

Susumu Shimazono

# Religion and Public Space in Contemporary Japan: Re-activation of the Civilization of the Axial Age and the Manifestation of State Shinto and Buddhism

**Abstract:** Religious discourses and activities or discourses by religious organizations and religious leaders are occupying an increasingly bigger space in the public sphere in Japan in the 2010s. On the one hand, State Shinto has manifested its presence, and a political movement to further its influence is in place. On the other hand, Buddhist and New Religion organizations in the Buddhist line are inclined to participate more in the public sphere, presenting their discourses against nationalist tendencies. The visualization of religions in the public space in Japan can be seen as an example of a revitalization of the Axial Age civilization, either from the aspect of the revival of State Shinto, or the aspect of Buddhism as a public religion.

**Keywords:** State Shinto, Axial Age civilization, public religion, imperial nationalism, Japanese nationalism, religious nationalism, Nippon Kaigi, Yasukuni Shrine, Soka Gakkai, Shinzo Abe

## 1 Revival of State Shinto

In discussing religion in contemporary Japan, there are many factors which tend to be overlooked if attention is given only to religious organizations. It is necessary to take into account the religious behavior and consciousness of people who do not belong to any specific religious organizations, and those who do not consider themselves to be related to religion. This does not imply only those people who assert: 'I am not religious, but I am spiritual.' In Japan, there is an influential system of religious discourse and behavior named 'State Shinto' which has not been based mainly on formal religious organizations. In East Asia, the traditional spiritual cultures – notably Confucianism, Taoism and folk religions – have exerted strong influence on the culture and behavior of the people and occupy important positions without having formal religious organizations. Thus, it is not easy to draw a proper picture of religions in East Asia.

A notable change is observable in religion in contemporary Japan. Ise Shrine, which enshrines Amaterasu Omikami, the principle female deity of Shin-

to mythology who is said to have ordered her descendants to rule Japan from heaven, and which had been the central axis of State Shinto until the end of World War II, was reportedly visited by over 14.2 million worshippers in 2013 (Asahi Shimbun, January 1, 2014). That number exceeded the record number of visitors in 2010 (8.83 million, which was the largest number since the beginning of recorded statistics in 1895) by over five million. The year 2013 was the twentieth year since the new shrine was constructed and the enshrined objects were transferred from the old shrine. This anniversary was the greatest factor for the increase in number of worshippers. In the years prior to transferring the shrine, the number of visitors amounted to 4.82 million in 1954, 8.59 million in 1973, and 8.39 million in 1993. Compared to these numbers, the number of worshippers in 2013 is remarkable.

It was reported that 13 out of 19 members of the Abe Cabinet, formed in 2012, belonged to the Nippon Kaigi Parliamentary Panel. This group is a parliamentary section of the organization named Nippon Kaigi (Japan Conference). It is a large group of 252 members in the parliament, with MP Takeo Hiranuma serving as its chairperson (Akahata, Communist Party Newspaper, January 15, 2013).

The Nippon Kaigi, according to its official website, is a non-governmental organization for advocacy and popular movement working to rebuild a beautiful and self-respecting Japan. The website gives the following explanation (accessed March 31, 2015, <http://www.nipponkaigi.org/about>):

Nippon Kaigi was established on May 30, 2007 combining the former ‘Nihon wo Mamoru Kokumin Kaigi (National Conference to Protect Japan)’ and ‘Nihon wo Mamoru Kai (Association to Protect Japan)’ as a popular movement with a national grassroots network.

Over the past 30 or so years, we developed nationwide movements in an effort to define the best path for Japan to take. Our activities include: the legislation in 1979 of the use of names of Meiji, Taisho and Showa, periods corresponding to the reign of each of those emperors, in official documents; the movement to celebrate the 60th year of the reign of Emperor Showa and the enthronement ceremony of the present emperor and other auspicious events in the Imperial Household; a movement to normalize education; editing of history textbooks; holding a memorial ceremony for the war dead in the 50th year after the end of WWII and festivals aiming for maintaining harmonious relations with countries in Asia; supporting the peace keeping operations of the Self-Defense Forces; and advocating the formulation of a new Constitution embodying a national concept based on tradition.

Japan today, however, has many problems such as confused politics, school education with problems, insufficient risk management, and its economic prospects are grim. We will advocate and take action to protect and pass on a beautiful Japan with the motto of ‘self-respecting nation building.’

