

## What Japanese Exchange Students think about Japanese Religion (2008)

(round table discussion, translation: Peter Ackermann)

### The Japanese concept of religion

Erlangen, 12 December 2008

A. Do you have *shinkôshin*, i.e. do you believe?

B. What do you think happens after death?

C. What religions exist in Japan?

The discussion was started by posing a German question: "Sind Japaner gläubig?" (Do Japanese have faith in something? / do Japanese believe?)

(Here *gläubig* – believing – is used as an expression frequently uttered in Europe to determine whether a person feels part of, or acknowledges a distance from, a social community, which in a very traditional sense has seen the church as its centre. The implication of *gläubig* can thus still be sensed as touching upon a person's very existence as a socially integrated individual. The idea that anyone would openly say that he/she does not "believe" may still conjure up the image of unethical conduct, for which reason it is essential to carefully consider what the Japanese students give as answer when asked about their belief.)

#### A. Do you have *shinkôshin*, i.e. do you believe?

##### Answer 1

No, I do not believe. But I take things like *shichigosan* [the shrine visits on the 15th day of the 11th month by children in their 3rd (girls), 5th (boys) and 7th (girls) year], or *seijinshiki* [the coming-of-age celebration] seriously.

What is absolutely essential is to carefully and strictly observe *fushime* (*fushime o kichinto suru*) [*fushime*, literally a bamboo joint, is a term used to designate the end of one phase before entering upon a next phase].

Japanese are *mushûkyô* [a-religious]; they have no religion. I have never taken part in a

*gyôji* [a festive/ritual event], but I performed *o-miyamairi* [visit to a shrine] when my sister was born, and I also did *jûsan-mairi* [visit to a shrine as a girl of 13].

### Answer 2

My family is *mushûkyô* [a-religious]. We don't do anything on Sunday (like visiting a church etc). For us there is no *kamisama* [god] with a name; we don't believe in any such *kamisama*.

But we do on occasions call an *o-bôsan* [a Buddhist priest] and have him read sutras (*o-kyô o agete morattari*).

Every month we do pay a visit to the grave (*o-haka mairi*). By the way, there is a television programme on visiting the graves of ancestors. This may have an influence on paying visits to a temple (*o-mairi*).

I live in Tennôji ward in Osaka. There we only perform rituals for our ancestors (*senzo kuyô*), but otherwise I don't do anything religious.

### Answer 3

Our religion is not like Christianity. It may be Buddhism, but not "religion."

However, we observe *shichigosan* [visits on the 15th day of the 11th month to the shrine by children in their 3rd (girls), 5th (boys) and 7th (girls) year], we also perform *hatsumôde* [visit to the shrine on the first day of the new year] and we do *o-mairi* [pay regular visits to the shrine or Buddhist temple]. We do this in a *shikkari* way [in a firm and steady way, taking it very seriously]. In this sense one may say that we do have deep religious feelings (*shinkô-fukai*).

My mother's mother knew a lot about Buddhism; she had studied Buddhism. And my father's mother is continuously going to the Buddhist temple (*shotchû jinja e iku*).

### Answer 4

Religion means to me the absence of *kegare* [impurity, stain] and a *shinsen* [fresh]

atmosphere.

#### Answer 5

If you ask whether our hearts have a strong sense of belief, the answer is "no"!

But mother's father is an *o-tera* [Buddhist temple] fan. In fact, he is *jûshoku* [chief priest at a Buddhist temple]. I used to take part in the *gyôji* [ceremonies]. I often thought to myself how strong their *shinkôshin* [belief] was.

#### Answer 6

I associate "religion" with the careful observation of individual *fushime* [joint, particularly a bamboo joint; the transition of one phase to another; the start of a new phase].

Important are *meinichi no hi* [the anniversary of a person's death]; my grandfather died on the 18th, so every 18th of a month is a *meinichi*. On this day we eat no fish, and also do not put soup flavouring (*dashi*) into our *miso* soup, as *dashi* is made from fish; i.e. we observe the rule *sesshō shinai koto* [not to kill].

#### Answer 7

In situations of danger, in critical phases and times of crisis we show our thankfulness to the *kamisama* [the local or specific deities].

#### Answer 8

Religion is to me *sôshiki bukkuyô* [the funeral rituals performed by Buddhist priests and Buddhist institutions].

### **B. What do you think happens after death?**

#### Answer 1

I feel no ties with any ancestors. I have never participated in a *hōji* [a memorial service for the dead]. I don't know what elder people think about this.

My grandfather always said he never wished to be buried in the ancestral grave. He also didn't want a funeral. He wanted his ashes to be scattered. However, he did consider the idea of a memorial day, but not more.

I myself wish that there is no kind of world of any sort after death.

My father thinks that a grave is necessary in order to console those left behind. A grave can become an emotional support.

I am from Tokyo, but relatives of mine who live in a more rural town arrange for funerals and have sutras read.

To me, the word *shūkyō* [religion] has a negative connotation. It is something to be scared of. Particularly the news about "new religions" is scary. This kind of "religion" is a mysterious, unidentifiable, suspicious-looking thing (*etai o shirenai mono*).

