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**SHINTO AND POLITICS OF JAPAN**

Melisa Pınar Demirbuğa

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**Abstract:** Religion and politics have been two concepts that sometimes dominate each other and sometimes act together for the same interests. This relationship has not always been to the benefit of states and has sometimes led to controversial situations. This research examines the controversial subject of Yasukuni Shrine and explains the place of Shinto in politics and social life in contemporary Japan. In addition, the relationship between Shinto and Japanese policy in different periods such as the Shogunate, World War II, and Meiji periods were examined, and the effects of State Shinto and Shrine Shinto in this relationship were evaluated.



**SHINTO AND POLITICS OF JAPAN**

**Introduction**

In December 2013, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe visited Yasukuni Shrine (靖国神社), in which 14 Japanese wartime leaders and war criminals are buried. Although it seems like a regular official visit of a prime minister in previous years, the visit of Abe was remarkable since six prime ministers avoided visits to Yasukuni Shrine. Regarding this incident, Qin Gang, spokesperson of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, said that they strongly condemned the actions of the Japanese leader and that the essence of Abe's visit to Yasukuni Shrine was to beautify Japan's history of militarist aggression and colonial rule. In addition, South Korean Culture Minister Yoo Jin-Ryong emphasized that Abe's visit was a move that damaged the ties between South Korea and Japan and the relations in northeast Asia. According to McCurry's article, Abe claimed that he visited the shrine simply to honor many Japanese soldiers who lost their lives in the wars although this was not enough to remove the criticism from the focal point (McCurry, 2013).

Abe's visit to Yasukuni Shrine drew attention to his official campaign slogan in 2012, "Rebuilding Japan," which would encourage this visit. In his article, Jaco Beyers (2015) mentioned that Abe emphasized that since the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) came to power in 2012, he would strive to lead to the economic, social, and political greatness of the 1990s. At the same time, Beyers claims that these efforts gain votes by appealing to national feelings for re-election in 2016. One of the biggest reasons is that promises regarding economic development is no longer sufficient to gather public vote. Therefore, an effort has been made to gain the support of society by using the religion as a political tool, which has been done repeatedly throughout the history of the country (Beyers, 2015, p.152).

Throughout Japanese history, Shinto has been interpreted in various ways to meet the demands of the nation and directed for different purposes. One of the most significant drawbacks of this is the lack of a fixed text or a book with specific rules. This makes the Shinto religion quite open to interpretation. In the Shogunate period, the emperors transformed into only religious leaders because of the weakening of the central government during that period (Yoko, 1996, p.102). Then, in the Meiji period, the emperor focused on State Shinto's emerging for creating a centralized power. Reaching people with religion aims to increase the respect for the empire and to achieve dominion over the people (Shimazono, 2009, p.96). Another phase Shinto has gone through turning it into a tool that promotes nationalism instead of its religious position was after World War II (Beyers, 2015, p.151). This paper examines Shinto's political power as well as its transformation, and explains how modernization has affected the relationship between religion and politics in today's world.

**Religion and State**

Jaco Beyers (2015) claims it is necessary to clearly understand what is meant by politics and religion. Religion, much like politics, is a belief system in which leaders maintain and rule the place of adherents. Nevertheless, the leaders of religion and politics can also be seen as the main forces that make the decisions, and a power struggle between politics and religion seems inevitable (Beyers, 2015, p. 144-146). In developing societies, religion leads the formation of power by influencing politics; on the other hand, in some nations, politicians use religion to spread this power to societies, such as Iran, Iraq, Vatican, or Saudi Arabia. Global and imperialist powers are using religion to control those countries, and they are putting the governments in a difficult situation by waging a religious and sectarian war against legitimate governments (Aygen, 2019, p.516).

According to Samuel P. Huntington (1993), civilizations are separated from each other by language, culture, tradition, history, and, most importantly, religion. These concepts shape the societies, their daily lives and political ideologies in various ways since different civilizations differ in their relations between God and man, citizen and state, individual and group (Huntington, 1993, p.24-25).

Differences in religion and culture affect political issues such as migration, trade, human rights, and the environment. Hence, their ability to form social mobilizations or coalitions, which states try to realize based on their ideology, may gradually decrease over time. That is because, with the changing world, the needs, views, and wishes of the societies change, and these wishes may not always match the state's interests. In this case, governments intend to regain the support of the society by applying to the identity of shared religion and civilization (Huntington, 1993, p.29).

