

Japanese Spirituality and the Age of World

Civilization

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Abstract

Our contemporary world is fraught with various coexisting and competing ideologies, religions, and ways of thinking. Perspectives and values differ across countries, ethnicities, societies, generations, genders, and individuals. Given such conditions, how can the Baha'i vision of a World Civilization be realized? Particularly in a country like Japan that is characterized by an acute sensitivity and skepticism of religion, what is the best way to introduce and present the Baha'i teachings? This paper attempts to conceptualize the Baha'i teachings in two ways, as a moral framework and as an ethical orientation. In doing so, it seeks to explore and open a discussion about which conceptualization is the most effective for connecting with Japanese spirituality and for connecting Japanese society to a World Civilization.

Introduction

This paper examines the similarities and overlaps between the Baha'i Faith and Japanese morality and ethics. First I briefly describe the field of sociocultural anthropology that informs my analysis. Second, I trace the dual strands of caution and acceptance of religion in Japan. Third, I offer a (very) brief description of the origin and contemporary contours of morality and ethics in Japan. Fourth, I describe some of the themes that have emerged among people in my own fieldwork, and how these relate to the Baha'i image of a World Civilization. Last, I hope to encourage a discussion about these themes through personal experiences.

Sociocultural Anthropology as an analytical lens

First, what is sociocultural anthropology? Put simply, sociocultural anthropology is the comprehensive study of humanity, from faith to lifestyles to language to art to thought. Through the study of these various facets of humanity, anthropologists hope to locate universal commonalities as well as to explain the differences found throughout the world. More specifically, in my own research on spirituality and morality in Japan, the anthropological approach differs from sociology, religious studies and psychology approaches in several ways. Rather

than the statistical focus of sociology, the individual mental analysis of psychology, or the study of doctrine and dogma of religious studies, anthropology instead utilizes qualitative analysis of individual life stories and the researcher's own participant observation in order to understand how individuals make meaning in their lives in contemporary society. The ultimate goal is to teach and encourage the unity and harmony of humankind.

Sociocultural anthropology employs several distinctive research methods, namely participant observation, interviews, and ethnography. Participant observation is the representative method of anthropological "fieldwork" and it includes living with other people, participating in rituals and activities, and experiencing and observing events that occur around you. Interviews range from formal to informal conversations about individual experiences and reflections. Finally, ethnography refers to the written documents anthropologists produce by recording, compiling and analyzing other's experiences.

As you can see, the goals of anthropology are in fact quite close to the Baha'i ideals and the creation of a world civilization.

I realized this when I began learning about the Baha'i Faith. I am not Baha'i, but my current doctoral dissertation research theme is on spirituality, morality and ethics in Japan, and in the course of my research I began studying with the Japan Baha'i Network as well as several other religious organizations in Japan. The more I studied spirituality and morality in Japan, the more I felt that the general perspectives of morality and ethics in Japan are similar to Baha'i ideals.