However, if asked for what kind of religious phenomenon I feel the greatest affinity, I would say "Shinto," the household Shinto altar, and the myriad (Shinto) deities of Japan.

## Answer 2

I have no attachment to this world. When I'm dead I will disappear.

Things might be different if you are closer to death. Grandfather and grandmother wished the *kaiki* [specific death anniversaries] to be held, e.g. the 3rd or the 7th anniversary.

When we sat down for the meal after the funeral a butterfly came into the room. Everyone said, "Be careful not to kill it!" We thought that maybe grandfather had returned in form of the butterfly.

Answer 3

I live in the country, in Hiroshima Prefecture. Here my village basically follows the Jōdo Shinshū [Pure Land Buddhism] rituals. We place *bon-dōrō* [(o)bon lanterns; see pictures] next to the grave at *o-bon* [the period in mid-summer when the deceased ancestors are thought to return to where they used to live].



Answer 4

The idea is that the dead person will return.

They return at *o-bon*, but also at *o-higan* [equinox], when people visit the grave, maybe put a candle in a *tōrō* [stone lantern] and light *o-senkō* [incense]. One also visits the grave at the end of the year.

Answer 5

I'm not interested (in what might come after death). Death is a *fushime* [a joint, an intersection], then it's just finished.

My parents use all kinds of terms when referring to after-death: *shijūkunichi* [the 49th day after death], *o-hakamairi* [the visit to the grave], *gyōji* [ritual events], *shonanoka* [the first 7th day after death], *nanakaiki* [the 7th anniversary of a person's death], *hōji* [the memorial service], and several others.

The old people of the neighbourhood gather on March 31. The *jūshoku* [main priest of a

Buddhist temple] performs *o-sekkyô* [reading and explanation of sutras]. I myself, together with my mother, we help in the *gyôji* [ritual events]. We prepare tea and entertain the guests.

#### Answer 6

My parents belong to the Jôdo Shinshû [True Pure Land Buddhism] school. So they visit the Honganji temple in Kyoto once a year.

Everyone thinks that at *o-higan* [equinox] and *o-bon* in mid-summer one should visit the grave of the ancestors. At *o-bon* one sets up a lantern at the grave. The ancestors return.

There exists the concept of *tamashii* [spirit]. *tamashii* remains in this world (after death), until *jôbutsu* [becoming a Buddha, entering nirvana] occurs. My parents used to tell me, "*tamashii* is listening, it hears you if you slander someone."

Eventually comes *jôbutsu* [becoming a Buddha]. Then a person can properly die (*chanto shineru*), leave this world without *miren* [feelings of attachment, lingering affection] and go on to *raisei* [the next life].

Grandmother and mother say: if you have killed an insect you must chant something (*tonaeru*), then it can complete *jôbutsu* [becoming a Buddha]; chant the name of Amida Buddha 10 times.

Grandmother has notions of *gokuraku jigoku* [paradise and hell]. We all know the story of *Kumo no ito* (The Spider's Web, by Akutaga Ryûnosuke) well. It tells us, if in *gensei* [this life] we do something bad, we will drop into hell.

#### Answer 7

My world is that of Jôdo Shinshû [True Pure Land Buddhism].

You are not supposed to kill even the smallest thing. I know stories about hell. Also the concept of *jôbutsu* [becoming a Buddha] is well known. After death the *tamashii* [spirit]

roams around (*samayou*) in this world for 1 year. Through *kuyô* [services for departed souls] the next steps can be taken, so that after 7 years the *tamashii* can complete *jôbutsu*.

I myself think that when one dies the functions of the brain end and everything stops. There is no more consciousness. Perhaps this is the point from which one is reborn - maybe as an animal, maybe as a human being, depending on what one did in life.

### Answer 8

For me Nichiren Shôshû Buddhism is relevant. It's a question of the region one lives in. Nichiren Shôshû Buddhism is important in my region, and I live near its Taiseikiji temple at the foot of Mount Fuji. At high school many children of priests from the Taiseikiji were in my class, and they had shaven heads.

I remember the services for my grandfather. Such services (*hôji*) are for those who have been bereaved.

Every one comes together for the *kaiki* [anniversaries of a person's death]. They all come for grandmother.

The priest speaks about *rinne* [transmigration of the soul]. He asks us to pray for our dead grandfather.

I feel that we have come together for the deceased, they will be happy, and we will speak to them.

### Answer 9

When I was young I had no interest in these questions. But as you grow older you begin to think. You think about substance and energy. When I am dead my substances will perhaps serve some purpose.

After 35 *kaiki* [anniversaries of a person's death] the priest says: That's enough. Such *kaiki* begin to be a burden.

### 3. What religions exist in Japan?

As time had run out, spontaneous, short answers were called for:

- Buddhism and Shinto and Christianity and others
- the same, but: if you begin to count them exactly there is no end
- the same
- Buddhism, Shinto, but I would not include Christianity. Then also New Religions and small religions
- Buddhism, Shinto, animism, cult-type religions
- *kami* [deities] and *hotoke* [Buddhas]
- The person living near Mount Fuji says that because of the nearby Fuji there are many New Religions in the region [structured around the symbolism and/or the spiritual powers of the mountain].