In response to our new popular movement, the multi-party ‘Nippon Kaigi Parliamentary Panel’ was established. Together with parliamentary members, we will conduct grassroots popular movements all over the country. We request your support.’

Notable concrete ‘popular movement’ projects are the legislation of the use of the emperor’s reign period names in official documents, the encouragement of the veneration of the emperor such as celebrations of auspicious events of the Imperial Household, the advocacy of formulating a new Constitution embodying the concept of a nation based on tradition, and support to the peace-keeping operations of the Self-Defense Forces. This organization places importance on strengthening the power of the state, and inspiring the veneration of the emperor in its activities.

The declaration for the establishment of the organization adopted at the initial assembly in May 1995 says (accessed March 31, 2015, <http://www.nipponkaigi.org/about>):

The Japanese people, since ancient times, have admitted the coexistence of diverse values and absorbed aspects of overseas cultures and assimilated them in our nation-building efforts while respecting our traditions and living in harmony with nature. The building of the first modern nation in Asia after the Meiji Restoration was a glorious result of our national efforts.

Despite the nation’s unprecedented defeat in WWII, our national character to venerate the emperor as the central being for national integration was never shaken, and people rose up from their despair and from the scorched land, and have made strenuous efforts to rebuild the nation into an economic power.

However, behind its admirable economic prosperity, the traditional culture which had developed over many generations and had been handed down to us by our ancestors came to be slighted, and our glorious history has been forgotten or sullied, and the spirit to protect the nation and devote ourselves to the good of society was lost among our people, while tendencies to seek only one’s self-protection and enjoyment prevail in society. Now, the nation is inclining toward dissolution.

In addition, the collapse of the Cold War structure clearly revealed the fallacy of Marxism, but on the other hand, the world entered a new age of chaos where nations selfishly pursue their own interests. Nevertheless, Japan today has no firm concept or national goal for survival in the rapidly changing international community. If we continue living an idle life, the ruin of the country cannot be avoided.

Being aware of living in this critical age, we establish this organization to promote the development of our nation and people so that we can contribute to the development of Japan and mutual prosperity with the world. We will inherit the achievements of activities carried out over the past 20 years and moreover, we will mobilize the passion and power of interested people in striving for a broad range of popular movements.

The Association of Shinto Shrines, embracing almost all Shinto shrines in the country, is deeply involved in Nippon Kaigi. Other than this organization, many organizations which belong to New Religion and the moral movement are associated with it. They include Gedatsu-kai, Kokuchu-kai, Reiyu-kai, Sukyo Mahikari, Institute of Moralogy, Kirisuto-no-Makuya, Bussho-Gonenkai, Nenpou Shinkyo, Shinsei Bukkyo Kyodan, Oisca International, and Ananai-kyo.

Further, there is the Shinto Political Federation working in partnership with the Association of Shinto Shrines. The Shinto Political Federation also has a parliamentary members' group. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe served as the chairperson of the group some years ago. More than sixty percent of members of both parliamentary groups under Nippon Kaigi and Shinto Political Federation belong to both organizations. In the election for the House of Representatives in June 2012, more than 200 candidates who were recommended by the Shinto Political Federation were successfully elected. The Association of Shinto Shrines has concentrated its efforts on reviving State Shinto after WWII (Shimazono 2010). After the 2012 election, parliamentary members in favor of the revival of State Shinto have grown to be a large force in the Diet. Prime Minister Abe made a worshiping visit to Yasukuni Shrine in December 2013 supported by this political background.

Even so, it should be carefully judged if the ruling party members are all affected by the Shinto Political Federation and Nippon Kaigi, because many members in the Liberal Democratic Party greatly depend on votes by Komeito supporters. Komeito party supporters comprise the followers of Soka Gakkai, a New Religion organization in the Buddhist line. Soka Gakkai is cautionary about the revival of State Shinto. The Komeito party has been expressing its concerns about Prime Minister Abe visiting Yasukuni Shrine. If the Liberal Democratic Party were to strongly push its agenda to revive State Shinto, the coalition of the Liberal Democratic Party and Komeito party would have no choice but to break up.

Is this political context related in any way to the increase in the number of worshippers at Ise Shrine? It is not known what kind of political consciousness worshippers have. In fact, the increase of worshippers is closely related with a 'Power Spot' boom. (Power Spots refer to spiritual places in which people can feel energy from the earth.) It is said that a large portion of the worshippers are young women wishing for their good fortunes.

