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**JAPAN, BEYOND INSTITUTIONAL RELIGION.  
PRIVATE RELIGION IN THE TRADITIONS OF  
SHUGENDŌ, KOMUSŌ AND NON-CHURCH  
CHRISTIANITY OF KANZŌ UCHIMURA**

**Introduction**

The problem of the relation of an individual, the deity and the religious organization often has more bearing on our everyday lives and our worldview than we seem to realize. It is, in a way, more comfortable to cede the responsibility for those relations to religious organization and have particular religious needs fully satisfied without the necessity of continuous verifying, evaluating and modifying religious thoughts and beliefs. On the other hand, also quite often the religious organizations themselves are so confident of being the only mediators between the individuals and gods, that the mediations become central to their teachings, convincing the believers that these are the only possible relations to gods they may have. But no matter what promises the religious organizations offer, the final responsibility for one's religious life and the real relation to the deity remains on the individual and depends on the choices he or she makes.

It is interesting to remind ourselves that during the lifetimes of Buddha, Jesus or Muhammad, there was nothing that we could compare to present day Buddhism, Christianity or Islam. And it is only because of their individual and uncompromised pursuit of religious understanding, that all these great religions could have happened. Still, once they became recognized organizations, they immediately restricted and in most cases usurped the right of individual religious pursuit of their followers, even though it was something essential to their founders. In the process of formation of Christian doctrine and organization, there were countless individuals, some of them of the sufficient power of influence

are called Church Fathers, some others were labeled heretics. The struggle to protect and expand the organization became the most important driving force that shaped the church and its teaching. The situation is quite similar with Buddhism and Islam, although in the case of Buddhism the outcome is significantly different.

In this short article we will show that in spite of religious organizations, political and religious laws, regulations and efforts to control the religious life of Japanese people, throughout the history there were always considerable instances of individual practitioners with an unprecedented range of religious freedom, not only as to their beliefs, but also practices, rituals and moralities, that existed beyond the jurisdiction of any particular religious organizations, or formally within organizations but without any essential restrictions concerning such beliefs or practices. We shall see that this is a characteristic feature of Japanese religiosity and should be considered as a possible key to a solution of present day problems of interreligious intolerance, hatred and violence, since it seems that without a backup of established religious organizations, they seldom occur between individual believers that honestly seek religious truths.

We will also argue that contrary to the general opinion of Japanese being uniform, lacking originality and voluntarily giving up their individualism in order to follow the paths of the majority, the range of freedom of individual religious pursuit and the persistence in implementing it have no comparison. Japanese people are known for their quite unique ability to absorb and adopt various foreign cultural and technical advances on an amazing scale. After the Meiji Restoration<sup>1</sup> and even more after the Second World War we can see unprecedented westernization of a nation that was not caused by colonial rule of foreign countries but by their own choice. No need to say, that for the Japanese this was not the first case of accepting foreign influence on a similar scale. From the beginning of the nation, that was an important feature of Japanese culture and its people.

Before we start our discourse we need to clarify how we understand non-organized or non-institutional religion. Nowadays freedom of religion is regarded as one of the basic human rights and is secured in most modern state constitutions. It means, on the one hand, that anyone is free to believe whatever one wishes without being forced to or prohibited from, and, on the other hand, that individuals are free to associate to create religious organization and churches that coordinate, control and develop religious beliefs on the level transcending the individual believers and bear the burden of keeping the organization or church alive.

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<sup>1</sup> Restoration of imperial rule in 1868 and the beginning of enormous political, social and cultural reforms and changes.

Here as non-organized or non-institutional religion we mean not only religions that have no specific organizations or institutions, but also such religions that are organized or have some kind of institutions, but these organizations or institutions are not essential and have no essential influence on the contents, form of worship and practices of individual believers. In other words, if the individual declares or not his affiliation with a certain organization is not essential for his or her religious quest and bears no consequences as to the way of his or her worship or practices. This is important also to allow for the inclusion of cases where affiliation is chosen for reasons other than religious. During the Christian era something like private religion was almost unthinkable, even after Luther's rebellion protestant churches putting stress on personal relation with god kept multiplying and creating new organizations and institutions that would promote and guard new, and often the only true, interpretations of the Christian faith. In Japan, however, we shall see that a wide range of individual religious freedom from the hegemony of religious institutions was a fact.

### **The process of formation of religious organizations and the need for belonging**

There are countless books and articles analyzing the process of development and formation of religions, discussing how and why teachings of certain people lead to the creation of religious organization while others don't. The problem, no need to say, can't be solved by a single theory, since usually historical and political conditions seem to play the essential role in the process along with a simple chance of being in the right place in a right time. Sets of beliefs seem to be time-sensitive in a sense that they must fit the needs of any particular area in order to get propagated, they must offer something valuable enough that people would want to take a risk betting all they have. The promise of reward is a very powerful motivation, particularly for those who are not satisfied with their lives, but there is yet another aspect that is present in all religious organizations that showed a substantial growth in a relatively short period of time, that is a skillful abuse of the need for belonging. Quite often people want to belong to a group, religious or not, even though they don't agree with its teaching or actions. And groups on the other hand try to keep its members not so much for their own sake, but solely for the purpose of self-preservation of the organization. That being said, we need to consider how priorities are set and how the aims and purposes may be unconsciously shifted in the process of formation and then in the phase of sustaining the organization. And then, and only then, we can consciously and

with informed consent define and decide our individual relation to the group, organization or institution.

The way Buddhism has developed from the teaching of Shakyamuni and the way that Christianity has followed growing on the work of Jesus of Nazareth show many similarities. Although Buddhism never created the idea of organization as the only mediator between believer and the deity, nevertheless the community, the *Sangha*, became essential part of Buddhist teaching and organization. The need for belonging was quite strong in both cases, though seems to be based on different motivations.

Considering the development of world religions it is difficult not to notice that religious organizations and institutions develop on one hand as a mechanism of self-preservation and continuous growth, but there is also the aspect of fulfilling the need for guidance and belonging of ordinary believers. It is impossible to deny that many or even most people feel more comfortable when they are taught what to believe and how to follow the rituals than if they were left free and alone to look for their own religions.

