

## Attitudes of Japanese Students towards Religion from 1992–2001: Findings in Relation to 'Family Religion' and Religious Education at High School

1992–2001年における日本の学生・生徒の宗教意識調査結果：  
とくに、家の宗教と宗教系高校の宗教教育の影響について

田島忠篤

Tadaatsu TAJIMA

From 1992 to 2001, Religious Education Project at the Institute for Japanese Culture and Classics of Kokugakuin University and the Japanese Association for the Study of Religion and Society operated the joint questionnaire survey for the college students' attitudes towards religion. As the results of continual researches, we find the spread of negative images of religion especially after the Aum Shinrykyo incident in 1995 and relatively stable continuity of folk customs in general. In this presentation, I will focus on the effect of religious education among surveyed students through comparing religious based college students with those of non-religious based college students. In conclusion, I propose that against confessional education at religious school, new type of religious education such as 'Religious Culture Education' or 'Study of religion as value education' is needed from cross-cultural understanding point of view in a globalising society.

1992年から國學院大學日本文化研究所の宗教と教育プロジェクトと「宗教と社会」学会の共同研究では大学生の宗教意識調査を開始した。2001年度までの調査結果によると、とりわけ、大学生は民俗宗教に関する意識や行動が継続して観られるのに対して、1995年のオウム真理教のサリンガス事件後宗教に対するマイナスの評価が増えている。この傾向は、対象となった学生の「家の宗教」が明確なほど強い傾向がある。また、明の星女子短期大学研究プロジェクトによる宗教系学校の高校生を対象とした宗教教育の効果に関する調査結果は、宗派教育は生徒の宗教観に対して影響が少ないことを示している。これらの調査結果は、従来の家庭における無意図的な宗教教育および宗教系学校における宗派主体の宗教教育ではグローバル化社会に対応しきれず、新しいタイプの宗教教育、「宗教文化教育」や「価値教育としての宗教教育」の必要性を示唆している。

Key words: college and high school students' attitudes towards religion

(大学生、高校生の宗教意識)

religious education in Japan (日本における宗教教育)

confessional education (宗派教育)

religious cultural education (宗教文化教育)

study of religion as value education (価値教育としての宗教教育)

## 1. Introduction

Japanese people do not advocate articulate affiliation to a particular religion; however they do practice religious folk customs regularly. This phenomenon can be made clearer by considering the following two stereotypical examples. The first example is that according to the statistics reported by the Minister of Education and Science in 2004<sup>1</sup>, the total number of registered religious organizations in Japan was 224,540 and the number of registered religious adherents was 213,826,661. The reliability of the latter statistic is of course a matter of controversy since it is one point six times greater than the actual population of Japan<sup>2</sup>. However, when that example is seen in light of the next example perhaps it makes sense to a person in Japan. The other example is a bewildering observation by foreigners from the West: many comment that: "It seems from the time Japanese are born they convert at least three times in their lifetime!" The background to that observation is the following course of conversion among modern day Japanese: first, because parents follow Shintoism, the new baby is taken to the Shinto shrine to bless the child; next, many couples opt for a wedding in a Christian church instead of strictly adhering to pure Shinto wedding ritual customs; and finally, Japanese prefer to be buried as Buddhist adherents so most funerals are presided over by Buddhist monks, and the remains of the person are interred in communal family graves in cemeteries adjacent to Buddhist temples.

Based on the confusion noted within the examples above, most Japanese are embarrassed when they are asked questions regarding their religion when they travel abroad. My English teacher in Junior High school actually advised me, "You should always answer 'Buddhist' when asked about

your religious affiliation when abroad. Otherwise, you might be negatively labelled as 'an atheist' by Christians in Western countries." These macro and micro examples concerning the situation of religious practices among Japanese reiterates the premise of my argument in the opening sentence, that whilst Japanese practice religious customs occasionally, they generally do not typically limit allegiance to only one religion.

Challenged by the current state of ambiguous religious practice by Japanese people in general, I initiated a project beginning in 1992 to focus on attitudes of Japanese college students towards religion by collecting and analysing empirical data. Later in the paper I will discuss the project in some depth. In order to give clarity to my research and collected data, it would be beneficial for readers to have some background knowledge concerning the present situation of religious education for young people in Japan, including a listing of the problems inherent in the education; this is the theme of this small paper.

