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Politics and Religion in Japan: The Separation of Religion and State, in Principle and in Reality

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A Brief History of Politics and Religion in Japan

In General: Separation of Church and State/Religion and State

- Exclusion of religious authority from the public sphere in building of the modern nation state.
- Separation of politics (public sphere) and religion (private sphere) to guarantee religious freedom.
- In reality, however, the modern nation states have not wiped out religious elements from their functions, but have incorporated them in a sophisticated way.

Religion as a Tool of the State

- No separation of politics and religion from the ancient times through the Edo era.
- Fierce persecution of the Christians (Catholics) in the Edo era (17th–19th centuries).
- Religious freedom was introduced in modern Japan as a necessary evil under the pressure of the Western powers. “Japanese subjects shall, **within limits not prejudicial to peace and order, and not antagonistic to their duties as subjects**, enjoy freedom of religious belief.” (Art. 28, Constitution of the Empire of Japan)

Fighting and Grieving Modern State

- Modern nation state has an official monopoly on military and police. Conscription is necessary for the state to be ready to wage war.
- National cemetery and national funerals to grieve war dead.
- A fighting state is a grieving state.
- Yasukuni Shrine was established in 1869 to venerate war dead and enshrine their spirits. In 1882 Shinto shrines were designated “not religious.”

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Future Issues of Politics and Religion

Article 20 as a Starting Point

1. **Freedom of religion** is guaranteed to all. No religious organization shall receive any **privileges** from the State, nor exercise any political authority.
2. **No person** shall be compelled to take part in any religious act, celebration, rite or practice.
3. The State and its organs shall refrain from **religious education** or any other religious activity.

***Religious Corporations Act* as a Focal Point**

(Order of Dissolution)

Article 81 (1) When the court finds that a cause which falls under any of the following items exists with regard to a religious corporation, **it may order the dissolution of the religious corporation** at the request of the competent authority, an interested person, or a public prosecutor, and by its own authority:

(i) **in violation of laws and regulations**, the religious corporation commits an act which is clearly found to **harm public welfare substantially**;

Interpretations of the Separation of Religion and State

- Lawsuits over the Shinto ceremony for purifying a building site (*Jichin-sai*) in Tsu, Mie, 1965

The City of Tsu provided the donation for the Shinto ceremony. The Supreme Court ruled the donation was not against the constitution, because the ceremony was a secular one.

- Prime Ministers' visits to Yasukuni Shrine

PM Nakasone (1985, as a PM, 10 times in total), PM Koizumi (2006, 6 times in total), PM Abe (2013)

Draft for the Amendment of the Constitution of Japan by the Liberal Democratic Party of Japan, 2012

Article 20 (Freedom of religion)

1. Freedom of religion is guaranteed to all. The State shall not grant privileges to any religious organization. (Omitted: “No religious organization shall exercise any political authority.”)
2. No person shall be compelled to take part in any religious act, celebration, rite or practice.
3. The State, local governments and other public entities shall refrain from particular religious education and other religious activities. However, this provision shall not apply to activities that do not exceed the scope of social rituals or customary practices. (Underline added)

Features of the Separation of Religion and State in the Postwar Japan

- Ambiguous separation
 - Incorporate religion into the social rituals or customary practices
 - Incorporate religion into politics (**religion as a tool of the state**)
- Surge and expansion of “new religions”
 - Respect of religious freedom
 - No strict watch of religious organizations

Features of the Separation of Religion and State in the Postwar Japan

- Expansion of various “religious right” groups

The former *Unification Church* is one of them. There are many groups deeply connected with conservative politicians, such as the *Japan Conference* (Nippon Kaigi), based on Shinto-related organizations, and the *Shinto Association of Spiritual Leadership* (Shinto Seiji Renmei).

Agendas for the Future

- Religious corporations should contribute to the public welfare based on the spirit of Article 20. At the same time they should have a decent and transparent relationship with politicians so as not to be given “privileges.”
- New social services are necessary to help victims of the radicalization of certain religious groups and to prevent them. Religious literacy education is needed for that prevention, which will also be effective for the more ethnically and religiously diversified future of Japan.