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*Religio*. 2009, vol. 17, iss. 1, pp. [57]-74

ISSN 1210-3640 (print); ISSN 2336-4475 (online)

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/125275>

Access Date: 01. 12. 2024

Version: 20220831

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# *Religion, Politics and National Identity in Modern Japan: Examining the Issue of Yasukuni Shrine*

Jakub Havlíček\*

*The peace and prosperity of Japan today  
is the fruit of the noble work  
of the Kami of Yasukuni Jinja.<sup>1</sup>*

## **Introduction**

The Yasukuni Shrine, a Shinto sanctuary in Tokyo where are enshrined the “spirits” or “souls” of those who supposedly gave their lives for Japan, remains subject of controversy. In 2006 newspapers informed that than Prime Minister of Japan Junichiro Koizumi<sup>2</sup> visited the Shrine on August 15, on the 61<sup>st</sup> anniversary of Japan’s surrender in World War II. It was Koizumi’s sixth visit to the Shrine since he had become Prime Minister in 2001. He made the visit in spite of the repeated warnings from China and South Korea. Indeed, both countries along with some Japanese politicians promptly condemned the visit, refusing the words of Koizumi, who told the press: “As I’ve said many times, I did not pray for specific people. I prayed for the war dead as a whole to express grief.”<sup>3</sup> The official statements of South Korean and Chinese governments speak of undermining

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\* The following text is composed of research notes and comments forming a basis for the author’s PhD thesis. The publication is supported by the Grant Foundation of the Dean of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University, for the year 2008. (Stať vznikla s finanční podporou Grantového fondu děkana Filozofické fakulty MU pro rok 2008).

1 “Welcome to Yasukuni’s Homepage – Questions and Answers”, available at: <<http://www.yasukuni.or.jp/english/index.html>> (October 7, 2006).

The word *kami* can be translated as “god” or “deity”; *jinja* means “(Shinto) shrine” in Japanese. The souls in Yasukuni are often referred to as *kokka no mamorigami* (“nation-protecting deities”), *shinrei* (“divine spirits/souls”) or *eirei* (“noble spirits/souls”) – cf. <<http://www.yasukuni.or.jp>>.

2 Japanese personal names are switched to Western order – given name comes first.

3 “Defiant Koizumi Visits Yasukuni”, *The Japan Times*, August 16, 2006. Cf. “Koizumi Shrine Visit Stokes Anger”, available at: <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/4789905.stm>> (October 7, 2006).

bilateral ties and of challenging international justice by the Prime Minister's act.<sup>4</sup>

There seems to be a simple explanation why the neighbours of Japan firmly denounced the Prime Minister's visit to the Shrine. China and Korea had suffered under Japanese occupation during the World War II. Moreover, the Yasukuni Shrine enshrines not only the "souls" or "spirits" of innocent victims of war. The *Book of Souls* kept in the Shrine contains also the names of Japanese war criminals, including 14 wartime leaders convicted of crimes against peace or against humanity at the International Military Tribunal for the Far East. Not only the representatives of foreign countries but also some Japanese politicians and activists consider the Shrine to be a living symbol of Japanese militarism, ultra-nationalism and war aggression rather than a sacred memorial dedicated to the victims of war (cf. fig. 7).



**Fig. 1** Yasukuni Shrine, Tokyo. Photo: author, April 2004.

Examining the issue of Yasukuni from the point of view of social sciences, of anthropology or political science and – needless to say – of the science of religions, one must realize its utter complexity. This issue is rooted not only in the disturbed history of East Asian region but it has ma-

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4 "China, South Korea lodge protests yet again", *The Japan Times*, August 16, 2006.

ny other interesting connotations as well. It is connected to the changing role of religious elements in modern Japanese society and, indeed, to the process of producing and re-producing Japanese national identity itself.

This short paper cannot – and does not intend to – analyze all questions posed by the Yasukuni issue to the science of religions. It treats mainly the topic of ancestor worship as it is officially presented to be the undercurrent of the faith of the Yasukuni Shrine. Even though the worship of dead as “deities” (*kami*) has a long tradition in Japan, the worship of dead in the Yasukuni Shrine seems to be a typical case of “invented tradition”,<sup>5</sup> bearing some new distinctive features if compared to the previous practices.



**Fig. 2** Yasukuni Shrine's precinct. Photo: author, April 2004.

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5 John Breen, “The Dead and the Living in the Land of Peace: A Sociology of the Yasukuni Shrine”, *Mortality* 9/1, 2004, 76-93: 82.