Islam was formulated to create a "state order," which was a feature determined clearly at the starting point of state. The developments made in the "state order" direction became clear with forming a federation among the tribes in the Arabian Peninsula and the emergence of a hierarchy among the tribes belonging to this federation. Hierarchical conflicts caused social problems; therefore, the need for a central organization occurred. This situation resulted from the need to formulate order's political and economic rules. 'Pan-Islamism'— the first form of using Islam as a tool of world politics— became a conscious state policy in the Ottoman period. The Ottoman Empire wanted to provide the state order with a more substantial central administration stemming from the unity of Muslims under their rule (Tat, 2000, para. 5-6).

Christianity is also one of the most common religions where we can observe the balance of religion and politics. According to Thomas Hall (1913), politics did not have a crucial role in the early emergence of Christianity. After the rapid spread of Christianity in Europe, it also came under the influence of the politically powerful classes. In this way, the first close relations between politics and Christianity began (Hall, 1913, p.20). Although this balance took on a structure where religion was dominant in some countries, such as Spain and France, it is possible to say that religion and politics were more balanced for a while in England.

According to James Beckford (1991), established churches in England in the 19th century meant that all religious innovations could cause political upheaval and sometimes severe disturbances in public order. However, the diversity of religious groups prevented the emergence of a single and dominant conflict between politics and religion. Because of this diversity, a situation that necessarily polarizes or unites religion and politics did not occur. Government of England preferred to make compromises between political parties and religious interests due to minorities. All major religious groups had members from various social classes, and cultural backgrounds prevented religion from becoming a political issue (Beckford, 1991, p.179).

The relations between religion and politics remained quite calm in England and Wales in the 20th century; however, this balance began to break under the pressure of political forces in time (Beckford, 1991, p. 195). In British history, religious dominance in England in the 20th century was seen in all kinds of pragmatic arrangements. In particular, the Church of England and the Presbyterian Church of Scotland were built as two churches with official ties to the state. England tried to cope with the difficulties experienced in consolidating an established power (Beckford, 1991, p.180). In addition, although de facto tolerance to most forms of religious expression became popular among the citizens, the freedom of religion did not have a constitutional guarantee. That is why, although the state emphasized the respect should be given to other religions, there was no basis to support non-Christian people and their rituals or worship. One of the biggest reasons for this was to reach the people by using religion to keep the center strong (Beckford, 1991, p.180-181).

Nevertheless, although there was a well-established and widespread assumption that most of the population are Christians there was also the fact that non-Christian minorities were the fastest-growing segment of the population because Christianity was the state religion in the United Kingdom in the 20th century. Unlike France or Spain, England's relationship between religion and politics had never been transformed into a country in which priests’ rule. This situation was an indication that politics and religion acted together but did not mix (Beckford, 1991, p.181).

The religion and politics’ harmony under the ruler's and bureaucrats' power is a structure that strengthens empire management. In that aspect, the state religion is an essential term for countries. Shinto is also one of the religions intended to make a state religion, and it had an important place for the Japanese empire, but it also had a structure at the forefront in politics.

**Shinto and Emperor**

Shinto (神道)—' the way of the gods'— is an animistic and the oldest religious belief in Japan. The most important god of the religion is *Amaterasu Omikami* (天照大神), the Sun goddess. In Japanese myth, the goddess sends her grandchild, JinmuEmperor (神武天皇), or Holy Warrior, to the world as a savor and ruler. According to the myth the lineage of the emperor is based on this warrior.

During the reign of Emperor Temmu (天武天皇) in the 7th century, he ordered genealogies to be drawn up to determine the rank and class of essential families. Finally, all the oral and written information gathered was converted into *Kojiki* (古事記) and *Nihon Shoki* (日本書紀) documents. These documents were to understand both the history and legend of Early Japan and guarantee the emperor's right to the throne by tracing the imperial lineage to the founding of the world (Matsumoto and Keene, 2007, para. 4). These documents provided the emperor a framework of legitimacy to play a central role in the political system and religion (Yoko, 1996, p. 102). Therefore, it was inevitable that the relations between empire and religion would shape the policy or that the policy would affect the Shinto.

In the 5th century, Shinto texts were recorded with the entry of writing into Japan via China and Korea that paved the way for the development of a centralized Shinto system. According to the Chinese political structure, in 645, Japan sought to establish a centralized and hierarchical administration around the Imperial Palace. In this model, the central structure was necessary, and the emperor was the messenger of God (Flourens and Gülan, 2011, p.105). Courts were opened in the empire and issued edicts for the construction of the new political process for central political power. Emperor Kōtoku (孝徳天皇) established state institutions reflecting China's imperial bureaucracy, national land tenure, taxation systems, and various military and administrative organizations which represented the emperor in capital and provinces. Apart from this, the palace and high-class people in the Japanese empire copied Chinese palace etiquette, official addresses, and titles, tea-drinking, eating habits, and ceremonies (Lu, 1997, p.28-29). *Taika* which means great transformation was the name of the reign period adopted by Emperor Kōtoku in 645, and these reforms and changes were called the TaikaReforms(大化の改新). The reforms considered the birth of the Japanese imperial state because there was the first time effective, and centralized imperial government in Japan (Lu, 1997, p.27).