The increase in numbers of worshippers at the shrine is also in response to the tourist strategy of local business people. Akafuku Honten, a long-established confectionery, invested 14 billion yen to develop 'Okage Yokocho,' a shopping lane in the style of the late Edo and Meiji periods, in front of the inner shrine to entertain visitors. This shopping lane became popular and helped attract more tourists to Ise Shrine.

The increase in Ise Shrine worshippers and the promotion to revive State Shinto may be seen to be related to some extent. If State Shinto, under the umbrella of the Association of Shinto Shrines, and Ise Shrine, which is considered as the main base of Shinto by the Association, have gained distinction in peo-

ple's minds, it should be carefully studied how this mindset is related to the current political context.

In short, since the beginning of the 2000s, and in particular after the March 11, 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake and Fukushima First Nuclear Power Plant accident, the movement to revive State Shinto has become apparent. The influence of the religion seems to have become stronger in the form of encouraging State Shinto and the veneration of the emperor in the public sphere. But is this movement only limited to State Shinto?

## 2 Seeking a lifestyle without depending on nuclear power

Because of the accident at Fukushima First Nuclear Power Plant following the Great East Earthquake on March 11, 2011, many people have lost their lands, living environments and jobs and are forced to live in evacuation housing arrangements. Many families have to live separately. Workers are engaged in post-accident work, exposed to high doses of radiation at the risk of shortening their lives. Several hundred thousand people sustained enormous damage. Radioactive substances spread over many acres of land, and a great number of people are concerned about the health hazards to children posed by radioactive substances. The accident is attributed to a failure in taking necessary safety measures by those who have promoted nuclear power generation. The nuclear power disaster is understood as a manifestation of making light of the value of human life.

Since April 2011, movements by religious organizations taking action to promote living without nuclear power plants became remarkable. Christian and Buddhist organizations were the main players in the movements (Fujiyama 2012). The action by Christian organizations was in concert with the decisions adopted by the parliaments of Germany and Italy and other anti-nuclear movements in the world. But here, movements by Buddhist organizations will be examined (Shimazono 2013a).

Among traditional Buddhist organizations, the Myoshinji sub-sect of the Rinzai Sect, the Otani sub-sect of the Shin Sect, and Rissho Koseikai advocated doing away with nuclear power generation. There were Buddhist followers who made public appeals against nuclear power plants and who carried out activities to help victims of the power plant accident and help children in Fukushima on individual or group bases. The more impactful event beyond these activities was

the ‘Declaration – Seeking a Lifestyle without Depending on Nuclear Power’ issued by the Japan Buddhist Federation on December 1, 2011. It begins by saying:

Due to the proliferation of radioactive substances caused by the accident at Fukushima First Nuclear Power Station of Tokyo Electric Power Co. Ltd., a great number of people are forced out of homes where they have lived for years, and are now living the life of refugees. With unfocused rage and anxieties with a bleak prospect, they live in distress. Many families with infants and small children are living in enormous fear of radiation damage to their health, and spending their days in fear of their ‘life.’ We cannot deny the possibility that the radioactive substances, diffused not only in Japan but also globally, will have an effect on the environment and ecological system and threaten the ‘life’ of not only humans but also other living things.

The document continues to state that many Japanese, as citizens of the A-bomb victim nation, have a special prayer, or hope, opposing the violation of life by exposure to radiation:

Japan is the only nation victimized by atomic bombs in the world. Many ‘lives’ were lost, and people who survived the explosions are still suffering subsequent complications of nuclear exposure. In order not to repeat the same mistake, we Japanese have been conveying the messages of misery and rage to help the world understand the importance of ‘life.’

Further, from the viewpoint of the peace desired by the Buddhist spirit, it stresses that the violation of life by nuclear power plants is unacceptable:

Based on the Buddhist spirit, we, at the Japan Buddhist Federation, have been trying to realize world peace in order to build a society in which the ‘life’ of each person is respected. On the other hand, we have expanded our desires to live a more comfortable and convenient life. Behind our pursuit for convenience, there are realities that people in the locations of nuclear power plants are spending their days risking their lives due to the possibility of accidents and leaving behind the unpleasant legacy of how to deal with indisposable radioactive wastes. We must, therefore, regret that we have brought about such a situation in which life and peaceful living are threatened by nuclear power plant accidents.