First, let us summarize briefly the history of the so called Yasukuni issue with its domestic and international consequences, since the historical overview of the topic is necessary for understanding its significance. Second part of the paper treats the issue of ancestor worship in Japan that is presented as a “traditional” element of Japanese religious thought. It focuses on the notion of ancestor worship as an ideological background of the Yasukuni Shrine. The aim of this essay is to answer the questions how is the idea of ancestor worship applied and modified in the context of Yasukuni issue and how can one perceive the “tradition” of ancestor worship in this context from the point of view of the science of religions.

### The Yasukuni Shrine and the History of Modern Japan

The Yasukuni Shrine was established in Tokyo in 1869 as *shokonsha* shrine – “shrine for inviting the spirits [of the war dead]”.<sup>6</sup> The *Tokyo Shokonsha* originated as a sacred place to enshrine the spirits of those who died fighting for the emperor during the Meiji Restoration. In 1879, following Emperor Meiji’s personal suggestion, the shrine was renamed *Yasukuni Jinja*, which means “The Shrine [for/of] the Country[’s] Peace” or “Peace[ful] Country Shrine”.

Until 1945 the Shrine was under the administration of Japanese government becoming a strong element in the concept of state ideology called *Kokka Shinto* or “State Shinto”. The Meiji state propaganda presented

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6 For the basic facts about the history of Yasukuni Shrine refer to the following publications: Klaus Antoni, “Yasukuni Jinja and Folk Religion: The Problem of Vengeful Spirits”, in: Mark R. Mullins – Susumu Shimazono – Paul L. Swanson (eds.), *Religion and Society in Modern Japan*, Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press 1993, 181-132; John Breten, “Introduction: A Yasukuni Genealogy”, in: idem (ed.), *Yasukuni, the War Dead, and the Struggle for Japan’s Past*, New York: Columbia University Press 2008, 1-22; John Nelson, “Social Memory as Ritual Practice: Commemorating Spirits of the Military Dead at Yasukuni Shinto Shrine”, *The Journal of Asian Studies* 62/2, 2003, 443-467; Michiaki Okuyama, “Is There Religious Freedom for Japanese Politicians? The Storm in East Asia Over Yasukuni Shrine”, conference paper presented at CESNUR Conference in Palermo, Sicily, June 2005, available at: <[http://www.cesnur.org/2005/pa\\_0kuyama.htm](http://www.cesnur.org/2005/pa_0kuyama.htm)> (October 7, 2006), quoted with the permission of the author; Michael Pye, “Religion and Conflict in Japan with Special Reference to Shinto and Yasukuni Shrine”, *Diogenes* 50/3, 2003, 45-59; Joshua Safier, *Yasukuni Shrine and the Constraints on the Discourses of Nationalism in Twentieth-Century Japan*, MA thesis, University of Kansas 1997, available at: <<http://www.dissertation.com/book.php?method=ISBN&book=0965856410>> (February 15, 2009); William D. Sturgeon, *Japan’s Yasukuni Shrine: Place of Peace or Place of Conflict? Regional Politics of History and Memory in East Asia*, MA Thesis, International Christian University 2006, available at: <<http://www.dissertation.com/book.php?book=1581123345&method=ISBN>> (January 10, 2009); Hideyuki Tokita, “Eleven Questions about Yasukuni Shrine”, *Japan Echo* 30/3, 2003, 48-49.

Shinto as a “non-religious” ideology and used it to consolidate the power of the newly conceived Japanese Empire. State Shinto emphasized the old myths by speaking about the divine origin of Japan, Japanese imperial family and of all the Japanese people and incorporated some Confucian elements, such as the ideas of self-cultivation and loyalty towards the family and the state.<sup>7</sup> It formed a new nation-building ideological system strongly influenced by the thoughts of *kokugaku* (“National Learning”) scholars and by other intellectual movements of the Edo Period. During the World War II the Yasukuni Shrine was already a very powerful symbol for those who served the country and the Emperor, especially for the staff of the Japanese Army. Before embarking on a suicide mission, soldiers supposedly used to tell their comrades they will meet again at the Yasukuni.<sup>8</sup>



**Fig. 3** Displays at Yushukan – photos of the *kami* enshrined in Yasukuni. Photo: author, April 2004.

7 For a historical review of establishment and abolition of so-called “State Shinto” refer e.g. to: Helen Hardacre, *Shinto and the State: 1868 – 1988*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1991; eadem, “State and Religion in Japan”, in: Paul L. Swanson – Clark Chilson (eds.), *Nanzan Guide to Japanese Religions*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press 2006, 274-288; Shimazono Susumu, “State Shinto and the Religious Structure of Modern Japan”, *Journal of American Academy of Religion* 73/4, 2005, 1077-1098; Cf. David M. O’Brien – Yasuo Ohkoshi, *To Dream of Dreams: Religious Freedom and Constitutional Politics in Postwar Japan*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press 1996: 32-62.