### **The main traits of Japanese religiosity**

The tolerance of Japanese people seems to be almost proverbial. Not only tolerance towards cultural differences but especially to different religions. When Buddhism was first introduced to Japan in the 6th century it encountered fierce resistance but not strictly for religious reasons but rather because of political agendas of struggling for power clans. Once it was accepted as an official religion, the process of amalgamation with native beliefs has begun leading to practical merger of Shinto and Buddhism. It is important to notice, however, that although both religions remained different and mostly independent organizations, the real syncretic unification was carried on in the minds and hearts of the believers.

The tolerance we have mentioned does not seem to mean indifference. People seem to be interested in religions and also religious practices but are somehow reluctant in declaring their beliefs or affiliations with particular religious organizations. As Mark Mullins correctly points out in his book on Japanese Christianity, "Although the large majority profess to be "without religion" (*mushūkyō*), what this actually means for most Japanese is that they are without an exclusive commitment to one particular organized religion. The vast majority of the Japanese continue to participate in religious life, including rituals over the course of the life cycle (birth, marriage, and death), ceremonies related to household and communal

obligations, and in annual festivals and celebrations connected to Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples.”<sup>2</sup> In spite of being involved in some kind of religious practices almost on daily bases one still can declare being a non-believer.

The tolerance towards different beliefs and the healthy distance to specific doctrines and dogmas allow for much wider individual search for religious truths. Also, it secures openness in such endeavor since there is not a certain truth or god that we need to find, we just depart and search without any assumptions as to what is it that we should find. We discover while we move ahead and accept even the unexpected.

### Shinto

Although for the purpose of this article it would have been better to start from analyzing emergence and religious practices of Shugendō, and minimizing the space devoted to description of Shinto, since by itself, it was almost never a sole subject of beliefs of any individual practitioners, but because of its great contribution to creating Japanese religious syncretism and non-exclusive character we shall mention some of its influences helpful to understanding the topic of this short article. In other words grasping the gist of Shinto will contribute a lot to better comprehension of Japanese spirituality and its main features.

Shinto seems to be quite easy to describe and at the same time extremely difficult to appreciate in its deepest insights. *Shinto*, the name of the religion, consists of two characters, *shin* or, in different reading, *kami* and *to* or *do*, which means a way. The translation of the second character does not pose any problems, however with the *shin* or *kami* we need to proceed very cautiously. As Stuart Picken points out, “*Kami is often translated as ‘god’ with a small ‘g.’ This is usually taken as grounds for claiming that the religious culture of the Japanese is polytheistic. However, in the Japanese language, singular and plural are not distinguished as they are in Indo-European languages; and although there may be many kami, they all share the same character. Kami thus refers to the essence of many phenomena that the Japanese believed were endowed with an aura of divinity. Rocks, rivers, animals, trees, places, and even people can be said to possess the nature of kami. Anything that can inspire a sense of wonder and awe in the beholder, in a way that testifies to the divinity of its origin or being,*

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<sup>2</sup> Mullins, Mark R., *Japan*. in Phan, Peter C. edit. *Christianities in Asia* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 198.

can be called *kami*.”<sup>3</sup> Proper understanding of the Japanese concept of god will also help to explain and comprehend the basics of Shugendō practices and a very specific attitude to the Nature, not only as a proper place for the individual to conduct his or her religious practices, but also as a manifestation of non-personal and non-pantheistic god.

The contribution to building a conception of a religion that can successfully function within a society where centrally governed religious organizations have a strong presence is undeniable. Shinto shrines were omnipresent, available to everyone who wished to worship and whenever one felt like doing it. The deities enshrined there were often connected to a given place, area or local clans, with non or only loose connections to other shrines or regional organizations. No particular holy scripture to follow, no institution to develop and guard an original theology. No particular founder. The Shinto deities seemed to emerge naturally, and were often worshiped as an integral part of the local natural space. Not so much as something transcending the realm of ordinary people, but more like entities of parallel or yearned into the human realm. The declaration of belief in a particular god or gods as well as of affiliation with a certain shrine seemed to have no sense whatsoever.

### **Amalgamation of Shinto and Buddhism**

This particular, not fully defined and in a way fluid status of Shinto was probably the main factor that made the merger with Buddhism possible. Since Buddhism itself was seldom aggressive and exclusive in its nature, both religions seemed to develop a very specific mode of coexistence. Thought it would probably be safer to say, that not the religions themselves, but the Japanese people developed within their heart and their culture a specific way to connect and interpret them so they would not show any contradictions or aggression. The later idea of perceiving Shinto gods as a manifestation of the Buddhist pantheon was only the next natural step to the systematization of the amalgamation that has already functioned in the hearts of believers for centuries.

The idea of Shinto gods being manifestations of Buddhist deities got a specific name, *honji suijaku*<sup>4</sup>, and as a phenomenon it seems to be quite well researched

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<sup>3</sup> Picken, D.B. Stuart, *Essentials of Shinto. An Analytical Introduction to Principal Teachings* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood Press, 1994) XXII.

<sup>4</sup> The term “*honji*” or “*honchi*” literally means the original or main ground and “*suijaku*” means a trace, leaving a mark or impression.

and described. Mark Teeuwen explains the notion as follows. “Clearly, the *honji suijaku* paradigm constituted the linchpin of the cultic system of pre-modern Japan: it was by combining individual deities from different cultic traditions that the multifaced divinities of pre-modern Japan were construed and arranged functionally and hierarchically in a structured divine realm. It is no exaggeration to state that an analysis of the functioning of this paradigm is the shortest route to grasping the essence of Japan’s premodern cultic system.”<sup>5</sup> As we can clearly see, combining deities and religious notions from different traditions seems to be the essential part of Japanese religious life.

We mention this amalgamation here not only to show one of the conditions of social and religious background but more to point out that this natural capacity for syncretic thought and development is the necessary feature for the private religion or individual religious practices to emerge. It would also be interesting to ask why Buddhism being incomparably more sophisticated theologically and stronger organizationally did not annihilate Shinto, as Christianity did with most native religions once it got the power to do it? The answer can probably be found again in the intrinsic capacity of the Japanese people not to look for or stress differences and contradictions but rather to seek a compromise and try to encompass various notions within individual and group consciousness.