While examining the historical structure of that period, the change in the political structure, the tremendous commercial agreements with China, and the exported products let the cultural influence of China began to increase on the Japanese society. Moreover, this situation was more visible, especially for the upper-class people and the palace because they were using expensive and luxurious products and goods such as silk, spices, or perfumes from China. These goods carry Chinese culture also created a cultural exchange for Japanese and Chinese.

Naofusa Hirai (2000) explains that Shinto is based on nature, daily life, way of thinking, and geography. Hence, it is not just a belief system; it is also a way of living encompassing not only the person but also the entire environment. That is why, in the Meiji period, different propagandas about Shinto in the media and schools from the state shelves were quickly accepted by the public (Hirai, 2000, para. 2-3). The main reason is this because Shinto, based on the life of the Japanese has gained an easily adaptable structure to new standards, expectations, and changes in Japan.

Shinto is animism, and does not have a founder or a prophet, nor does it have a scripture or religious codex. Shinto is religious teaching or way of life-based on worshiping supernatural beings or gods associated with ancestral spirits within the framework of certain rituals, respecting the Japanese tradition and family. Unlike Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, there is no conversion or mission activity in the Shinto tradition (Demirci, 2002, p.76-77). Shinto has developed a solid moral system that feeds on a primitive understanding of naturalism and attaches importance to all existing, visible, and invisible relationships between nature and humans (Rots, 2013, p.24-25). Because its bond with the emperor is much more robust, this situation gives the emperor a semi-divinity rather than a prophet. The difference between emperor and prophet at this point was in their roles. While the prophet was a representative sent to spread the teachings of God to people, in Shintoism the emperor was sent by the goddess *Amaterasu* as a savior and ruler.

This understanding has formed the basis of today's Shinto, with the influence of other religions such as Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism. Shinto adopted *Yin-Yang* (陰陽) in Taoism as *Onmyōdō* (陰陽道), and some Shrines were turned to the Buddhist Temples when Buddhism arrived in Japan in the 6th century. Until then, there was only one religion directly connected to the empire, and this connection was strengthening central power, but with the arrival of Buddhism, people met a new religion that had no connection with the state or emperor. Thus, because of people's moderate reaction to Buddhism, Emperor Yomei applied new policies to strengthened Shinto (Demirci, 2002, p.77-79). The emperor wanted to set Shinto's boundaries to a particular standard by purging the influence of other religions, especially Buddhism. In addition, Studies to increase the power of Shinto over society lead Shintoist circles to gain negative approaches against Buddhism in time. Shinto was essential to the power of the empire, yet the rise of popularity of Buddhism among urban intellectuals and bureaucrats could not be prevented (Demirci, 2002, p.77-79). Nevertheless, it was until the Feudal system that the imperial center could prevented the new religions from being active in the country.

By the time of the feudal system (1192-1867), *Shogunate* (*Bakufu*/幕府), the emperors were no longer at the center of politics, and placed as ceremonial roles in religious rites. When the Shogunate became more powerful than the emperor's court officials, political and military mandates started to express by the *Shoguns* (将軍), high-rank military officials. *Shoguns* had their territories and were in power wars against each other (Yoko, 1996, p.102). Although the position of the emperor could not have political power, the relationship of religion with this position was reinforced. The close relationship between religion and the position of the emperor led to the strengthening of the central administration with the later gaining of political power. That is because religion and emperor, two important powers gathered under one roof. However, in 1600, after bloody wars between *Shoguns*, power passed to the Tokugawa family (Flourans and Gülan, 2011, p.106).

**Shinto and Politics in Japan**

Shinto had essential changes during the Edo period (江戸時代) in between 1600-1868. The most significant changes that were decisive for this period can be summarized as the perception of Shinto as a national religion and its transformation into a state religion. The effort to separate it from Buddhist and Confucian influences, such as reading Buddhist scriptures in front of *Kami* while praying or believing the idea that *Kami* were incarnations of Buddhas. (Antoni, 1995, p.142-143). Moreover, Buddhist monks became responsible for managing some Shinto shrines (Hirai, 2020, para.8). Even though priests had differences in their teachings with the effects of Buddhism and Confucianism, the common belief of their education was that they always viewed the emperor as a religious representative. This common denominator enabled different groups to serve of empire.