8 Cf. J. Breen, “The Dead and the Living...”, 89.

Status of the Shrine as a prominent institution of the officially promoted State Shinto has changed deeply with the defeat of the Empire in World War II. In 1945 office of Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers issued a document generally called the “Shinto Directive”. It banned any government support, control or dissemination of the so called “State Shinto”, extending its applicability to: “... all rites, practices, ceremonies, observances, beliefs, teachings, mythology, legends, philosophy, shrines, and physical symbols associated with Shinto”.<sup>9</sup> The constitution of Japan from 1947 adopted the concept of separation of state and religion and banned all state support of any religious organization. Following these changes the Yasukuni Shrine had to transform to a private institution. The majority of Shinto shrines in Japan joined a newly created Association of Shinto Shrines (*Jinja Honcho*), an independent organization designated to administer shrines’ affairs and finances. Even though there is a close relationship between the Association and the Yasukuni Shrine, the official separation of the Shrine from all the other Shinto institutions leaves some space for the state to support the Yasukuni.<sup>10</sup>

Government has attempted to use this opportunity several times, aiming to change the Yasukuni to a national “non-religious” institution, “the Japanese Spiritual Home”.<sup>11</sup> In 1969 the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), a leading right-wing political power in Japan, has tried to submit to the National Diet (Japanese parliament) a bill entitled *Yasukuni Jinja Hoan*, “Bill for the National Establishment of Yasukuni Shrine”, which would have legalized state support of the Shrine.<sup>12</sup> The bill had to be withdrawn as a consequence of strong public pressure and four other attempts to enact it failed through 1974.

Nevertheless, right wing politicians found a new way of supporting Yasukuni – in 1975, on the anniversary day of Japan’s surrender, Prime Minister and chairman of LDP Takeo Miki has visited the Shrine, declaring his visit to be a private act. Miki was not the first of Japanese Prime Ministers to pay a visit to the Yasukuni – it was Shigeru Yoshida, who had visited the shrine in October 1951. Japanese leftists and activists strongly opposed Miki’s act, pointing out the constitutional principle of separating

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9 M. R. Mullins – S. Shimazono – P. L. Swanson (eds.), *Religion and Society...*, 100.

10 For the issue of public/state financing of religious activities refer to: J. Breen, “The Dead and the Living...”; D. M. O’Brien – Y. Ohkoshi, *To Dream of Dreams...*; Shigenori Matsui, “Japan: The Supreme Court and the Separation of Church and State”, *International Journal of Constitutional Law* 2/3, 2004, 534-545.

11 D. M. O’Brien – Y. Ohkoshi, *To Dream of Dreams...*, 165.

12 Cf. Cyril Powels, “*Yasukuni Jinja Hoan*: Religion and Politics in Contemporary Japan”, *Pacific Affairs* 49/3, 1976, 491-505.

state from religion.<sup>13</sup> Since 1975 several Prime Ministers and statesmen have visited Yasukuni, some of them declaring their visits to be more or less “official”, the others declaring it “private”. In 1983 Yasuhiro Nakasone signed the guest book of the Shrine as “Prime Minister” and in 1985 he declared his visit to be “official” – for the first time since the end of World War II. As for the Emperors, whose political role in post-war Japan is arguable, but “symbolic” from the point of view of the Constitution, they have not visited the Yasukuni since November 1975.

いくつもの  
て、必死に  
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牙をとり  
殉じた。  
一を守り、  
将兵たち  
に鎮まる  
の聖なる  
に必ずし  
けられた。

## Spirit of the Samurai

More than 2,600 years ago, an independent nation was formed on these islands. But many battles were waged before that independence was assured. When a crisis arose, Japan's first warriors took up their weapons and headed for the front lines. There they fought bravely, defending their homes, their villages, and their nation. Yasukuni Shrine was established to honor the courageous soldiers who laid the foundation for modern Japan, and to pray for the repose of their souls.

Fig. 4 Displays at Yushukan, the Yasukuni Shrine museum.  
Photo: author, April 2004.