### Shugendō

Shugendō is a peculiar phenomenon that for most of the history of its emergence is difficult to be classified as a religion or religious organization. Throughout its history it has been functioning in a more or less strict organizational framework, and from time to time under the governance of organizational structure of Tendai and Shingon schools of Japanese Buddhism. Nevertheless, it always maintained its distinctive feature which may be characterized as freedom of individual belief and practice, specially the practice of mountain pilgrimages. Still some people ask if Shugendō is a kind of a Buddhist school, some even ponder if Shugendō is a religion at all. Indeed it is difficult to apply the category of religion to it, but we may say that it is a very peculiar kind of religion that can exist without any religious organization, without a set of scriptures or theology and without a particular leader, and even remain its original method of life under the jurisdiction and governance of another religion.

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<sup>5</sup> Teeuwen Mark, Rambelli Fabio, edit. *Buddhas and Kami in Japan. Honji suijaku as a combinatory paradigm* (Oxford: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 6.

Kubota tries to define Shugendō as follows. “Ancient people probably have felt kami in this impalpable presence<sup>6</sup> of Nature. The Japanese have felt this extraordinary presence in every existence of the surroundings such as not only animals or plants, but also crags, the rustle of the wind, sunlight pouring through a bunch of trees or the flow of water. It may be said that the Japanese perception of *kami* lies in the consciousness of this presence. Shugendō makes its way into this presence of the Nature, connects with breath of every existence found there, and departs to a place where it tries to acquire it as a new energy for the self. At the same time, in the mountains the spirits of the ancestors settle down, it borrows the power of these ancestors spirits, and finally the way of trying to acquire supernatural power, energy may be said to be the principle of Shugendō.”<sup>7</sup>

As we can see from the above quotation, the deepest and most essential experience of Shugendō practitioner does not require any mediation of a specific organization, priesthood or canon of teachings. It is based on the very individual experience of the practitioner placing himself or herself in very specific conditions that help to attain that specific insight and personal experience. Further he stresses that “But if I go deep into the mountains and receive the life energy emanated by grass, trees, insects and fish in the mountains, and was shaken by the thought if the mountain is me or if I am the mountain, then there is no way to doubt that the mountain is alive and moving.”<sup>8</sup> This fragment also clearly points to a religious experience that exceeds any diversification of subject and object, of human beings and the Nature or gods, and leads to a realization of the unity and sharing the same life energy with all elements creating the mountain environment. The conditions of that experience are not based on a schema a human being versus the Nature or gods, or human being, mediator, the Nature or gods, there seem to be no need for separation, antagonism or mediation, once we experience and realize that basic unity and accept it as such.

It would not be however right to believe that this kind of religious practice not restricted by any particular organization or religious institution was always possible without any struggle. Since the emergence of Shugendō in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, not only the government but also rival religious establishments tried to control and restrict free religious practices in the mountains. Since the government strictly controlled Buddhist hierarchy, and becoming a monk required administrative permission, those who chose to become monks or religious practitioners by

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<sup>6</sup> The term *kehai* is often translated as sign, indication or presence, but originally it refers to a feeling one unintentionally gets from the state of his surroundings.

<sup>7</sup> Kubota, Nobuhiro, *Shugen no sekai. Shigen no seimei uchū* (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 2005), 16.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 18.



themselves sometimes became a target of persecution. The *Yōrō-ritsuryō*<sup>9</sup> codes include quite detailed regulations concerning monks and nuns stating clearly what kind of behavior is now allowed and punishable. Since the law targeted Buddhist monk and nuns, it should not be applied to private monks or those outside of the Buddhist hierarchy, however, as Kubota points out in the earlier mentioned research, “At that time, any kind of religious activities, required a permission of a monk official called Sango who was responsible for supervision of monks belonging to temples.”<sup>10</sup> And further “The Ritsuryo code strictly prohibited Shugendō practitioners a free activities in mountains and forests. Also, it prohibited people to privately enter the Buddhist priesthood and become a monk or a nun.”<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless the enforcing power of these regulations was not strong enough to completely wipe out the religious movement of Shugendō at its beginning and in spite of some instances of almost complete extinction, the practitioners are still active in contemporary Japan after about 1300 years of its history without any central and continuous organization or institution.

There seems to be a big difference between the status of individual followers depending whether the society is dominated by tolerant or absolutistic religions. Most religions and religious organizations try to show their tolerance towards others even though this tolerance may not always be true or acted upon. But nevertheless at times tolerance is also a rational choice for missionary purposes and a good marketing strategy, especially for religious organization that through most of their history used to be exclusive in their teaching and actions.

Thus Shugendō offers its practitioners freedom from religious organizations based on authority and teaching of authorized members of such. Though it functions as a kind of organization, there is no central authority of power to subdue the individual practitioners to follow rules and teachings under the punishment of being excluded from the group or community. Shugendō did not have separate shrines or temples. For the practitioners of Shugendō mountains were in a sense something like a temple, but there is also an essential difference. For the practitioners, the mountains were not so much the place of worship, as shrines, temples and churches are, but they are more like *dojo*<sup>12</sup>, a place where one develops his or her skills, physical and spiritual.

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<sup>9</sup> *Yōrō-ritsuryō* code of 720, enacted in 757 consists of 10 volumes of administrative code and 10 volumes of criminal code, including the *Sōniryō* Regulations for Monks and Nuns.

<sup>10</sup> Kubota, Nobuhiro, *Shugen no sekai. Shigen no seimei uchū* (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 2005), 44.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* 44.

<sup>12</sup> The term *dōjō* is quite well known in the West due to widespread interest in Japanese martial arts and refers mainly to a place of practice. It is written using two characters, one meaning a way and the other meaning a place.

***Shugyō*<sup>13</sup> as the distinctive feature of non-institutionalized private religion**

The term *shugyō* itself at a first glance is supposed not to pose any problems, but in fact because of its essential importance to Shugendō, translating it merely as practice or religious practice does not give it justice. As it happens in many Buddhist temples, cleaning the floors, watering vegetables or preparing meals can also be a form of religious practice. And so can be climbing the mountains or walking through the forests. We also need to remember that asceticism and spiritual exercises, broadly conceived, may be and in most cases are quite different things. Asceticism seems to be reserved for monks, nuns, priests and any other kinds of religious professionals, but spiritual exercises may be practiced by anyone within the framework of everyday activities of people actively engaged in the life of the society.

