



Religious Change in Japanese Shinto

Podcast with **Michael Pye** (19 March 2018).

Interviewed by **Hans Van Eyghen**.

Transcribed by **Helen Bradstock**.

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<http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/religious-change-in-japanese-shinto/>

Hans Van Eyghen (HVE): I'm with Professor [Michael Pye](#), at the University of Marburg, to discuss Shintoism. Welcome, Professor Michael Pye.

MP: Thank you.

HVE: My first question: Shinto is often called the native religion of Japan. Could you tell us a little about that definition, and what might be wrong with it?

MP: Yes. Well it *is* a native religion of Japan. That's not problematic in itself, I think. But the problem is that during the long history of Japan, what we now call Shinto was constantly created and recreated. So, what people nowadays regard as Shinto isn't necessarily what was Shinto a few hundred years ago, or a thousand years ago etc. That's the problem.

HVE: What would be some of the main differences between the current Shintoism and, say, ancient Shintoism?

MP: Well, the main point is that in the 19th century Shinto became ideologised and used by the state in support of nationalism. And so, therefore, new agendas appeared which were of a modern kind. And prior to that, there was a long period when Shinto was very closely identified with Buddhism and it was difficult to separate them out. They formed part of a wide religious complex. And then, if we look back even earlier, we have difficulty in being sure that Shinto was very much like what modern Shinto is like. Nevertheless, there are ancient traditions of the worship of *kami*, and rituals connected with *kami* – that's the divinities in Shinto – and so there are important continuities. But, as I said, because of the long history there have been many shifts and developments.

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HVE: *Some mainly Japanese scholars, I've been told, try to argue that there's a form of pure Shintoism, which goes all the way back to ancient times, which got corrupted during the middle ages. Could you tell us a little bit about their claim and what may be wrong with it?*

MP: Well, I think what's wrong with it is that they're trying to posit a unique pure Shinto, which can't really be historically maintained.

HVE: *Why is that?*

MP: Well, they want to do that because they want it to be the national religion of the whole of the Japanese people. Not all Japanese people agree with that, and want that. But they would like it to be that. So, therefore, they're laying claim to the origins of the Japanese people and the origins of the imperial line of emperors, in an attempt to have a kind of coherent, civic religion. Which just doesn't fit with what we know about the ancient periods.

HVE: *And how doesn't it fit?*

MP: Well it doesn't fit because although some *kami* rites – Shinto rites – were organised by the ancient courts - the *Yamato* court- we don't actually know very much about what happened in the regions of Japan, what kinds of religious practices there were. And these were not really coordinated into something which we can call Shinto.

HVE: *And the whole influence of Buddhism, like, the claim of the Japanese scholars suggest that there was a process when they tried to do away with Buddhist influences. Was that actually the case?*

MP: Yes, in the 19th century, they definitely tried to separate Buddhism and Shinto. It's called *shinbutsu bunri*: separating – the Shin of Shinto means *kami* and the *butsu* are the Buddhas of Buddhism. So they effectively took away Buddhist images and Buddhist practices away from the shrines, and tried to create and promote the pure Shinto as they thought of it.

HVE: *And who did this? The Government, I assume.*

MP: The Government led it and the Government wished it and decreed it. But it was carried out, of course, by shrine authorities.

HVE: *And how did people respond? Like, often people are very resistant to religious change. They try to keep doing the things that they always did. Was there something like that going on, or did they just*

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follow the dictates?

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MP: Well, there wasn't very much resistance because it wasn't very easy to resist it, actually. And to some extent, after the Second World War, there has been a move to return to a closer symbiosis of Shinto and Buddhism. But at the time it wasn't really possible to resist it. So part of that movement, also, was to install the divinities – which are mentioned in the ancient texts in shrines all over Japan – where previously there had been more mysterious divinities of, maybe, an ambiguous nature. So they tried to clean up the kind-of character of Shinto, in many ways. Not only by removing Buddhist influence but also by organising the pantheon, the Shinto pantheon in a structured way.

HVE: Well, the whole symbiosis with Buddhism: I imagine Buddhism has a very specific goal in mind what Buddhas, and *Bodhisattvas* are doing for people – what role they play. So could you tell us a little about that, how that changed Shintoism?