Finally, the declaration explains that the ground for ‘seeking a lifestyle without depending on nuclear power generation’ is a lifestyle that contains a religious spirit:

We, at the Japan Buddhist Federation, will try to decrease our dependence on nuclear power generation which threatens our life, and aim to build a society with sustainable energy not supported by nuclear power generation. Instead of hoping to live in affluence at the expense of others, we must choose ways whereby personal happiness goes together with human wellbeing.

We declare that each of us should address this issue as our own problem, and while reviewing our own way of living, we should break away from excessive material desires, know that we each have enough, do our best to realize a way of living that is humble before nature, and build a society in which every 'life' is protected.

Their religious spirit is embodied in sentences emphasizing that nuclear power plants 'threaten our lives,' that we receive power supply 'at the expense of others,' and urging that we should seek ways by which 'personal happiness goes together with human wellbeing,' and that, for that purpose, every person should 'know that one has enough and become humble before nature.' It can be said that this declaration is intended to express a view based on Buddhist spirit in a broad sense, beyond various traditional Buddhist Sects, and that its content has an appealing tone to the religious mind and spirituality of Japanese people.

The Japan Buddhist Federation encompasses almost all traditional Buddhist organizations in Japan. Never before had Buddhist organizations made a concerted appeal of this kind to the public. This can be seen as the emergence of a new function for religious organizations: as public religion responding to the needs of society.

Later, on February 2012, the assembly of the Otani sub-sect of Shin Sect announced its resolution 'demanding the realization of a society not dependent on nuclear power generation by discontinuing nuclear power plant operation and decommissioning reactors.' The reason for this resolution is similar to that of the Declaration of the Japan Buddhist Federation, but it takes one step further by demanding concrete measures 'by discontinuing nuclear power generation and decommissioning reactors.'

On June 18, 2012, Rissho Koseikai, in the Hokke Sect line, published its statement titled 'Building a truly rich society – beyond nuclear power plants', which says: 'what is demanded of us now, is to build a truly rich society without nuclear power generation as early as possible.' It also says: 'The most important thing is to review our values and lifestyles to unlimitedly increase energy consumption at the cost of many things. It is now, in this time of greatest need that we should control our consumption and lead a life "to know that we have enough to live" and to find happiness in simple living.' With this, Rissho Koseikai pushed forward its religious spirit while controlling the expression of its religious faith.

Soka Gakkai, another New Religion in the Buddhist line, published a memorial proposal titled 'Century when the tie of dignity of life gives off a brilliance' on the 37th 'Soka Gakkai International Day' on January 26, 2012, by Honorable President Daisaku Ikeda. In it he says: 'The government should immediately examine energy policies not dependent on nuclear power generation.' However, the Komeito Party, supported by Soka Gakkai, is a coalition partner with the Lib-

eral Democratic Party which is greatly inclined to the promotion of nuclear power plants; therefore, Soka Gakkai does not announce a position in favor of breaking with nuclear power generation.

Not all religious organizations in Japan are taking action to break with nuclear power generation as there are some religious organizations, such as Kofuku no Kagaku (Happy Science), advocating the promotion of nuclear power generation and others which maintain a neutral position on this issue such as the Soto Sect. Even so, it should not be slighted, in terms of impact on society, that the Japan Buddhist Federation – linking major organizations of traditional sects and influential Buddhism-line New Religion organizations such as Soka Gakkai and Rissho Koseikai – presented their directions for the nation to live without nuclear power generation.

Inter-religious and inter-sectoral activities to support the people affected after the 3.11 Earthquake/Tsunami, and the action by the Japan Buddhist Federation in making a public appeal ‘seeking a lifestyle without depending on nuclear power generation’, should be noted as epoch-making events in the history of public functions of Japanese Buddhism (Mukhopadhyaya 2005, Shimazono 2013b). They may trigger Buddhist organizations in Japan to display their public functions anew within the current trend to examine the spiritual blank caused by the prevalence of secularism in our ever-diversifying society. Although the pace is slow, Japanese Buddhist organizations have begun to evolve as a public religion, and the public looks to the movement with potentiality and hope rather than being cautious about it.

### 3 Revival of State Shinto and involvement of religious organizations in the public sphere

In section 1, the trend toward revival of State Shinto was discussed, followed in section 2 by an examination of the expanded involvement in the public sphere of Salvation Religion organizations. These two trends are rising from two different directions, and have some opposing aspects.

