Chapter 12: Japanese Traditions

Chapter Overview

In chapter twelve titled “Japanese Traditions,” John K. Nelson discusses the historical, political, social, and cultural bases of Japan’s various religious traditions, from Shinto, Buddhism, and Confucianism, to the new religious movements of Soka Gakkai, Rissho Koseikai, and the Aum Shinrikyo. Throughout the chapter, Nelson particularly focuses on the interactions between the religious traditions within Japan, and points out that religious belief often takes a backseat to religious activity. According to Nelson, the concept of taking action is key to understanding religious practices in Japan. He explains that the pragmatic practice of securing benefit is at the centre of most rituals performed in shrines, temples, and household altars (*butsudan*). Thus, Nelson describes the diversity of practices for the Japanese people, who regularly draw from multiple religious traditions, create reciprocal relationships of obligations and expectations with multiple *kami*, bodhisattvas, or buddhas, and participate in *matsuri* (festivals), pilgrimages, the purchasing of amulets or talisman, or give monetary donations and perform acts of service for temples and shrines.

In order to fully explain these practices, Nelson begins by discussing the development of Shinto, through the texts of the *Kojiki* and the *Nihon Shoki*, the *kami* Izanagi, Izanami, and Amaterasu, and the modern developments of Shinto practices under the Meiji government. Nelson then discusses the emergence of Buddhism, Confucianism, and the combination of these traditions with and alongside, Japanese traditions.

The Japanese phrase *honji suijaku*, which means “manifestation from the original state,” for instance, explains the relationship between Japanese traditions and Buddhism, as it illustrates how Buddhist entities became connected to Japanese *kami*. Nelson also examines the historical and religious developments of Tendai, Shingon, Pure Land and Rinzai Zen Buddhism in Japan. He pays attention to the development of Rinzai Zen in particular, and discusses the forms of Soto Zen and Nichiren. Nelson looks at other topics of interest such as the emergence of Christianity, the material impact of religious traditions on Japanese culture (including the art of *ikebana*, which is the art of flower arranging, the *haiku*, manga, and anime), and the development of new religious movements in Japan.

Learning Objectives are met when the student:

1. Summarizes and defines the key terms within the Japanese traditions.
2. Analyzes the syncretism within and across the religious traditions and practices in Japan.
3. Categorizes and summarizes the significant myths and historical moments for the development of Japanese religions, including the most significant branches of Japanese Buddhism.
4. Outlines and describes the influence of politics on religion in Japan, such as, the rise of Japanese nationalism and the role of state Shinto.
5. Identifies and evaluates the transitions and transformations of religious practice in the modern and contemporary periods in Japan.

Study Questions

1. From amongst the diversity within the Japanese religious traditions, what are three or four common practices that are believed to produce benefits?
2. What is the meaning of the well-known expression “turning to the gods in a time of trouble” in Japan and what does it teach us about the religious outlook of Japan?
3. Who are the primordial *kami* couple? Where is the narrative of the primordial *kami* couple located and what is the overarching storyline?
4. Explain the development of modern Shinto in Japan under the Meiji government.
5. Who are the two most popular bodhisattvas in Japanese Buddhism? Why are these two popular in Japan?

