

IMPRESSIONS ABOUT RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS

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The teaching of environmental awareness should be recognized as a central element in the social studies, particularly in geography, history, and economics. Our future depends on it. Teaching for environmental awareness offers a context for a deeper enrichment of these social sciences in ways that bring a sense of meaning and importance that has been largely missing from the topics normally taught. Although the visibility of environmental awareness is not at the level that it is in the United States, environmentalism is nevertheless an important emerging force with a growing number of groups and individuals in Japan.

An exploration of environmentalism in Japan provides a fascinating setting for comparing and contrasting environmental attitudes and philosophies that have their origins in Shintoism and Buddhism, which are the two indigenous religions in Japan. Tracing the origins of various attitudes toward the environment in Japan forms the heart of the discussion that follows.

A curious thing about Japan is that the practice of religion is so unobtrusively and naturally integrated into the lives of the people, and that Buddhism and Shintoism coexist with each other harmoniously in the Japanese culture. What appears to be happening in Japan—and this is a very significant turn of events—is that the environmental movement in Japan has always been a latent part of the native culture, but is now becoming more visible and active. It is as though the Japanese people are beginning to awaken to the meaning of the values they have always held, but didn't connect with the perils of the environment until recently. In the United States, by contrast, environmentalism has very diverse roots, but those roots are now being closely linked with native American beliefs.

Buddhism came to Japan via India (where it originated), Korea, and China. A key feature of Buddhist thought with respect to the environment, is the interconnectedness of all life. Buddhism also teaches such things as

making do with what one has, not wasting, and seeking the welfare of others ahead of oneself.

These are admirable goals to be sure, but to find their practice in Japan one has to look very carefully. In Japan, one sees levels of materialism and consumerism similar to that in the United States. On the other hand, communitarianism is much more widely practiced in Japan than in the United States. There is a much greater concern for the group, the welfare of others, the good of the society than one generally experiences in the United States, where we have historically worshiped at the altar of individualism.

In Shintoism, which is a form of nature worship, there are several parallel and complimentary ideas. Shinto's origins in Japan go back to prehistoric times, and are shrouded in myth and legend. It is the indigenous religion of Japan, analogous to native American religion. But Shintoism is more than a religion. It is an amalgam of attitudes, ideas, and ways of doing things that through two millenniums and more have become an integral part of the way of the Japanese people. The word Shinto means kami way. The Kami are the deities which inhabit all things: rivers, lakes, mountains, rocks, trees, animals, etc. Kami also include qualities such as growth, fertility, and production, and natural phenomena such as wind and thunder.

The kami concept today includes the idea of justice, order, and divine favor (blessing), and implies the basic principle that the kami function harmoniously in cooperation with one another and rejoice in the evidence of harmony and cooperation in this world.

Many Japanese cultural traditions and practices have the idea of kami as their basis. The more obvious ones are the art of flower arranging, the tea ceremony, calligraphy, and the various arts and crafts practiced all over the country. In general, the various styles of artistic expression are heavily influenced by Shinto ideals concerning nature, beauty, and goodness. While in Japan, one sees gardens with meticulously pruned trees, houses of simple but classic design, and the natural settings and architecture of Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines that reflect these values.

In contrast to these values, one also sees mountains of styrofoam at the central Tokyo fish market, smoke-belching factories, and automobile-clogged streets and highways, and other conditions that plague all industrialized countries. Emerging from the styrofoam, smoke and plastic, however, Shinto and Buddhist publications reveal a growing concern over the peril of our planet, and environmental organizations are on the increase.

CONCLUSION

In teaching about modern culture through history, geography, or economics courses, attention to attitudes toward the environment can provide important perspectives. Since some of the ideas in this article involve religious beliefs and their analysis, a potential for controversy extending outside the classroom exists. Issues such as indoctrination, teaching values and ethics, the role of the teacher in being objective, subjective or neutral, and the selection of classroom materials are very sensitive areas in today's climate. Teachers attempting to address any of these topics or issues should be aware of the potential hazards. Care must be taken whenever one deals with controversial issues in the classroom, especially those which touch on values and religion. How can the thoughtful educator not address these issues, however, when attempting to provide the full range of understandings about another culture? The NCSS position statements on Academic Freedom and Religion, along with the NCSS scope and sequence, *Social Studies Within A Global Education*, are useful documents with which to become familiar.

1. Dr. Sokyō Ono. *Shinto: The Kami Way*. Rutland, Vermont and Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1962. p. 3
2. Dr. Sokyō Ono. *The Kami Way*. p. 7.
3. Noriyoshi Tamaru, *Human Responsibility for the Environment*, Kazuo Matsushita, *The Environment: A Global Concern*, Giichi Muto, *A Buddhist Approach to the Environment*, *Echoes of Peace*, Quarterly Bulletin of the Niwano Peace Foundation, No. 26, July 1989, pp. 3-9.
4. Jim Griffith, *The Environmental Movement in Japan*, *Whole Earth*, No. 69, Winter 1990, pp. 90-96.
5. All of these documents are available from NCSS in *Building Support For The Social Studies: The Tool Kit*, National Council For the Social Studies, Washington, DC 20016.