In 1600, Tokugawa Ieyasu (徳川家康) won the civil war against other Shoguns with Battle of *Sekigahara* (関ヶ原の戦い), and in 1603, Emperor Go-Yōzei (後陽成天皇) accepted Tokugawa’s superiority. Thus, Tokugawa and his family started to rule the country from the palace until the Meiji period which started in 1868, and it was an essential step for creating central power for politics and religion (Flourans and Gülan, 2011, p 101). Although *Shoguns* were officially appointed by the emperor, in reality, they the de facto rulers of the country and dictated orders to everyone, including the reigning emperor (Fan, 2016, p.117). Therefore, when Tokugawa won the war between *Shoguns*, he provided absolute authority in center. Nevertheless, although the central authority and political power were in the Tokugawa family, the emperor was the religious leader, so his role was still crucial.

In the Meiji period (1868-1912), the modernization era, the power of religion and politics in one center peaked, and State Shinto ideology has emerged. State Shinto was the official nationalist religion of Japan from the Meiji Period until World War II and meant the union of religion and government in Japan (Fridell, 1976, p.548). Emperor Meiji (明治天皇) desired to gather everyone together by forming a common state religion and absolute sovereignty over society in the center. With the gaining power of the imperial center, the authority sought to consolidate its power.

Susumu Shimazono (2009), Japanese religious scholar argues that the term "State Shinto" is used mainly to represent Shinto among its citizens. Shimazono explained that people from all walks of life actively participated in State Shinto, supported it, and gathered around the Shinto religion. State Shinto was an important tool to connect the people to the state and bring them closer to the state. Shimazono also studied the transformation and development of State Shinto in 4 different periods: the formative period which is the period of complete formation of State Shinto (1868- 1890); the establishment period (1890-1910); the penetration period (1910-1931); and the fascist period (1931-1945) or pre-war period (Shimazono, 2009, p.101). The first three periods represent the most turbulent and changing periods of Shinto. From the state's perspective, the regime's "politics of religions" developed in three distinct phases in Meiji Period: the assertion of an exclusive national faith, passive tolerance of existing religions, and incorporating established religions into the dominant structure (Shimazono, 2009, p.96).

**Shinto for the Modernization of Japan**

The first period of State Shinto in the Meiji period is the "formative period." State Shinto's boundaries were determined in this period, and the foundation stones were laid to make the term state religion a reality. Emperor Meiji established foundations to maintain shrines as representatives of the Japanese Nation. Nevertheless, Shinto still took a long time to lay a solid foundation in the state system despite the efforts. Later, this process was reinforced because the state should have rituals, and the ceremonies started to have religious characteristics. The religious touches in these state ceremonies imposed the combination of religion and state phenomenon on people. For a long time, however, State Shinto did not influence people's lives not as much as Emperor Meiji expected (Shimazono, 2009, p.101).

Although the regime failed to establish a national religion in the 1870s, authorities gradually turned local famous Shinto shrines into political instruments to instill emperor-centered values of patriotism and social harmony. The government insisted that state-sponsored shrines do not constitute a religion but rather secular forums to honor the emperor and nation. They also decided that the shrines did not compete with Christianity and Buddhism in any way and did not interfere with the freedom to practice religion (Garon, 1986, p.279). Thus, while Emperor Meiji placed Shinto in a different status from Buddhism or Christianity, he also mentioned religious freedom. Although this freedom was not officially guaranteed, it played an important role in displaying a moderate approach to society. However, this freedom should coexist with the status of State Shinto as the state religion (Kimpara, 2015, p.431).

During Meiji period, changes began not only in the state religion but also in the state structure. In 1871, bureaucrats and the emperor made a new constitution. The basic principle of the Meiji Constitution was a combination of the constitutional monarchy principal characteristic of the 19th-century German constitutions and the divine law theory in the form of Shinto. It was the unity of political governance and worship, and according to the Constitution, the Japanese emperor had the status of high priest within the Shinto belief system. Thus, the Constitution legalized Shinto as a state religion in Japan (Mihaylovna, 2000, p.67-68) With this constitution, the overlords were forced to leave their lands, the provinces began to be administered by governors appointed from the center, and the school system was changed first to the French and then to the German system. The calendar and clothes were arranged according to Western examples, the authority introduced compulsory education, and intensive modernization work began. With the restoration, Japan experienced many developments in military, economic, political, and social fields and entered the Westernization process. Nevertheless, the changes that developed with westernization and the move away from the traditional system caused concerns in the central administration of the empire. Emperor Meiji insisted that State Shinto remain vital to ensure the central power because he was worried about losing his power under the influence of the West, wanted to reach the people with a more traditional approach and maintain his influence on the people (Demirci, 2002, p. 77).

