Japan prime minister Abe seeks to revive Shinto

by Michael Holtz

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(*The Christian Science Monitor*) Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe's deep adoration for the Ise Grand Shrine, the most sacred Shinto site in Japan, is no secret. He visits every New Year and reportedly even postponed a cabinet meeting in 2013 to attend a ceremony on its hallowed ground.

So when Abe announced recently that the 2016 summit of the Group of Seven industrialized nations would be held in the nearby resort city of Shima, Satoru Otowa wasn't surprised.

"I believe it has something to do with his Shinto beliefs," Otowa, a spokesman for the shrine, said while leading a tour there in August. "When the prime minister visited in January, everyone saw how passionately he prayed."

The decision to host the G-7 summit near Ise underscores Abe's devout Shinto faith. Yet his commitment to Japan's indigenous religion has led to far more than symbolic gestures. He and his Liberal Democratic Party have pursued a wide range of Shinto-inspired policies—from more openly embracing Japan's imperial heritage to reforming aspects of Japanese education and even re-evaluating the country's wartime record—with the explicit goal of renewing what they say are traditional values.

As old perhaps as Japan itself, Shinto has no explicit creed or major religious texts. Its adherents pray to *kami*, spirits found in objects both living and inanimate, and believe in a complex body of folklore that emphasizes ancestor worship. But as Japan modernized in the late 19th century, officials made Shinto the state religion, and Japanese were taught to view the emperor as having divine stature. The religion became closely associated with Japanese militarism, leading to its separation from state institutions after World War II.

Shinto struggled for decades to find a place in postwar Japan, and given the religion's history, some critics see the country's newfound interest in it as a sign of simmering nationalism at best. At worst, they describe it as a reprise of the official State Shinto of imperial Japan.

But among conservatives it reflects a palpable fear that Japan has somehow gone adrift after two decades of economic stagnation, rampant materialism, and the rise of neighboring China. Many believe the time has come for the religion to regain its rightful place in the public sphere.

“Shinto is refusing to be restricted to the private and family life,” said Mark Mullins, a professor of Japanese studies at the University of Auckland in New Zealand. “There is this sense that Japan needs to get back what it lost after World War II and that this will be good for the nation.”

One of Keiji Furuya’s most formative experiences was the three years he spent as an exchange student in New York as a teenager. Furuya, who has since become one of Japan’s most conservative LDP lawmakers, recalls marveling at America’s unabashed displays of patriotism. He was astonished to see flags billowing from front porches and students reciting the Pledge of Allegiance in school.

Growing up in Japan, Furuya's never saw such displays. The official Shinto ideology used to promote Japanese superiority and a presumed right to govern Asia was tucked away after Japan's defeat in 1945. Emperor Hirohito renounced his divine status as a “living god” in early 1946 and the country’s new Constitution, drafted by U.S. occupation forces, enshrined pacifism as national policy.

The Constitution also mandated the separation of state and religion. The U.S. occupation not only ended Shinto's official designation, it inaugurated a period when Shinto began to disappear from Japanese society altogether. Shinto, along with the nationalism it helped spawn, quickly became taboo.

“For people like me who went through the postwar education system in Japan, raising a flag was not a popular thing to do,” Furuya said in August during an interview in his office conference room. As if to make up for the loss, the room had been adorned with three flags. “But as time went by,” he added, “I came to believe that it was natural to have respect and pride in one’s own country.”

It’s a belief that has come to define much of Furuya’s political career. He was first elected to Japan’s lower house of parliament in 1990 and re-elected to an eighth term in 2012. He also serves in Abe’s cabinet. As a defender of what he calls “true conservatism,” he considers it his duty to protect Japanese traditional values. To do so, he said, “We need drastic reforms.”

Interest in such reform has been building for much of the past decade. Masahiko Fujiwara's *Dignity of a Nation* sold 2 million copies in 2006 and revived the concept of *bushido*, the honor code of the samurai. The former ultranationalist governor of Tokyo, Shintaro Ishihara, spoke of the Japan "that could say no" to the US. And the introduction of patriotic education in public schools was one of Abe's top initiatives during his first stint as prime minister from 2006 to 2007.

More recently, a new wave of conservatives—often compared to members of the tea party in the U.S.—helped the LDP win a landslide victory in 2012 and put Abe back in power. Their support helped him pass a package of laws last month that allows Japan to send troops abroad in support of allies for the first time in its postwar era.

Shinto Association

Furuya’s support for a wide range of initiatives that aim to revive pieces of prewar Japanese culture led him to join Shinto Seiji Renmei (the Shinto Association of Spiritual Leadership). Since its founding in 1969, Seiji Renmei has transformed into one of the most influential political lobbying groups in Japan. According to the most recent count, 302 parliament members are affiliated with the association, compared with 44 two decades ago. Abe and many of his top cabinet officials—including the deputy prime minister, defense minister, and justice minister—are longtime members.

