



# Cultural Identity and Buddhism in Japan

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## Abstract

Cultural identity seems to be very much individual, subjective, vague and fluid although collective identity in a group is also referred to as cultural identity. Japanese people had to have religious identity as Buddhists in the Edo period because everyone was affiliated to a Buddhist monastery. Although it is almost impossible to preserve religious identity in the process of modernization, it is necessary for Japanese Buddhism to provide with satisfactory supply of religious supports. I would like to look into the history of Buddhism in Japan to find out why Buddhism does not meet the religious demand from Japanese people. In this presentation, I will talk about the characteristics of Japanese cultural identity with regard to religions, especially Buddhism.

*Keywords:* Buddhist monastery, Modernization, Japanese cultural

## Introduction

In this presentation, I would like to talk about the characteristics of Japanese cultural identity with regard to religions, especially Buddhism. I am no expert of sociology or had no clue what to talk about when I was invited to this conference. I did not even have a clear idea what “cultural identity” was. According to Lustig and Koester,<sup>1</sup> cultural identity “refers to one’s sense of belonging to a particular culture or ethnic group.” Culture here includes nationality, ethnicity, race, gender, religion, and so on. Being a researcher in Buddhist studies, therefore, I have decided to explicate Japanese identity as Buddhist.

Even after deciding the theme of my presentation, I still had a problem because what we refer to as cultural identity is so difficult to get hold of. It is explained by Hall as follows:

Cultural identity is not a fixed essence at all, lying unchanged outside history and culture. It is not some universal and transcendental spirit inside us on which history has made no fundamental mark. ... Of course, it is not a mere phantasm either. It is *something* – not a mere trick of the imagination. ... Cultural identities are the points of identification, the unstable points of identification of suture, which are made, within the discourse of history and culture. Not an essence, but positioning.<sup>2</sup>

Cultural identity seems to be very much individual, subjective, vague and fluid although collective identity in a group is also referred to as cultural identity. A person’s “sense of belonging” itself might change from time to time depending on the internal mental conditions. Culture, which is the external identifier of identity, also changes, or another culture might be chosen as its background. Everyone is born to a nation, and most of them do not change their nationality. In the same way, everyone was born into a religion, and most of them are not used to change their religion. In countries where freedom of religion or belief is guaranteed, however, it is much easier for them to change their religion, or just to abandon religion entirely. The significance of religion in society is, moreover, diminishing in the processes of modernization, including technological development, scientific advancement, economic growth and rising educational level. This tendency has led to gradual secularization

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<sup>1</sup>Lustig and Koester 2010, p. 142.

<sup>2</sup>Hall 1990, p. 226.

in society<sup>3</sup>. It seems to me there is almost impossible to preserve cultural identity based on religion. I am afraid, therefore, that I will not be able to propose any way of avoiding it, except for by a single unfavorable means. Be that as it may, I think that it is rather desirable to opt for a religion of one's own accord than to a religion by birth, which is the result of a mere coincidence. In addition, it is still necessary to analyze and explain how and why shifts in religious identity occur even if it is impossible to suggest any solution to the problem.

## Japanese Religious Identity

It is not at all straightforward to figure out what Japanese believe, as has been too often pointed out. According to the 2017 edition of the *Annual Statistics of Religion (Shukyo Nenkan)* published by the Agency for Cultural Affairs in Japan, the number of followers of Shinto in 2016 stood at 84,739,699 (46.5%), Buddhism at 87,702,069 (48.1%), Christianity at 1,914,196 (1.1%) and others at 7,910,440 (4.3%). The total number of people who were affiliated to religious organizations in Japan amounts to 182,266,404, which by far exceeds the Japanese population of 126,933,000 (October 2016). Of these, the number of Buddhists in 2016 decreased by 1,017,218 (1.15%) compared to 2015. In the same way, total number is 6,626,102 (3.5%) less than the previous year in contrast to the total Japanese population, which decreased only by 162,000 (0.13%). However perplexing the result may seem, it shows large decrease in the number of people affiliated to religious organizations.

Another survey shows that about 30% of Japanese answered that they have religious faith and about 70% of Japanese, however, have value religious attitude.<sup>4</sup> Their percentages are usually proportional to each other from other countries. In Italy, for example, 87.8% consider that they have religious faith and 86.0% regard religious attitude as important. In the case of France, the former is 64.4% and the latter 62.5%. Oddly, Japanese do not believe in religion but they are somewhat religious.

