

Religious Dimensions of the Japanese Imperial System in the Contemporary Social Situations¹

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要 旨

2016年8月に発表された明仁天皇のメッセージ「象徴としてのお務めについての天皇陛下のおことば」は天皇の生前退位についての議論を呼び起こしたが、象徴としての天皇が果たしてきた役割のなかの宗教的次元についても新たな関心と呼ぶことになった。本稿は、安丸良夫の『近代天皇像の形成』における議論、島蘭進の一連の国家神道論、ベン＝アミー・シロニーの編著 *The Emperors of Modern Japan* における天皇論をふまえて、現代天皇制における宗教性について振り返り、特に戦後の皇室とキリスト教との関係についても確認したうえで、明仁天皇と美智子皇后の宗教性に着目する。その際、天皇皇后の慰霊と祈りへの取り組みが、宮中祭祀に注目した国家神道論の射程に収まりきらない、重要な主題となっていることを指摘する。

A New Look at the System of the Symbolic Emperor in 2016

Modern emperors in Japan can be a subject of scholarly inquiry from several different perspectives, such as history, political science, intellectual history, or political philosophy. If we take a comparative perspective, the Japanese emperor can be studied in comparison with other emperors, kings, or monarchs of any other kind or title. In the case of the Japanese emperor, one characteristic feature of his profile is the religious aspect of his roles and activities.

The Japan Newspaper Publishers & Editors Association, composed of 130 newspaper, broadcasting, and communication companies nationwide, awards outstanding press coverage annually. This year (2016) the award was presented to the Japan Broadcasting Corporation (Nippon Hōsō Kyōkai [NHK]), besides other award winners, for their report on Emperor Akihito's 明仁 (1933-) intention and will to abdicate. Akihito himself broadcast his recorded message through NHK on August 8th, and the Imperial Household Agency posted both the text message and the recorded video on its website on the same day.

¹ A panel entitled “Kingship and Religion in the Modern World” was organized for the 21st World Congress of the International Association for History of Religions held in Erfurt, Germany, in August 2015. This paper is a revised and enlarged version of my presentation at the panel entitled, “Religious Dimensions of the Japanese Imperial System in a Post-Secular Society.”

NHK obtained from an anonymous news source the information about Akihito's intentions in advance, and on July 13th, they broadcast a special television program on this issue as a scoop, which was soon judged to be deserving of the above-mentioned annual award.

The Imperial Household Agency posted Akihito's message both in Japanese and in English on its website, and some of the excerpts are as follow.

[....] As we are in the midst of a rapidly aging society, I would like to talk to you today about what would be a desirable role of the Emperor in a time when the Emperor, too, becomes advanced in age. While, being in the position of the Emperor, I must refrain from making any specific comments on the existing Imperial system, I would like to tell you what I, as an individual, have been thinking about.

Ever since my accession to the throne, I have carried out the acts of the Emperor in matters of state, and at the same time I have spent my days searching for and contemplating on what is the desirable role of the Emperor, who is designated to be the symbol of the State by the Constitution of Japan.

[....] I am already 80 years old, and fortunately I am now in good health. However, when I consider that my fitness level is gradually declining, I am worried that it may become difficult for me to carry out my duties as the symbol of the State with my whole being as I have done until now.

[....] I have considered that the first and foremost duty of the Emperor is to pray for peace and happiness of all the people. At the same time, I also believe that in some cases it is essential to stand by the people, listen to their voices, and be close to them in their thoughts. In order to carry out the duties of the Emperor as the symbol of the State and as a symbol of the unity of the people, the Emperor needs to seek from the people their understanding on the role of the symbol of the State. [....] In my travels throughout the country, which I have made together with the Empress, including the time when I was Crown Prince, I was made aware that wherever I went there were thousands of citizens who love their local community and with quiet dedication continue to support their community. With this awareness I was able to carry out the most important duties of the Emperor, to always think of the people and pray for the people, with deep respect and love for the people. That, I feel, has been a great blessing.

In coping with the aging of the Emperor, I think it is not possible to continue reducing perpetually the Emperor's acts in matters of state and his duties as the symbol of the State. [....] When the Emperor has ill health and his condition becomes serious, I am concerned that, as we have seen in the past, society comes to a standstill and people's lives are impacted in various ways. The practice in the Imperial Family has been that the death of the Emperor called for events of heavy mourning, continuing every day for two months, followed by funeral events which continue for one year. These various events occur simultaneously with events related to the new era, placing a very heavy strain on those involved in the events, in particular, the family left behind. It occurs to me from time

to time to wonder whether it is possible to prevent such a situation.

As I said in the beginning, under the Constitution, the Emperor does not have powers related to government. Even under such circumstances, it is my hope that by thoroughly reflecting on our country's long history of emperors, the Imperial Family can continue to be with the people at all times and can work together with the people to build the future of our country, and that the duties of the Emperor as the symbol of the State can continue steadily without a break. [...]

(<http://www.kunaicho.go.jp/page/okotoba/detailEn/12>)

Several important points are clearly stated here. First, as the symbol of the state and the symbol of the unity of the people, Akihito refrains from making any comments on the existing imperial system. Secondly, Akihito considers that the most important duty of the emperor is to think of the people and to pray for the peace and happiness of the people, and he hopes this duty will continue. Third, as he grows older, now being over eighty years old, he worries that his fitness may someday prevent him from carrying out his duties, and that if he becomes seriously ill, it might affect people's lives in some negative way. Fourth, Akihito wonders if the heavy strain caused by the practices in the imperial family of the funerals and of the enthronement can be reduced.

These points of Akihito's message have aroused an active debate on the role of the emperor as the symbol of the state. Since there is no legal nor constitutional procedure dealing with the emperor's abdication, whether or not he can abdicate at all is a big question. If a procedure could be made so that Akihito could abdicate, what kind of legal and/or constitutional changes would be necessary? But if any changes are made following Akihito's message, wouldn't this mean that his voice has had some political influence on the legislative process of the state? With a number of questions and doubts emerging, the debate may continue for the next few years.

The general reactions among the Japanese people have been to show sympathy toward the aging emperor, and the majority of people seem to agree with his abdication. According to news coverage in the months following his announcement, the government has started to study the possibility of legislating special measures for the present emperor's abdication, without any major changes to the existing Constitution and the Imperial Household Law. Any major legislative reforms to the Constitution or the Imperial Household Law would take several years, and thinking about Akihito's age, it would be unrealistic.