Seiji Renmei's mission is to reclaim the spiritual values that it says were lost under the U.S. occupation. The association supports efforts to revise Japan’s pacifist Constitution, encourage patriotic and moral education, and promote the return of the emperor to a more prominent place in Japanese society. It also calls for restoring the special status of Yasukuni Shrine, a controversial memorial to Japan’s war dead, including convicted war criminals from World War II.

"After the war, there was an atmosphere that considered all aspects of the prewar era bad," former Seiji Renmei director Yutaka Yuzawa told Reuters last December.

"Policies were adopted weakening the relationship between the imperial household and the people," he added, "and the most fundamental elements of Japanese history were not taught in the schools."

Seiji Renmei declined multiple requests for an interview from The Christian Science Monitor.

Iwahashi Katsuji, a spokesman for the Association of Shinto Shrines, a closely linked organization that administers 80,000 shrines in Japan, said it's time for the Japanese to re-evaluate their past.

"Even after the Meiji Restoration there are many good points," he said, referring to Japan's rapid transformation from a feudal farming society into an industrial power at the end of the 19th century. "Just saying that Japan lost the war and that Japan was bad and evil is not constructive."

A growing influence?

Inoue Nobutaka, a professor of Shinto studies at Kokugakuin University in Tokyo, said it's far from clear how much of the past Abe and his supporters want to revive. But he contends that organizations such as Seiji Renmei and Nippon Kaigi, a like-minded nationalist group, hold more sway over the Abe administration than they did over its predecessors.

"These groups have been politically active for a long time," Nobutaka said. "Their influence has grown because Abe has turned to them for support."

That support is starting to pay off. With the help of Furuya, who heads a group of conservative lawmakers that promotes the cultivation of patriotic values in schools, Seiji Renmei and its allies have gained some of the most ground in education.

The group argues that changes in the education system are essential to restoring Japanese pride, which they say has eroded over decades of teachers imparting "a masochistic view of history" on their students. Its members dispute the death toll of the 1937 massacre in Nanking, which the Chinese government places at 300,000, and deny that the Japanese Army played a direct role in forcing so-called comfort women to provide sex to its soldiers in China and Korea.

The group launched a campaign this summer to encourage local education boards to adopt revised textbooks that eliminate negative depictions of Japan's wartime activities. The strategy is gaining attention. Last month, 31 school districts in 14 prefectures had agreed to use the more conservative textbooks in their junior high schools, up from 23 districts in 11 prefectures four years ago.

Those achievements came after Abe pledged in January to fight what he called mistaken views about Japan's wartime actions. Yet history is an unresolved subject in East Asia. In the eyes of China and South Korea, two victims of Japan's early 20th-century aggression, Abe and his supporters are historical revisionists who want to whitewash the country's wartime atrocities.

Abe's critics warn the new textbooks could weaken an antiwar message they say has helped keep Japan peaceful for seven decades. But supporters like Furuya argue that they are needed to instill a new sense of patriotism among young people.

"That doesn't mean we're fostering nationalism," Furuya said. "I believe it is natural to understand our country's history correctly and to have respect for our country."

The Ise mystique

The Ise Grand Shrine is a sprawling, tree-covered complex located in Mie prefecture, about 200 miles southwest of Tokyo near the Pacific coast. The sun goddess Amaterasu, a major Shinto deity who is believed to be an ancestral god of the imperial family, is enshrined in its inner sanctum. Her story is a powerful legend that draws millions of Japanese every year to pray at the shrine. It's one that Abe is eager to share with the world.

"I wanted to choose a place where world leaders could have a full taste and feel of Japan's beautiful nature, bountiful culture, and traditions," he told reporters after announcing the location of the G-7 summit.

Never mind that the governor of Mie prefecture hadn't even submitted a bid to host the summit when the deadline came and went last August. At the time, Hiroshima and Sendai, a major city in the area ravaged by the March 2011 earthquake and tsunami, were widely considered the frontrunners.

But it soon became clear that the prime minister had other plans. That December his staff contacted the Mie governor to encourage him to enter the race, according

to reports in Japanese media. On January 21, just weeks after Abe visited Ise to celebrate the New Year, Shima's candidacy was announced. He declared it the winner on June 5.

The summit will in fact be held on an island off the coast of Shima. Yet that hasn't stopped Abe from calling the host city Ise-Shima in an apparent effort to draw more attention to his beloved shrine.

"Every country has its myths," said Nobutaka of Kokugakuin University. "Myth has a special place in the heart of the Japanese, regardless of what happened in the past."

Michael Holtz reported from Japan as a fellow with the International Reporting Project.