The *Bukkyo Times* January 1, 2013 issue reports that the number of candidates for the election of the House of Representatives held in December 2012 who were recommended by the Japan Buddhist Federation greatly decreased, and the number of election winners fell accordingly. The article says that the Federation recommended 85 persons, of whom 46 were elected (in both single-seat and proportional representation constituencies). This was a great drop from the previous election in 2009 when 98 persons were elected out of 119 candidates



recommended by the Federation. Among the 46 winners, 32 were from the Liberal Democratic Party (out of 33 recommended), 10 (out of 40) from the Democratic Party, 1 (out of 2) from the Japan Restoration Party, 1 (out of 16) from the Tomorrow Party of Japan, and 0 (out of 2) from non-affiliates.

The same tendency was true in the election for the House of Councilors in July 2013. The *Chugai Nippo* July 5, 2013 issue gives an intermediary report that the Japan Buddhist Federation recommended 17 candidates: 9 from the Liberal Democratic, 5 from the Democratic, 2 from the People's Life, and 1 from the Japan Restoration Parties. The article says that comparing 35 candidates recommended by the organization for the election in 2010, the number of recommended candidates has been greatly decreased. As a reason for the decrease, the newspaper considers that to be eligible to obtain recommendation from the Federation, candidates were required to agree to the Declaration 'Seeking a lifestyle without depending on nuclear power generation' of December 2011, and the letter of protest against 'Official worship visit by the prime minister and cabinet ministers to Yasukuni Shrine' which was sent to Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in May 2012.

According to this article, the members of parliament (MPs) are declining to link with traditional Buddhism. It is said that the conservative parties gained force through the House of Representatives' election in 2012, and the House of Councilors' election in 2013, but the Liberal Democratic Party, which increased its MPs in number, has weakened its partnership with traditional Buddhist organizations which had been playing a central role in Japan's spiritual culture. Here, the Party's pro-business-community stance, shown in its policy in favor of nuclear power generation, and its position in favor of the revival of State Shinto as manifested by a worship visit to Yasukuni Shrine (see below), are contrary to what traditional Buddhist organizations seek.

In order for the Liberal Democratic Party to increase its seats in the Diet, collaboration with the Komeito, supported by the Soka Gakkai, means a lot. However, the Liberal Democratic Party, which is inclining toward the revival of State Shinto, and the Soka Gakkai, which has a bitter memory of having been suppressed under the State Shinto administration, can hardly go together. The *Bukkyo Times* reports in its January 1, 2013 issue that the votes given to the Komeito in the proportional-representation constituencies are on the decrease. The Komeito itself increased its number of MPs, but the number of votes in the proportional representation constituencies was the smallest in national elections since 2001: 8.98 million votes in 2005 under the premiership of Ichiro Koizumi insisting on the privatization of Japan Post, 8.05 million votes in the previous election for the House of Representatives in 2009, and 7.11 million votes in the most recent one.

The increase in seats was affected by lowered voting rates. The Soka Gakkai had always strenuously encouraged its followers to vote as if it is a way to confirm the result of their faith. Even when the voting rate was generally low, Komeito supporters surely took part in voting; hence there were more winners. Nonetheless, the number of votes to the Komeito dropped from 2009 to 2012. What can be the reason for this decline? It can be presumed that the Soka Gakkai members have come to question the partnering with the Liberal Democratic Party, whose policies are far different from their own, notably with respect to the revival of State Shinto, and its understanding of recent history which is opposed by China and Korea.

As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, many candidates in national elections who support the Nippon Kaigi and Shinto Political Federation have been elected. The change in involvement in national elections by Buddhist organizations may imply that the traditional Buddhist community does not support the nationalist forces led by the Liberal Democratic Party. The Soka Gakkai, the supporting body of the Komeito, has a potential inclination against nationalist policies that Prime Minister Abe is seeking to push forward.

As seen so far, in the public sphere in contemporary Japan there are ideological powers aiming for the revival of State Shinto, and opposing religious powers. The former is represented by the Shinto Political Federation, Nippon Kaigi, and the Association of Shinto Shrines. Upon entering the 2000s, the Liberal Democratic Party has strengthened its inclination toward the revival of State Shinto, and there are some further sympathizers in the Democratic Party, Japan Restoration Party, and Your Party. As seen in section 2, religious forces different from or sometimes opposing nationalism and the revival of State Shinto are also moving toward increasing involvement in the public sphere.