One important point to consider here is that although the emperor is constitutionally stipulated as the symbol of the state, the meaning of the "symbol" has not been defined in any clear way. In addition, as for the duties of the emperor, Akihito takes praying for the people to be essential, but praying for the people is not an official duty of the emperor. Praying for the people has been something Akihito has devoted himself to personally, and as long as the emperor himself is a public figure, his prayers can be regarded as something public, if not official.

Akihito's message given in August 2016 has brought public attention to the emperor's role, and his role as a figure who prays has become one focal point. We are now at a point where we should think anew the religious dimensions of the Japanese emperor in contemporary social situations.

The Modern Japanese Emperor as a Subject of Inquiry

Yasumaru Yoshio 安丸良夫, a historian specializing in modern Japan, published a monograph featuring historical images of the modern imperial system in 1992. His book, *Kindai tennō zō no keisei* 近代天皇像の形成 (The making of the images of the modern emperors) summarizes basic ideas about the modern emperor system hypothetically in four points:

1. The emperor as a living divinity in human form in one unbroken hereditary line from time immemorial, and the absolute and eternal order that systematizes hierarchy with the emperor at the summit;
2. The idea of theocracy as illustrated in the unification of ritual and administration;
3. The mission of the emperor and Japan to reign the world;
4. The emperor as a charismatic political leader to lead the civilizational enlightenment of modern Japan. (Yasumaru 1992 (2007), 13)

These points represent the religious character of the modern emperor system. According to Yasumaru, these four ideas appeared as a cohesive whole in the late-eighteenth to mid-nineteenth centuries. The first three points above were declared by Motoori Norinaga 本居宣長, both the Mito Learning and National Learning schools, and reactionary nationalist movements. The fourth point was added by the modern enlightenment policy (*ibid.*, 13–14).

Yasumaru's book deals with the process of creating the images of the emperor in modern Japan. This focus basically excludes contemporary images of the emperor, but the very last section of the final chapter deals with the issue of "the contemporary imperial system," especially after the defeat of World War II. Yasumaru's final remarks about what the contemporary imperial system means in modern Japan, and what roles it could play, summarize his critical view about it.

According to Yasumaru, after the defeat of the war, the imperial system—with a living divinity and the mission to rule the world as its components—was smoothly removed of its fanatical elements and its delusionary insistence on the superiority of the Japanese national polity over other nations. Then, after the war, it accommodated itself to an era when Japanese people focused on material civilization and consumerism. That said, however, Yasumaru judges that the imperial system functions to organize the nation state, representing the uppermost authoritative dimension, which is taboo. The imperial system is taboo, in his judgement, because it should be secluded in ritualistic ways from impurity, evil, and misfortune (*ibid.*, 308). This system of keeping the order has continued to exist because contemporary Japanese society requires the principle of order that is enabled by division, discrimination, and exclusion (*ibid.*, 309). Yasumaru continues:

Each sub-group in Japanese society, which is organized based on the characteristics, abilities, and achievements of their members, have no relation with the imperial system at all. They aspire, on the other hand, to be evaluated and authorized in reference to the general and universal dimensions

of the nation, and their aspiration will lead to the emperor at the summit of the hierarchy of evaluation and authorization. If someone ignores or rejects the evaluation and authorization of this kind as something unrelated to one's own tasks or achievements that he or she performs in their own sub-group, then this person will be judged as a stranger who is difficult to co-operate with and to sympathize with. (Ibid., 310)

In contemporary Japan, enterprises, organizations, and individuals act as they please, seemingly very freely, to satisfy their own desires, but in fact this freedom is given conditionally in exchange for belonging to the nation and living in the national order. The nation thus establishes the unification of itself, by wedging the anchor deep in the people's consciousness, and by mobilizing national vitality, through appearing to hand freedom to the people. [...] It [the emperor system] is a mirror through which we see ourselves as belonging firmly to the nation state of Japan under the appearance, or delusion, that we are free. Accordingly, it is this monument of disgrace that challenges us, we who aspire to live freely. (Ibid., 311)

The emperor system has been a subject of inquiry not only among Japanese scholars but among foreign scholars as well. In contrast with Yasumaru's severely critical view of the imperial system, the editor of a collection of essays entitled *The Emperors of Modern Japan*, Ben-Ami Shillony, seems to take a more sympathetic standpoint. As for leadership in the modernization process of Japan, Shillony differentiates the sacred monarch and collective leadership. He does not see a charismatic dictator in the emperor. He summarizes the function of the emperor, especially Emperor Meiji, as follows:

The emperor legitimized what the ruling group of politicians, military men, senior bureaucrats and imperial advisers had agreed upon in advance. He was rarely expected to choose between conflicting recommendations or to formulate his own policies. (Shillony 2008a, 2)

As for the postwar situation surrounding the emperor and the nation, Shillony characterizes Japan as "the only modern country in the world in which the monarchy survived defeat and still exists today," and also as "the only country today that has an emperor, despite the fact that Japan is not an empire anymore" (ibid., 3). If this is so, the exceptional monarch, that is Japan, should present an interesting case study in its own right.

This volume edited by Shillony contains a chapter entitled "State Shinto and Emperor Veneration" written by Shimazono Susumu 島蘭進. Shimazono has published a number of essays focusing on "State Shinto" in addition to this chapter. One topic in his argument is the relationship between the emperor and State Shinto. Now we turn to Shimazono's arguments on this relationship by reviewing a couple of articles written by him.

Shimazono on the Emperor within the Framework of State Shinto

Here I summarize some features of Shimazono's argument of State Shinto in general, and also focus, in particular, on the place of the emperor in the framework of his argument.² Although he has published a number of essays on this subject in Japanese, here I concentrate on his essays written in English.

In his 2005 article that appeared in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Shimazono first points out the ambiguous usage of the term "State Shinto" in the so-called Shinto Directive. The Shinto Directive is an abbreviated way to refer to the memorandum issued on December 15th, 1945 by the General Headquarters, the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers for the Imperial Japanese Government, on the subject of "Abolition of Governmental Sponsorship, Support, Perpetuation, Control, and Dissemination of State Shinto (*Kokka Shintō*, *Jinja Shintō*)."³ As the words in the parentheses show, "State Shinto" can be understood in this directive as the translation of the Japanese, *Kokka Shintō* 国家神道 or *Jinja Shintō* 神社神道. This title itself suggests, in essence, the problems of the terminology of State Shinto in its relation to *Kokka Shintō* and also *Jinja Shintō* (Shrine Shinto), and of the inter-relationship among these three concepts. Shimazono himself reviews the arguments regarding the concept of State Shinto, especially in the Shinto Directive, which I will not delve into here in detail. A basic direction that Shimazono takes in this article is to differentiate the narrow meaning and the broad meaning of the term "State Shinto." These two usages of the term are both used in the Shinto Directive, seemingly without a conscious differentiation. Thus Shimazono here tries to differentiate clearly between the two.