In the same year, Shinto became the only official religion of the state, and *Shinbutsu Bunri* (神仏分離) was established by the Ministry of Religious Affairs (Antoni, 1995, p.143-144). *Shinbutsu Bunri* was the expulsion of Buddhism from Shinto, and this separation was the formation of modern Shinto in that period. (Antoni, 1995, p. 139). This method was necessary in order to guarantee the power of the administration over religion at that time. That is because if the state religion stays strong, the center will also be strong.

The Constitutional Monarchy and the emperor were accepted as the sole sovereign power in the political, military, and cultural sphere in Meiji Constitution until the end of World War II. As the head of state and the commander-in-chief of the army, the emperor is the only one who can decide on war and peace. Moreover, absolute authority and sovereignty were reserved for the monarch. Society obeyed the emperor due to his divine personality, and he had the recognition of his right to a high degree of sovereignty in the constitutional texts (Büyükbaş, 2013, p.47).

As the Meiji government sought to make Shinto the official religion of Japan and respect and loyalty to the emperor became a symbol of nationalism because Emperor Meiji was head of religion and politics. Consequently, the respect and loyalty shown to the emperor emerged as an aspect of patriotism. The Shinto clergy took on the task of glorifying the emperor and the state. The influence of Shinto as a tool of state propaganda has resulted in a state of religious overzealousness, even lethargy, among ordinary people. However, the state continued to support Shinto shrines that nationalism and religion became intertwined with the official edict (Beyers, 2015, p.149).

To make Shinto an emperor-centered national religion, they confiscated shrine lands and sought to eradicate Buddhism itself. By bringing the state religion to the fore and suppressing Buddhism, the empire tried to make changes such as strengthening and consolidating a hierarchy among religions and the state's authority. Nevertheless, the Meiji bureaucrats soon realized that it was futile to try to eradicate Buddhism, the faith of the vast majority of Japanese. Under a national religion, the drive for doctrinal absolutism alienated many subjects and paradoxically hindered the regime's pursuit of general political consolidation (Garon, 1986, p.277). As a result, the government gradually switched to a policy of bona fide disregard for existing religions. In 1884, the State Council passed a decree placing Buddhism on an equal legal footing with the Shinto sects. The measure delegated regulatory powers to the officially recognized head of each unit, giving Buddhist and Shinto organizations a significant degree of autonomy. Responding to Western powers and some Buddhist leaders, the regime later guaranteed freedom of religious belief in 1889 (Garon, 1986, p. 272-278).

**Shinto as State Religion**

In the second period, the authority established certain Shinto rituals and systems that people respect the system of government and the emperor. These changes adapted the Shinto religion to the modern nation. While the power of the State Shinto was consolidated, it was easier to be accepted by society. In this period, the Meiji government also revealed a new ritual system regarding respect for the palace and the holy emperor. It was decided that the idea of *Kokutai* (国体), which is the system of running the state, should be allowed to take root in people's lives through education and training and that these teachings had the legendary symbols of Shinto (Shimazono, 2009, p.120). *Kokutai*, which cannot be fully translated, is an idea that accepts the divine self of the emperor and supports that the fact that there is a single political and religious center in this field should exist in the administrative system and that this constitutes the national self, the essence. Imposing the idea of *Kokutai* on the public was an essential tool that softened the view of the State Shinto and made this idea widespread (Kitagawa, 1974, p. 209).

At that time, the state tried to implement expansion policies for Shinto, tried to create state religion. Thus, within the expansion system, a cooperative organization and training program was organized for the shrine priests, which enabled the state to become a powerful element of Shinto. In this context, the concept of Shrine Shinto has emerged. Shrine Shinto supports worship at public shrines, and it was a form of Shinto that centered the shrines and promoted traditional shrines serving regional or local communities, and it was against sectarian practices (Fridell, 1976, p.554). The state manages and gives financial support to Shrines; therefore, they are closely and directly related to the emperor (Hirai, 2020, para.3).

According to Shrine Shinto, priests had to attend some training for learning the concept—the priests' unconditional support to the State Shinto and loyalty to the state and the emperor. There should not be any sects in this belief, and this idea also supported the state religion because, without different thoughts and separations, a single thought would be supported by everyone so that it would have more substantial foundations. The Empire expected that these changes lead the State Shinto to become a part of people's thoughts and daily life and became popular in all segments of the people (Shimazono, 2009, p.120).