The Emperor decided not to visit the Yasukuni because of the decision of the Shrine administration to enshrine 14 war criminals convicted of the worst war crime against peace and against humanity, including the former Prime Minister and war leader Hideki Tojo. The decision from 1978 intensified considerably the controversy over the Yasukuni issue. Also the enshrinement of Koreans and Taiwanese who died as “subjects” of the Ja-

13 For the issue of Prime Ministers' visits to Yasukuni refer e.g. to: Peter J. Herzog, *Japan's Pseudo-Democracy*, Folkestone: Japan Library 1993; J. Nelson, “Social Memory...”; D. M. O'Brien – Y. Ohkoshi, *To Dream of Dreams...*; D. Shibuichi, “The Yasukuni Shrine Dispute...”; W. D. Sturgeon, *Japan's Yasukuni Shrine...*



panese Empire continues to stir controversies as the courts refuse to order the removal of their names from the list of enshrined “spirits”.<sup>14</sup>

The arguments of conflicting parties in the “struggle for Yasukuni” did not change. The rightists consider the Shrine to be the symbol of Japanese tradition, culture and of the Japanese national identity itself.<sup>15</sup> They promote an alternative view of the modern history of Japan, including its role in the World War II – their opinions can be clearly deduced from the displays of Yushukan, a museum in the precincts of the Shrine, showing the artifacts connected with the “deities” enshrined in Yasukuni. The displays promote the idea of Japan’s self-defense in the wars of 19th and 20th centuries. The internet homepage of Yushukan begins with the following motto which expresses the aim of those who want to change the “official” interpretation of Japanese modern history: “The Truth of Modern Japanese History is Now Restored”. This approach to modern Japanese history argues or entirely ignores Japan’s aggressive pre-war politics, such as the Nanking massacre or “The Rape of Nanking” in 1937. It stresses the “traditional” Japanese virtues in the intentions of pre-war ideology of State Shinto and claims that the interpretation of history is determined by those who won the War.<sup>16</sup> The leftists and public activists reject such arguments. They point out the constitutional principle of the separation of state and religion and even challenged the Prime Minister’s visit in court.<sup>17</sup> Besides, the veterans and relatives of the war dead, as for example the Japan Bereaved Families Association with a close connection to LDP,<sup>18</sup> request a simple respect towards their loved ones, who died for Japan and want to mourn their relatives without any disputes.

Shinzo Abe, a prominent LDP politician, replaced Koizumi in the office of the Prime Minister by the end of September 2006. Abe refused to say whether he will visit the Shrine as a Prime Minister or not, but in fact, he

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14 Cf. “Court Rejects Suit to Remove Koreans from Yasukuni Rolls”, *The Japan Times*, May 26, 2006.

15 For the rightist view of Yasukuni refer to: J. Nelson, “Social Memory...”; D. M. O’Brien – Y. Ohkoshi, *To Dream of Dreams...*; C. Powels, “Yasukuni Jinja Hoan...”; D. Shibuichi, “The Yasukuni Shrine Dispute...”. Cf. Daisaburo Hashizume, “Koizumi and the New Nationalism”, *Japan Echo* 28/6, 2001, 51-55.

16 For the debate about the interpretation and “misinterpretation” of Japanese war history refer to: Roger B. Jeans, “Victims or Victimizers? Museums, Textbooks, and the War Debate in Contemporary Japan”, *The Journal of Military History* 69/1, 2005, 149-195.

17 Cf. “Supreme Court to Issue Ruling June 23 on Yasukuni Visit”, *The Japan Times*, June 14, 2006; “Top Court Upholds Shrine Trip, Dodges Constitutionality”, *The Japan Times*, June 24, 2006. Refer also to: D. M. O’Brien – Y. Ohkoshi, *To Dream of Dreams...*

18 Cf. “Yasukuni Grips Still Dog Nation”, *The Japan Times*, August 12, 2006.

supported Koizumi's Shrine visits and has gone there several times himself. Moreover Abe has declared that the 14 wartime leaders in Yasukuni are not criminals from the point of view of the Japanese law: "... they stood trial for crimes against peace and humanity, which were concepts created by the Allies after the war and not enshrined in law."<sup>19</sup> Abe did not visit the shrine during his premiership. Neither did his successor in the office Yasuo Fukuda who, moreover, opposed the politics of official support of Yasukuni. Taro Aso who took charge of the Prime Minister's office in September 2008 is widely recognized as rather conservative. As a minister of foreign affairs Aso defended Koizumi's visits to the shrine and suggested the Emperor should re-consider his policy of not visiting the sanctuary.<sup>20</sup> It seems that the Yasukuni issue is not to be solved in the near future...