Study Questions: Answers

1. Amongst the many practices and diverse benefits to be gained, the following six are included in the textbook: (1) contact a religious specialist and perform rituals for a particular spiritual agent (buddha, bodhisattva, or *kami*); (2) purchase an amulet or talisman that establishes a relationship with a deity of a particular temple or shrine; (3) to undertake a pilgrimage; (4) monetary donations or perform good deeds for a temple or shrine; (5) take part in a *matsuri* (grand festival); (6) to venerate a spirit. (pp. 565–566)
2. “Turning to the gods in a time of trouble” describes the central emphasis in the Japanese religious traditions to secure benefits. This pragmatic expression teaches that one could gain a number of benefits religious traditions, places of worship, *kami*, bodhisattvas and buddhas, because the emphasis is on the practice or the taking of action to gain the benefit in various situations and contexts across the Japanese religious traditions. (pp. 565–566)
3. The narrative of the primordial couple, Izanagi and Izanami, is located in the *Kojiki*, a collection of regional stories compiled in 712 CE to legitimatize the dominance of the Yamato clan by associating them with the divine origins of the land. Inzanagi and Izanami create the islands of Japan, however, Izanami dies giving birth to the deity of fire. Izanagi kills the fire deity and journeys to the netherworld to beseech the return of his wife. Inzanagi is allowed to bring Izanami back as long as he does not look at her. However, Inzanagi does look and is horrified to see her corpse full of “squirming and roaring maggots,” thus he flees, which shames Izanami, who promises vengeance. After several narrow escapes, Izanagi reaches the land of the living and uses a huge boulder to block the opening to the netherworld, but not before Izanami vows that she will cause 1,000 of his subjects to die each day; he counters that he will cause 1,500 to be born. Izanagi leaves the underworld, and purifies himself in a river. As he bathes, the female *kami* of the sun, Amaterasu is born from his left eye, the *kami* of the moon is born from his right eye, and the *kami* of the land is born from his nose. (pp. 567–568)
4. The two most popular bodhisattvas are Kannon and Ojizo-sama because they have the greatest reputation for intervening in human life. Kannon, who arrived in Japan from China under the name Guanyin, is the bodhisattva of compassion and is committed to alleviating human suffering and frailties. Ojizo-sama is known for freeing souls from hell and protects children and travellers. Ojizo-sama also helps the souls of deceased children and aborted fetuses find salvation. (p. 569)
5. The modern practice of Shinto developed during the Meiji government (1868–1911) in Japan, which sought to create a nation of citizens and to shift from a system of clan rule to a parliamentary system of governance. In emulation of Western nations where religion was used to legitimatize policy, the Meiji government promoted a national cult that was based on the emperor and his association with various kami. For a brief period of time, the Meiji government persecuted Buddhism, and Shinto was designated the official religion and promoted adherence to it as a matter of civic duty. (pp. 583–584)

Research Questions

1. What is the key prayer of Pure Land Buddhism in Japan? How does this prayer help us to understand the fundamental principles of this tradition?
2. What were the key teachings of the Tendai monk Eisai (1141–1215), who developed the traditions of Zen Buddhism in Japan? How did Eisai’s teachings help establish Zen Buddhism in Japan?
3. Compare and contrast the development, teachings, and practices of Zen Buddhism and Soto Zen Buddhism.
4. How did Confucian ideals influence the modern Japanese state, especially during the Tokugawa regime?
5. How do the concepts of *jiriki* and *tariki* interrelate within the True Pure Land doctrine of Shinran (1173–1262) and other teachers of this tradition?
6. Researching two or more modern examples, provide an explanation as to why these new religious movements have taken root and grown in Japan?
7. Genshin’s (942–1017)) *Essentials of Salvation* describes in graphic detail the six realms of existence. What are these realms? What does each of these realms teach us about Pure Land Buddhism?
8. Explain the concept of *mappo* in dialogue with teachers and traditions therein accounting for its development and range of meaning.
9. Outline the rise and fall of Christianity in Japan therein providing a historical explanation coupled with the close reading of one primary source document, such as the textbook document *Seiyō kibun* (“Tidings from the West”)?
10. Discuss the development of the “way of the warrior” known as the Bushido. Possible questions to address include which traditions and ideas does *Bushido* combine, and in what ways was this concept appropriated in the political and religious histories of Japan?

Reflection Questions

1. How does the concept of *honji suijaku* (“manifestation from the original state”) help to explain the implications of the complex relationships within and across the Japanese religious traditions, such as the Buddhist and Shinto?
2. Based on the interview in the textbook, what are your reflections, impressions and questions with regards to Rev. Miura Akari and her role at her family’s True Pure Land Temple?
3. How does the poetry of haiku help you to understand Zen Buddhism in Japan?
4. What do you think are the main challenges to understanding the interplay between the various types of traditions in Japan?
5. Why do you think that the *kami* are foundational for Japanese traditions?

Additional Resources

1. “Shinto and Japanese Religions,” *Internet Sacred Text Archive*. <http://www.sacred-texts.com/shi/index.htm>.

This site provides links to a wide range of unabridged Japanese sacred texts, including the *Kojiki*, the *Nihongi*, *The Yengeshiki* (*Shinto Rituals*), and *Kogoshui: Gleaning from Ancient Stories*. Additionally, thissite provides links to a number of texts from Japanese Culture, Spirituality and Folklore.

2. Byron. H. Earhart. 2013. *Religion in Japan: Unity and Diversity*. Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing.

3. Buddhism & Shintoism in Japan: A – Z Photo Dictionary. <http://www.onmarkproductions.com/html/buddhism.shtml>

4. The Tokugawa Art Museum. <https://www.tokugawa-art-museum.jp/en/>

This museum is home to an excellent collection that features over 10,000 items from the Edo period. There are a number of fine images with descriptions provided on the website.