This mode of religious practice as mentioned above also allows for the individual to successfully fulfill his religious needs beyond and outside a specific religious organization, since the organization itself may be helpful with the methodology and education but is not a necessary mediation between the individual and the deity or the religious goals. The individual practitioner reaches these goals not because of the organization, but only because of his devotion and following the practices he considers suitable, sometimes against the advice of the organization he belongs to. The individual may carry on these practices outside any specific religious structure, a shrine or a temple, and without any assistance of any specific religious organization or institution.

One of the leading scholars of Shugendō explains its gist as follows. “It is said that according to Shugendō doctrine, religious practices in the mountains aim at turning the Shugendō practitioner into a Buddha (becoming a Buddha in this body). In other words, a worldly man by caring on religious practices in holy mountains, aims at changing himself into a holy being. For this reason mountain practices of Shugendō may be divided into three aspects. Firstly, the aspect of mountains as a holy place, secondly the religious character of Shugendō practitioner as a person that can be turned into a holy person, and thirdly the process of religious practices that transforms a Shugendō practitioner into a holy being.”<sup>14</sup> As we can see, there is the environment of the mountains that gives a proper place, there is the practitioner himself or herself equipped with the possibility and ca-

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<sup>13</sup> *Shugyō* is a term that is usually translated as training or ascetic practices, but it does not just mean mortification of the flesh, but rather perfecting oneself also through diligent carrying out not only special religious or non-religious practices but also ordinary everyday duties.

<sup>14</sup> Miyake, Hitoshi, *Shugendō* (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 2001), 291.

capacity to transform himself or herself and the religious practices, the efforts of the individuals to realize this transformation. It is important to notice that this transformation does not happen because of a specific manmade holy temple or the necessary guidance or mediation of a specific institution or organization, but solely due to the efforts and persistence of the individual practitioner.

We also need to remember that in spite of its often overdeveloped social aspect, religion is originally a private matter, and the stress of the social dimension of religious life sometimes is due to the abuse of the power that religion may have for the purpose of controlling and manipulating individuals and groups.

### **Emergence of practitioners groups $K\bar{o}$ <sup>15</sup>, their function and relations to individual members**

When we look at various definitions of Shugendō we can't fail noticing that belonging to a practitioners group or an organization seems to be an essential part of caring out a religious quest. Indeed, practitioners may form groups and organizations but they are not as important as in Christianity, Buddhism or Islam and serve quite different purposes than in those religions.

It is quite difficult to adequately define the term  $K\bar{o}$ , since it showed a little different characteristics depending on time in the history, place or the purpose of its activities. Often it is translated as religious association, confraternity, mutual assistance association. It is said that the origin and the naming of these associations derives from meetings held to hear Buddhist lectures, but quickly developed also in other areas of social life. There are various aspects and methods for studying this phenomenon, anthropological, sociological, historical just to name a few, but here we shall consider the existence, activity and characteristics of practitioners groups  $K\bar{o}$  as a mechanism of providing and protecting freedom of belief and religious practice of their members.

*The New Dictionary of Sociology*<sup>16</sup> defines the  $K\bar{o}$  groups as follows: "non-occupational organization put together by people for a common purpose, build upon their capacity of freedom and equality and also a free will"<sup>17</sup>. As the definition points out, the group is created for a certain purpose, and once the purpose is achieved, the organization may be dissolved. It is a very important feature,

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<sup>15</sup> In modern Japanese the term  $K\bar{o}$  is generally recognizable and frequently used.

<sup>16</sup> Morioka, Kiyomi, Shiohara, Tsutomu, Honma, Kōhei, *Shin Shakaigaku Jiten*. (Tokyo: Yūhikaku, 1993).

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 407.

since this should save the organization from deviation to self-preservation, which seems to be quite a common case for religious institutions. In his research on *Kō*, Hasebe<sup>18</sup> says that “Even though the group establishes a leader or a manager, a mutual aid due to voluntarily and equal union of the members, and because of it, easily conceived organizational weakness related to sustaining the stability of the group, no matter what is the kind of the group, it may be said to be general structural characteristics the *Kō* groups possess.”<sup>19</sup> As we can see, on the one hand we have mutual help of free and equal members and on the other the organization that is vulnerable to numerous kinds of temptations. But as long as the free and equal union remains the core of this organization, the danger of the organization itself taking over the lead is relatively small.

Hasebe’s work is also extremely valuable for further study of the phenomenon, because it is not so much devoted to historical studies of the sole form of *Kō*, but more concentrated on the principles that keep the groups together.

The practitioners groups in a way seem to be similar in purpose and in form to those of medieval and modern Christian Europe where numerous kinds of fraternities developed and were active in almost all social classes. Associations of pilgrims to the Grand Shrine of Ise, fraternities of the Shrine of Fushimi Inari or fraternities of Mount Fuji are only a few examples of associations that bear resemblance to European counterparts were created all over Japan. These are however very different in their purposes from the associations of practitioners (*gyōja*<sup>20</sup> *Kō*) we are discussing here in connection to Shugendō. The associations of pilgrims that were also called *Kō* were in a way similar to their counterparts in Europe, but the Shugendō *Kō* showed quite unique features. The most important one was that these groups were not formed to create a church or a religious community per se, but to help individual members reach their individual goals which may have been quite different for each member of the group.

Also in Christian religious fraternities or religious orders becoming a member often means giving up a great part of or sometimes even all religious and non-religious freedom. When one looks at constitutions of such institutions obedience to the superiors seems to be the most important condition and feature of the

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<sup>18</sup> There are not many materials devoted to the problem of such practitioners groups itself, but Hachiro Hasebe’s *The possibilities of research on Kō groups* published in 2013 is a great source of information and help to understand the phenomenon itself. In 2014 he has published *The possibilities of research on Kōgroups II*, which is as much informative and valuable as the previous one.

<sup>19</sup> Hasebe, Hachiro, *Kō kenkyū no kanōsei* (Tokyo: Keiyūsha, 2013), 9.