For example, the Japan Buddhist Federation submitted a letter of request to Prime Minister Shinzo Abe titled 'Official worship visit to Yasukuni Shrine by the Prime Minister and Cabinet Ministers' on August 5, 2013 at the Prime Minister's official residence:

We Buddhist followers deeply regret that we have in the past been involved in wars against the teachings of 'dignity of life, and the spirit of compassion' by Sakyamuni, and have conducted various activities in an effort to realize a world free of disputes.

More than 70,000 temples affiliated with the Japan Buddhist Federation are politely offering memorial services for the war dead and victims who sacrificed themselves for the country in the Pacific War.

However, beginning in 1981 we have continued to express our opposition to the prime minister and cabinet ministers visiting and worshipping Yasukuni Shrine.

As we have pointed out, Yasukuni Shrine is a religious institution which played an important role as the center of State Shinto in the past. Considering the process by which the

war deceased were enshrined altogether under a specific criterion regardless of their individual faith, this act clearly violates the ‘freedom of religion’ set forth in the Constitution. It is natural that memorial services for the war deceased should be conducted according to the religions of bereaved families.

The prime minister as well as cabinet ministers are always ‘public figures’ as long as they are in these positions, therefore, we wish that the prime minister and cabinet ministers of the government of Japan, observe the Constitution of Japan and serve in their leadership positions to realize world peace.

Later, on August 10, 2013, the Japanese Association of New Religious Organizations affiliated with Risho Koseikai, the Church of Perfect Liberty, Myochikai, Ennokyō, and Zenrinkyō (including Gedatsu Kai affiliated to Nippon Kaigi) also submitted their memorandum on ‘Official Worshipping to Yasukuni Shrine’ to Prime Minister Abe:

As the anniversary of the end of the Pacific War approaches, visits to Yasukuni Shrine by the Prime Minister and other cabinet ministers are noted. The fact that ministers are involved in Yasukuni Shrine, which is a religious organization, in the form of making ‘official visits’ is against the ‘freedom of religion’ and the principle of ‘separation of government and religion’ set forth in the Constitution. We would like the Prime Minister and other ministers to pay sufficient consideration to this.

As you may be well aware, the provisions regarding ‘freedom of religion,’ and the principle of ‘separation of government and religion’ were created based upon reflection of the past wars which took a heavy toll of lives. These are fundamental elements of a modern nation based on freedom and basic human rights.

At the Budget Committee of the House of Councilors held on May 14, 2013 the Prime Minister replied, ‘Yasukuni Shrine is a core facility to comfort the souls of the war dead.’ However, the Constitution ensures people to have the freedom to comfort and commemorate the war deceased according to the religion they believe in. There is the Chidorigafuchi National Cemetery in Tokyo which was completed in 1959, and in which a memorial service was held by the government. After 50 years of existence, the cemetery is now covered with a thick bunch of trees, and is accepted widely as a cemetery of unknown soldiers where people can comfort and commemorate the victims of war without discomfort.

Considering the Prime Minister thinking of comforting the spirits of people fallen in war and the need for a ‘place where families of the deceased and people at large can pay respect’ as stated in the Budget Committee session, one would think that the improvement of the National Chidorigafuchi Cemetery, and the organization of continued non-religious memorial services for the war victims there are things that the government should be involved with.

With an understanding that the freedom and prosperity of Japan today have been built at the expense of people fallen in war, we believe that the true way of comforting the souls of the war victims would be for each and every person to pay their memorial tribute according to their own religion.

We wish the Prime Minister may confirm the ‘freedom of religion,’ and the principle of ‘separation of government and religion,’ and that you yourself and all cabinet members would refrain from paying official worship visits to Yasukuni Shrine.

The Prime Minister gave an offering of *masakaki* [a branch of the evergreen sacred tree decorated with a five-color silk flag] at the time of the Spring Festival of Yasukuni Shrine in April in the name of the Prime Minister. The *masakaki* offered to the altar in a shrine means a religiously important offering in Shinto, and the act of offering it is a religious act. Therefore, we request the Prime Minister to give full consideration to this act.