Shimazono first traces the arguments presented by such scholars in Shinto studies as Ashizu Uzuhiko 葦津珍彦 and Sakamoto Koremaru 阪本是丸, pointing out that they take the narrow usage of "State Shinto" based on the prewar official—legal and administrative—treatment by the Japanese government of Shrine Shinto. *Jinja* (Shrine Shinto) was treated separately from *Kyōha Shintō* 教派神道 (Sect Shinto) by the government. The clear point of differentiation in legalization between shrines and Sect Shinto can be seen in the establishment in 1900 of the two different administration bureaus: one exclusively for Shrines (*Jinja-kyoku* 神社局), the other for religions in general, including Sect Shinto (*Shūkyō-kyoku* 宗教局).

According to Shimazono, the representative of the broad definition of State Shinto can be seen in Murakami Shigeyoshi's 村上重良 book *Kokka Shintō* (1970). Inserting a couple of citations from Murakami's book, Shimazono summarizes Murakami's theory on State Shinto as follows:

Murakami, utilizing typological concept of religious studies, argues that State Shinto was the religious-political institution inheriting the old Shinto tradition of Japan's ethnic religion which were

² For a general overview of recent Japanese scholarship on "State Shinto," including Shimazono, see Okuyama (2011).

³ For the text of the Shinto Directive, see, for example, "Directive for the Disestablishment of State Shinto, 15 December 1945," in Mullins et al. (1993, 97–102).

revived by Meiji Restoration in the 1860s and dominated the religious system of modern Japan over a period of about 80 years until 1945. [...]

Murakami considers State Shinto to consist of Shrine Shinto, Imperial House Shinto, and the *Kokutai* (National Polity) Doctrine which advocates that Japan has a unique state system from ancient times based upon Emperor worship. He also assumes that this system has infiltrated into every person's consciousness. He further views Sect Shinto, Buddhism, and Christianity as authorized religions that were subordinated to State Shinto and played due roles to supplement the function of State Shinto. He expresses the whole in the term "State Shinto System." (Shimazono 2005, 1083)

Shimazono's basic standpoint is to take the broad definition, because it will enable us to take into consideration, besides Shrine Shinto, the cult and worship of the emperor, and the rituals and concepts around Amaterasu Ōmikami 天照大神, deemed as the ancestor of the emperor (ibid., 1084).

Shimazono discusses the concept of "religion" and related ideas, such as rites and teachings, in the modern Japanese context, and tries to situate Shinto in the configuration of these spheres. He traces the development of State Shinto by paying attention to its substance and styles of propagation. He also refers to the recent arguments on nationalism, and characterizes State Shinto as one type of modern nationalism that has a close connection with a religious tradition.

According to Shimazono, the religious structure of modern Japan—"religious" in a broad sense—can be summarized as one comprised of two strata. On the state and national level, State Shinto administered "indoctrination" and "rites and rituals." And at the individual level, "religions," in the narrow definition of the word, dealt with salvation, the concerns of life and death, and other aspects of daily living (ibid., 1094). As for this dual structure, Shimazono explains that "State Shinto and other religions coexisted based on a relation of a kind of division of roles" (ibid.). He suggests that this model of the dual structure of religion can be useful to grasp the transformation of the religious structure from the early modern (mid-sixteenth century to the Meiji Restoration) to the modern period (Meiji Restoration onwards). As for the early modern period, the duality can be seen in the Shogunate power that sanctified the dominance of the warlords over Buddhism and other religions and sects (though Christianity was suppressed) (ibid., 1095–96). He then states that "[t]here was continuity from the early modern era through the modern era of Japan in the dual structure consisting of a system for sanctifying the worldly ruling system emphasizing the hierarchy, and religions and sects taking care of individuals' salvation and life-and-death affairs (ibid., 1096).

In this 2005 article, Shimazono did not elaborate much on the postwar situation surrounding Japanese religions. He then published a book chapter entitled "State Shinto and Religion in Post-War Japan" in 2007. Here I only focus on his arguments that can be regarded as something developed from his earlier essay. In the beginning of this essay, Shimazono states that the postwar Japanese state "not only has a special relationship with Shinto but it is also integrated by it," additionally asking the question, "In these circumstances, can we say that Japanese society is completely secular?" (Shimazono 2007, 697)

He first pays special attention to one "very important component of Shinto which is sometimes

overlooked in descriptions of religion in Japan today” (ibid., 698), that is “Imperial House Shinto.” This Shinto is composed of the private rituals of the Imperial family, mainly performed in the Imperial Palace in Tokyo using three altars. In these rituals, the emperor plays the role of high priest (ibid.). In addition, “the Ise Shrine whose main deity is the Goddess Amaterasu, the ancestor of the Imperial House, became the central sacred place for the state” (ibid., 699).

In Shimazono’s view, one thing that the Shinto Directive issued in 1945 did not pay much attention to was Imperial House Shinto, though this “had often been considered as essential components of State Shinto” (ibid., 700). Then the question arises as to the postwar situation, “whether ‘State Shinto’ had really been dissolved and, if so, in what respects” (ibid.). Shimazono summarizes the basic idea of the Occupation policy regarding the status of Imperial House Shinto: “If a system was to set up to ensure that no group could use the rites for political purposes, Imperial House rites would remain matters of private belief which would presumably not exercise much influence over people’s lives” (ibid., 702).

Shimazono then discusses the situation of Imperial House Shinto following the Occupation period under four categories:

1. Daily and seasonal rites in the Imperial House;
2. Rites of passage for the emperor and other family members;
3. The three sacred treasures (the sacred mirror, sword, and the curved jewel) and imperial graves;
4. The relationship with Shrine Shinto (especially with Ise Shrine, the ancestral mausoleum of the Imperial House).

I do not delve into these four issues here, but the important question should be how these items are connected to the postwar state of Japan. Basically, in the postwar years, the Imperial House rituals have been conducted as private events, and therefore, the national treasury does not make budgetary allocations for these rituals. But as for the personnel who work for the Imperial House rituals, there remains some overlap between private and state affairs. Shimazono mentions that “[r]itualists are regarded as employees of the Imperial House and are paid from the budgeted allowances for its private expenditure, but chamberlains are employees of the government” (ibid.).