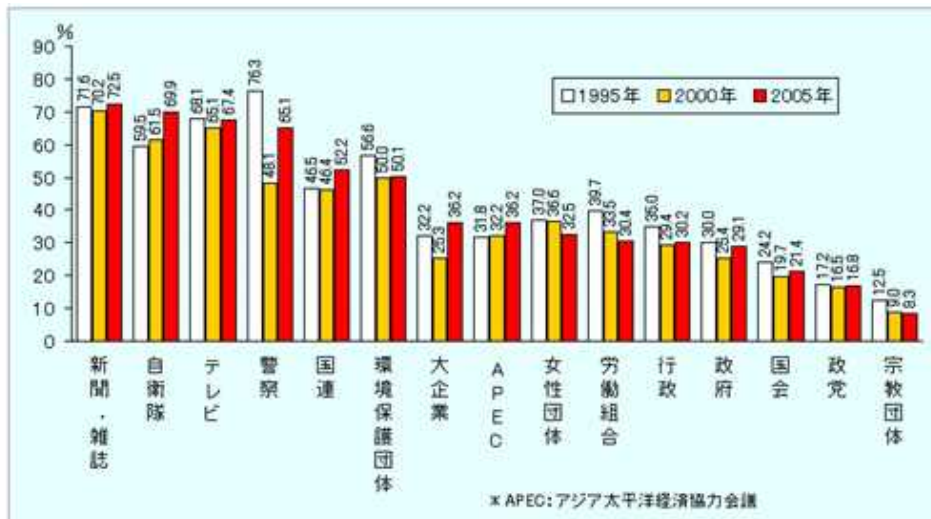
The fear of "religion" in Japan

As Figure 1 shows, religious institutions are seen as the least trustworthy among various institutions in Japan. Since 1995, the year of the sarin gas attack by the religious group Aum Shinrikyō, the already low level of "trustworthiness," 12.5%, dropped further to 8.3% by 2005. In contrast to this low number, trust in the mass media including newspapers and magazines and trust in television reached 72.5% and 67.4%, respectively.

For the development of the Baha'i Faith in Japan as a religious organization, this is of course a very unfortunate condition that must be overcome. However, a closer look at the survey presented here also reveals some positive results. Japanese do not trust solely in the media; high levels of trust were reported for the Self-Defense Force (69.9%), the police (65.1%), environmental protection agencies (50.1%), and major corporations (36.2%).

Furthermore, the high level of trust in international organizations such as the United Nations (UN) and the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) are also encouraging results. Trust in the UN has risen 6% in the past 10 years to 52.2%,

whereas trust in APEC rose 5% to 36.2%. To summarize very briefly, even though religious organizations do not garner a high level of trust in Japan, the interest and trust in the international community and its institutions is increasing and this represents a certain level of agreement and concord with the Baha'i ideal of world unity.



(注) 18歳以上男女1,000サンプル程度の回収を基本とした意識調査の結果である。数字は各組織・制度に対し「非常に信頼する」と「やや信頼する」の回答率の計。各組織・制度は2005年の信頼度の高い順に並べた。

Figure 1: Shift in Trust in Organizations and Systems³

(Source: Honkawa Data Tribune: <http://www2.ttcn.ne.jp/honkawa/5213.html>)

In exploring where the contemporary attitude of distrust and fear came from regarding religions in Japan, it is helpful to divide the historical trajectory of such attitudes into four major periods based on the particular source and nature of distrust in each.

The first period lasted from the 16th century to the mid-19th century, and was characterized by the attitude of distrust and caution regarding Christianity. Beginning with Francis Xavier's visit to Japan in 1549, Christianity began to spread slowly through Japan. The first Christian in Japan, Anjiro, is said to have told Xavier: "My people would not immediately become Christians; but they would first ask you a multitude of questions, weighing carefully your answers and your claims. Above all, they would observe whether your conduct agreed with your words. If you should satisfy them on these points – by suitable replies to their inquiries and by a life above reproach – then, as soon as the matter was

³ Data presented in Figures 1-4 are based on the research prepared by 統計数理研究所 and subsequently published as 「日本人の国民性調査」 (<http://www.ism.ac.jp/kokuminsei/index.htm>).

known and fully examined, the king, the nobles, and the educated people would become Christians. Six months would suffice; for the nation is one that always follows the guidance of reason.' (Boxer 1967: 49)" However, the Tokugawa Shogunate feared the influence of foreign powers that were behind Christianity, and together with the policy of seclusion, Christians in Japan suffered tremendous persecution while Christianity itself gained a negative and dangerous image. Although the Meiji Restoration brought freedom of religion to the Japanese people, among most Japanese Shinto, Buddhist, and so-called "new religious movements" that arose from folk religious practices spread widely and the lures of Christianity were mostly limited to those in the upper classes and intellectuals with worldly experience (see Earhart 2003; Davis 2007; Shimazono 2001).

The second major period of religious suppression in Japan came during the period of increasing militarization in the early 20th Century, together with the move into Asian countries as part of Japan's imperialist expansion. Religious organizations were forced to register under specific categories as Buddhist, Shinto or Christian (the latter being a very small number of intellectuals), and all religious organizations which did not follow the official regulations of the imperial and military system suffered oppression and persecution. Religion itself became a despised concept. It was during this time that Agnes Alexander and the Baha'i Community in Japan first became active, although they were not a legally registered religion. For Baha'is in Japan, though, their avowed non-political stance earned the understanding of the Japanese government and so they were relatively unharassed until the late 1930s (see Alexander 1977).