### The Yasukuni Shrine and Ancestor Worship

Visiting the official web page of the Yasukuni Shrine, one can find an official explanation of the Shrine's purpose of enshrining and venerating the "spirits" of Japanese war dead:

From ancient times the people of Japan believed that the mitama (soul) of the deceased remained upon the land to be celebrated by their descendants. It was believed that the mitama of the deceased would watch over the good fortune of their descendants together with the ancestral Kami. ... deep in the hearts of the Japanese people is the faith that the mitama dwell in a quiet and lofty land in the place of one's birth from where they watch over us. It is a land from where they will respond if called upon. Yasukuni Jinja was founded upon this belief from ancient times.<sup>21</sup>

A visitor to some of the Japanese Shinto shrines affiliated to *Jinja Honcho* (Association of Shinto Shrines) can get a bilingual Japanese-English brochure published by the Association. The brochure by Hideaki Takeda, Associate professor of Kokugakuin University in Tokyo, is entitled "The Japanese View on Ancestral Spirits. The Undercurrent of the Faith of the Yasukuni Jinja". It begins with a brief account on the *Bon* festival and the New Year's Day – both holidays, very popular in contemporary Japan, are

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19 "Under Japanese law, 14 at Yasukuni Not Criminals: Abe", *The Japan Times*, October 7, 2006. Cf. "Abe Noncommittal on War Stance", *The Japan Times*, October 4, 2006.

20 Cf. "Aso Wants Emperor to Visit Yasukuni", *The Japan Times Weekly Online*, February 4, 2006, available at: <<http://www.japantimes.co.jp/weekly/news/nn2006/nn20060204a4.htm>> (November 5, 2008).

21 "The Worship of Ancestors by the People of Japan", available at: <<http://www.yasukuni.or.jp/english/index.html>> (October 7, 2006).

explained as originating in the ancient custom of consoling ancestral spirits. Next part of the brochure is dedicated to the custom of deification of human spirits in the pre-modern era and it continues to the establishment and history of Yasukuni Shrine. Takeda concludes:

Seeing the historical background of these shrines, we realize that the ancient Japanese view on life and death lies in the faith of the Yasukuni Jinja as its backbone, though its establishment was rather recent (1870). ... To revere ancestors' spirits is the source of religious consciousness of the Japanese ... The Yasukuni Jinja is, as we have seen, the place where souls of the war dead are enshrined. It is a place not only for the bereaved family but also for the majority of the Japanese to depend on in order to keep their religious integrity. It is also a place of communication between ancestors and descendants.<sup>22</sup>

Indeed, the ancestor worship constitutes an important part of Japanese religious life. In the context of Yasukuni as a Shinto shrine it is worth mentioning that the veneration of ancestors in modern Japan is generally related to Buddhism, which deals with funerals and other religious practices connected to death and afterlife. In Shinto, death causes “pollution” or “defilement” (*kegare*) disrupting the state of original purity and, in fact, no ashes or other bodily remains are kept in Yasukuni.<sup>23</sup>

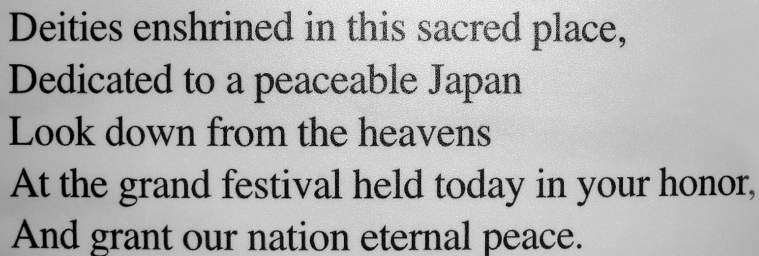
For the reason of “defilement” the funerals and other ritual practices for the dead and for the ancestors take place in Buddhist context and the overwhelming method of corpse disposal in modern Japan is cremation with the assistance of a Buddhist priest. The ashes are buried in a tomb near the Buddhist temple of the sect that the family of the dead belongs to.<sup>24</sup> The priest of the family temple gives to the deceased a posthumous name (*kamiyo*) – it is an important step on the “path” of the deceased to the new identity of the ancestor (*senzo, sorei*). The “properly treated dead” is then

22 Hideaki Takeda, *The Japanese View on Ancestral Spirits: The Undercurrent of the Faith of the Yasukuni Jinja*, Tokyo: Jinja Honcho, The Association of Shinto Shrines (non-dated): 9.

23 Cf. H. Tokita, “Eleven Questions...”. For the concept of *kegare* refer to: Brian Bocking, *A Popular Dictionary of Shinto*, Richmond: Curzon Press 1996; Stuart D. B. Picken, *Historical Dictionary of Shinto*, Lanham – London: The Scarecrow Press 2002.

