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Religious Pluralism in Japan

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Helen Hardacre, Religious Pluralism in Japan
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I am very honored and happy to be here today, and I would like to begin by expressing my sincere gratitude to our hosts from Shinnyo'en, to Duncan Williams for his invitation, and to my fellow participants. The topic I was given is pluralism and religious freedom in modern Japan.

The concept of religious pluralism can be considered from a variety of perspectives. For example, some view pluralism as the view that all religions are essentially aiming at the same thing, and hence no meaningful distinctions can really be drawn among them. Others see in the concept of pluralism a kind of hidden bias in which Christianity is taken to be the prototype of religion, and by comparison to it, all other religions are inferior even if they must be tolerated for expedience's sake. Some dislike the concept because it seems to imply a relativism so that it becomes difficult to assert that some religions contribute to society while others may be anti-social or contain other elements that are harmful. In this talk today, I would like to discuss pluralism as the peaceful, productive coexistence of religions, but reserving the prerogative to comment on the relation between religion and society in terms of relative contribution to the good of the society.

Religious pluralism ideally requires a commitment to unconditional, universal religious freedom for all, thus allowing people of all religious beliefs and members of all religious organizations to have the same rights as all other citizens. Religious freedom has been interpreted in different ways in different societies at different times in history. In ideal terms, religious freedom should include the freedom to hold any religious belief, to form associations, to build places of worship, to proselytize, to operate businesses and own property, and to participate in society on an equal footing with members of other religions and with ordinary citizens. In my understanding, true religious pluralism can exist only when and where religious freedom is upheld as a shared value of society.

The constitutions of democratic countries include articles that protect religious freedom. Both the Meiji constitution of 1889 and the postwar constitution of 1947 include such clauses. There are significant differences between the two, both in their wording and in the way they have been interpreted. Furthermore, other laws besides the constitution itself can limit or place conditions on religious freedom. The infamous Peace Preservation Law of 1925, laws about lese majeste, and the Newspaper Law were used before 1945 to restrict religious groups, especially the new religious movements of the period. Even groups not targeted directly by these laws were greatly intimidated. Limitations on religious freedom and pluralism were closely tied to State Shinto,

a system in which shrines were under state management, and in which the people were pressured to participate in shrine rites and give lip service to the literal truth of Shinto myths. In this way, the right to religious freedom was subordinated to the duty to uphold Shinto.

Under the Meiji constitution and its associated laws, it was assumed that the state must regulate religion in order to uphold the social order and to prevent inter-religious conflict. The prewar government brutally suppressed a new religious movement called Omoto, first in 1921 and again in 1935, bombing its headquarters and imprisoning its leaders until the end of the war. There are numerous other cases of suppression of religion before 1945, in spite of constitutional guarantees.

How could a country that recognized religious freedom also persecute religion so severely as happened before 1945? There is no question but that Japan subscribes to the rule of law, so the question remains why these suppressions could take place. I suggest that the answer lies in the character of Japanese secularism. I cannot fully explain my idea in so short a time as we have today, and the thesis remains admittedly under-developed, but let me try to sketch the outline.

Secularism, like pluralism and religious freedom, has been defined in a variety of ways. Some would use the term as a synonym for separation of religion from state, or to refer to religion's supposed decline accompanying modernization, based in part on statistical information showing declining rates of church attendance and so forth. I would like to focus instead on a perspective derived from the work of Charles Taylor in A Secular Age, in which he examines secularism as a long-range process in which "the conditions of belief" change. He is interested in a change he sees happening in the West between the years 1500 and 2000, so that at the beginning of that time, religious belief is "axiomatic," but by the end it is just one of a variety of possible stances, and is increasingly a difficult choice to adopt. In addition, it seems to me that the perspective of Talal Asad in Formations of the Secular is also relevant to Japan. In this work Asad approaches secularism as a political project of elites, which seeks to exclude religion from the public sphere. That is to say, in secular regimes, an elite polices the public sphere to exclude views on social issues that are made on the basis of religious faith. The net effect is to push religion into the private sphere--and there it is free--people are free to believe what they like, so long as they do not try to influence social policy or sway public opinion on the basis of their religious beliefs. Secularizing elites claim to embody rationality, while simultaneously linking religion with irrationality, superstition, and ignorance as a way to keep it out of public discourse. There is a danger of secularism becoming an ideology, claiming to have a monopoly on rationality, modernity, and science, while proclaiming that religion must inevitably decline and must confine itself to the private sphere. Clearly the conditions of religious belief are greatly constrained

in a secular regime that sees religion as anti-modern and retrograde, even if there are constitutional protections of religious freedom and an apparent commitment to pluralism.