MP: Well I think you may be thinking of the situation in which Buddhist leaders – Buddhist monks and thinkers – tried to assimilate Shinto divinities and mobilise them, for the purposes of leading people into Buddhism. Is that what you're thinking about?

HVE: *Indeed. Or leading them into salvation.*

MP: Yes, leading them into salvation or enlightenment, rather. Leading them into the path of Buddhahood – *butsodo* is the path of Buddhahood. So I think *Mahayana* Buddhism is quite well-known for its tolerant integrative attitude towards the great variety of religious practices. So it's not so much tolerance in a kind of modern, Western, liberal sense, but more in the sense of making room for things to be carried out: popular practices, daily practices in which people have the possibility of satisfying their daily needs, their practical needs for security, safety, for good harvests, for benefits of various kinds in this world. And so *Mahayana* Buddhism – most Japanese forms of Buddhism are within the *Mahayana* tradition – seeks to make room for all of these things, in order to lead people towards Buddhist ideas. So it has . . . the leading monks have a very reflective attitude about that. They understand those processes.

HVE: *It sounds rather like Buddhism is incorporating Shintoism, rather than there is symbiosis where the two are mutual partners.*

MP: Well no, they weren't. In the heyday of the medieval period they were not really mutual partners, that's true. Buddhism, especially esoteric Buddhism, was the dominant partner. So that's why, when

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you have the more decisive response by Shinto-oriented thinkers – and especially when it came to be backed up by the Government – the attempt was made to take the initiative over against Buddhism.

HVE: *I want to get back to post-war Shintoism.*

MP: OK

HVE: *You said we can see a symbiosis with Buddhism, or mutual influences. I imagine some Shinto thinkers are unhappy with that. Are there people who try to do away with that, or try to respond to that?*

MP: Well, I don't think so. I mean this is not a massive movement, but we've recently seen some signs. For example, the head temple of [Tendai Buddhism](#) on [Mount Hiei](#), has been making overtures to the priest in charge of the [Ise shrine](#), which is closely linked with imperial family where the sun goddess is enshrined, [Amaterasu Omikami](#). So these overtures are a kind-of friendly approach which is quite supportive of Shinto institutions and Tendai Buddhist institutions. And not all Buddhists are interested in that. But there isn't really any complaint. There isn't really any resistance to that, on the part of Shinto leaders, because they're happy to be recognised and to find wider recognition in Japanese society.

HVE: *Ok. And I want to touch on another point now, again on post-war Shintoism. There is the experience of the war, of course. This must have been traumatic. How did that influence Shintoism? Of course, the Emperor renouncing his powers, more-or-less: what was the impact of the war and especially the after-war period in Shintoism?*

MP: Well, it's a big subject, but – by the way, we usually speak of Shinto rather than Shintoism.

HVE: *I'm sorry.*

MP: That's ok. Shintoism is widely used, I know, but it rather suggests an ideology, rather than a religion. So I prefer to speak of Shinto, usually. Well, the first main point is that the official forms of Shinto were disestablished: separated from the state. That was a very necessary move after the end of the war. And so there is a problem about the ways in which contemporary Shinto can be part of public life. There are various problems with that, for example we have the problem about [Yasukuni shrine](#), which is where the Japanese war dead are enshrined. And whether the Prime Minister of Japan can go to visit that shrine, as Prime Minister. And of course in recent years they have been doing that. So other people have objected to that.

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HVE: *Because they're war criminals?*

MP: Well that's one reason, yes. Because a small number of convicted War criminals are enshrined there. But the main problem is the question of the separation of religion and state, you see. People don't really want to have a blurring of that distinction, which is an important guarantee for the secular democracy which we now have in Japan. So that's one of the problems. A similar problem arose with the enthronement of the present Emperor, because again the Emperor is descended from previous emperors of course, and the enthronement is partly based on religious traditions connected with *Amaterasu*, the sun goddess. And so, how can you have the enthronement of the emperor in a non-religious way? That was the problem. So in fact they did it quite well, because they had two separate lots of activity. One was the public secular ascension to the throne and the declaration of the emperor himself. And the other part was a series of rituals in the imperial household, in the gardens, in the grounds of the imperial palace. So those two things were separated. And I thought that was quite successful. But some of the other things are not so successful. And at the *Yasukuni* Shrine there is a blurring of the distinctions, and in some other cases too.