<sup>20</sup> The term *gyōja* also poses a difficulty. It is translated as ascetic, pilgrim, devotee, but we need to remember that one can be a pilgrim but not an ascetic, and being solely a pilgrim or devotee does not make one an ascetic. The term *gyōja* originally meant a person devoted to any kind of religious or non-religious exercises to perfect oneself and attain certain goals.

membership. As Nicholas Terpstra points out, “Brotherhoods were the most public face of the church, yet were almost entirely lay. They originated to promote civic peace, yet were factious and partisan. Their internal ordering was to reflect the equality of souls in the eyes of God, yet everything from seats in the oratory to place in procession was ranked hierarchically.”<sup>21</sup> The confraternities were integral part of church organization also as institutions mirroring its hierarchical structure, based on the absolute distinction between laity and priesthood. He continues that “Gabriel Le Bras first approached confraternities as a parallel or alternative church, encouraging others to see the brotherhoods as a means of understanding religion as a lived experience centered around social relations rather than as a set of doctrines or institutions.”<sup>22</sup> Le Bras notices a very important feature of confraternities, that of being centered around social relations and not the teachings or institutions of the church. Here we can see yet another difference compared with the characteristics of *Kō* groups. For *Kō* members, the group is not an alternative or a substitute of any kind of church or religious organization, neither are the social relations, nor the doctrine or the institution at its core. *Kō* seems to be based solely on the will of individual practitioners to tentatively share the same path and help each other with each other’s individual struggle.

Trying to summarize we may say that absence of hierarchy and equality of members, independence of any church or religious organization, no group purposes or goals exceeding individual ones, no regular clergy or priesthood are all the features that kept Shugendō tradition as mostly private religion and also kept groups of practitioners *Kō* from becoming self-centered institutions.

### **Komusō<sup>23</sup>, the monks of nothingness**

Before we proceed to Christianity, I would like to mention another instance that may in a way be regarded as a form of private religion. Even though it seems that the religious movement of Komusō was quite strictly regulated by the Tokugawa government, the very teaching and practices of the religious movement were extremely simple and vague. Looking at the popular image of the wondering

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<sup>21</sup> Terpstra, Nicholas, edit. *The Politics of Ritual Kinship. Confraternities and Social Order in Early Modern Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 1.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 3.

<sup>23</sup> A mendicant practitioner of the Fuke sect, wearing a sedge hood and playing a bamboo flute *shakuhachi*. Because of wearing a big straw hat covering completely their face safeguarding their anonymity, they were also called monks of nothingness.

monks playing long bamboo flutes, it seems to be more of a legend than the truth. Unfortunately, since the movement, similar to Shugendō, had no specific doctrine or headquarters that would set the orthodoxy and guard against the heretics, written documents or materials that can clearly throw some light on the origin and development of the religious aspects of the movement are extremely scarce. But from what we know, being a Komusō offered a lot of unique benefits for the practitioners. The most important for us would be an almost complete freedom as to the contents and scope of beliefs. Although a Komusō were perceived as Zen monks, their private beliefs were nobodies concern.

Since the movement in its original form is practically extinct<sup>24</sup> it is impossible to reconstruct the spiritual practices and worldviews of the practitioners. There are however a few sources that may help us reconstruct some pieces of that religious movement.

In his book on Komusō movement Kyōson Takeda says that “Little by little I will explain about the Fuke sect, but to tell the truth, it is a rare sect that has nothing that would resemble a doctrine. For this reason it had no such a doctrine that would deny the Emperor system or would reject State Shinto, much less had it any anti-Establishment inclinations, complete denial of worldly things or thought or action towards creating an Utopia as desired by themselves sacred space”.<sup>25</sup> As we can see this almost completely unknown sect seems to have neither particular contents nor any specific religious stance. But still it had enough practitioners to be easily recognizable and still present in the memories of contemporary people due to their appearances in literature or historical movies. For the very characteristics stated above our knowledge concerning the movement, its real form and purposes is very scarce. From historical documents we can learn a little about their behavior and activities, but there is almost nothing we can state for sure about their systems of belief or religious teaching.

Later on in his book<sup>26</sup> Takeda explains that at the beginning of Edo Period, to become a Komusō was extremely easy, it was enough to dress as one and be able to play a bamboo flute *shakuhachi*, no other regulations seemed to apply. No particular confessions, and most likely no vows of any kind. How much more of religious freedom could an individual practitioner expect?

Although Komusō and Fuke sect became popular enough that was recognizable by most of the Tokugawa Period society, the doctrine, practices and organi-

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<sup>24</sup> There were some attempts to revive the movement and some temples that were traditionally head temples for the movement are now officially headquarters of similar schools but those involved nowadays are more interested in the musical aspect of playing the bamboo flute than religious practices per se.

<sup>25</sup> Takeda, Kyōson, *Komusō. Sei to zoku no igyōsha tachi* (Tokyo: Sanichi Shobō, 1997), 36.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. 49.

zation never seemed do develop any further. As Takeda explains, the Fuke sect was regarded as a derivative of a Rinzai (Linji) Zen School, and since the monk Fuke<sup>27</sup> was a friend of Rinzai (Linji), a short speech of his included in *The Records of Linji* is regarded as “the only scripture of Komusō, and the doctrine of Fuke sect”<sup>28</sup>. It is important to notice that the speech mentioned above is only 26 Chinese characters long. In the English translation it reads: “Coming as brightness, I hit the brightness; Coming as darkness, I hit the darkness; Coming from the four quarters and eight directions, I hit like a whirlwind; Coming from empty sky, I lash like a flail.”<sup>29</sup> For most people thinking of religion in categories similar to Christianity it is almost impossible to comprehend a religion that can be based on a few vague sentences, all the more understand a complete lack of desire to develop it into a doctrinal canon and a proper organization to safeguard it. As extreme as it may seem, the Fuke sect functioned for quite a long time giving a great number of practitioners a chance to freely pursue their private religious goals.

### Individual practitioners and monasticism in early Christianity

Before Christian church institutions fully developed and gained religious and political power, the first movements of monasticism seen in Christian history, no doubt, bore a lot of similarities to the practices of Shugendō, Komusō and then non-church movement of Kanzō Uchimura, who also thought of the apostolic church as an ideal form of association.