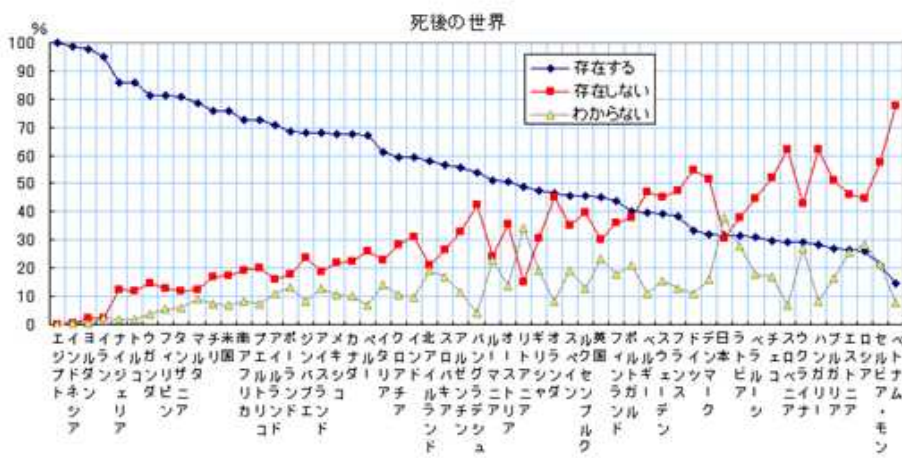
The third period of religious persecution and distrust actually came hand-in-hand with the broad widening of religious freedom in postwar Japan. At the end of World War II, democratic reforms asserted freedom of religion once again and the number of religious organizations skyrocketed. For Christian, Baha'i, Islamic, Buddhist, and other religious organizations, this was a welcomed development. However, the freedoms and protections afforded by the new religious freedoms also facilitated the rise of individuals who used the mantle of religion to pursue individualistic desires of egoism and material benefits, resulting in an increase of fake religious organizations as well. As a result of the actions of some of these organizations, including tax evasion, sexual abuse and violence by leaders, and other illegal and unethical activities, religious organizations as a whole became criticized by the Japanese media and citizens as being money-making or otherwise immoral organizations.

Despite this ongoing criticism in the postwar period, new religious organizations continued to increase in number and size throughout the 1980s.

The fourth major period of religious caution and fear began in 1995, however. In early 1995 members of the eclectic and exclusive anti-social religious group Aum Shinrikyō launched sarin gas attacks in Matsumoto City and the Tokyo subway system, killing 7 and injuring more than 500 innocent individuals. As a result of this attack, legal regulations for religious institutions were strengthened and the word “religion” itself became synonymous with “dangerous cult” in Japan. The so-called “allergy to religion” that grew out of this history of misunderstanding, distrust, and persecution continues today.

Receptiveness of religiosity in Japan

Despite this caustic environment for religion in Japan, in considering Japanese history and analyzing contemporary Japanese society we can also say that Japanese society has been and still is remarkably open and tolerant to religion. For instance, in regards to international surveys on belief in the existence of God (Figure 2-a) or of the afterlife (Figure 2-b), Japan falls into a unique position of half belief, half disbelief, and half uncertainty—a completely ambivalent result not seen in other countries polled, although of course this also might represent the different ways such questions can be asked, provoking ambiguous interpretations among respondents.



(注) 各国の全国18歳以上男女1,000サンプル程度の回収を基本とした意識調査の結果。

Figure 2a, b: Perceptions of the Existence of God and Life after Death
 (Source: Honkawa Data Tribune: <http://www2.ttcn.ne.jp/honkawa/9520.html>)

Another survey shown in Figure 3 reveals the breakdown among generations and historical periods. Particularly significant here is that the 20-somethings at the beginning of Japan's economic recovery in 1958 answered with only 13-14% having some kind of faith or belief in the afterlife, while fifty years later in 2008 this same group, now in their 70s, answered with nearly 36%. At the same time, today's youth in their 20s showed the highest level of belief in an afterlife in the fifty years that the poll had been taken. However, despite these numbers, one possible reason why the number of respondents answering that they had some kind of faith is still quite low might lie in the fact that words like religion and faith/belief themselves are still strongly colored by enduring negative preconceived notions.