Shimazono then pays attention to the Association of Shinto Shrines, “the umbrella organization of Shinto shrines across Japan” (ibid., 704), which was established after the war, in 1946, as a private religious organization. As for the political agenda of the association, he explains:

This association has developed as a politically oriented organisation having the state and the Emperor as its main preoccupations rather than as a force for uniting folk beliefs in shrines at a national level. With belief oriented towards State Shinto (in the broad sense of the term) as its religious principle, the Association adopted the aim of strengthening both reverence for the Emperor within a Shinto frame of reference and partnership between the Emperor and shrines. (Ibid.)

According to Shimazono, “reverence for the Emperor, the Imperial House and the Grand Shrine of Ise is the highest aim [of the Association] ; and it constitutes the axis of its belief system” (ibid.). This is clearly illustrated with the Charter of the Association formulated in 1980. Shimazono cites its first three articles:

Article 1 The Association of Shinto Shrines shall place value on tradition, promote rites and rituals, and enhance moral principles, pray for the permanent prosperity of the Emperor’s reign, and at the same time contribute to peace in the world.

Article 2

(1) The Association of Shinto Shrines shall revere the grand Shrine of Ise as its head shrine, and shall sincerely devote itself to the work of the Grand Shrine.

(2) The Association of Shinto Shrines shall be engaged in services for the prosperity of all Shinto shrines and shall convey the gods’ power of commanding love and respect.

Article 3 The Association of Shinto Shrines shall initiate an educational doctrine of revering the gods and respecting the Emperor, and uphold the platform for its practice. It shall train Shinto priests, and educate parishioners and followers. (Ibid.)

Since “[t]he Association strongly advocates reverence towards the Emperor and the Ise Shrine; and it argues that all shrines in Japan should be integrated under the Grand Shrine of Ise and the Emperor,” Shimazono insists that “the Association is rightly regarded as pursuing a form of Shinto that leans towards State Shinto in its broad meaning” (ibid., 705). Among the political campaigns conducted by the association, Shimazono mentions, with a U.S. scholar Kenneth Ruoff, the establishment of National Foundation Day (February 11th; based on a mythical day of enthronement of the first Emperor Jinmu 神武) and the enactment of the use of the reign-name in dates (such as Meiji 明治 or Shōwa 昭和) as successful cases (ibid., 706).

In Shimazono’s view, these two examples—the Imperial House Shinto rituals and the political agenda of the Association of Shinto Shrines—show the revitalization of State Shinto in the postwar period. In short, “[t]aken together, these two projects constitute the core of today’s State Shinto within the current framework of law” (ibid.). He then refers to a couple of intellectuals who support the restoration of State Shinto, such as Mishima Yukio 三島由紀夫 or Nakanishi Terumasa 中西輝政 (political scientist) (ibid., 707).

Shimazono concludes his essay as follows:

Thus, it has been widely accepted that State Shinto was dissolved and had become extinct just after the end of the World War II. In reality, however, State Shinto has survived to play an important part in post-war Japan and has even been gaining more influence in recent times. In order to correct these misunderstandings about the religious system of post-war Japan we need to re-think such basic concepts as religion, Shinto and State Shinto. (Ibid., 707–8)

After he published these two essays, Shimazono extended his scope in his 2008 essay entitled

“State Shinto and Emperor Veneration,” which appeared in the above-mentioned book edited by Ben-Ami Shillony, by following the historical development from the Tokugawa period, through the Meiji Restoration, to the Pacific War period, of such concepts as *kokutai* 国体 (National Polity) and *kōdō* 皇道 (Shimazono 2008).

In the next essay, published in 2009 and entitled “State Shinto in the Lives of the People: The Establishment of Emperor Worship, Modern Nationalism, and Shrine Shinto in Late Meiji,” Shimazono traces the development of the following three systems:

1. The ritual system for revering the sacred emperor and the imperial house;
2. The system of education and propagation of Kokutai thought, which took root in the life space of the people; and
3. The training system for Shrine Shinto and shrine priests.

(Shimazono 2009a, 120)

He argues that through the historical process of the development of these systems, “State Shinto penetrated the lives of the people” (ibid., 93). Shimazono begins this article by presenting a bibliographical survey of arguments on State Shinto after Murakami Shigeyoshi, and then goes on to present a historical overview of State Shinto, focusing on “the establishment period” of State Shinto. His periodization follows Murakami’s idea of dividing the four periods of the history of State Shinto, but changes slightly as to how to call each period. These four periods are named “the formative period” (1868–1890, the same wording as Murakami’s), “the establishment period” (1890–1910), “the penetration period” (1910–1931), and “the fascist period” (1931–1945). The three systems mentioned above during the establishment period are the major subject of this article.⁴

In the conclusion of this 2009 essay, Shimazono points out the merit of using the concept of State Shinto. He finds this preferable to a concept such as “imperial ideology” because the latter depends too much on elite discourse, while the former can take into consideration the religious consciousness of people at various levels of society (ibid., 120–21).

These four essays on State Shinto in English somehow summarize Shimazono’s arguments on the same subject written in Japanese. Among them, the 2007 essay in particular gives the readers his original view about postwar situations regarding State Shinto. If we compare this view of his with another argument that he made in a different context, his idea of postwar State Shinto will present another meaning in its own right.

In 2008, the University of Tokyo Center for Philosophy organized a symposium with Jean Baubérot, a French sociologist of religion, as a keynote speaker on the subject of secularization and “laïcité,” and its proceedings were published both in Japanese and French the next year. Shimazono contributed an essay entitled “Secularization and the Concept of Religion in Japan” (Shimazono 2009b), where he discusses the applicability of the concept of secularization or “laïcité” in Japan. According to

⁴ In this article, which was translated by Regan E. Murphy, Shimazono introduces the concept of “Court Shinto,” instead of “Imperial House Shinto” that he used in his 2005 essay.

Shimazono, there are four hypotheses regarding secularization in Japanese history, each of which he thinks seem reasonable to some extent.

First, when the Shogunate power established itself in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it subordinated Buddhism and oppressed Christianity, whereas more secular Confucian or Shinto doctrines became prevalent and influential in the public domain of society. Second, the Meiji Restoration introduced modern social institutions with enlightening rationality and scientific knowledge, resulting in the establishment of freedom of religion, including Christianity, which actually was conditional and limited so as not to come into conflict with the emerging system of State Shinto. Third, after World War II, the occupation policy promoted secularization by dismantling State Shinto and establishing freedom of religion more thoroughly. That said, Shimazono continues, even after this third point of the postwar reforms, secularization has not been completed, which is his fourth hypothesis and seems to be his own opinion. Here his argument on secularization meets with his view of postwar State Shinto.⁵

As mentioned above, Shimazono thinks that State Shinto has remained even after the war, and on this very point, he insists that secularization in Japan is not complete. It is true that Japan experienced important transformations in its political and social systems in three periods, comparable to secularization in Western societies. According to Shimazono, even if it is true, postwar Japan has kept the religious elements that he regards as State Shinto. Following the line that Shimazono has been elaborating, we can probably argue that through the modernization process, Japan experienced secularization to some extent in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Meiji Restoration period, and the postwar occupation policy that brought about reforms in religions. However, religious influences still remain even in the present after the partly-realized secularization in the above-mentioned three different historical settings.