5. Encyclopedia of Shinto. <http://k-amc.kokgakuin.ac.jp/DM/dbTop.do?class_name=col_eos>

This site, which is maintained by Kokugakuin University, provides a comprehensive database with links to a wide range of material on Shinto, divided up into ten categories, including: General Introduction; Kami (Deities); Jinja (Shrines); Rites and Festivals; and more.

1. Tenrikyo (Official Website) <https://www.tenrikyo.or.jp/eng/>

This is the official website of the Tenrikyo religion. It includes resources and information on the teaching, history, faith, activities and news related to Tenrikyo.

1. Joseph Cali and John Dougill. 2012. *Shinto Shrines: A Guide to the Sacred Sites of Japan’s Ancient Religion*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
2. Samurais Archives. <http://www.samurai-archives.com/index.html>

This site contains a comprehensive database of material on the history of the Samurais.

1. *Electronic Journal of Contemporary Japanese Studies*. <http://www.japanesestudies.org.uk/>

This is an international peer reviewed journal in the Social Sciences and Humanities that publishes scholarship on all issues related to contemporary Japan, including a subject area devoted to Religious Studies. From the homepage, click on “Subject index” then “Religious Studies” in the Table of Contents by Subject Area.”

1. Shrines and Temples of Japan. <http://www.art-and-archaeology.com/japan/japan.html>

This site contains photos with brief descriptions of shrines and temples of Japan. It also includes some additional material on sculptures, masks and village life.

Field Work Guidelines

If you are interested in doing fieldwork, you need to plan and organize your fieldwork experience as thoroughly as you can. Generally, you can divide your fieldwork experience into three stages: Planning, during, and after your fieldwork.

Planning Your Fieldwork

*Research:* Begin by researching the individual, group, or place you would like to do work on or with. Visit websites if available, and read any available scholarship.

*Make Contact:* Contact the person, group, or administrators of the place you would like to research. Give as much information as possible about your project so that your contact can guide. Often your contact will be able to help you understand the rules for conduct that will be needed during your fieldwork. Remember to be polite and courteous.

*Questions:* Based on your research and interests, create a set of questions you would like to answer during the course of your fieldwork.

*Ethics Approval:* Some projects need to have ethics approval, especially if your research involves people. The guidelines for applications for ethics approval may differ depending on the organization or university you work with; thus, please contact your organization or university to find out more about this process.

During Your Fieldwork

Often, there are specific rules for conduct when you visit sacred spaces and/or interview people, and usually, these rules can be seen before you enter a site, or spoken about before you interview people. It is best to find out about these rules before you begin your fieldwork. There are some general rules that should be followed at all times: Always be polite and courteous, dress modestly, and participate where appropriate.

*Be polite and courteous:*

1. Introduce yourself. If you are visiting a sacred site or a worship centre, you will be able to find people who are either there to meet you specifically, or would like to help you during your visit.
2. Leave your camera, phone, notebook, or laptop in a bag or even at home unless you have received prior permission to use these items.
3. Be aware of signs. Signs have important information about the place you are in, thus, look for the signs and the information they give.
4. Be respectful of the people and your surroundings. Do not disturb the rites or the privacy of the people. While there are times when you may be invited to participate, please remember that if you are not invited, you should keep a respectful silence and distance from the rite. Also, people may be curious about why you are visiting or conducting your research. Try to answer their questions as best you can. They may be able to provide you with additional information and further help.

*Dress modestly:*

1. Rules for appropriate dress are often important when visiting a place or a group. Please follow these rules if you have been given them.
2. There are various types of sacred sites in Japan and dress will depend on the type of site you are visiting. Try to contact the site before visiting to find out these rules. Often, if you are not dressed appropriately, you may be given appropriate attire, or you may not be allowed into a site.

*Participate Where Appropriate:*

1. If you have been invited to participate, please do so!
2. Generally, follow the guidelines that have been given to you, or the people around you. The best tip: Stand when people stand, and sit when people sit.
3. Ask questions. If you are not sure what to do, ask the people around you. Most people will be happy to help you out.
4. If you are interviewing a particular person or people, make notes on the questions that you ask, and answer any questions that you are asked as well.

After Your Fieldwork

1. Make a comprehensive set of notes on your experience as soon as you are able. The better your notes are, the more you will be able to draw on later.
2. Thank anyone who has helped you with your experience, and acknowledge their help in the written version of your work.
3. Follow up with the people or the place that you have visited. If you have used information from any interviews, offer to send a copy your work to the place or the people you have met.