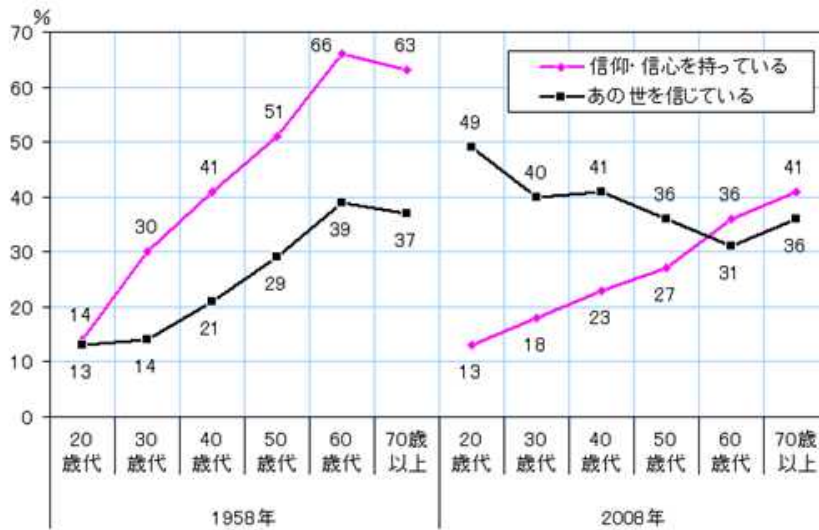


Figure 3: Two Aspects of Religious Belief

(Source: Honkawa Data Tribune: <http://www2.ttcn.ne.jp/honkawa/3971a.html>)

Lastly, Figure 4 examines belief in the afterlife together with the power of miracles and o-mamori (amulets). Together, these three aspects of so-called “irrational” existence and powers (according to the wording of the survey) reveal one dimension of spirituality and religiosity in Japan. The survey reveals that young people between the ages of 16 and 29 have the highest level of belief or at least interest in all three categories. Furthermore, the past 35 years have shown a general increase in belief in all three categories among those under 60 years of age.

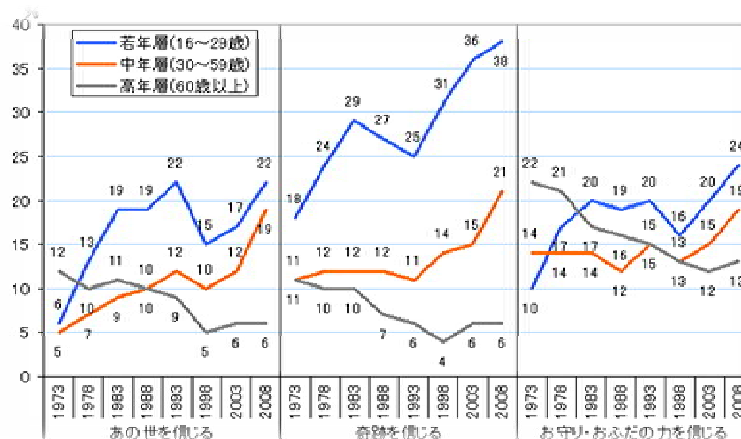


Figure 4: The Growth of Young People’s Belief in the Existence of the “Irrational”

(Source: Honkawa Data Tribune: <http://www2.ttcn.ne.jp/honkawa/2927.html>)

Moreover, a poll by Kokugakuin University (2003) revealed that 72.6% of all Japanese participate in hatsumoude, the New Year's visit to a shrine or temple, while 76% participate in o-hakamairi, the visit to ancestor's graves (usually Buddhist).

While looking at these various surveys can be enlightening and intriguing, we also most take into consideration the way questions are asked and historical and social contexts in which these surveys are conducted.

In the first place, the word "religion" (shūkyō in Japanese) was coined in response to the influx of Christianity in the 19th century; before this, words such as "sect" (shūha) and "faith" (shinkō) were widely used to distinguish among Buddhist, Shinto, and other branches of spiritual belief and practice. Or in some cases, spiritual beliefs and practices weren't grouped together under any single label. Thus, in order to research contemporary perspectives on religion, terms such as "religiosity" and "spirituality" may be more appropriate (See Earhart 2003; Davis 2007; Shimazono 2001).