The character of the Japanese state as set out in the Meiji constitution is avowedly secularist, and we can see the prewar persecutions as efforts in fact to enforce secularists' ideal that religion would be free in the private sphere but not the public. The writings of the Meiji oligarchs, Meiji public intellectuals such as Fukuzawa Yukichi, and political thinkers centrally involved in the drafting of the Meiji constitution such as Inoue Kowashi, show a clear commitment to secularism and a low opinion of Japanese religions. However, Japanese secularism was not solely a question of the opinions of these social and political elites. It was intimately connected to the way the government deployed, shaped, and manipulated Shinto over the years 1868 to 1945, and these various appropriations of Shinto were inseparable from the expansion of Japan itself into an empire controlling extensive overseas colonies and the puppet state of Manchukuo.

It should not be forgotten that even as the government of Japan was working toward promulgation of the Meiji constitution in the 1870s and 1880s, it was carrying out a massive program of shrine construction. As Okinawa and Hokkaido were colonized, government and settlers built many shrines in partnership, and these shrines were brought into the system of universal shrine rankings administered by the bureaucracy. The government itself built numerous shrines of several different kinds: satellites of the Ise Shrines, such as the Yokohama Kotai Jingu, and others called Daijingu or Kotai Jingu; shrines for imperial loyalists, such as the Minatogawa Jinja, Nogi Jinja and others; shrines for the war dead such as Yasukuni Shrine and its prefectural branches that were called Nation Protecting Shrines (gokoku jinja); shrines dedicated to emperors, such as Meiji Jingu, Kashihara Jingu, and Heian Jingu. The largest category by far was the overseas shrines throughout the empire, including Taiwan, Korea, Manchuria, Sakhalin, the south seas territories, Singapore, Batavia, Thailand, and the Republic of China. It is estimated that a total of 1640 overseas shrines were built with government support and oversight.

Thus, while the character of the Japanese state before 1945 claimed to be a constitutional monarchy with no state religion, the government was a major patron of Shinto and used it as the symbolic representation of Japanese rule in the colonies and in Manchukuo. This discourse depended on the bureaucratic fiction that Shinto is non-religious in character, and hence not covered by religious freedom. Shinto not being a religion meant that the people were not free not to show reverence for its deities and its theology of kokutai. The conditions under which religious freedom actually operated thus were greatly constrained by State Shinto. That means also that the people did not really have

religious freedom, and also that the appearance of religious pluralism was a sham, since no religion could avoid subordinating itself to State Shinto.

The postwar constitution's protection of religious freedom changed the terms of the debate. Both the constitution and related laws, such as the 1951 Religious Corporations Law, assume that government must be prevented from interfering with the free exercise of religious freedom. Under this postwar regime, the religious world grew and flourished. New religious movements, especially, proliferated new teachings and created new organizations that many people found deeply satisfying and meaningful. In the process, Japan has become a world model of religious pluralism.

Recently, however, we see changes in religion's social position in Japan. The Aum Shinrikyo incident of 1995 was a serious act of terrorism, and Japanese society turned against religion dramatically. Public opinion polls found that negative attitudes toward religion increased, and many organizations that had nothing to do with Aum suffered as a result. The public began to question whether religion truly contributes to society, and the entire religious world became defensive. The Religious Corporations Law was revised, now giving government a mandate to protect the public from religion's potential to do harm. This revision actually reverses the basic assumptions of the postwar legal system. Whereas the system was originally constructed to protect religion from excessive government interference, now the government is mandated to administer religious affairs to prevent religion from abusing the people.

What has happened to Japan's religious pluralism since that time? It has become virtually impossible for researchers to conduct studies of new religious movements, and while there are some exceptions, most organizations are reportedly very reluctant to allow academic study. This limits the public's access to correct and unbiased information about religion. The Japanese media has a long history of bias against religion and cannot be relied upon to provide consistent, balanced reporting.