Religious Surroundings of the Current Emperor and Empress

When Shimazono discusses the postwar continuation of State Shinto, one example is Imperial House Shinto with its series of court rituals, and another is political campaigns and the involvement of the Association of Shinto Shrines. Here I will focus on the postwar situation surrounding the emperor.

Ben-Ami Shillony contributed the introduction and two chapters to the volume he edited, *The Emperors of Modern Japan*. One chapter, "Conservative Dissatisfaction with the Modern Emperors," deals with the relationship between Japanese nationalists and the emperors. Regarding the postwar situation, especially in relation to religions, Shillony briefly mentions Hirohito's 裕仁 (Emperor Shōwa, 1901–1989) relationship with Christianity and Yasukuni Shrine, and then moves on to the case of Akihito, the current emperor, and his family. The section about Akihito is entitled "Dissatisfaction with Akihito," meaning his unpopularity among conservatives and the right wing. According to

⁵ In the latter part of this essay, Shimazono discusses the limits of the Western concept of "religion," which I skip here in this article.

Shillony, Akihito is less popular than Emperor Shōwa for several reasons, among which “his liberal and pacifist education” and “his marriage to a commoner, Shōda Michiko 正田美智子 (1934–)” are mentioned (Shillony 2008b, 152). Criticism of the current emperor and his family comes not only from the conservative nationalists but also from Hamao Minoru 濱尾実, “the Catholic chamberlain and tutor of Akihito and his children from 1951–1971,” especially in the early years of the reign of Akihito (ibid., 152–53).⁶ For Hamao, Akihito and his family do not seem to sympathize with the people’s sorrow enough. Shillony himself seems to side with critics regarding the lavish lifestyle of the imperial family:

The imperial couple went to console disaster victims, but did not give up its luxurious lifestyle. After the devastating Kobe earthquake of 1995, Akihito and Michiko visited the victims and hugged their children, but that same year a new palace was built for them at the cost of 50 million dollars. (Ibid., 153)⁷

Shillony also mentions Akihito’s seemingly liberal and pacifist leanings that disappoint or irritate the conservatives, and goes on to review some criticism not only about Crown Prince Naruhito 徳仁 and his wife, Crown Princess Masako 雅子, but about Prince Akishino 秋篠宮 as well. The dissatisfaction toward the current emperor and his family among the conservative nationalists, in Shillony’s view, has led to a loss of awe for the imperial institution among some nationalists (ibid., 157–59). Shillony concludes his chapter by mentioning the birth of Prince Hisahito in 2006 (which means the birth of a possible future emperor, the first time in over forty years after the birth of Akishino in 1965), which dampened a controversy about the succession rule of the throne that is restricted to males under Imperial Household Law. The general impression concerning Akihito and his family written in this chapter is unexpectedly severe, because, as I mention below, the image of the current emperor and empress seems to have improved in the last few years, probably after the publication of Shillony’s volume.

The other chapter written by Shillony in the same volume is entitled “Emperors and Christianity.” He begins this chapter with the following paragraph:

Although one would expect a wide gap to exist between the emperors of Japan—allegedly the descendants and high priests of the sun goddess Amaterasu Ōmikami—and Christianity, which regards polytheistic religions as pagan creeds, the modern emperors of Japan and their family

⁶ Hamao’s father Shirō 四郎 (1896–1935, a lawyer, member of the House of Peers, and detective fiction writer) was born as Katō Terumaro’s 加藤照磨 (1863–1925) fourth son, and adopted by Hamao Arata 濱尾新 (1849–1925), who served successively as the president of the Tokyo Imperial University, the Minister of Education, and the Director of the Imperial Prince’s Household Affairs. Katō Terumaro was a medical doctor in the Imperial Household Ministry, whose father was Katō Hiroyuki 加藤弘之 (1836–1916), who served successively as the president of the Imperial University before Hamao Arata, and the president of the Imperial Academy. Katō Terumaro’s sixth son, adopted by the Fukurawa family, became the very famous comedian Furukawa Roppa 古川ロッパ (1903–61).

⁷ The new palace was actually constructed in 1993, not in 1995, and has been inhabited since December 1993.

members have shown an interest in the religion of the west. Christian officials and educators have occupied senior positions in the palace since the Taishō period, despite the nationalistic atmosphere of the 1930s and 1940s, and this phenomenon has widened after the Second World War. (Shillony 2008c, 163)

Focusing only on the postwar situation, a couple of interesting episodes are presented. General Douglas MacArthur, the Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers (SCAP), was a devout Episcopalian, supported Christian missionaries coming from the United States, wishing himself to convert the Japanese nation into Christianity. Shillony continues:

The quickest way to convert the Japanese nation was to first convert the imperial family. An imperial conversion could also improve Hirohito's image abroad, remove the danger of his dismissal, and ensure the continuity of the dynasty. When State Shinto was disbanded in December 1945, the emperor's religion became his private affair. [...] That seemed to mean that the emperor, as a private citizen, was free to adopt any religion, including Christianity. (Ibid., 172)

Here are a few examples that show the relationship between Christianity and the Imperial House. Prince Asaka Yasuhiko 朝香宮鳩彦, an uncle of Hirohito, was baptized to Catholicism in 1951 together with his wife and children (ibid., 174). Hirohito started inviting Christian lecturers to the palace shortly after the war. Uemura Tamaki 植村環, the president of the Young Women's Christian Association of Japan, provided weekly Bible lessons to the empress and her three daughters for four years (ibid., 175). Hirohito visited the French missionary Joseph Flaujac in Nasu in 1947, welcomed Cardinal Francis Spellman of New York in 1948, and visited the Catholic writer Nagai Takashi 永井隆 in Nagasaki in 1949 (ibid., 175–76).⁸