In my own experience in Japan, in talking with people who identify themselves as members of religious organizations as well as those who do not claim any religious affiliation, when issues such as the ideal virtues of a world civilization or spiritual characteristics are raised, they are almost never addressed in a religious manner. However, the more I talk with Japanese individuals of different faiths and perspectives, the more I have become aware of the commonalities among many people in terms of spirituality and ethical attitudes. This, I believe, is connected with the high degree of flexibility and openness in regards to religiosity and spirituality in Japanese society.

In an extremely brief historical perspective, Japanese flexibility and openness can be traced back thousands of years to the origins of Shinto practices (see Earhart 2003; Davis 2007, 1980). In terms of spiritual faith, Shinto can be said to be connected with the daily struggle with natural forces and the problems of everyday life; when Buddhism arrived on Japanese shores from the ancient kingdoms of Korea, spiritual beliefs regarding life and death as well as of understanding one's self as a living being coexisted relatively harmoniously alongside Shinto at this time. Furthermore, despite being forcibly regulated, Christianity's influence also spread throughout Japan in terms of strengthened doctrines, expanded institutional and social welfare structures, and worldwide Salvationist ideas. Then, during the latter part of the Edo Period and the Meiji Restoration, the tremendous social and lifestyle changes brought about by the industrial revolution and modernization gave birth to new attitudes and understandings of life and death and forced people to reexamine the meaning of

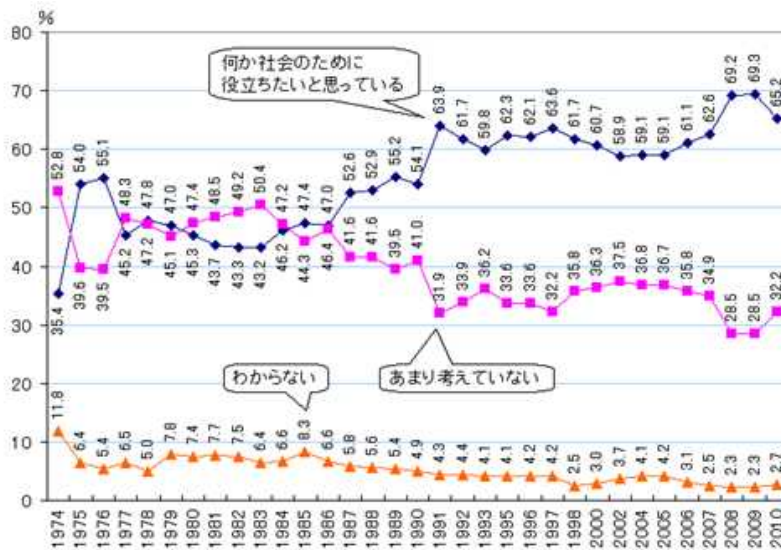
living in their own lives. Out of these transformations came the rise of so-called “new religious movements” in Japan that grew out of the new perspectives on spirituality and faith of this period. Seen in this way, we can even say that the historical development of religiosity in Japanese society in fact bears a distinct resemblance to the Baha’i notion of progressive revelation. To summarize very simplistically, one could say that the history of religiosity in Japan differs considerably from that of Europe and the United States, where religious developments were marked by repeated conquest and rejection; instead, when new spiritual teachings appeared in Japan, previous teachings were not discarded entirely but were in fact overwritten with newer teachings thereby adjusting and adapting to new conditions.

When viewing religiosity in Japan in light of its historical development, then, even when schisms and clashes or criticism and suppression did arise, one can say that close analysis beyond the surface of religious form reveals that the underlying spiritual ethics and moral views (religious content) have in fact changed very little. At a social level religious problems have been mostly limited to political and material issues, while conflict and criticism of actual religious thoughts and concepts have been limited.

From my own perspective, then, I believe that the ethical and moral views shared by most Japanese today can indeed form a strong foundation for the future civilization of Japan as well as a future world civilization.

Japanese moral and ethical views

What is Japanese morality and ethics? The survey on Attitudes toward Contributing to Society, Figure 5, is particularly insightful regarding conceptions of morality and ethics and their relation to religion in contemporary Japan. Looking at the results of this survey, 65.2% of respondents answered that they feel that they want to do something to contribute to society. Though this is 4% lower than last year, when viewed historically since 1974 this reflects a continued increase over the past 36 years.