**Shrines, Rituals and Government**

In the third period between 1910-1931, namely the penetration period, the number of shrines founded to spread the state's policies and financed by the state increased considerably. As State Shinto's symbol, Emperor Taishō (大正天皇) decided to build the Meiji Shrine. This shrine was dedicated to the spirits of Emperor Meiji and his wife, Empress Shōken (昭憲皇后), making it not only a religious site but also a political symbol (Shimazono, 2009, p.114). It seems that Emperor Taishō built Meiji Shrine as drawing attention to the intense political and religious partnership in the Meiji period. At that period, the effects of the unity of religion and politics on the people were undeniable, and people's faith in the state and religion was very high. Nevertheless, the joint action of shrines and the state was not enough to reach all segments of the society. Therefore, the government dedicated to the State Shinto resorted to social pressure to compel the people to participate in various religious and state-symbolic activities.

First of all, the authority added rituals to show respect to the emperor in the palace at school events, and everyone's participation was required. These events were described as "rituals of the imperial system" (Shimazono, 2009, p.113-114). They were not the first attempt at those kinds of events; the first attempts to organize these school activities started in the second half of the 1880s and then in 1891 (Shimazono, 2009, p.103). The success of school activities, which came to the fore again in 1910, shows that the power of the administration at that time got stronger.

Establishing local unions dominated by shrine priests was another attempt that made Shrine Shinto a pillar of State Shinto. Shrine Shinto has also featured as a critical player in rituals associated with imperial funerals and grand ceremonies, the Russo-Japanese War, and the establishment of the Meiji Shrine during the Taishō period (1912-1926). With the support it received in this period, State Shinto increased its place in politics and its influence on society. In order to support the innovations made, Emperor Taishō and the bureaucrats of the Ministry of Interior made statements to those who argued that shrines could help unite people. (Shimazono, 2009, p.117-118).

Shinto played a significant role in the state's gaining power, and it was accused of causing the suppression of belief in other gods due to the unlimited support given to it. Thus, in 1906, the financial support given by the state would be given only to the great shrines, which were elite and fully supported, and the state performed rituals only with these shrines. Moreover, Emperor Meiji reduced the financial support of local shrines. In this way, only well-kept and large shrines representing the state would survive and represent the state in the best way (Shimazono, 2009, p.116-117).

This policy received different reactions in different provinces and cities, sometimes even in big cities. Shimazono illustrates that people were uncomfortable with this discrimination in elite shrines and local shrines in that period. That is because, all shrines were holy places for the Shinto; therefore, they thought that discrimination among shrines was unfair. However, in the face of this policy, it was only in 1914 that the number of shrines fell from 200,000 to 120,000. This situation later caused the public to think that spiritual feelings were ignored, and society's negative perspective affected the central structure. Because the empire did not only bind religion to itself but also began to regulate and limit religion according to itself, that is why, in the following years, the public made efforts to rebuild the shrines that were disposed of and not supported (Shimazono, 2009, p.118).

With the end of the Meiji period, the state's attitude towards Shinto began to change. During this period, the Japanese empire regulated public and religious departments alongside many laws to establish a viable religious policy. Nevertheless, the public no longer tolerated these changes and policies (Shimazono, 2009, p.118-119). The activities such as religious gatherings, and worship of non-Shinto religious organizations increased despite efforts to prevent them. In addition, the change in Japanese social life and the interaction of different cultures created a different way of thinking about Shinto; this led to the gradual erasure of its state-supporting structure. People began to question the pressures on religion that were coming from the state's authority.

**Shinto and Nationalism**

Coming to the fourth period, place of Shinto was shifted away from a religion to an instrument to promote patriotism (Beyers, 2015, p.149). Government officials tried to integrate Shinto as a national ethical concept. Some of the reasons were the political and international conflicts before World War II, such as Japanese military activities that increased in Asia. There was a return to the previously organized religious rituals supporting the state, which Holtom explains (1922, p.2). While arguing that Shinto contributed to the unification and discipline of the people's feelings of loyalty and patriotism, the Japanese state wanted to impose a new idea on the people, which argued that Shinto should strengthen free thought against the dangers of socialism and even anarchism.

With the direction of the authority, Shrine priests organized Shinto ceremonies attended by civil servants. These ceremonies were systematized in national law and were counted among the essential works of the state. Shinto priests received the rank of the palace, were treated as civil servants, and priests attended new training so that they would be more effective in society. In addition, Emperor Shōwa (昭和天皇) articulated that the state would make the appointments or inspections of priests, and he guaranteed state revenues (partially or entirely) to support people and institutions affiliated with Shinto. After these policies, shrines were brought closer to politics symbolically by qualifying them as non-religious institutions to strengthen national morality (Holtom, 1922, p.2-3).