The reason the Japan Buddhist Federation and Japanese Association of Religious Organizations oppose the official visit to Yasukuni Shrine by the Prime Minister is somewhat different from the reason it is opposed by Chinese and Korean peoples. The focal point of opposition by neighboring nations is the issue of their understanding of recent history: their perception that paying official visits to Yasukuni Shrine implies a justification of Japan’s prewar aggressive and invasive activities. In contrast to this, the Buddhist Federation and Association of Religious Organizations focus on the principles of ‘freedom of religion’ and ‘separation of government and religion,’ and by reference to these, the pre-war administration under the State Shinto system is critically reviewed. Their critical framework was developed under the influence of the actions of the United States, during the post-war occupation period, which applied a policy to nullify State Shinto according to the principle of ‘separation of the state and church.’ Furthermore, it reflects the experience of people who were forced to venerate the emperor, and whose freedom of religion, thought and belief was threatened until the defeat in WWII. By 1945, many people had been severely suppressed and considered to be betraying State Shinto because they believed in specific religions or ideologies. People were forced to venerate the holy emperor, and many people voluntarily placed themselves in positions from which they could force emperor veneration on other people. Fostering the state system under the holy emperor, people took part in colonialist and militarist invasions of other countries.

The pre-war State Shinto system was initiated at the time of the Meiji Restoration, and firmly established with the promulgation of the Imperial Rescript on Education in 1890. The Imperial Rescript on Education demanded that the Japanese observe morals based on teachings of the emperor (considered to have a divine ancestor). Children were forced to memorize the document. Military forces led by the emperor became the driving force of national integration under State Shinto. In this atmosphere, sacrificing one’s life for the emperor came to be admired. Yasukuni Shrine was established to enshrine service men and soldiers who died for the emperor. It became a core shrine of State Shinto together with Ise Shrine.

After the 1890s, as a great portion of people came to accept State Shinto, religious organizations were forced to change their doctrines and were suppressed one after another. Scholars and teachers were deprived of their jobs or forced into obscurity simply because they harbored thoughts against State Shinto.

Some incidents of irreverence – by Kanzo Uchimura (in 1891, not making a profound enough bow before the Imperial Rescript on Education at the school ceremony where he worked, resulting in his resignation), and by Kunitake Kume (whose article on Shinto mythology appearing in a history magazine was blamed by Shinto leaders criticizing its impious attitude towards the deities related to Imperial Family and who ended up retiring from the Imperial University in 1892) – were early examples of suppression (Shimazono 2010). In the 1930s and onward, many religious organizations were forced to be disbanded or suspended (Shimazono 2010).

Clearly, the Japan Buddhist Federation and the Japanese Association of Religious Organizations are fully engaged in their opposition to the visits to Yasukuni Shrine by the Prime Minister and other cabinet ministers, taking into account the historic fact that State Shinto played a suppressive function. The point at issue is the freedom of religion, thought and belief. The promotion of the revival of State Shinto will mean the suppression of such freedom. It is a question of whether the government is going to compel people to live under a unitary national spiritual order, or is going to admit diversity in religions, thoughts and beliefs. This can be rephrased to be a question whether free and open public space is allowed or not.

Upon the birth of the government headed by Shinzo Abe in 2012, this question rapidly surfaced as a critical issue. It is closely linked with the other important issue of constitutional revision. The ‘Draft of revised constitution of Japan’, published by the Liberal Democratic Party in April 2012, includes proposed changes in articles relating to the position of the emperor, ‘freedom of religion’ and ‘separation of government and religion.’ These changes will be deeply concerned with the revival of State Shinto, and heated arguments are anticipated on this issue.

## **4 Religious nationalism and East Asian forms of civilization of the Axial Age**

Previous sections have shown that religious discourses and activities or discourses by religious organizations and religious leaders are occupying an increasing part in the public sphere in Japan in the 2010s. On the one hand, State Shinto

has manifested its presence, and a political movement to further its influence is in place. On the other hand, Buddhist and New Religion organizations in the Buddhist line are inclined to participate more in the public sphere, presenting their discourses against nationalist tendencies. The latter can be called pacifist religious discourses. A conflict in religious discourses is coming to the fore between those advocating nationalism and those for pacifism.

However, there is an example which does not fall on either side of the conflict. Because the Soka Gakkai supports the Komeito as a coalition partner with the Liberal Democratic Party, which is increasingly inclined toward nationalism, their criticism against nationalism and their pacifist discourses are both decreasing in tone compared to those of a few decades ago. Even so, this does not mean that the organization is inclined to a nationalist position. It is because the organization wants to maintain its force as a religious organization by taking advantage of the Komeito's partnership with the Liberal Democratic Party. It is reported, however, that there is strong opposition to the idea of downplaying pacifism within the Soka Gakkai. Therefore, the Soka Gakkai seems to maintain its influence while controlling its pacifist discourses.

