Japan has been called the “supermarket of religions” because of the many different religious traditions (including the many “new” religions and “new, new” religions) on display there. In Japanese approaches to religion and spirituality we have a fascinating combination of modern and ancient patterns: Japan is today one of the world’s most modernized, technologically advanced and literate societies, and yet ancient religious assumptions, values and practices continue to flourish.

**Japanese approaches to religion / spirituality:**

1. The relative unimportance of explicit religious beliefs; ritual (ancestral rites with the butsudan / kamidana, festivals such as obon, hatsumode) experience, and the social dynamics of religion take priority over belief and doctrine.

Japanese approaches to religion and spirituality emphasize the aesthetic and experiential dimensions. Beauty, tranquility, harmony and a sense of wholeness are valued more than clarity of doctrinal formulation. Daoist and Buddhist influence has resulted in a general suspicion of words and precision in doctrines (words and doctrines are like the finger pointing to the moon; do not mistake the finger for the moon).

2. Religion is an expression of social “belonging” or group and national identity, not individual commitment and belief. There is a kind of cultural /ethnic relativism, so that religion is identified with particular cultures (if you are American you are Christian; if Indian then Hindu; if Japanese then Buddhist…)

3. A relativistic and syncretistic approach which is highly tolerant of diversity of belief so long as essential commonalities in the social context (especially the ancestor cult) are maintained. Religious groups which are perceived to be exclusivistic or dogmatic (Nichiren sects of Buddhism, “new” religions such as Seicho no Ie, Christianity) are regarded with suspicion.

4. Religion has a pragmatic "this worldly" orientation which emphasizes tangible benefits in this life. The pragmatic thrust of Japanese religion is reflected in the popular saying kurushii toki no kamidanomi (turn to the gods in times of distress).

“Genze riyaku [this-worldly benefits] is a normative and central theme in the structure and framework of religion in Japan -- sought through numerous ritual practices, symbolized in various religious objects such as talismans and amulets, and affirmed in doctrinal terms in various religious organizations as well as through textual traditions.... Although genze riyaku
may cover any kind of good results, they are generally understood to involve primarily material or physical gains such as good health, healing, success, or, as in the case cited here, personal advancement in one’s life path, as well as less tangible benefits such as an increased sense of personal well being and freedom from problems.”

[Ian Reader & George Tanabe, Practically Religious, 14, 2]

5. There is a curious mixture of advanced modernization and scientific sophistication with very traditional, animistic and polytheistic religious patterns.

- Skepticism about Christian claims (the miraculous; exclusivity of salvation in Jesus Christ).
- Influence of science and scientism (evolution is unquestioned).
- Openness to “new” new religions, the occult, claims of miraculous healings, etc.

Magical and animistic folk religious practices flourish alongside highly sophisticated scientific understandings of the world.

6. There is a general respect for Christianity along with the widespread perception that Christianity is a foreign religion which is not an option for “real” Japanese.

7. Due to Confucian, Shinto and Buddhist influence, Japanese generally adopt fairly positive views of human nature and the possibility of ultimate human “salvation” (however that is understood).

For the Japanese, full of the spirit of tolerance, eternal damnation is absolutely inconceivable…. Among the doctrines of Christianity the idea of eternal damnation was especially hard for the Japanese to comprehend. M. Anezaki, commenting on this point, says that this is the outstanding line of demarcation between Christianity and Buddhism…. The idea of “being beyond deliverance forever” was also hard for the Japanese to comprehend…. Generally accepted, instead, was the view, “All men are predisposed to become Buddhas”.

[Hajime Nakamura, Ways of Thinking of Eastern Peoples, pp. 384-85]

Upon death, people are said to become “buddhas” (hotoke).

Evangelism in Japan -- some random tips.

1. Buddhism is aesthetically pleasing and communicates tranquility and peace (cf tea ceremony, temple gardens, etc). Christians in Japan should express genuine appreciation for what is admirable in Japanese religious traditions -- the concern for beauty, peace, purity, experiences of tranquility. We should also give more attention to the aesthetic dimension of the Christian faith, and especially to the physical surroundings of the church.

2. “Truth flows through relationships in Japan.” Christians must take the time to cultivate strong relationships of trust, earning the right to be heard.

3. While not ignoring the pragmatic benefits of Christianity, the centrality of the truth question must be gently but firmly pressed. We must emphasize the historical context of Biblical
revelation, the historicity of Jesus of Nazareth, and the reliability of the New Testament. (These concepts need to be carefully explained and defended, as they are not part of the Shinto / Buddhist religious framework.) While acknowledging positive aspects of Gautama the Buddha and Japanese religious leaders such as Shinran, we should carefully point out differences between them and Jesus Christ.

4. We should focus upon the major, central claims of the Christian faith and do not become preoccupied with secondary disputes (the many divisions within Christianity is a continual stumbling block to Japanese).

5. We should not be overly rational or systematic in our presentation of the Christian faith. While explaining the reasons for accepting the Christian gospel as true in appropriate ways, we should also allow room for mystery and unanswered questions, for tensions and paradox. Christian teaching and a heavy emphasis upon systematic doctrine often comes across to Japanese as simplistic and shallow.

At the same time, we should be prepared to answer the question, "Why should one be a Christian rather than a Buddhist?" What is needed here is a creative "soft apologetic" which brings out the plausibility of the Christian faith and relates Christian claims to other domains of modern inquiry, such as the sciences and questions about Japanese religious traditions.

References

Lim, David and Steve Spaulding, eds. Sharing Jesus Holistically with the Buddhist World (William Carey Library, 2005).