24 For Buddhist funerals in Japan refer to: Elizabeth Kenney – Edmund T. Gilday, “Mortuary Rites in Japan: Editors’ Introduction”, *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, 27/3-4, 2000, 163-178; Kyoko Murakami, “Changes in Japanese Urban Funeral Customs during the Twentieth Century”, *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, 27/3-4, 2000, 335-352. For the ancestor veneration in Japan refer to: Ian Reader, *Religion in Contemporary Japan*, London: Macmillan Press Ltd. 1991; Robert Smith, *Ancestor Worship in Contemporary Japan*, Stanford: Stanford University Press 1974; John W. Traphagan, *The Practice of Concern: Ritual, Well-Being, and Aging in Rural Japan*, Durham: Carolina Academic Press 2004.

addressed as *hotoke*, which literally means “buddha”. The posthumous name is usually written on a memorial tablet called *ihai* that is placed in the family *butsudan* which has the form of a lacquered decorated cabinet. The word *butsudan* literally means “Buddhist altar” and indeed, it contains an image of a Buddhist deity or deities. But the primary function of *butsudan* consists in memorializing and venerating the ancestors by the means of making offerings of food, incenses, candles or praying. The veneration of ancestors consists also in visiting and cleaning of the family grave (*haka mairi*) or in observing holidays such as *o-bon*, a popular holiday when the dead spirits are believed to come back to the world of the living.



Deities enshrined in this sacred place,  
Dedicated to a peaceable Japan  
Look down from the heavens  
At the grand festival held today in your honor,  
And grant our nation eternal peace.

**Fig. 5** Displays at Yushukan, the Yasukuni Shrine museum.  
Photo: author, April 2004.

The ancestor worship in contemporary Japan represents an elaborated system of ritual integration of the dead into the world of the living. As we have seen above, it is based on the idea that the “soul” (*tama*, *rei*, *reikon*) of the dead can influence the living in either positive or negative sense. If the “soul” of the departed is treated properly, if it is venerated and remembered, it can protect and guide the living, helping them in many different ways. This principle is rooted in a reciprocal relationship of exchange, as a Buddhist priest says: “There is a feeling of give and take between the living and the dead. The ancestors protect the living in return

for the offerings of rice”.<sup>25</sup> From that point of view ancestor worship includes the notion of *genze riyaku* or “this-worldly benefits”. It is based on a simple idea that practical benefits such as success or good health can be achieved by the means of religious practices such as worshipping the ancestors.<sup>26</sup>

If the “soul” or “spirit” of the dead is neglected, it becomes *muenbotoke*, or “unconnected/unrelated dead” who does not or cannot get the ritual services from the living. Such a “wandering spirit” with no ties and relations to his relatives feels unhappy and unsatisfied and can cause various troubles to the living. There is a specific category of *onryo* or *goryo* – the “vengeful spirits” of those who have died by a violent, unnatural or uneasy death. The unhappy and malevolent spirits can be appeased by giving them a proper funeral or by performing a ritual of memorial service (*kuyo*) for them.<sup>27</sup>

However, this connection of death and Buddhism is not exclusive and we can find many examples of venerating the dead in a non-Buddhist context. There are some indications in historical records showing the concept of afterlife in the thoughts of ancient Japanese. The dead inhabited a gloomy place called *Yomi no kuni* or dwelled in the mountains from where they descended to assist in the cycle of agricultural events.<sup>28</sup> If the relationship between the living and the dead was disrupted somehow, the people called for exorcists and diviners (*onmyoji*) to mediate with the other world. There is also historical references of pacifying unhappy spirits of those who died by an untimely or tragic death – the most famous is the well known example of Sugawara no Michizane who died in exile and was deified and venerated as Tenjin, a Shinto deity of learning and scholarship, in order to calm his angry spirit. It is important to mention also the veneration of extraordinary people – there is no need to talk about the case of Japanese emperors, considered to be “deities in a human form” (*arahitogami*, *akitsumikami*) already in their lifetime. In Japan one can find Shinto shrines dedicated to statesmen and heroes, such as Oda Nobunaga or Wake no Kiyomaro, or to outstanding people, who were considered to possess some “special powers”, such as Abe no Seimei, a famous diviner and exorcist (*onmyoji*) of Heian period.

25 J. W. Traphagan, *The Practice of Concern...*, 80.

26 For the concept of “this-worldly benefits” refer to: Ian Reader – George J. Tanabe Jr., *Practically Religious: Worldly Benefits and the Common Religion of Japan*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press 1998.

27 Cf. R. Smith, *Ancestor Worship...* For the concept of “bad death” in connection to the worship of Yasukuni deities refer to: K. Antoni, “Yasukuni Jinja ...”.