Much like other nations, religious nationalism emerged prominently in Japan during World War II (Beyers, 2015, p.150). When the war began, the empire started to use religious symbolism to motivate and engage the people effectively in this struggle. *Kamikaze* (神風) pilots — *Kamikaze* is a combination of two letters, divine (*Kami*) and wind (*kaze*) (Saunders and Peter, 2018, para. 2) —were one of the examples in that situation. *Kamikaze* was the name given to the suicide attacks carried out by Japanese fighter pilots during the final phase of World War II. Defined as a "suicide mission" or "suicide bombing," *Kamikaze* pilots crushed themselves into enemy units, especially the navies (Mori, 2017, p.1).

In 1945, Japan's "structuring of the national Shinto" understanding continued unabated from World War II until its defeat. This framework aimed to use Shinto as a unifying element for society and unite the people under the influence of Emperor Shōwa, who was attributed to him as holiness, thus creating a deep sense of loyalty and patriotism. The fact that the emperor comes from divine lineage meant that he was the legitimate ruler of the state administration. Therefore, we can say that loyalty to the emperor, the state's god-legitimized leader, was seen as a form of patriotism. Nevertheless, after the war, the people were disappointed with religious belief and patriotism began to decline in Japanese society admission of defeat, and in line with the request of the United States, Shinto was removed from the status of official religion (Beyers, 2015, p.101). This situation stems from the bond between the emperor and religion because Shinto supported the power of the emperor in politics. Hence, removing Shinto as an official religion and supporting other religions' freedom paved the way for the weakening of the power in the center. After that, Shinto continued the form of widespread belief among some Japanese people but lost its power on society for a while (Beyers., 2015, p.101-102).

**Contemporary Japan and Shinto**

The decline of religious belief and patriotism caused a clear break between Shinto and nationalism during the post-war period, and that was a crucial turning point for Shinto to gain a new meaning in Japan. One of the main reasons for the break was the practice of religious freedom and the prohibition of state funding for Shinto shrines under the American occupation power. The United States' biggest argument on the issue was that the emperor should be considered a war criminal at that time. The constitutional amendments made changes in the administration according to the suggestion of American General Douglas MacArthur and his occupation team commanded the Southwest Pacific in World War II, such as the emperor's renunciation of his claim to divinity in 1946 (Flourans and Gülan, 2011, p.108).

Later, freedom of religion was emphasized with the new Japanese constitution proclaimed in 1947. However, this time religious freedom, unlike the Meiji Constitution, forbade any religion, including Shinto, from receiving preferential treatment (Beyers, 2015 p.151). In addition, the United States' influence in rebuilding Japan economically and socially during this period was strong; therefore, nationalist sentiments and religious affiliation drastically decreased. As a result, Japan has successfully adapted to democracy. Nevertheless, the close ties between Shinto and militarism during this period caused Shinto to have an ongoing negative side for some segments, and many Japanese even consider *Kamikaze* pilots to be an embarrassing mark in their history (Beyers, 2015, p.152).

In 1955, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) was established, and it was consolidating the new process in Japan. By the 1960s, the focus was on economic growth and development rather than religion and nationalism. The development of the economy increased the votes of the people (Krauss and Pekkanen, 2010, p.6). Coming to the 1970s, the LDP focused attention on pollution control and an improved social welfare system, allowing them to secure their place in power. However, with the stagnation in the economy in 1993 and a few LDP members leaving to form new conservative parties, their votes dropped, and for the first time in their history, they lost control of the government (Krauss and Pekkanen, 2010, p.9-11). Later under the leadership of Shinzo Abe, they were united again under the LDP, which has ruled Japan to this day.

Although the links between religion and politics weakened in the post-war period, a certain degree of religious conservatism still lingered in LDP policies. For example, according to Andrew Weiss (2018), many LDP politicians, especially Abe's Cabinet members, have close ties to conservative religious groups such as *Shinto Seiji Renmei* (神道政治連盟), the most influential political lobbying group in Japan; Abe is a crucial group member. This lobby's members aim to protect Japanese history, traditions, culture while putting Shinto at the center of government (Weiss, 2018, p.2). Moreover, Abe is more focused on Shinto than almost any post-war prime minister (Reynolds, 2016). These close ties are also seen as a basis of support for the party.

**Controversies Surrounding Yasukuni Shrine**

Yasukuni Shrine has been one of the controversial places in Japanese history. Originally this shrine was established to commemorate the soldiers who fought for the restoration of imperial rule, and then it became a holy place dedicated to all those who died in the wars of imperial expansion until 1945. During this period, the shrine was financially supported by the state, while at the same time, it was under the administrative control of the Land and Maritime Ministries. In addition, the empire specially employed Shinto priests under a military commander as abbot for the rites performed in this shrine. From this point of view, there was a tendency to keep everything under control while fully supporting nationalist sentiments (Beyers, 2015, p.148).

