protected. Interestingly, there are few records of Buddhists or Christians recanting their faith in favor of Shinto.⁴² It seems, as discovered in the next section, people still desired the spiritual assistance religion brought them, no matter the cost.

Religion and the Populace: Dependence on and Creation

Though the government preached secular society and a national cult of Shinto, it did not stop the populace from showing their dependence and need for religion in their own personal lives. People experienced change in the lives due to modernization and Westernization, and many felt like they needed somewhere, other than the new, modernized State Shinto, to turn. Peasants, experiencing Rice Riots and labor strikes often turned to new “messianic or healing” religious activities because they felt that “neither modern civilization nor an industrial economy would alleviate their distress.”⁴³ By 1935 there were over 1,000 of these new religions in practice,⁴⁴ and many of these were practiced underground for fear of government disapproval.⁴⁵ Like the mainstream religions of Christianity and Buddhism, new religions were also seen as a threat to the government. Leaders were arrested and religions were “dissolved,” though many still existed in secret. Again, showing that secular society provided by freedom of religion on paper was not in practice.

⁴¹Kitagawa, *Religion in Japanese History*, 198.

⁴²Bunce, *Religions in Japan*, 42.

⁴³Kitagawa, *Religion in Japanese History*, 222.

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Bunce, *Religions in Japan*, 160.

Peasants and rural populations were not the only ones who felt they needed some where to turn. Young men and women struggled with *hammon*, spiritual trouble and agony, and were searching for something that went beyond what State Shinto could offer. In extreme cases, the inability to find what one was looking for led to suicide. For example, a young man, seventeen years of age, jumped into a waterfall, leaving words carved in a tree nearby rendering life “a riddle never to be solved by religion or philosophy.” Though this was an extreme case, it encompasses the idea that many young people, both urban and rural, felt at time.⁴⁶ It seems that the very set up of Japan’s modern secular, religiously free, society had a different effect on the people than the government originally predicted. Many were left desiring a place that offered more “concrete” and “practical” help than State Shinto.⁴⁷

Conclusion

There is no doubt that Meiji era brought about changes, political, social, international, economic, etc. that set modern Japan on a path necessary to play a significant role in the modern globalizing world. To do so successfully, the nation adopted many Western practices, including a Constitution that granted religious toleration. Article 28 of the 1889 Constitution stated that Japanese citizens are guaranteed religious freedom “within limits not prejudicial to peace and not antagonistic to duties as citizens.”⁴⁸ However, this hardly meant Japan was a secular nation. Religion was central part of modern Japanese life. The introduction of State Shinto was used to stabilize, control, and unite Japan as a nation, while other religions, mainly Christianity and Buddhism, were hardly tolerated or protected. Additionally, many were left with a longing for a different, more practical, religion than State Shinto.

⁴⁶Anesaki, *History of Japanese Religion*, 376.

⁴⁷Gordon, *A Modern History of Japan*, 159.

⁴⁸Ibid., 110.

By exploring these aspects of Meiji society, it is obvious that Article 28 may have established a state separated from church on the surface. However, in reality, religion still played an integral part in citizens' everyday lives, making it impossible to consider Japan a secular and religiously tolerant nation.