No need to say that church or religion independent ascetic practices are not limited to any particular culture, and may be observed in the East as well as in the West. In the Christian tradition in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries, when the monasticism seemed to form its orthodox shape to a certain extent due to reaction of Christian clergy to ascetic wonderers that gained trust and popularity of many communities, such instances of individual and independent ascetic teachers were not rare at all. Since the church had not yet developed an absolute orthodoxy and mechanism to enforce it, such ascetic teachers were in a way free to teach and to follow their own way to salvation based on individual interpretations of Christ’s gospel. In his book “Wandering, Begging Monks” Daniel F. Caner writes as follows: “certain wandering monks received both popular acclaim and alms by virtue

<sup>27</sup> Zhenzhou Puhua, a Chinese monk, lived probably 770–840 or 860.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. 124.

<sup>29</sup> Kirchner, Thomas Y., edit., Fuller Sasaki, Ruth trsns. *The Record of Linji* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2009), 295.

of their material renunciations (i.e., their ascetic poverty) and their charismatic behavior or utterances (here specified as prophesying). From an ecclesiastical perspective, such acclaim could prove challenging indeed. At Constantinople it became pivotal in a series of confrontations between church officials, whose claims to spiritual authority derived mainly from their church office, and monks, who derived both apostolic authority and aristocratic patronage by virtue of their ascetic practices and spiritual services.”<sup>30</sup> As he bluntly points out, there surfaces a problem of spiritual authority to which both clergy and ascetic teachers claim their rights. From the point of view of modern Christian teaching the problem of monasticism is fixed and there is no place whatsoever for wondering ascetics that could function independently of a given Christian denomination. It is difficult to even imagine that in the modern times we could have religious practitioners or teachers who would live in a society without trying to create their own sect or religious denomination.

As the author explains further, “But as Christianity gained a more central position in Roman society after Constantine, church rhetoric increasingly favored those solitaries whose *askēsis* (spiritual exercises, practices, renunciation, or mode of life) placed them outside the normal (urban or village) course of human interactions and concerns.”<sup>31</sup> For Christian monasticism, as it happened in the case of Buddhism, separation from ordinary life and the society became a default. People who wanted to devote their lives to searching for religious truth and getting closer to god had no choice but leave the society and there try to work within the framework set by church authorities. The aim of monastic life was not a free quest for truth, but obedience in following the savior. “It was based on the notion that strict imitation of Jesus and his apostles (meaning absolute poverty, prayer, and spiritual teaching) was the highest form of Christian life.”<sup>32</sup>

### Japanese Christianity

The above tradition was a common sense in the western societies but for the Japanese the contents of the teaching and the spirit of the teachers seemed to convey more of Christianity than the tradition they had no access to. It is interesting to consider the relation of the individual and religious organization,

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<sup>30</sup> Caner, Daniel, *Wandering, Begging monks. Spiritual Authority and the Promotion of Monasticism in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 3.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* 5.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* 14–15.



as opposite to the relation of an individual to a particular deity, if any. For most westerners it is difficult to imagine a religion without any particular deities or with many deities but striped from any particular relations of the individuals to gods. Christianity supplies a very specific view of what religion is and of what it should be, but quite many religions or belief systems don't fit into that view no matter how strong we feel about trying to force them to. As Muller points out "Those of us familiar only with the world of established churches, denominational bureaucracies, and large Christian institution tend to forget that Christianity began as a new religious movement with a leader who was known as a healer and exorcist."<sup>33</sup> And this is how quite many Japanese may have perceived Christianity.

The history of religions in Japan shows how complicated and how different from the West, the development and coexistence of literally non-compatible belief systems can not only exist in harmony in the same society in a particular era, but also in one individual believer throughout his life. Not only for those familiar with Japanese history, and also for those who had a chance to spend a few days in Japan and do some sightseeing, it is quite clear that religious tolerance is one of the main features of its religious landscape not only in the past, but also at present.

All the religions and religious beliefs we have mentioned so far are of Asian or native Japanese origin and their non-institutionalized margin is, in a way, easy to understand and accept, but how can we relate all these features to such a religion as Christianity, that was for most of its history exclusive and less than friendly not only to different beliefs but also to any different religious organizations, that were naturally perceived as a threat.

Looking at how all foreign religions and thought systems that were brought from Korea, China and India were adopted and changed to fit the needs of Japanese society, it is fit to expect that the same thing has happened to Christianity. Although because of its exclusive nature the process might have been more difficult, in Japanese religiousness the orthodoxy seems to be less important than intrinsic talent for incorporating and adjusting only those parts that are compatible with the Japanese religious sense.

The first encounter with Christianity took place in the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century and was regarded as a great success by missionaries, since, in spite of various difficulties, they succeeded to convert a considerable number of the natives. Christianity could have become a third great religion of Japan, after Shinto and Buddhism, if Japan had not closed its borders and expelled all foreigners from

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<sup>33</sup> Mullins, Mark, *Christianity Made in Japan: A Study of Indigenous Movements*. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1998), 31.

its land. There were some exceptions but their influence on our topic is negligible. After Japan opened its borders again in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Christianity became legal again and basic religious freedom was granted to the Japanese subjects. At that time it turned out that there were still a few Christians on some remote islands who kept their Christian faith in secret for two and a half centuries without any contacts with priests or church hierarchy outside Japan. But even when they could come out and unite with the mother church, sometimes they chose not to and remained independent Christian communities on their own, with theology and rituals that only resembled European Christianity of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

When Japan opened its borders again, Christian missionaries of all denominations rushed to convert the totally non-Christian nation. Also many Japanese interested in the western culture looked at Christianity as a progressive and innovative religious trend that may be necessary for the modernization of Japanese society. The ground for transplanting Christianity in Japan was quite different than everywhere else in Asia. “Japanese were not passive recipients of transplanted Christianity, but active agents who reinterpreted and reconstructed the faith in terms that made sense to them. Many converts both within and outside of the mission churches have felt that the faith was unnecessarily bound to Western theology, organizational forms, denominational politics, and missionary control. Although many observers note that Japanese theology has tended to remain Eurocentric in orientation, there are numerous examples of how Japanese have transformed Christianity into a religion of their own through the process of inculturation or indigenization.”<sup>34</sup> As Mullins points out, the active involvement in getting to the gist of Christianity, inevitably lead to undermining the validity and importance of the wrapping the religion was delivered in. It is also interesting to note that most indigenous Christian movements that emerged in Japan were quite often the consequence of Missionaries’ failure to relate Christianity to the conditions of Japanese culture and utilizing basic features of the Japanese mind. “Missionary theology and practice have tended to emphasize a total discontinuity between the Christian faith and Japanese religious traditions and practices. Indigenous traditions needed to be “displaced” or removed to make room for the Gospel and authentic Christian faith.”<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Mullins, Mark, R. *Japan*. in Phan, C. Peter, edit. *Christianities in Asia* (Chichester: Blackwell Publishing, 2011), 206.