28 Cf. S. D. B. Picken, *Historical Dictionary...*

The attempt to pursue the topic of worshipping dead in Japan would exceed the limited space of this treatise. As was shown by the aforementioned examples, it is a complex phenomenon with a wide range of consequences. When trying to describe the history of the ancestor worship as a Japanese religious phenomenon, one has to notice that it underwent complicated changes and alternations during the past centuries. Its historical complexity makes it almost impossible to trace its “original” form. Moreover, the problem of “origins” or “authenticity” seems to be rather irrelevant, as it often reflects the undercurrent motivations and aims of the one who seeks them, rather than the real context and continuity of the phenomenon in question.

The case of ancestor worship seems to be a relevant example. Many historical resources reveal that worship of ancestors always constituted an important element in Japanese religious thought. But in the form of “Buddhist ancestor worship” as described above, it became widely used only during the Edo period, at which time Buddhism was promoted by the Tokugawa shogunate (1603-1868) as a means to strengthen its power. The system connecting of households (*ie*) to their respective Buddhist temples persisted the fall of the Tokugawa, so the Meiji Restoration tried to replace it with its own ideology of State Shinto and with its own concept of ancestor worship, the “Ancestor Religion/Teaching” (*sozenkyo*).<sup>29</sup> It provided a complex ideology aimed at supporting the newly established Japanese imperial state, while it was presented as a result of a continuous tradition grounded in the deeds of ancestors and in the filial piety of their descendants. This idea can be clearly seen in the Imperial Rescript on Education from 1890:

Our Imperial Ancestors have founded Our Empire on a basis broad and everlasting and have deeply and firmly implanted virtue; Our subjects ever united in loyalty and filial piety have from generation to generation illustrated the beauty thereof. This is the glory of the fundamental character of Our Empire ... So shall ye not only be Our good and faithful subjects, but render illustrious the best traditions of our forefathers.<sup>30</sup>

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29 For the concept of *sozenkyo* refer to Kiyomi Morioka, “The Appearance of ‘Ancestor Religion’ in Modern Japan: The Years of Transition from the Meiji to Taisho Periods”, *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 4/2-3, 1977, 183-212.

30 M. R. Mullins – S. Shimazono – P. L. Swanson (eds.), *Religion and Society...*, 81.



**Fig. 6** Displays at Yushukan – infamous Japanese “Zero” fighter.  
Photo: author, April 2004.

Even though State Shinto was officially abolished after World War II, its ideas still persist. They continue to play an important role as a part of “nation-building” ideology promoted by right wing politicians and intellectuals. These point out the notion of ancestor worship as a distinctive feature of Japanese religious thought and represent the Yasukuni as being the natural product of a long tradition. As we have seen, this “tradition” is very complex and it underwent important changes during the Japanese religious history. But one thing is obvious – in comparison with the previous concepts of venerating the dead, the “souls” of Yasukuni are no more considered to be mere “family ancestors”. Their veneration becomes the concern of the whole nation, not only of the families of the enshrined dead. It is important to bear in mind the account of Hideaki Takeda quoted above, who sees Yasukuni as a place: “... for the majority of the Japanese to depend on in order to keep their religious integrity”.<sup>31</sup> And one can add – their national integrity as well. The 2.5 million of dead enshrined in Yasukuni are presented as having sacrificed their lives for the Emperor and for

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31 H. Takeda, *The Japanese View...*, 9.

the Japanese state, through which act becoming the very basis of the Japanese state.<sup>32</sup>

For sure, this issue has more levels, as one can discuss some other features of venerating the Yasukuni “spirits” – for example that of pacifying the spirits of the untimely dead. Considering this, one must agree with John Breen, who points out the “multiplicity” of the Yasukuni: “There is the Yasukuni of the priests, the privileged organizations and right wing intellectuals and there is also a Yasukuni of the veterans, and the bereaved, a Yasukuni which is a place of peace, of mourning and of consolation”.<sup>33</sup>



**Fig. 7** Anti-Yasukuni protests in central Tokyo. Photo: author, April 2004.

32 John Nelson quotes a young priest who accompanied him during his tour of the Shrine’s museum: “The sacrifice of the individuals established the nation” (J. Nelson, “Social Memory...”, 450).

33 J. Breen, “The Dead and the Living...”, 90.



## Conclusion

From the point of view of the science of religions, worshipping dead in the Yasukuni Shrine is a good example of changing role of religious ideas along with society's changing needs. Ancestor worship, which is presented as foundation of Yasukuni, becomes an element of "nation-building" ideology with international impacts.