Before expounding further about my research and the main issues in my presentation, I would like to credit the sources of my data. I am greatly indebted to three other research projects. One is, "The Joint Survey by the Religious Education Project" of the Institute of Japanese Culture and Classics at Kokugakuin University, and another is "The Religious Awareness Survey Project" of the Japanese Association for the Study of Religion and Society; hereafter in the paper I will refer to them by the acronyms: Kokugakuin & JASRS Project. The last resource for data I borrowed from is "Ake no Hoshi Women's Junior College Project (1988–1990)," directed personally by me; hereafter I will refer to results from it by its original title, "Ake no Hoshi Project." In 1992 the "Ake no Hoshi Project" merged into the Kokugakuin & JASRS Project.

In this presentation, firstly, I would like to introduce the interesting findings resulting from the survey by Kokugakuin & JASRS. Secondly, I shall concentrate upon just one issue from this survey, which demonstrates how family life vis-a-vis the practice of religious customs heavily affects religious attitudes of students. Lastly, I would like to examine the effectiveness of religious education in high school curriculum upon students' attitudes to religion, as demonstrated in the data from the "Ake no Hoshi Project."

## 2. Religious Awareness and Behaviour of Contemporary Japanese College Students

Professor Inoue who will also be presenting a paper at this 29<sup>th</sup> ISSR World Congress at University of Lipzig has already published a report in English dealing with the issue of religious education and young people in Japan. In his report, he pointed out seven impressive findings from the data accumulated from 1996-2001 from Kokugakuin & JASRS. I would like to introduce these seven pivotal points and support them with results taken from data and tables that appeared in his report<sup>3</sup>.

First Inoue's research identified that the proportion of college students who responded, "I believe in a religion," was estimated to be only around 5 percent of all college students. Therefore, a very low percentage of college students openly avow any religious affiliation (see Table 1). First, it would be helpful to explain some of the key words used in this table: the word 'overall' below the title 'Religious Affiliation' column means the number of all students surveyed as a whole. This questionnaire was circulated to university, college, and junior college students. In the different years that the questionnaire was conducted the language in the questions changed which elicited different levels of response. For instance, only in 1992 did we pose the question; "Do you have a faith?" versus later versions which more pointedly asked, "Do you believe in a specific religion?" in which case the the number of "yes" answers decreased. This demonstrates how research into the Japanese sense of believing in a religion by questionnaire format seems to depend also upon the wording of the question inquiring solicited to the respondents.

Second Inoue identified a very low level of trust in religion, religious organisations and religious leaders (see Table 2). The tendency

**Table 1. Religious Affiliation among students (overall)**

	1992*	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001
Religious Affiliation: Yes	11.2%	5.8%	5.3%	5.8%	5.3%	6.0%	5.3%

**Table 2. Affirmative answer for "the religion has a dangerous image" (by presence of faith)**

With Faith	++	+	-	--
1997	14.1%	32.4%	20%	31.9%
1998	16.4%	36.0%	23.8%	23.7%
Without Faith	++	+	-	--
1997	22.7%	44.9%	19.4%	12.6%
1998	20.9%	45.9%	21.3%	11.6%

++: I think so.    +: If I had to say one way or the other, I think so.

-: If I had to say one way or the other, I don't think so    --: I don't think so.

of students to mistrust religious leaders was evident from the large number of students dismissing allegiance to any specific religious faith. Inoue's interpretation of the large numbers of negative responses is directly linked to the gas attack in 1995 by members of Aum Shinrikyo in the Tokyo subways.

Third Inoue identified that about half of all student respondents had some interest in the occult, in paranormal phenomena, and in other items of religious subculture (see Table 3). In the columns below, 'secular school' refers to schools established without any connection to any religious organisations, by the government and by the private sector 'religious school' are connected to a religious organization; hereafter any reference to the latter will be associated by mention of the word, 'religious school.' More than 60% of the overall respondents believe in some form of

spirit inspiration and spirit reading, even those who attended religious schools.

Fourth Inoue identified that the percentage of students who believe in the existence of God, gods and Buddha, or who believe in the existence of an afterlife world was about 50%–60% (see Table 4). This table also demonstrates that irregardless of an affiliation to a specific religion, half of the minds of all Japanese students are opened to the notion of an afterlife world.

Fifth Inoue identified that the percentage of students who participate in religious folk customs such as New Year's visiting Shinto shrines and visiting family graves throughout the year was about 50% (see Table 5). Usually these folk customs are practiced with family members four times a year near to the winter solstice, the spring equinox, August 15 (the Festival of the Dead),

**Table 3. Do you believe in spirit inspiration and spirit readings? (originating from deceased ancestors and/or via spiritual mediums)**

	Religious School	Secular School
++	20.7%	22.3%
+	40.8%	42.0%
–	26.2%	23.4%
--	11.4%	11.7%

++: I think so.   +: If I had to say one way or the other, I think so.  
–: If I had to say one way or the other, I don't think so   --: I don't think so.