The phenomenon of religions in contemporary Japan becoming more involved in the public sphere from the opposing directions of nationalism and pacifism coincides with the world trend in which religions are gaining influence in the public sphere. This is different from the structure of discourses in the public sphere during the Cold War period. During that period, the opposing axes were mainly liberalism versus socialism, and it was generally considered that secularist discourses were mainly on the socialist side, while religions joined the liberalist side.

However, while socialist and other secularist discourses have weakened their influence, and secularist discourses also have lowered their influence in the liberal side, religious discourses in terms of public policies are strengthening their influence in the following two directions. As a worldwide trend, opposing relations between externally aggressive religious powers and pacifist religious powers are widely observed. The former groups are the exclusivist tendencies in Islam and Christianity, and the religious-nationalist tendencies in Judaism and Hinduism; while the latter powers include the conciliatory sectors of the Roman Catholic Church and Islam, and most Buddhist organizations. If applied to this structure, the State Shinto supporting power can be seen to be close to the religious-nationalist tendencies of Judaism and Hinduism.

A different perspective can be taken for East Asia. In countries in East Asia, an imperial nationalist tradition is deeply rooted whereby an emperor rules an empire which includes the people's spiritual dimension. Nationalism in this case values the order governed by learned bureaucrats well versed in traditional

and spiritual learning under an emperor who conducts state rites and respects culture. Nationalism had been supported largely by Confucianist tradition until the nineteenth century. But after the nineteenth century, western knowledge exerted a stronger influence, while the influence of Confucianist scholarship fell back. These nations had difficulty in rebuilding their nationalist discourses to support modern nations.

In the case of Japan, the State Shinto discourse was developed rapidly with influences from Shinto and Confucianism, and the Meiji Restoration was executed in the wake of this discourse. In this way, State Shinto attained its supremacy in Japanese nationalism (Shimazono 2010). In China, as Marxism became the support pillar of its nationalism, religious characteristics became hardly visible. However, the tradition of rule by learned bureaucrats with an orthodox scholarly education has continued and been strengthened. In the Korean peninsula, while influenced by Marxism and Christianity, both North and South Koreans maintain the influence of their nationalism by emphasizing their distinctiveness of 'nation.' Japan, which promoted the process of modernization under the banner of State Shinto, can be a good example of religious nationalism, but it is questionable to define nationalism in China and the Koreas as religious nationalism.

The tradition of East Asian nationalism continues to exist in the 2010s, and even appears to be gaining in strength. In the process of modernization, many actors were involved, and their form of East Asiatic nationalism has come to exert great influence together with western nationalism. It follows the tradition of Imperial nationalism or the sacred imperial state system of the Axial Age civilization of East Asia while having the aspect of a modern nationalism of western origin. Confucianism and Shinto are strongly related to it. The visualization of religions in the public space in Japan can be seen as an example of a revitalization of the Axial Age civilization, either from the aspect of the revival of State Shinto, or the aspect of Buddhism as a public religion (Shimazono 2011). Religious revival and post-secularist trends are occurring in many places around the world today, and the visualization of religions in the public space of Japan today can be seen to be a common phenomenon in terms of the movements to reactivate the civilizations of the Axial Age.

In Robert Bellah's thesis 'Religious Evolution' in 1964, Japan's Shinto is said to maintain ancient elements from before the Axial Age. But if seen in terms of the present situation in which State Shinto is being revived, various characteristics of State Shinto in modern Japan rather need to be understood as Shinto adapting itself to the Axial Age civilization of East Asia (Shimazono 2014). The movement to revive Shinto in Japan has aspects similar to the revival of indigenous peoples' cultures, but the revival of State Shinto should be seen rather as a phenomenon closer to the revival of Axial Age civilization.

Relations between religion, nation, and state systems in the Axial Age civilizations are not uniform in Western, Islamic, South Asian, East Asian and other civilizations. In order to have a better understanding of the religious situation in Japan today, the perspective of comparative civilization studies must be mobilized. Religious studies and comparative civilization studies have many overlapping areas. Such aspects in religious studies should be reactivated.

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### Susumu Shimazono

Graduate School of Applied Religious Studies  
Sophia University  
7–1 Kioi-cho, Chiyoda-ku  
Tokyo, Japan 113–0033  
s-siso@mbd.ocn.ne.jp