As for the educational surroundings for Hirohito's two sons, Shillony gives detailed information. In 1947, a Christian educator, Abe Yoshishige 安倍能成, was appointed president of Gakushūin 学習院. The theologian Mitani Takamasa's 三谷隆正 brother, Mitani Takanobu 三谷隆信, a Christian diplomat, was appointed the school's vice president, and then became the emperor's great chamberlain. In 1948, a Quaker businessman, Tajima Michiji 田島道治, was appointed director of the Imperial Household Agency. Tajima appointed Koizumi Shinzō 小泉信三, who converted to Christianity after the war, as the chamberlain in charge of Akihito's education. In 1950, a Catholic jurist, Tanaka Kōtarō 田中耕太郎, was appointed Akihito's tutor on constitutional affairs. In 1951, a Catholic educator, Hamao Minoru, was appointed a personal tutor of Akihito.⁹ Shillony then mentions Elizabeth Gray Vining:

⁸ The Imperial Household Agency made the official account of the Emperor Showa's life, *Shōwa Tennō Jitsuroku* 昭和天皇実録, open to the public in 2014, and started the publication of 19 volumes in 2015, which will supposedly continue until 2019. There are a number of episodes regarding the imperial family's relation with Christianity, especially during the occupation period. Hara Takeshi 原武史 presents renewed information on this topic (Hara 2015, 188–205)

⁹ Hamao's younger brother Hamao Fumio 濱尾文郎 would be made a Cardinal by John Paul II in 2003.

Akihito's most influential Christian teacher was Elizabeth Gray Vining, who was appointed in 1946 to be his English tutor. Although there were many linguists among the occupation personnel who were qualified to fill the position, MacArthur brought Mrs. Vining all the way from Philadelphia because she was meant to be more than a language teacher. Vining was a devout Quaker, and Philadelphia was the center of the Quaker movement from where missionaries had been coming to Japan since 1885. (Ibid., 177–78)

Other Christian relations surrounding the imperial family include the following. Prince Mikasa 三笠宮 is Hirohito's youngest brother, and Mikasa's eldest son, Tomohito 寛仁, married a catholic, Asō Nobuko 麻生信子. Nobuko is the granddaughter of Yoshida Shigeru 吉田茂 (prime minister: 1946–1947, 1948–1954), and her elder brother is Asō Tarō 麻生太郎 (prime minister, 2008–2009).

As for the marriage of Akihito and Shōda Michiko, Shillony pays attention to Koizumi Shinzō's matching role. Shillony summarizes Michiko's religious background as follows:

Michiko's family was Catholic and her entire education, from the Futaba elementary school to the University of the Sacred Heart, had been Catholic. She was the valedictorian of her 1957 graduating class, and in 1958 she was sent to Brussels to represent her Catholic university at an international conference of Catholic schools. Was she herself a Catholic? The official version was that she had not been baptized, and therefore was not a Christian. This would mean that her parents ignored the binding Code of Canon Law, which obliges Catholic parents to baptize their children. (Ibid., 180)

It is widely known that Michiko had difficulty in adjusting herself to court life after her marriage. This caused her depression, and to deal with this situation, “a woman psychiatrist, Kamiya Mieko 神谷美恵子, the daughter of the Christian education minister Maeda Tamon 前田多門, was summoned to treat her. Kamiya stayed with Michiko for more than six years and became her closest friend and adviser” (ibid., 181).¹⁰ Shillony adds a few more Catholic acquaintances close to the emperor and empress, and also mentions that Masako attended the Futaba Catholic elementary and middle schools in Tokyo (ibid., 183).

After all these interests in and connections with Christianity among the imperial family members, they have not converted. This does not mean, however, that the current emperor and empress in particular only keep the Shinto tradition within their own roles. If we review the most recent reports surrounding their activities, a new image with some religious aura will seem to appear around them.

Religious Images of Akihito and Michiko after the 2011 Disaster

When Shillony published his volume in 2008, he painted a negative portrait of the current emperor

¹⁰ “The Christian education minister” in this citation means that he was the minister of education briefly after the war (1945–1946), and became a Quaker.

and his family alongside the conservative nationalists. Shillony himself seems to some extent to take sides with the nationalists. Aside from conservative nationalists, what kind of attitude does the general public hold toward the emperor and his family? We can take some hints from the nationwide surveys that have been conducted regularly.

There are two kinds of nationwide surveys that are conducted regularly regarding Japanese people's general attitudes toward society and the world. One is the survey conducted by the Institute of Statistical Mathematics, a national research institute, on "the Japanese National Character." This survey has been conducted every five years since 1953, and the survey in 2013 was the thirteenth occasion. The other is the survey conducted by the NHK Broadcasting Culture Research Institute, a public research institute under the Japan Broadcasting Corporation (NHK), on "Japanese Value Orientations." This survey has been conducted every five years since 1973, and the survey in 2013 was the ninth occasion. The NHK survey conducted through personal interviews contains a simple question that asks people's attitudes or sentiments toward the emperor which shows the very basic tendency of the general public toward the emperor of the time. The results of this question in the survey are as follows.

Question: How do you feel about the emperor now? Choose one of the four choices.

(Numbers indicate the percentages among the valid responses.)

| | 1973 | 1978 | 1983 | 1988 | 1993 | 1998 | 2003 | 2008 | 2013 |
|----------------------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| <i>Number of valid responses</i> | 4,243 | 4,240 | 4,064 | 3,853 | 3,814 | 3,622 | 3,319 | 3,103 | 3,070 |
| I respect him. | 33.3 | 30.2 | 29.3 | 27.5 | 20.5 | 19.2 | 20.2 | 24.7 | 34.2 |
| I like him. | 20.3 | 21.9 | 20.9 | 22.1 | 42.7 | 34.5 | 41.0 | 33.5 | 35.3 |
| I don't feel anything. | 42.7 | 44.1 | 46.4 | 46.5 | 33.7 | 44.2 | 36.3 | 38.6 | 28.4 |
| I dislike him. | 2.2 | 2.4 | 2.2 | 2.1 | 1.5 | 1.1 | 0.8 | 1.0 | 0.5 |
| (Other) | 0.1 | 0.2 | 0.2 | 0.2 | 0.1 | 0.2 | 0.2 | 0.2 | 0.1 |
| (DK or NA) | 1.3 | 1.3 | 1.1 | 1.7 | 1.6 | 0.9 | 1.6 | 2.1 | 1.5 |

(Source: "Dai kyū-kai 'Nihonjin no ishiki' chōsa 2013 kekka no gaiyō" 第9回「日本人の意識」調査(2013)結果の概要, <http://www.nhk.or.jp/bunken/summary/yoron/social/pdf/140520.pdf>)

The results look very simple, but still tells something about general attitudes toward the emperors. Since Emperor Shōwa (Hirohito) died in 1989, the surveys until 1988 concerned Emperor Shōwa, and those since then have concerned the current emperor (Akihito). As for "respect," Emperor Shōwa appeared to have been given much respect compared to the current emperor, but the respect toward the latter has grown to surpass that of the former. On the other hand, the current emperor has maintained a favorable impression ("I like him"), higher than his father. "Dislike" seems to be

slightly higher toward Emperor Shōwa than toward the current emperor. If we compare the results of 2008 and 2013, the number of respondents stating that they respect the emperor increased by almost ten percentage points, and those indicating no feeling or no interest decreased by over ten percentage points. If we ask what happened between 2008 and 2013, we can easily imagine the effect of the 2011 earthquake and its aftermath. I will turn my focus to a certain role that the emperor and empress have been performing till today.