Roughly speaking, out of the Japanese population of 127 million people, more than 180 million are affiliated to either (or some) of the religions but it is estimated that only

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<sup>3</sup>Many scholars claim that the decline in religion is neither as widespread nor consistent as previously assumed. (Davie 2007, for example) However, this does not necessarily mean that people's religious identity has not changed.

<sup>4</sup>See the Japanese National Character Survey (1983-2013) conducted by Research Organization of Information and Systems, The Institute of Statistical Mathematics.

approximately 37 million (30% of the total population) have faith in them. The first survey is based on the number counted by religious institutions, and leaves some room for doubt of its accuracy. Even so, these Shinto and Buddhist groups technically are regarded as most Japanese are belonging to them. Contrary to the results of this survey, only approximately 30% of Japanese believe in these religions.

Other characteristic results are found in the World Happiness Report published by the United Nations Sustainable Development Solutions Network. It ranks national happiness and analyses the data from various perspectives. The ranking is based on answers to life evaluation questionnaires which ask respondents to rate their own current lives on 0 to 10 scale.<sup>5</sup> Japan came to the 54th out of 156 countries with the score of 5.915 in the 2018 report. This is considerably a low ranking for Japan, being at bottom in the G7 countries.

It is understood in general that if you are richer, you will be happier and if you are religious, you will be happier, too. However if you are richer, you will be less religious. Gundlach's article concludes as follows:

As expected, happiness is positively correlated with religiosity and with income, but income and religiosity are negatively correlated.<sup>6</sup>

It is presumed that rich countries should be ranked higher in the Happiness Report. Even if there are poor people in these countries, they can be ranked high as long as religion does its job to make them happy. It seems that when income and religiosity make up for each other's shortcomings, more people consider them to be happy within the country.

It can be concluded that Japanese low rank in the report shows that Japan is rich but Japanese religions are not functioning as an effective support for those who do not obtain happiness from financial reasons. Gundlach's argument may explain how it happens:

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<sup>5</sup>The question is as follows:

Please imagine a ladder with steps numbered from 0 at the bottom to 10 at the top. Suppose we say that the top of the ladder represents the best possible life for you and the bottom of the ladder represents the worst possible life for you. On which step of the ladder would you say you personally feel you stand at this time, assuming that the higher the step the better you feel about your life, and the lower the step the worse you feel about it? Which step comes closest to the way you feel?

<sup>6</sup>Gundlach (2012) p. 19.

The main insight from this line of research is that an efficient market for religion will supply the level and the quality of the product (religion) that is demanded. But if there is an inefficient market with monopolistic supply, the quality of the product may be rated as substandard by the consumers, who will reduce their demand accordingly.<sup>7</sup>

He also argues:

In contrast, if the substitution effect dominates, the level of religious activities may decline with rising levels of income even in the presence of an efficient market for religion. ... One interpretation of the negative correlation is that the *weight* is given to religious beliefs in everyday decision making may decline with rising levels of income, which may be independent of the level of religious beliefs in a country.<sup>8</sup>

Strictly speaking, Japanese market for religion is not monopolistic. However, Japanese religion does not meet the demands. It assumed, moreover, that higher level of income also causes the decline in religious beliefs. It is very likely that these two factors together resulted in current non-religious tendencies of Japanese population. In this way, religion has rapidly lost its efficacy as the base of Japanese cultural identity and it is hardly possible to sustain the sense of belonging to religious groups in Japan any more.

## **Brief History of Buddhism in Japan**

I would like to look into the history of Buddhism in Japan to find out why Buddhism does not meet the religious demand from Japanese people.

The official introduction of Buddhism to Japan has considerably occurred in 538 (or 552) when the king of Baekje kingdom, a territory on the western Korean Peninsula, offered an image of the Buddha, scrolls of scripture and ornaments as gifts to the Japanese Emperor Kimmei. There was a controversy over whether or not they should accept the foreign religion. The Mononobe and Nakatomi clans were against Buddhism because Japan already had its traditional and indigenous religion of Shinto, which was a system of animistic beliefs and the backbone of Japanese cultural identity. The Soga clan was, on the other hand, in strong favor

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<sup>7</sup>Gundlach (2012) p. 5.

<sup>8</sup>Gundlach (2012) p. 5.

of accepting it in the way of advanced culture from the west. In the end, the emperor followed the Soga clan's policy.

A few decades later, the Prince Shotoku (574–621) was appointed regent to the Empress Suiko. He was a pious Buddhist and governed the country with Buddhist principles. The 17–Article Constitution in 604, which was believed to be written by him, was formally issued by the government of Japan in 604. Its second article reads, “faithfully revere the Three Treasures (the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha).” Since then Buddhism became the state religion, but Japan never be fully converted away from Shinto. Rather, Japanese adopted Buddhism gradually, syncretizing with Shinto. This syncretism made Japan's primary religion from the Heian Period through the Edo Period up until the beginning of the Meiji period (the end of 8th century to the mid-19th century).