<sup>35</sup> Mullins, Mark R. edit. *Handbook of Christianity in Japan* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 145–146.

### Non-church Christianity of Kanzō Uchimura<sup>36</sup>

It is difficult to say to what extent was the Kanzō Uchimura rebellion against the western Christianity a consequence of the missionary work of overzealous American preachers, but in the end it led him to a negation of church institution as such. If we look at Luther's critique of the Catholic Church we see that although it is focused on the immoralities and indulgences of the Church, he does not want to destroy and abandon it but just to reform it so it could continue to exist in a better, and more Christian way.

It seems to be extremely difficult to revolt against certain religious beliefs or organizations, and not to create a counterpart for it that's almost like the one we were in opposition to in the first place. Making a new and the only true church seemed to be one of the main purposes of reformation itself and then never ending severance and emergence of yet new denominations. It is interesting to notice that, for example in China, the dissatisfaction with foreign Christianity led not so much to negating the institution of the church itself but to creating a native Chinese denomination that would replace all the churches governed from abroad.

In Japan, Kanzō Uchimura was not interested in the reformation of any particular Christian denomination or any particular church but came to a conclusion that church itself as an organization or institution may not be essential for a Christian faith, and that there may be some ways to function as a Christian outside of any specific Christian organization. Sharing this notion with others in the West would certainly lead to creating of a new denomination, but his way of preaching his non-church faith managed so save him and his followers from falling into a contradiction of creating a non-church organization.

Discrepancies that occurred during reformation and then in reformed churches were mainly due to the way the church organization was run or interpretations of the truths of faith. In the case of Uchimura's non-church there is another and the only aspect of faith that is in play, the individual, personal, free belief that gets its proper meaning and rightful place over the organization or institution backed doctrine or dogma. Furthermore, since non-church had no specific organization no disagreements about the way it should be run could occur and since there was no central authority setting the orthodoxy, there could be no heretics and disputes about the right interpretation of the teaching.

Already in his early writings Uchimura seems to be a little critical of how Christian missions were carried on and how the faith was presented to the

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<sup>36</sup> For reading materials (more than 200 books and articles) about Kanzo Uchimura published in western languages refer to Sonntag, Mira. *Uchimura Kanzō. A Bibliography of Studies and Translation in Western Languages.* in *Japonica Humboldtiana* No4. January 2000. (pp. 129–176).

Japanese people, and at the same time open to objective evaluation of other Japanese religions and the good traits of the Japanese character. In the article *Moral Traits of The “Yamato-Damashii”* (“*Spirit of Japan*”) included in the first volume of his complete collected works dated 1884, he writes as follows: “One may say that the source of the Buddhist faith is humanity – a source found in the heart of an Indian prince whose unconquerable sympathy for human suffering impelled him to discard his royal state and seek, in lowly guise, some means for the alleviation of a world’s miseries. So far as man could succeed, he won success. His doctrines may be gainsaid, his religious system may be wrong, but non among us doubt that his humanity knew no bounds.”<sup>37</sup> That humanity within is the starting point that exceeds any religious boundaries or organizational limitations.

At the early stage of the development of his religious belief system and inevitable evolution towards the idea of non-church Christianity he has already pointed out the problem of various denominations and churches, the situation that is not good at all for propagating faith in Japan and suggests a union of churches or finding out another radical solution that would not involve creating yet another church. “‘You desire union,’ some missionaries may say, ‘but how are you going to attain your end? You reject all of our denominational churches; what system are you going to adopt? Are you going to make a new sect, thus adding one more to the multitudinous sects already existing?’”<sup>38</sup>

For missionaries the multitude of churches was something of a common sense and each church organization was interested and involved in getting converts not so much for Christianity as such but more for a particular denomination or church that sponsored, played for and expected some gains from the work of hired preachers. But for Japanese converts the situation was not that simple. One difficulty was understanding the Bible and the teaching of Christianity, and another one the way and scope of naturalization and making the religion in a way Japanese. As it happened with Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhism before, the same faith of Japanization was also inevitably waiting for Christianity. For Missionaries who were ready to treat Japan as a backward Asian country it was just a nuisance, but if we try to look at the efforts of the native Japanese we must admit that is only shows how seriously they treated the new religion and that they were not satisfied with merely memorizing what the preachers said, but were focused on understanding and receiving the gist of the teaching without the unnecessary wrapping. “Secondly, let the attitude of missionaries in church government be more as helpers and councilors that as officers and managers, and

<sup>37</sup> Uchimura, Kanzō *Uchimura Kanzō Zenshū* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1981) Vol. 1, 126.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.* 162.

give to the converts freer scope in management of their own churches. This we say, not because we wish to place too much trust upon converts, but because we want to foster the spirit of independence in them.”<sup>39</sup> says Uchimura.

It lead to the idea that to be a Christian one does need a specific culturally based organization or institution, and if any form of organization may be permitted that should not be a fixed, lasting one, but more or less functioning only when and in the range required by a certain group . “Strict nationalistic tendency in Japanese churches in unavoidable, and it is not wise to avoid it even if possible. Union must be effected in some way, and this union is possible only through high spiritual culture”<sup>40</sup>. Then the question of what form should the united church or the new non-church have remains. Uchimura sees the primitive apostolic church as the answer.