According to the official website of the Imperial Household Agency, the imperial family members are supposed to perform “Official Duties and Public Activities.”¹¹ The “Official Duties and Public Activities” contains three subcategories: “Official Duties and Public Activities in the Imperial Palace” ; “Official Visits within Japan” ; and “Fostering friendly relations with foreign countries.” Their Japanese website has the category *gokōmu nado* ご公務など, with the implication that *nado* means something other than official or public roles or activities. This *nado* is supposed to mean “the Ritual Ceremonies of the Imperial Palace,” which should be understood as the activities performed personally by the imperial family, and not supported financially by the national budget. This is a major component of the Imperial House Shinto that Shimazono pays attention to as a sign of the postwar survival of State Shinto. The English website of the Imperial Household Agency omits the delicate treatment that can be seen on the Japanese website with the term *nado*. On the English website, “the Ritual Ceremonies of the Imperial Palace” is simply situated under the category of “Official Duties and Public Activities in the Imperial Palace,” which makes “the Ritual Ceremonies” seem to be something official or public. If “the Ritual Ceremonies of the Imperial Palace” were official, this would directly conflict with the constitutional separation between religion and the state. This kind of ambiguous treatment of “the Ritual Ceremonies in the Imperial Palace” could be understood as an example of Shimazono’s idea of State Shinto.

The English website also omits detailed description, but the Japanese website of the “Official Visits within Japan” contains various information (*Gyōkōkei nado* [kokunai no odemashi] 行幸啓など [国内のお出まし]). Among the general category of the “Official Visits within Japan,” one subcategory looks very interesting for the purpose of this article, which is *senbotsusha irei* 戦没者慰霊, which can be literally translated into “consolation of souls, or spiritual consolation, of the war dead,” roughly comparable to “commemoration of the war dead.” The current website of *senbotsusha irei* notes “four dates to remember annually” in addition to the list of the related historical visits of the emperor and empress under this subcategory around 1995, the 50th anniversary of the end of war, 2005, the 60th anniversary, and 2015, the 70th anniversary of the end of war.

The four dates to remember annually refer to June 23rd (Okinawa Memorial Day), August 6th (anniversary of the atomic bombing in Hiroshima), August 9th (anniversary of the atomic bombing in Nagasaki), and August 15th (anniversary of the end of war). Akihito mentioned these four annual memorial days in 1981, saying that the Japanese should remember these four every year. His attention to war experiences and the postwar experience under the U.S. occupation (1945–1972) of Okinawa traces back to an earlier year. Akihito as crown prince visited Okinawa with Michiko for the first time

¹¹ The following description is based on the website of the Imperial Household Agency.

in 1975. During this visit, they experienced the extremists' protest at the Himeyuri Cenotaph, and narrowly escaped a fire bomb hurled at them.

Their 1995 visits included Nagasaki, Hiroshima, Okinawa, and the Tokyo Metropolitan Memorial Hall, in addition to the visit to Iwo Jima in the previous year. In 2005, the couple visited Saipan in Micronesia, a commonwealth of the United States. Around the 70th anniversary, the couple visited Okinawa, Nagasaki, and Hiroshima in 2014, Palau in 2015, and the Philippines in 2016. These visits of the royal couple apparently show their pacifist stance, and this pacifism seems to be entangled with their somehow "spiritual" or "soul-related" attitudes, as the category heading of the website of the Imperial Household Agency, *senbotsusha irei*, suggests. As mentioned above in the citation of Shillony's work, the liberal and pacifist leanings of the current emperor might have caused some disappointment or irritation among the conservative nationalists. But around the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II, Akihito's sincere remembrance of the war dead and sympathy with the war victims has been referred to in a somehow positive way in some journalistic venues. The "spiritual" element in this pacifist attitude of the emperor and empress seemingly cannot be assimilated into ritual ceremonies conducted in a Shinto style. If so, it would be desirable that this element should be dealt with in a distinctive way from the debate about postwar State Shinto.

At this point, we should turn our attention more to the image of the empress, in addition to the image of the emperor with the empress. Some of the recent publications featuring Akihito and Michiko have the word *inori* (prayer) in their title. If we only pick up the publications around 2015, here are three examples; a major female weekly magazine, *Shūkan Josei* 週刊女性, published a special January issue in a photo-album style to commemorate Michiko's eightieth birthday (in 2014) entitled *Kōgō Michiko-sama no inori to yorokobi* 皇后美智子さまの祈りと慶び (Prayer and joy of Empress Michiko). This book contains the empress's written messages on her eightieth birthday, photographs of her activities together with the emperor in 2013–2014, in addition to a historical album of photos taken since the 1960s. Especially after the enthronement of Akihito in 1989, the subject of her prayers becomes more conspicuous, mainly because she made numerous journeys to the sites of natural disasters to visit and sympathize with survivors. These sites of disasters include the eruption of Mount Unzen in 1991, the 1993 Hokkaido earthquake, the Great Hanshin earthquake in 1995, a series of eruptions on Miyake-jima from 2000 onwards and earthquakes in neighboring islands, the eruption of Mount Usu in 2000, the 2004 Chūetsu earthquake, the 2005 Fukuoka earthquake, the 2007 Chūetsu offshore earthquake, and the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake.