**Table 4. Do you believe in past lives and reincarnation? (over all)**

	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
++	15.7%	17.9%	17.4%	16.9%	17.3%	17.0%
+	36.4%	39.3%	37.4%	36.7%	37.0%	37.5%
–	28.2%	28.1%	29.6%	28.9%	29.2%	29.7%
--	11.7%	14.3%	14.9%	16.7%	15.5%	14.8%

++: I think so.   +: If I had to say one way or the other, I think so.  
–: If I had to say one way or the other, I don't think so   --: I don't think so.

**Table 5. Participation in Folk customs among secular school**

	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001
Practices based on Folk believe such as;							
First visit of the year to shrine	50.0%	52.4%	49.3%	49.2%	51.3%	48.6%	50.4%
Visiting family graves (For the Festival of the Dead)	46.0%	50.1%	51.8%	51.0%	50.9%	52.7%	48.2%

and the autumn equinox. These data from the Kokugakuin & JASRS questionnaire confirms the premise of my argument that modern Japanese people still do sometimes partake in religious customs and rituals in spite of no or little recorded explicit allegiance to a particular religion.

Sixth Inoue identified that no great disparity in responses existed between either those students who received religious education in religious junior high schools and religious high schools, or those students who studied in secular junior high school and senior high schools.

Seventh Inoue identified that the most prominent difference in responses between male and female students was seen in questions about gender. For instance, the higher percentage of female students tended to admit to believing more in spiritual inspiration and activities such as fortune telling than did male student respondents.

Conclusively then, according to the data accumulated in the Kokugakuin & JASRS research projects it is difficult to find any statistically significant differences between student responses whether from a religious school setting or a secular school setting. Nevertheless, in spite of the similarities in responses from students some differences remains in reference to the extent religious education at school affects a student's sense of 'religiosity.' I will comment upon this point later in the paper.

Next, I would like to point out the influence of the tragic Sarin gas attacks in 1995 by the Japanese new religion called "Aum Shinrikyo" upon the feelings and impressions of young students towards formalized religion.

### 3. Changing attitude of Students towards Aum Shinrikyo believers after the 1995 Sarin gas attack by Aum Shinrikyo

The first Kokugakuin & JASRS survey was already conducted three years before the 1995 Sarin gas attack by members of the Aum Shinrikyo in the subways of Tokyo, which killed 12 innocent people. The memory of the incident was apparently still quite vivid in the minds and hearts of the student respondents. Cognizant of the influence such an incident could exert on young Japanese students, in order to assess its effects we asked several questions in the questionnaire about Aum Shinrikyo.

Among the questions I was most interested in how did the family religious background of the students affect their attitude towards Aum Shinrikyo believers. To understand this point more clearly I did an analysis of the influence of the family religion upon students' sympathetic attitude towards the Aum Shinrikyo believers. The analysis of the data revealed the following points for consideration.

1. The students' attitudes toward Aum Shinrikyo believers were different depending upon the family religion; (Table 6.)
2. The students' attitudes toward Aum Shinrikyo believers show a strong influence from the family religion; (Table 6 and 7)

To accomplish my analysis I first attempted to categorize the answers of students' religious affiliation in columns, as the Table 6 and 7 shows. Among them, the category "Plural religions" was meant to appeal to student respondents those who say they belong to more than one religion, either personally or as a family religion unit. The results reveal an interestingly different feeling

**Table 6. Attitude toward Aum Shinrikyo by Family Religions**

	Understandable	To a certain extent	Could be a member	Nothing to do with me	Miscellaneous	Total
Shintoism	25 (28.7%)	36 (41.4%)	1 (1.1%)	20 (23.0%)	5 (5.7%)	87 (100.0%)
Buddhism	618 (30.6%)	754 (37.4%)	53 (2.6%)	389 (19.3%)	203 (10.1%)	2017 (100.0%)
Christianity	15 (22.4%)	30 (44.8%)	2 (5.7%)	14 (20.9%)	6 (9.0%)	67 (100.0%)
New Religions	30 (28.6%)	34 (34.2%)	6 (5.7%)	20 (19.0%)	15 (14.3%)	105 (100.0%)
Soka Gakkakai	15 (30.6%)	9 (18.4%)	3 (6.1%)	14 (28.6%)	8 (16.3%)	45 (100.0%)
Plural religions	44 (21.9%)	91 (45.3%)	10 (5.0%)	31 (15.4%)	25 (12.4%)	201 (100.0%)
Sum	747 (29.6%)	954 (37.8%)	75 (3.0%)	488 (19.3%)	262 (10.4%)	2526 (100.0%)

