

Japanese look to ancient traditions for strength

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(RNS) When uncounted thousands have died in a disaster such as last week's earthquake and tsunami, where will the Japanese people find spiritual strength?

Experts on Japanese culture say they'll find it in the critical, comforting rituals of religion.

They will rely on centuries-old traditions of a distinctive Buddhist culture and the ancient Shinto beliefs of their earliest people. Japan is 90 percent Buddhist or Shinto or a combination of the two, with young urban Japanese more inclined to have drifted from religious attachments.

Right now, most Japanese survivors are at the stage, like survivors of the 9/11 attacks, of posting photos of missing loved ones. For families who have found their dead, wakes, funeral prayers and cremations may already be under way, said Duncan Williams, a survivor of the Friday (March 11) quake and a scholar of Japanese Buddhism at the University of California, Berkeley.

Seven days after the quake and tsunami, memorials will begin in whatever temples remain near the disaster zone. In Buddhist traditions, the seventh day ritual begins 33 years of formal mourning ceremonies, Williams said.

Just as Christians and Jews in the West may offer prayers for those who have died and those who mourn, so these rituals and prayers will come from throughout Japan, as well as from Thailand and Taiwan, where many share the Japanese form of Buddhism, said Williams, a native of Japan.

Buddhism addresses and tries to alleviate suffering, physical and mental. It stresses compassion while still acknowledging that death is part of life. Monks in Japan will assure people that they survived for a reason, Williams said.

"In the memorial services, after prayers and chants, the monks and the people will offer all the merit, the good karma, from these rituals to those who have perished and those who are suffering. They will pray to the gods that 'the kings of hell will not take your loved one away,'" Williams said.

Such talk of gods and hell kings doesn't sound like the meditative Buddhism better known in the West, cultural anthropologist John Nelson said. He's an expert on Shinto and Buddhist shrines and chairman of the department of theology and religious studies at University of San Francisco.

Nelson described Shinto culture as "like Native American or tribal religions, it is strongest in rural environments. If you are in the mountains, you speak of the mountain deities, for example. It's all about the local spirits of that particular place, and they may have a dual nature -- beneficial or destructive."

By contrast, Buddhism, the dominant religion now, is less about the spirits of the natural world and more about rituals of society, family and state, Nelson said.

"Japanese Buddhism is similar to Western religions with deities that can be petitioned and can intervene in worldly affairs, and there are many mechanisms to appeal to them, to pray for miracles," he said.

Even so, the idea that gods also punish people turned up Monday in the Japanese press. Nelson said he read at online sites of two major newspapers that the governor of Tokyo described the tsunami as "punishment from heaven for the greed of the Japanese."