Moreover, the issue of Yasukuni is a good illustration of the problem of separating "religion" from "politics", or "religious" from "secular". Japan's post-war constitution adopted the concept of religion as something distinct from the secular and prohibited state interference in religious affairs. This concept, based on Western political and philosophical thinking and constituted under specific historical circumstances,<sup>34</sup> apparently could not be implemented in modern Japan without complications. Japan's identity as nation state has been built upon the ideological system of the so called State Shinto. From the point of view of the dualistic system of "state – religion", the State Shinto can be characterized as: "... an ambiguous (*sic!*) system, clearly classifiable as neither 'religious' nor 'secular' ... adopted as a means by the native elite in Japan to unify the people in a response to the wave of Westernization."<sup>35</sup> Here we come to the core question of identifying and classifying of specific phenomena as "religious", an issue that Jonathan Z. Smith solves with his statement: "Religion is solely the creation of the scholar's study. It is created for the scholar's analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization."<sup>36</sup> This "non-essentialist" or "instrumentalist" approach allows the study of religions to deal with ideological systems, which defy such categories as "traditional" or "established" – or – said with Jacques Waardenburg – the "explicit"<sup>37</sup> religions. The issues challenging the prevalent "religious-secular" dichotomy – as for example in the case of Yasukuni – show the importance of

34 Cf. Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*, Baltimore – London: The Johns Hopkins University Press 1993; Cf. Zdeněk R. Nešpor, "Sekularizace, implicitní náboženství", in: Zdeněk R. Nešpor – David Václavík (eds.), *Příručka sociologie náboženství*, Praha: Sociologické nakladatelství, 296-305.

35 Jun'ichi Isomae, "The Formative Process of State Shinto in Relation to the Westernization of Japan: the Concept of 'Religion' and 'Shinto'", in: Timothy Fitzgerald (ed.), *Religion and the Secular: Historical and Colonial Formations*, London: Equinox Publishing Ltd. 2007, 93-10: 99.

36 Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 1982, xi.

37 Cf. Jacques Waardenburg, *Bohové zblázka: Systematický úvod do religionistiky*, Brno: Georgetown 1997,

examining the role of such phenomena that can be described as religious within political systems rooted in nationalist ideologies.<sup>38</sup> It is also necessary to study more carefully the role of religions or religious phenomena within the process of constructing ethnic or national identities in the modern world.

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38 For the issue of religion(s) and politics ref. e.g. to: Dušan Lužný, *Náboženství a moderní společnost: Sociologické teorie modernizace a sekularizace*, Brno: Masarykova univerzita 1999; T. Fitzgerald, *Religion and the Secular...*; Z. R. Nešpor – D. Václavík, *Příručka sociologie...*

## RESUMÉ

**Náboženství, politika a národní identita v moderním Japonsku.  
Případ svatyně Jasukuni**

Ve svatyni Jasukuni v Tokiu je uctíváno na 2,5 milionu „duší“ padlých ve válkách, které Japonsko vedlo od druhé poloviny 19. století do roku 1945. Od konce války navštívilo svatyni mnoho japonských politiků, včetně předsedů vlád. Zatím posledním premiérem, který během svého funkčního období Jasukuni navštívil, byl v roce 2006 Džuničiró Koizumi. Návštěvy japonských politiků ve svatyni vyvolávají značné kontroverze doma i ve světě, protože svatyně je od svého založení v roce 1869 považována za symbol japonského nacionalismu a tzv. „státního šintó“, které bylo jako základ japonského militarismu zrušeno Spojenci v roce 1945. Svými odpůrci je Jasukuni kritizována jako přežívající ikona válečné agrese. Navíc jsou zde v roli ochranných božstev japonského národa uctíváni i váleční zločinci, odsouzení Tokijským tribunálem za zločiny proti míru a lidskosti, mezi jinými válečný premiér, generál Hideki Tódžó. Odpůrci svatyně poukazují rovněž na princip odluky náboženství od státu, zakotvený v japonské ústavě z roku 1947. Jasukuni se i přes tuto kritiku dostávalo od řady politických představitelů poválečného Japonska značné podpory. Zastánci Jasukuni poukazují na důležitost uctívání předků v japonském náboženském myšlení a prohlašují tuto tradici za základ úcty k padlým v Jasukuni. Případ svatyně Jasukuni je dobrým příkladem proměn náboženských prvků spolu s měnícími se společenskými potřebami a historickým kontextem, kdy se z rodinného uctívání předků stává důležitá součást japonské národní ideologie s domácími i mezinárodními politickými dopady.

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