Although the rituals performed in the shrine conformed to the religious rituals of Shinto, the government regulated them as non-religious ceremonies for those who “gave” their lives for the empire. In addition, other events held in the shrine were used to mobilize the Japanese within the framework of national feelings, celebrate military victories, and commemorate the dead of war. After Japan's surrender in August 1945, the shrine's status was quickly changed, and all shrines were forced to reassert their religious identities (Mullins, 2018, p.145). However, the main controversy regarding the Yasukuni shrine was that 14 wartime leaders charged as class-A war criminals were buried here along *Kamikaze* pilots’ photos and letters, and state visits were made to reinforce nationalist sentiments (Przystup, 2014, p.2-3). Therefore, this shrine is easily considered as a religious center that entirely appealed to nationalist sentiments.

Nationalist initiatives through Yasukuni Shrine were vehemently opposed by other parties in the parliament and other dominant religions, such as Christianity and Buddhism in Japan. However, the LDP was able to initiate an annual visit to the shrine by the prime minister. The visit would take place on August 15 —Memorial Day for the end of the war— each year and would mark the end of World War II. Nevertheless, after the 1993 economic collapse in Japan, these nationalist initiatives of the LDP gradually weakened, and then prime ministers and other state officials avoided official visits there for a while (Beyers, 2015, p. 149-151). The LDP had already started to lose votes due to the recessions in the economy; therefore, party members did not want to cause more negative perceptions in the society with these visits, which were the subject of discussions. Yet, Japanese prime minister’s visit to Yasukuni Shrine is an international political controversy among China and Korea, the victims of the empire of Japan.

**Conclusion**

While this study examines the relationship between political power and religion in Japan from a historical perspective, the aim is also to explain how the role of Shinto was changed at different times according to the needs of the empire, such as it gained nationalist identity during World War II, and in Meiji period when it was the state religion. The characteristics of Shinto and its strong connection with national identity have created an environment in which Shinto is conveniently interpreted to support political goals of each period. In Shinto, the emperor's descent from *Kami* made him the legitimate political and religious leader. Nevertheless, Shinto has not always been able to maintain its role in political power. During the Shogunate period, the central authority was weakened by different families' land and power wars.

However, with Tokugawa's victory in this power struggle, the central structure began to be re-established, and when it reached its peak in the Meiji period. Shinto showed its influence in politics under the state administration and later gained a nationalist identity. This nationalist identity, combined with the State Shinto ideology, influenced a large part of the society, and the coexistence of religion and politics strengthened the authority. The emergence of new state rituals has been a method of instilling nationalism into society. Nevertheless, after World War II Shinto again lost its political power so did the emperor who was closely linked to Shinto. Also, Shinto was removed from being an official religion from the request of the United States’ occupation team. Therefore, this created more space for other religions, such as Buddhism and Christianity in the society.

In Japanese society today, Shinto is not influential in politics as much as in the Meiji and the Shōwa periods (1926–1945). Shinto's place in Japanese society has become more fundamental than its religious and political structure. In today's Japan, there is still an attempt to make politics over Shinto such as the visits of the politicians to Yasukuni Shrine. Official visits to Yasukuni Shrine on August 15 have a controversial position, especially between China, Korea, and Japan. For many years, the absence of state visits to this shrine and Shinzo Abe's re-visit in 2013 increased the tension between the countries. Although Abe says that he only visited here for nationalistic feelings, it was obvious that this visit was an electoral policy aimed at gaining votes and increasing the power of the Liberal Party.

It is undeniable that Shinto as the state religion lost its political power and remained as an essential part of Japanese culture with modernization and globalization. That is because it has become easier today to reach information, experience other cultures, learn different perspectives or different believes. Therefore, experiencing new things and learning different thoughts allowed people to have different views of life than people who lived fifty or a hundred years ago and this situation may change state’s policies according to need and wish of society. Today, in Japan, many different cultures and religions are in harmony. The idea of ​​"born Shinto, married Christian, die Buddhist" has become a part of Japanese society (Kisala, 2006, p.3). This is a common practice in contemporary Japan that a new born baby is blessed at a Shinto shrine, marriage at a Christian church, and a funeral at a Buddhist temple. Therefore, with the coexistence of many cultures and changing world, Shinto’s relationship with politics has become quite different from the past such as Meiji and the Shōwa period before World War II.

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