

In 'nonreligious' Japan, shrines still exert a pull

by [Michael Holtz](#) in the [October 14, 2015](#) issue

([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) Yasunori Ueda may visit the Ise Grand Shrine every summer to pray to for his family and good health, but that doesn't make him religious.

"Visiting a shrine to pray is different," he said while walking along the gravel path that leads to the main shrine, the most sacred spot in Shinto, Japan's indigenous religion. "Most Japanese, including me, don't think about whether we're religious or not."

It's a common refrain at Japan's more than 80,000 shrines and temples. Yet evidence of a spirituality that infuses daily life can be spotted across the country, from the small shrines tucked behind busy Tokyo streets to the sacred grounds that dot rural byways.

A survey published earlier this year by Gallup International and the Worldwide Independent Network of Market Research found that Japan is among the world's least religious countries. Sixty-two percent of respondents identified themselves as either not religious or atheist, placing the country behind only China and Hong Kong in Asia.

Yet in everyday life in Japan, the sacred is often inseparable from the secular. Ryosuke Okamoto, a sociologist of religion at Hokkaido University, argues that more and more Japanese seem to be seeking some sort of spiritual experience by visiting sacred sites, both Buddhist and Shinto.

Handwritten signs flutter outside Meiji Shrine, a Shinto shrine in Tokyo devoted to the Emperor Meiji. On one morning in August, they included prayers for a swift recovery from illness, a long-awaited job promotion, and tickets to see Arashi, a popular Japanese boy band. "I wish for all my wishes to come true," read one.

The first wish Ikue Kumata made that morning was for her pregnant daughter. “She is due in December,” Kumata said. “Her having a safe delivery is our first priority.”

Kumata and her husband, Tomeo, moved to Tokyo after the 2011 earthquake and subsequent nuclear disaster forced them to abandon their home in Fukushima prefecture. Since then, they’ve been coming to Meiji almost every month. The tree-covered shrine instills in them a sense of stability and peace, they said, that is often hard to come by in their day-to-day lives.

The pull of religious tradition for people like the Kumatas was on full display here in August. It lured city dwellers home to rural areas in celebration of the Buddhist festival of Bon, when family members gather around the communal graves of their loved ones. It drew war widows to Yasukuni Shrine, a memorial to Japan’s war dead in central Tokyo, on August 15, the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II. And across the capital at Meiji Shrine, as the new school year drew nigh, students eager for good luck in the upcoming term fastened bits of paper inscribed with a fortune on metal racks.

That enduring appeal has contributed to a booming tourism industry. A largely domestic audience of about 3 million people flock to Meiji Shrine and Senso-ji Temple in Tokyo during the first three days of the New Year, Japan’s most significant holiday. The number of visitors at the iconic Ise Shrine (pronounced “ee-say”) spiked at 14 million in 2013, the year the shrine was deconstructed and rebuilt as part of an ancient ceremony that’s repeated every 20 years. And for the most intrepid, there is the 1,000-year-old Kumano Kodo, a lengthy pilgrimage route to Buddhist and Shinto sites across the Kii Peninsula.

“The boundary between religion and tourism is blurring,” said Hiroshi Yamanaka, a religious studies professor at Tsukuba University. “Ordinary people don’t think that behavior is religious. To them it’s just customary.”

Many Japanese say nonchalantly that they’re born Shinto, marry Christian, and die Buddhist.

“Japanese don’t devote themselves to a specific god or religious doctrine, but they pick parts of established religions and make them their own,” Yamanaka said. “In the Western perspective religion is a faith, but in a Japanese context religion is very different.”

Tomoyasu Shimakawa, a deputy director at the Japan Tourism Agency, has been intrigued by an uptick in the number of young tourists at sacred sites. He said many visit ahead of pivotal moments in their lives—such as college entrance exams and job interviews—to pray for good luck.

Satoru Otowa, a spokesman for the Ise Grand Shrine, has noticed a similar mentality among the growing number of young people he's spotted at the shrine. Two decades of stagnant economic growth have led many to feel adrift and uncertain about their futures, he said.

"Many young people are disillusioned with society," Otowa said. "They are looking for spiritual healing."

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