(注) 全国20歳以上の男女が対象

FIGURE 4: The Rise of the Desire to Contribute to Society

(Source: Honkawa Data Tribune: <http://www2.ttcn.ne.jp/honkawa/2990.html>)

Japanese society is characterized by both ambiguous attitudes regarding an afterlife or the existence of God and a relatively high belief (or lack of disbelief) in the effectiveness of miracles and amulets; it is also characterized by low trust in religious organizations but a relatively high trust in the U.N. and APEC and other international organizations. Taken holistically, then, how can the kind of world civilization conceived of in the Baha'i Faith take root in a country like Japan?

In response to this issue, the above survey regarding the desire to contribute to society is deeply connected. At the heart of this desire to contribute to society lies a socially-framed belief that is heavily concerned with society. In other words, I feel that there is a deep-seated receptiveness and openness to the connection of the individual to other individuals that permeates Japanese society.

There are numerous influences behind views of morality and ethics in Japan. First, as a moral system, Confucianism, Buddhism, and Western religions have all been influential. Very briefly, these function as more or less systematized frameworks of behavior that are based on standards of judging good from evil (see Rogers 2009). As a result, the religious concepts within the systemized frameworks of Confucianism, Buddhism and Christianity have been very influential on Japanese culture and social structure.

As moral systems that offer standards of judging good and evil, how much influence have they had on Japanese society? Confucianism, Buddhism and

Christianity offer a moral system together with ethical ways of thinking and acting. However, ethical views in Japan—attitudes and behavior regarding everyday ethical practice (see Rogers 2009)—do not necessarily stress the moral systems of Confucianism, Buddhism and Christianity. Aside from a small number of elite or religious scholars, for most people in Japan everyday practice of ethical speech and actions is more important than these moral systems; such ethical influences come from a variety sources as well, including Confucian teachings on proper actions (but on absolute moral issues), Shinto and Buddhist teachings on respect for all life and for ancestors, and democratic ideas of equality. In contrast, the underlying moral system in Japan maybe said to stem from a much more socially conscious view of one's personal connection to social structures writ large. (This requires further thought and is an important topic for future research.)

Here I wish to introduce what I will call the Ethics Society, an ethics organization that has a strong social influence in Japan, and which offers these kinds of teachings on daily ethical practice to its members.

Setting aside the practices and rituals used by this group, there are very few Japanese who would reject the ethical views of the Ethics Society. This is because the Ethics Society's ethical views are built primarily on the importance of greeting and being polite to everyone in daily life, to fulfilling one's family and social roles, to respecting all faiths, and appreciating a life that is in accord with the natural world. This kind of ethical view can be called a fusion of the social teachings of Confucianism and teachings about the natural world found in Shinto. Although each of these individual elements is open to multiple interpretations by individuals, generally speaking it is thought that this kind of ethical view is relatively easy to accept by most Japanese individuals.

Nonetheless, the moral system that lies behind the ethical views of the Ethics Society is in fact not very different from the morals taught in the Baha'i faith. Even though the Ethics Society uses a term like "Nature" (daishizen), it actually carries a strong connotation of God. Moreover, the stated goal of this organization is world peace that begins with domestic harmony, and to this end they emphasize daily reflection on one's actions and attitudes and the importance of being grateful for one's life.

In regards to these particular points, most Japanese individuals including the members of various new religious organizations or traditional religions as well as Baha'is can also identify with these desires and practices. Of course, one of the first steps to creating a world civilization based on these kinds of moral views is to make people aware of the fact that they in fact share a similar moral view. Even if individuals might feel that the specific organizational structure and

practices found in the Baha'i Faith or the Ethics Society are difficult to understand or obey, there are few who would reject the moral view itself.

Thus, the generally shared ethical views in Japan that privilege compassion vis-à-vis others, fulfilling one's role in society, and living a life in synch with Nature are all important elements of the Baha'i world civilization. Moreover, the Confucian, Buddhist, Christian (and postwar democratic) moral systems that exist behind these ethical views advocate world peace, the acceptance of different faiths, and respect and gratitude to Nature—elements which are also crucial to the Baha'i world civilization.