Indeed the ideas of non-church developed by Uchimura were at the same time implemented and tested through his Bible study groups and meetings. The lectures on the Bible he held regularly in his private house seem to show some features that the apostolic church might have had.

“Many a convert thinks Christianity a sort of philosophy to be intellectually attained, and the church itself a kind of social organization to be controlled and promoted by laws and regulations. But, these means of promoting the Christian cause only “rise the dust” of doubt and discord, and repel earnest seekers of Truth from the Central Figure of Christianity.”<sup>41</sup>

Since his dream of unification of Christian churches turned out to be unrealistic, he made a shift to trying to create some kind of status quo that would in a way transcend any church organization but at the same time allow independent believers to gather for study and prayer if they wished to do so.

Several years have passed since the previously cited texts were written and the idea of non-church began to gain clarity and real shape. In 1901 Uchimura published the first number of his periodical “Non-church”. A few months earlier he started publishing a periodical *Biblical Studies*. It should be pointed out that he started to perceive the problem of church or rather non-church as something important enough that should require a separate paper as a media of clear conveying the idea not within the framework of *Biblical Studies*, but as an independent and important issue. Just at the beginning of the article “The theory of non-church” he writes “If one hears “Non-church” one may think that it is a brochure of some kind of destructionist like anarchism or nihilism, but it definitely is not

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid. 165

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. 163

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. 166

such at all. “Non-church” is a church for those who have no church. That is, it may be said, a dormitory for those who have no home.”<sup>42</sup> The first issue of Non-church is in a way a non-church manifesto, where Uchimura conveys his basic ideas concerning the form of existence of non-church Christianity. The first point he makes is the one that his non-church thought is not destructive and not aimed at the annihilation of existing churches. His idea is to invite those who believe not to create a church, but to offer them a dormitory or a hostel, so that they could dwell there for a while and then move again on their way to God. In the same manifesto he explains further, that in non-church “There is an Universe created by God. There is the Nature. These are the church in this world for us believers of non-church.”<sup>43</sup> This in fact is an incredible statement that resembles much of the Shugendō idea of the mountains and the Nature as the best place for religious practices. It also means that for religious purposes we do not need to build special churches or temples, but the whole world, the whole universe is the place of worship and the best place for religious practices.

After the death of Uchimura, non-church communities still exist and function in various forms, giving Christian believers the possibility to pursue their private religion outside specific organizations, but with the help and advice of fellow non-church Christians.

## Conclusion

No need to say that religion, no matter where and no matter when, is always a very complex and multidimensional problem. But still, based on rigorous analysis, it is possible to single out the unique features of each and every religious movement in the history. These features may be discussed from a viewpoint of the religion as a whole including its organization, institutions and teachings, or from a viewpoint of the believer or follower choosing for some reasons to be involved with a certain set of beliefs and not with others. The scope of free choice of the individual is more or less limited by the options available at a given time and place. The scope in most cases is defined by education, socio-political customs, fear for life, awareness of other sets of beliefs and courage to follow what one believes to really be true. If we remember the situation of Jews and *Conversos*<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Uchimura, Kanzō, *Uchimura Kanzō Zenshū* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1981), Vol. 9, 71.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. 73.

<sup>44</sup> Jews or Muslims converted to Catholicism.

under the Spanish Inquisition, no doubt we will see that their options were extremely limited. On the other hand, in Japan the religious choices were numerous and free most of the time.<sup>45</sup> The variety and diversity of choices one may have is the best condition for any serious religious practitioner.

As we have seen, in Japan not only the traditional religions, such as Shinto, Buddhism and the religious movement of Shugendō, but also a typically western religion such as Christianity, when planted on the Japanese ground immediately gains a new feature, that is the tendency of transcending the organizational, institutional and legislative aspects, and becomes adjusted to the needs of free individuals' standpoint, not afraid of searching for the truths. As the long hiding Christians who have chosen not to unite with the church but to follow their own tradition, so did the Christians of the Meiji Era negate the institution of the church and kept seeking their own Christianity, convinced that no mediation is necessary, since everyone can reach religious goals through a proper and intermittent religious practice.

Looking at the whole history of religious endeavor in Japan, one can conclude that no matter what the circumstances were, no matter if the basic religion was simple or sophisticated, polytheistic or monotheistic, the Japanese were always ready to go beyond established religious institutions and organizations to pursue their individual religious goals. We can also see that even though, depending on the time of history and place within the country, sometimes national or local governments or religious establishments were not so understanding, the ordinary public in most cases was tolerant to any new or unorthodox teaching or behavior.

The aim of this article was not only showing that such movements and practitioners existed and enjoyed their private religion, but also that they may be some social conditions that allow or sustain it, and that there was quite a substantial number of people who have chosen their own path on the journey towards their gods, that their choices were, in most cases, sincere and followed consequently with full devotion, but at the same time tolerance and respect towards others and also the organizations that sometimes they have opposed. We hope that any reader of no specific affiliation but of deep faith can benefit from learning a little about Japanese religious movements that at their very core were based on the individual practices and beliefs of practitioners and where any kind of religious organization or institution was only of secondary importance to those.

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<sup>45</sup> There are some exceptions however, for example the ban of Christianity that led to persecutions and capital punishment for being a believer. But we also need to remember that Christianity was banned not so much for religious but mainly political reasons.

### Summary

In this short article we will try to discuss a very peculiar phenomenon of the Japanese religious scene that can be identified throughout the history, showing similar characteristics in completely different religious settings. This phenomenon we should call non-institutional religious practices, non-organized individual religious practices or private religion. Due to a very specific character of Japanese religiousness, free individual religious quest have become an important part of Japanese religious life. After describing some factors that contributed to the emergence of religious tolerance and sincerity, we shall discuss instances of non-institutional individual practices of Shugendō, Komusō and the notion of non-church Christianity proposed by Kanzō Uchimura, thus building an image of Japanese religiousness not from the standpoint of historical development of religious organizations and their teachings, but from the point of view of an individual practitioner, giving the individual an opportunity and his or her intrinsic right not to depend on organized religions, but to freely follow their own religious pursuits.

**Key words:** Non-organized Religion, Shugendō, Komusō, Non-church Christianity, Kanzō Uchimura, Japanese Religion

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