HVE: *So what's the main motivation for separating Shinto and public life of public officials? Is it just that – separation of church and state, as we have here? Or are they afraid that what happened in the past will repeat itself?*

MP: Well, it was actually forced upon the Japanese government immediately after the war, by the American occupation.

HVE: *Could you elaborate on that?*

MP: There was a directive given that this should all be separated out. And so that was combined with a freedom of religions law, which made it possible for other religions in Japan to organise very well, including a good number of new religions, some of which had been oppressed in the meantime, and some of which were newly founded after the war. So religious freedom is an aspect of it. So if you're going to have religious freedom you can't, at the same time, have a state religion which is completely dominant and not permitting space for other religions to organise. And this is a classic problem all over the world.

HVE: *There's no idea that the past connection of Shinto with the imperial family led to atrocious things? That's nothing to do with it?*

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MP: Well there is among the Japanese population. But, within the world of Shinto Shrines, this is not something which is talked about very much. But in some other important religious denominations, such as [Shin Buddhism](#), and also in [Soto Zen Buddhism](#), there is a very clear understanding that Shinto led – organised, modern, politicised Shinto – contributed to leading Japan into war and disaster. So – remember the [population of Japan](#) is very large, well over 100 million. I don't know what it is today, but 120 million, or something. So there is quite a lot of room for people to have different views.

HVE: *And connected to that, nowadays some claim we see some resurgence of Japanese nationalism. Is there some implications for current Shinto, or it isn't an issue?*

MP: Well, there's a constant resurgence of Japanese nationalism, in my opinion.

HVE: *Is there?*

MP: Yes. Ever since the Second World War we have had mainly right-of-centre governments in Japan. And, usually, some members of the governments have been saying things which are quite right-wing, and even militaristic. But, of course, the constitution doesn't permit Japan to have an army in the same sense as some other countries, although they have very large self-defence forces. So, anyway, public figures sometimes say quite disturbing things about the past of Japan, and how it "wasn't so bad", and this, that and the other, you see. So whereas, on the other hand there are those who resist this – there are quite a lot of people who want to defend [Clause Nine](#) of the Constitution, which forbids having a military

HVE: *People that say these things about the past: they don't make a connection to Shinto, or they don't identify Shinto more strongly?*

MP: Well the ones who criticise it identify Shinto with that, and they identify the emperor system with that. But within the Shinto world there is not very much concern about that. They rather tend to be on the right wing, or tolerating right-wing attitudes.

HVE: *OK*

MP: Speaking very generally, that's the way. But of course the Shinto world is quite large. There are many shrines, there are many priests who have been educated in various universities. And I think it's of interest to speak, above all, with moderate Shinto figures and to encourage them, and to encourage moderate Shinto thinkers or leaders to keep a steady view, and not to rush off into some right-wing movements or something like that.

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HVE: *You talk about moderate Shinto – does that imply that there is a not-moderate Shinto, as well?*

MP: Oh yes. Well, some of the leaders of Shinto shrines are not actually very reflective about politics. So, they obviously have uncritical views about Japan's past. And there is always a danger that they will encourage nationalism, especially if they're talking about Shinto as the religion of the ethnic group. So this tends to focus on the particular ethnic group. And that's the seed-bed of nationalism. But some of the Shinto leaders are more widely educated and it's easier to talk with them and help them to have a balanced view of their own history.

HVE: *But, in your view, the non-moderates aren't gaining ground or aren't gaining influence?***MP:** I don't think so. Things are fairly stable. As far as I know.**HVE:** *And is there a connection between these less or non-moderate people and those who advocate, like, the view of a pure Shinto in ancient times?*

MP: Yes, they are more likely to be saying that, yes. I've advanced the notion that Shinto – this is my personal way of looking at it – that "Shinto", in inverted commas, is an adapted religion. It's an adapted primal religion. In other words, it does have indigenous roots.