**Table 7. Attitude toward Aum Shinrikyo by Students' Religions**

	Understandable	To a certain extent	Could be a member	Nothing to do with me	Miscellaneous	Total
Shintoism	4 (21.8%)	9 (47.4%)	0	4 (21.1%)	2 (10.5%)	19 (100.0%)
Buddhism	15 (31.9%)	18 (38.4%)	2 (4.3%)	10 (21.3%)	2 (4.3%)	47 (100.0%)
Christianity	22 (27.8%)	42 (53.2%)	1 (1.3%)	6 (7.6%)	8 (10.1%)	79 (100.0%)
New Religions	30 (31.9%)	34 (36.2%)	5 (5.3%)	10 (10.6%)	15 (16.0%)	94 (100.0%)
Soka Gakkakai	9 (24.3%)	7 (18.9%)	2 (5.4%)	11 (29.7%)	11 (29.7%)	37 (100.0%)
Plural religions	2 (11.1%)	12 (66.7%)	1 (5.6%)	1 (5.6%)	2 (11.1%)	201 (100.0%)
Sum	82 (27.9%)	122 (41.5%)	11 (3.7%)	42 (14.3%)	37 (12.6%)	294 (100.0%)

towards Aum Shinrikyo, depending upon the religion of choice. For instance, the students who claim to be members of Soka Gakkai strongly distance themselves from Aum Shinrikyo methods and beliefs; Table 6. In sharp contrast to Soka Gakkai student members attitudes, the students who opted for 'Plural Religion' status seem more open to the ideas of Aum Shinrikyo; Table 6. Similarly, Christians seem more sympathetic to Aum Shinrikyo than do either Shintoist or Buddhist students; Table 7.

#### 4. Effect of Religious Education on the Students of Religious High Schools

Before the Kokugakuin project started, I conducted my own research under the name of "Ake no Hoshi Project," whose goal was: an empirical demonstration of the effect of religious education on high school students, focusing on 'Religious View and Awareness.' The method chosen to obtain the empirical data was through a questionnaire given to both the first year high school students and

the third year high school students. In order to measure to what extent religious education is influential upon students' religious attitudes my research project team decided to compare the results from first year high school students, who had not yet received a thorough religious education, and the third year students, who had been educated in religious education for a longer period of time.

Out of 341 all religious high schools in Japan, 12 schools were carefully chosen, to elicit a representative sampling of the differing religious traditions, the diverse geographic locations, and in order to be sensitive to the gender composition of the student body. The following list shows the high schools selected for the research study:

4,350 questionnaires were distributed to 12 high schools and 3,679 were collected (85.2%). Analysis was done to determine factors for 'Religious Views and Awareness' vis-a-vis how these factors were affected by the religious education at school<sup>5</sup>. To accomplish this research goal we used an analysis of variance method to demonstrate the

**Figure 1. List of Surveyed Schools**

No.	Religion	TY	District	No.	Religion	TY	District
H1:	Catholic	W	Hokkaido	H7:	Catholic	W	Chubu
H2:	Protestant	M	Tohoku	H8:	Shintoism	WM	Chubu
H3:	Buddhist	WM	Tohoku	H9:	Buddhist	M	Kansai
H4:	Buddhist	W	Kanto	H10:	Catholic	W	Kyushu
H5:	Catholic	W	Tokyo	H11:	Buddhist	WM	Kyushu
H6:	Buddhist	WM	Chubu	H12:	Catholic	M	Kyushu

TY; W is Women's school; M is men's school, WM is coeducation school.

**Figure 2. Summary of Analysis of Religious View by Grade and Religion**

		A)-1	A)-2	A)-3
Main Effect	Grade	Non	Non	Non
	Religion	Strong	Less	Less
Interaction		Non	Less	Less

**Figure 3. Summary of Analysis of Religious View by Grad and School**

		A)-1	A)-2	A)-3
Main Effect	Grade	Non	Non	Non
	School	Strong	Strong	Strong
Interaction		Strong	Strong	Non

**Figure 4. Summary of Analysis of Religious Awareness by Grade and Religion**

		B)-1	B)-2	B)-3
Main Effect	Grade	Strong	Strong	Strong
	Religion	Strong	Strong	Strong
Interaction		Strong	Non	Less

**Figure 5. Summary of Analysis of Religious Awareness by Grad and School**

		B)-1	B)-2	B)-3
Main Effect	Grade	Strong	Strong	Strong
	Religion	Strong	Strong	Strong
	School	Less	Non	Non
Interaction		Strong	Strong	Non

relationship among the three key variables: grade; religion; and school.