Morals and ethics from an anthropological perspective

As an anthropologist, I am interested in much more than the kinds of data revealed by sociological surveys and charts or religious studies-type analysis of ethical and moral views. Rather, for me, individual experiences and interpretations are much more humanistic and insightful. Over the past year or so I have had the privilege of speaking with people from a variety of backgrounds including individuals who claim membership in religious organizations and those who claim to be skeptical of all things religious or spiritual. I have also participated in a variety of rituals and practices with different organizations. Through these experiences, a number of commonalities frequently emerged. I will summarize and explain them here.

Even if individuals are uncomfortable with the concept of "religion," there are a tremendous number of people who highly value spirituality as a broad concept.

Even if one does not personally hold some faith, most do not have an issue with others having some faith (unless this results in specific infringement on one's personal connection with that individual).

Throughout the world and within Japan, various religious organizations that emphasize the ultimate truth or existence of only one God or one religion are generally seen as extremely exclusive and closed. However, there is a strong general consciousness in Japan that all gods are actually the same universal God, to a relatively high degree that is not seen in European or American society.

Contemporary Japanese society is marked by both the cultural coexistence of Shinto and Buddhist shrines and temples as well as Christian style weddings and holidays, together with a continuing consciousness regarding the "8 million gods" that originates in folk religion and Shinto consciousness. The combination of these trends and the harmony and fusion of many faiths in Japan is an extremely rare social phenomenon.

As institutions, Japanese are skeptical of religious, governmental, and other domestic organizations, but on an international level Japanese tend to have a

relatively high degree of trust in regards to organizations such as the U.N. or APEC. Thus, if Japanese society becomes more aware of the Baha'i Faith's recognition by and cooperation with the U.N., it is likely that Japanese trust in the Baha'i Faith will also grow considerably.

Lastly, many individuals living in Japan both wish for stability in their own life and are highly conscientious in regards to social conditions. As found in the old "Ōmi Shōnin" phrase, Japanese society has long had the ideal of "The 3 Goods": "Good for me, Good for you, Good for society." The ethics organization the Ethics Society I mentioned earlier also uses a similar slogan: "Happiness for me and for you." Of course, from the Baha'i perspective it is true that the key components of "God" and "Soul" are missing here. Furthermore, these phrases can also be seen as privileging the self over others. Nonetheless, as taken up in the first lesson of the Baha'i teaching system known as the Ruhi Institute, if you don't "polish your own heart," then you will not be able to teach the joy of the Baha'i faith to others.

In summary, like all nations around the world, Japan possesses a complex and fascinating spiritual, religious, moral and ethical history. The ethical views from Shintoism, the ethics and ethical system of Confucianism, the spiritual teachings of Buddhism and the moral systems of Christianity and postwar democracy have all had a range of influences on Japanese society. The process of fusing and harmonizing and their coexistence in society are all part of contemporary Japanese culture.

World Civilization begins with each nation. Each political and social conglomeration called a nation is made up of various communities. And each community is also made up of individuals. Thus, beginning with spreading what is good for oneself to what is good for others, and from there what is good for others to what is good for society, and ultimately what is good for society to what is good for world civilization, it should be possible to realize happiness and peace around the world. The seeds for this are already planted in the soil of Japanese society and culture. In glancing back over Japan's thousands of years of history, these seeds have already sent out sprouts in various religious and social forms. The challenge facing Baha'is and all peoples today is to demonstrate to the Japanese people, and to people from all over the world, that all of these sprouts share the same roots—the oneness of humanity and religion.

Discussion questions

Finally, the questions posed during the discussion session were as follows:

Generally speaking, what kinds of spiritual practices or beliefs do Japanese people engage in or encounter during their lives?

In speaking with Japanese who claim to be atheist, which teachings, beliefs, or practices are the most difficult to explain?

In speaking with Japanese who are members of other religions or who claim another faith, which teachings, beliefs, or practices are the most difficult to explain?

In your own experience, when you became a Baha'i, what was the most difficult part for you? What required the biggest change in behavior? In thought? If you were raised as a Baha'i, where there aspects of the Baha'i faith which didn't seem to match very well with Japanese society?

As a human community, does the Baha'i community differ from other communities in Japan?

When compared with non-Baha'is, what kind of new possibilities or opportunities were open to you by becoming Baha'i, or by being raised as a Baha'i?

What sorts of differences are there between Baha'i ethical views and general ethical views in Japanese society? What sorts of similarities?

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