A second book to mention here is a collection of poems (*waka* 和歌, and other kinds) composed by the emperor and empress, entitled *Tennō Kōgō ryōheika: Irei to inori no gyosei to miuta* 天皇皇后両陛下 慰霊と祈りの御製と御歌 (Their majesties the emperor and empress: Their poetry of soul-consolation and prayer). The major part of this book is the thematic collection of Akihito and Michiko's poems with annotations. The authors Warita Takeo 割田剛雄 and Kobayashi Takashi 小林隆 sort their poems into the following twelve headings:

1. At the War Memorial for Fallen Sailors 戦没船員の碑 in Kannonzaki 観音崎, Yokosuka
2. To congratulate the return of Okinawa to the Japanese administration in 1972

3. At the Okinawa visit in 1975, including the visit to the 1975 Okinawa Expo
4. At the first visit to Okinawa as emperor and empress in 1993
5. At the visit to Iwo Jima in 1994 for *irei*
6. At the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the war in 1995
7. For commemoration of the *Tsushima-maru* 対馬丸 (a ship that sank)
8. For victims of the atomic bombing in Hiroshima and Nagasaki
9. For disabled veterans
10. For prisoners of war, both foreign and Japanese
11. At the sixtieth anniversary of the end of war in the 2005, including the visit to Saipan
12. At the seventieth anniversary of the end of the war in 2015, including the visit to Peleliu Island, the Republic of Palau

Under these headings, 27 poems composed by the emperor and 18 by the empress are included. While the empress's prayers in the above-mentioned first book are basically related to her visit to the survivors of natural disasters, the poems with prayers and *irei* collected in this second book are related to the commemoration of the war.

A third book worth mentioning is a photo collection entitled *Tennō Kōgō ryōheika: Inori no tabiji* 天皇后兩陛下 祈りの旅路 (Their majesties the emperor and empress: Journeys of prayer), edited and published by NHK Shuppan. This book seems to be a compilation of two sides of the royal couple's prayers, one for the victims and survivors of natural disasters, and the other for the victims and survivors of the war, composed of two parts: Part 1, Visit to the Sites of Natural Disasters; and Part 2, Journeys for the *Irei*. This book also contains Akihito and Michiko's poems in addition to a number of photographs. Besides that, Part 1 contains the emperor's message delivered on March 16th, 2011, and Part 2 contains, among others, his message in 2005 mentioning their visit to Saipan in the same year, and another in 2012 regarding Okinawa's difficulty during and after the war. The March 2011 message was delivered as a video message, and this was an epoch-making event. Its official English translation by the Imperial Household Agency reads as follows:

I am deeply saddened by the devastating situation in the areas hit by the Tohoku-Pacific Ocean Earthquake, an unprecedented 9.0-magnitude earthquake, which struck Japan on March 11th. The number of casualties claimed by the quake and the ensuing tsunami continues to rise by the day, and we do not yet know how many people have lost their lives. I am praying that the safety of as many people as possible will be confirmed. My other grave concern now is the serious and unpredictable condition of the affected nuclear power plant. I earnestly hope that through the all-out efforts of all those concerned, further deterioration of the situation will be averted.

Relief operations are now under way with the government mobilizing all its capabilities, but, in the bitter cold, many people who were forced to evacuate are facing extremely difficult living conditions due to shortages of food, drinking water and fuel. I can only hope that by making every effort to promptly implement relief for evacuees, their conditions will improve, even if only gradually, and that their hope for eventual reconstruction will be rekindled. I would like to let you

know how deeply touched I am by the courage of those victims who have survived this catastrophe and who, by bracing themselves, are demonstrating their determination to live on.

I wish to express my appreciation to the members of the Self-Defense Forces, the police, the fire department, the Japan Coast Guard and other central and local governments and related institutions, as well as people who have come from overseas for relief operations and the members of various domestic relief organizations, for engaging in relief activity round the clock, defying the danger of recurring aftershocks. I wish to express my deepest gratitude to them.

I have been receiving, by cable, messages of sympathy from the heads of state of countries around the world, and it was mentioned in many of those messages that the thoughts of the peoples of those countries are with the victims of the disaster. These messages I would like to convey to the people in the afflicted regions.

I have been told that many overseas media are reporting that, in the midst of deep sorrow, the Japanese people are responding to the situation in a remarkably orderly manner, and helping each other without losing composure. It is my heartfelt hope that the people will continue to work hand in hand, treating each other with compassion, in order to overcome these trying times.

I believe it extremely important for us all to share with the victims as much as possible, in whatever way we can, their hardship in the coming days. It is my sincere hope that those who have been affected by the disaster will never give up hope and take good care of themselves as they live through the days ahead, and that each and every Japanese will continue to care for the afflicted areas and the people for years to come and, together with the afflicted, watch over and support their path to recovery.

(<http://www.kunaicho.go.jp/e-okotoba/01/address/tohokujishin-h230316-mov.html>)

According to *The Asahi Shinbun* article on December 8th, 2015 entitled “Irei no tabi, sanju koete 慰霊の旅 傘寿を超えて,” Hara Takeshi 原武史 picks up the issue of this very message of the emperor as the critical moment, after which, according to Hara, a growing number of Japanese people turned to the Imperial House as the final source to depend on at this epoch-making moment in Japanese history. Akihito’s message, delivered on August 8th, 2016, mentioned in the beginning of this article, was the second occasion following this March 2011 message.

Conclusion

I have reviewed Yasumaru’s decidedly critical attitude toward the emperor system, and also Shillony’s complaints, together with others, against the current emperor and his family’s distance from ordinary people’s lives. If we only pay attention to the most recent attitudes of the public toward Akihito and his family, the general image about them can be regarded as more favorable. The cause of this favorable image may be at least partly attributed to Akihito and Michiko’s activities of *irei* and prayers. And besides that, their sympathetic attitude to the victims and survivors of the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake in particular seems to have been very significant.

As his August 2016 message clearly shows, Akihito considers praying for the people to be his first and foremost duty. What kind of prayer do the current emperor and empress offer? Is this an example of a continuation or rebirth of State Shinto? It does not quite look as if this is so, because it is not really formulated in a Shinto style. We cannot say nevertheless that these prayers are not religious at all. The recent occasions of the royal couple's prayers, one showing their pacifist stance at a number of war-related sites, and the other showing their sympathy with victims and survivors of natural disasters, seem to contain a somewhat religious aura, in that at least they sincerely pray. In addition to the relation of the imperial family with Shinto, there are arguments about their relation with Christianity that Shillony discussed, and these prayers of the royal couple might contain some characteristics similar to Christian prayer.

The religious dimensions of the Imperial Household must have experienced various phases in the postwar years. The activities of the current emperor and empress from 1989 onwards seem to have accumulated a certain religious meaning, and not those of a strictly Shinto style, in the numerous occasions of their visits to sites of natural disasters and to war-related sites. It can be argued, as mentioned before, that through modernization, Japan experienced the secularization process step by step in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, in the Meiji Restoration period, and in the postwar occupation policy. If we look at the most recent image of the current emperor and empress, the religious atmosphere surrounding them seems to be growing gradually. We can probably say that here we see one element of the religious dimension of contemporary Japanese society.

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