Meanwhile, as long as the LDP remained in power, its leaders repeatedly tried to appeal to the most conservative voters by showing support for Shinto. For example, in 2000 Prime Minister Mori came out saying that, "Japan is the land of the Kami." During Prime Minister Koizumi's administration (2001-2006), he repeatedly visited the Yasukuni Shrine. Other religious groups protested against these actions as violating the constitution's provision for separation of religion from state, as well as undermining the principle of pluralism. For politicians to show a preference for and to advocate one religion--Shinto--is incompatible with a democratic society of pluralism and religious freedom.

In these actions of recent government leaders, we can see important continuities with or echoes of the special relation that the Japanese government

maintained with Shinto before 1945, even at the same time that it made a renewed commitment to religious freedom, and even as the postwar bureaucracy has renewed its commitment to religious pluralism.

It is also the case, however, that the Japanese public has been horrified to find out what was going on in Aum Shinrikyo. The public was also appalled to learn that law enforcement suspected Aum of any number of crimes before the sarin attack but refrained from investigating for fear that they would be criticized for persecuting religion.

The Aum incident provoked widespread calls to tax religions. In 2010 came the publication of a book by Yamada Naoki, titled The Money of New Religions: Secret of Untaxed 'Giant Donation Boxes'. Especially on Internet sites, we can read thousands of posts saying that religions are up to no good, that they are so rich that they should be taxed, and supporting much stricter government oversight. Actually, religious organizations that operate for-profit businesses are already taxed, though the public seems not to be aware of this in all cases. Religions are allowed a slightly lower rate of taxation than ordinary businesses in consideration of their contribution to the public good, contributions that could not be fully supported if the religious organizations had to rely solely on donations. Opportunistic politicians sometimes seem to encourage these broad-brush criticisms of religion. To me it seems like a cheap shot, a kind of pandering to public opinion that is often based on misinformation but which might nevertheless bring in a few votes. There are some politicians, notably Buddhists, who seek to counter misplaced criticism, but they do not seem to have much of a hearing or to gain much traction.

How are these developments related to Japanese secularism, pluralism, and religious freedom? I believe that they show a tendency to view religion now as a social issue or problem, rather than as an aspect of culture, a set of beliefs, or in relation to morality and issues of conscience. There is also another set of lenses for popular views of religion, and that is in relation to politics.

The postwar constitution's provision for religious freedom specifies in part that no religion shall "exercise any political authority." This preeminently secular position has been challenged by the creation of the political party Komeito in 1964, sponsored by the new religion Soka Gakkai, and more recently by the Happiness Realization Party (Kofuku Jitsugento), sponsored by the new religion Science of Happiness, whose first candidates for election appeared in 2009. Although none of them were elected, the religion/party compiled a draft for a new constitution that seems to support the unity of politics and religion. They would amend the present article 20 to be a simple declaration of religious freedom and eliminate the following clauses about separation of religion from state.

The existence of these two political parties is a major challenge to Japanese secularism, and secularists would like to find ways to rule them to be in violation of the constitution. From another perspective, we can see these two religious organizations as refusing to comply with the secularist ideal of religion remaining a purely private matter. It seems likely that we will continue to see a push-pull relation between secularism and activist religions that believe they should be able to influence Japanese political life and conversations about the kind of society Japan ought to be.

Religions' response to the triple disaster of March 11, 2011 may present an opportunity for society to see again the good that religions do, and their many contributions. As soon as the disaster happened, every religious group began relief work for the victims of the earthquake, the tsunami, and the nuclear meltdown. I'm certain that Shinnyo'en is contributing. In the beginning, the Sankei and Yomiuri newspapers presented information on religions' relief work, but there was little if any such coverage on television. Society's understanding of religion's many social contributions could be much enhanced by making their relief work better known. We find a great deal of inter-religious cooperation that allows young people to volunteer, to see with their own eyes and to give their energy and time in service to others. The sight of inter-religious cooperation can remind citizens of all beliefs of religion's contributions to the good of Japanese society, the value of religious pluralism, and the importance of safe-guarding religious freedom for all.