During the Nara period (645–794), Buddhism in Japan was classified into dominant six doctrinal schools. All of these schools were patronized and controlled by the Japanese imperial government of Nara. Their official functions were to study Buddhist teachings and undertake rituals for the benefit and protection of the state and imperial house.

*Soniryō* is the regulations for Buddhist monks and nuns, comprised of a set of 27 clauses. It compelled them to submission so that they were controlled by the state. For example, it restricted their propagation of the Buddhist teachings to lay people outside their assigned monastery in the 5th code:

Any monk or nun who establishes separately a practice hall (*dojo*) without staying at the monastery, gathers people and teaches sins and merits indiscriminately, and one who assaults the monastic superiors shall all be laicized.<sup>9</sup>

Its 23rd code also restricts instruction to lay people:

Any monk or nun who makes a lay person visit door to door for the purpose of missionary work, giving him sutras or images, shall be punished with 100 days of labor. The lay person shall be judged according to (civil) penal code.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> 凡僧尼。非在寺院。別立道場。聚衆教化。并妄說罪福。及毆擊長宿者。皆還俗。

<sup>10</sup> 凡僧尼等。令俗人付其經像。歷門教化者。百日苦使。其俗人者。依律論。

In this way, monks and nuns were expected to follow these regulations, study the teachings in the monastery and undertake rituals for the peace and prosperity of the state as government bureaucrats, rather than ministering to lay people as preachers.

During the Edo period (1603–1868), affiliation of extended families with specific Buddhist temples was made compulsory by the Tokugawa Shogunate for the purpose of preventing Christianity from spreading. Buddhist temples were ordered to issue certificates of affiliation for all households and then became registry offices where births, marriages, deaths, and funerals had to be registered. All households were thus officially affiliated with Buddhist monasteries. This resulted in indolence and corruption in Buddhism because monasteries were allowed to collect monthly tribute from their affiliated households and tended to abandon the effort to teach Buddhist doctrines.

In this way, Japanese Buddhism was under governments' control and support for a long time and its main objective was to achieve the peace and prosperity of the state. Lay people, on their part, did not necessarily become affiliated to Buddhism out of their religious needs.

## **Meiji Restoration and Buddhism**

At the end of the Tokugawa Shogunate and Meiji Restoration in 1868, which was the beginning of modernization by adopting the Western civilization, imperial rule was reestablished and Shinto became the state religion. The syncretism of Buddhism and Shinto was technically made to end as the Meiji government repeatedly issued the proclamation of the separation of Shinto from Buddhism. This was a huge blow to Buddhism that had been living upon government authority. It further led to the purging of Buddhism, in which temples were destroyed and many Buddhist monks were forced to be laicized or become Shinto monks. In 1872, the Meiji Government further decreed, in national edict number 133 issued by the council of State, that the Buddhist clergy “should be free to eat meat, take wives, grow hair, and so on.” From that time, the secularization of the clergy proceeded rapidly although some considered that the government only intended to stop regulating the conducts of Buddhist clerics.

Since the Meiji Restoration in 1868, Japanese people have experienced a profound change in the traditional cultural values that is the basis of their cultural identity. Being in Japan, which has confronted conflicts between the maintenance of traditions and modernization

for 150 years, Japanese Buddhism lost its authority and has not succeeded in regaining the efficacy as the base of Japanese cultural identity.

## Conclusion

Japanese people had to have religious identity as Buddhists in the Edo period because everyone was affiliated to a Buddhist monastery. Since the Meiji Restoration, it has gradually lost its role as identifier, as the clergy have got secularized and the government abandoned its control over and support to Buddhism. Most Japanese still are affiliated to Buddhism because their family graves are located in Buddhist monasteries.

As it is previously shown, those who are financially stable feel more in control of their lives and less in need of religion. Those who are not, on the other hand, tend to rely on religion. In Japan, however, those in need of religion tend not to satisfy with Buddhism or any other existing religions. I believe that this means Buddhism can be the religion of their choice if it meets their demands. It is, in a sense, desirable as Buddhism can be the ground of religious identity according to people's religious belief, not because of the government policy, even if it is not the same sense of identity as before.

Although it is almost impossible to preserve religious identity in the process of modernization, it is necessary for Japanese Buddhism to provide with satisfactory supply of religious supports.

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