To assess the 'religious views' of the students, carefully crafted questions were asked to ascertain whether the students could determine the significance in folk beliefs and customs to religion. We composed four optional responses to the questions: 1. religion; 2. religious; 3. religious but not religion; and 4.

not religious. Then to assess the 'religious awareness' of the students, standardized questionnaires concerning Japanese religious awareness developed by Takashi Iezuka in 1972<sup>6</sup> were used. After factor analysis, we isolated out the following six influential factors in students' lives related to 'Religious Views' and 'Religious Awareness':

Religion View: A-1) Pray,

A-2) Afterlife World,

A-3) Occult

Religious Awareness: B-1) Dogma,

B-1) Divine Grace,

b-3) Common morality

Next, to determine what affect, if any, religious education at school affect had upon the students, the following series of questions were posed to the respondents; the figures are the summary of the result of analysis of variance.

Conclusively, the research regarding "Religious Views and Religious Awareness" showed through comparison of the results collated from the first year high school students and the third year high school students that religious education did not seem to have any influence upon the students' 'Religious Views,' but did apparently help to modify their 'Religious Awareness.'

### 5. Concluding remarks

In this short research study, I have

examined the findings of contemporary college and high school students' attitude towards religion; 95% of Japanese students do not advocate an affiliation to a particular religion; however, half of them practice religious folk customs related to annual festivals and various rates of passage which indicate their interest in spirituality. But 60% of religiously non-adherent students recognise religion as something dangerous; for examples, their negative attitude toward Aum Shinrikyo was shown to be influenced by the implicit religious education received at home.

Religious education in religious high schools in Japan is sometimes effective to one degree but not to another. I discussed that students' religious awareness depended upon their schools' religious tradition, be that Protestant, Buddhist or Catholic and the curriculum content of dogma, divine grace, and morality. However, their views of religion outside of the school have not so been influenced by the religious education at high school. I think that this must be caused by the way religious education is practised and experienced at the schools. According to our field research in religious high schools; most of the time was spent teaching the stories of the founders their own religions and the teachings and its related religious rituals.

Japanese young students have been getting involved in globalising society which necessitates information about many religions that Japanese make contact with. Now in this globalised society; Japanese already encounter new unfamiliar religions such Islam, Sikhism Hinduism, and so forth. At the moment, the implicit religious education at home and the dogmatic religious education, sometimes referred to as 'confessional education', at religious schools may be ineffective and insufficient for understanding unfamiliar religions. In this sense, Japan needs much more religious education for deeper cross-cultural understanding. But religious

education is also needed to assist in the solution the ambiguous Japanese religious identity, so that they would not be embarrassed, when foreigners inquire about religious affiliation when abroad. The new type of religious education at school such as 'religious cultural education'<sup>7</sup> or 'studies of religion' as 'value education'<sup>8</sup> is urgently needed not only for the religious schools but also for public schools as well as in this era of a globalising society.

### References

- 1) [http://www.mext.go.jp/b\\_menu/toukei/001/index39.htm](http://www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/toukei/001/index39.htm)
- 2) <http://www.stat.go.jp/data/kokusei/2005/kihon1/00/01.htm>
- 3) Inoue, Nobutaka *Japanese College Students' Attitudes Towards Religion; An Analysis of Questionnaire Surveys from 1992–2001*, Kokugakuin University, 2003.
- 4) Tajima, Tadaatsu 'College students' Attitude towards Aum Shinrikyo issues through the analysis of Family Religions and Religious affiliations', *Report of a Comparative Study of Religious Education between Japan and Korea*, founded by Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research, 2000–01 Category C–1, leded by principle leader, Inoue, Nobutaka pp.85–98, 2002.
- 5) Tajima, Tadaatsu 'Religious conscious-ness' among Contemporary Japanese Youth: The Practice and Effect of Religious Education', *Sociological Studies*, No.17 published by the Department of Sociology, Shophia University pp.77–93, 1993.
- 6) Iezuka, Takashi 'Shukyo-ishiki no Inshibunsekiteki kenkyu', *Shukyo-kenkyu* 41(1), (in Japanese) pp.25–52, 1972.
- 7) Inoue, Nobutaka, "The Possibility of Education about Religious Culture in Public Schools", *Politics and Religion*, 2, Belgrade, 2007.
- 8) Ehara, Takekazu ed., *Sekai no Kokyoiiku to Shukyo (Educational Practice and Religions: International Perspectives)*, Toshindo, 2003.