HVE: *In Japan?*

MP: Yes, indigenous in Japan. It's not an imported religion. It has indigenous roots in Japan. So that's what I call a primal religion. Some people just call it an indigenous religion. And this has been adapted, due to the changing political and social circumstances, up until the present day – when it's quite complicated. And the moderate Shinto leaders are quite happy with that understanding. And they are less likely to be asserting some kind of simplified essential Shinto as having been there from time immemorial. So they're quite happy to perceive the historical vicissitudes and changes, and they know perfectly well that the way in which Shinto is used politically, in the 19th and early 20th century is not really a possible way for Japan in the future. So they're providing a more balanced service to the religious needs of Japanese people, without having a heavily politicised attitude.

HVE: *Apart from the shrines and the priests – the common practitioners: is that something that's on their minds . . . whether there's a pure Shinto?*

MP: No, I don't think so. They just go to the shrine to get their fortunes told, and to pray for benefits, and for a quiet life, and prosperity, and so on. People are not really thinking about this, no. I don't

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think so.

HVE: *And do they show certain more symbiosis with Buddhism, as you see here in the West: Christians who meditate, Christians who attend other services, even? Do you see that in Japan as well, with Shinto practitioners who are engaged with Buddhist practices, or other practices?*

MP: Well, some Buddhist denominations are quite tolerant of Shinto practices, but others are more strict and they don't really want their believers, their followers, to take part in the practices of Shinto shrines. But as far as the Shinto shrine leaders are concerned, they don't really mind if people go to Buddhist temples or not. They just like them to come to the shrine first. For example, at New Year: "Please come the shrine first and then you can go off somewhere else to celebrate New Year in a different way." That's quite common.

HVE: *There's no friction in certain Shinto beliefs or certain Buddhist beliefs, for example?*

MP: Well, there is between . . . In general, there is not – in the minds of, maybe, the majority of people. But there is some friction in the case of what we might call the more decisive popular denominations of Buddhism. Shin Buddhism, which has about 16 million followers after all, and also Nichiren Buddhism, and some of the new Buddhist movements which have a rather strict view of their own form of Buddhism. So there is, to some extent, a rejection of Shinto. They try to encourage people not to bother with Shinto practices, not to go to Shinto shrines, but to concentrate on their own religious practice. And of course, because there is not public religious education in school, because of the separation of religion and state, people in general are not very well-informed about the variety of religions in Japan. They don't actually know very much about the different Buddhist denominations. Or, if they're in Buddhist contexts, they don't know very much about Shinto shrines for example. So that's part of it. Some ignorance. Difference through ignorance, you might say.

HVE: *A final question about the study of Shinto. Like these questions about pure Shinto and the symbiosis with Buddhism, how do you see it going forward? Is there building a consensus somehow that the ancient pure Shinto isn't a worthwhile approach?*

MP: Do you mean amongst scholars, or amongst . . .

HVE: *Amongst Scholars.*

MP: Well I think that's pretty well accepted amongst scholars, that there wasn't an original pre-Shinto which we can just define and grasp. But that the origins are complex, and that the focussing on
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something that we can call Shinto actually took place step by step, and later than the oldest documents that we have. So I think everybody realises that. But the problem arises because when Japanese writers – maybe rather popular writers, maybe media people – when they refer to Shinto as if it were an original pure thing, which you can just get from the past. That's the problem. It's not among academics.

HVE: *And that isn't going away?*

MP: Oh, that won't go away. I don't think so.

HVE: *You're not very optimistic?*

MP: No, because it's an ideological statement which people find easy to swallow. So they will keep on saying that for some time. We just have learn to live with that, and to maintain the academic clarity over against the religious standpoints. But this is . . . You find this in any studies of religion. You have to distinguish between the academic reflection on it and historical analysis on the one hand, and the religious positions on the other hand, which are quite often misleading or incorrect.

HVE: *Ok. Thank you very much, Professor Pye. That was a very interesting interview.*

MP: My pleasure. Thank you very much.

HVE: *Thank you.*

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