

文化・事象「話文」読解演習

Japanese Wander Among Three Religions in 10 Days

From the end of December to New Year's Day, Japanese take part in three different religions. As December starts, Christmas trees decorate shopping centers and the Christmas mood envelops the nation almost as if Japan was a Christian country, and as Christmas approaches, Christmas parties are held everywhere.

Soon after Christmas, Japanese change the mood to prepare for New Years. On December 31, they visit temples (Buddhism) to ring the watch-night bell, and on the following day they all visit shrines (*Shinto*) to offer their wishes to a god. In other words, in 10 days starting from Christmas, Japanese take part in rituals from three religions: Christianity, Buddhism and *Shinto*.

When foreigners observe this, they are likely to think Japanese are very religious, especially when they see the crowds of Japanese who visit shrines on the first few days of the year. Three million people visit Tokyo's Meiji shrine alone during the first three days of New Year and about 85 million people in all visit shrines all over Japan. This number of pilgrims must be the largest in the world exceeding those going to Mecca. However, for most Japanese, these actions are not based on any religious belief.

According to a survey carried out in August 2005 by the Yomiuri Shimbun, three out of four people do not believe in religion and the majority do not think religion is important. To the question "Do you believe in any religion?" 23% of respondents replied "Yes" and 75% said "No." To the question "Do you think religion is important?" 35% said "Yes" and 65% said "No."

Japanese view of religion is frivolous

Christmas and New Year's visits to shrines should be looked at rather as a fun festival or an event for Japanese. To illustrate this, Japanese who celebrate Christmas very seldom visit a church. For most Japanese, the reasons many people give for visiting a shrine at New Year comes from their wish to receive good luck or protection from the gods.

In the traditional Japanese religion of Shinto, people worship anything supernatural or things they hold in awe such as certain mountains, rocks, forests, animals and even famous historical figures

as gods. People even now respect these things in daily life. Because of this, many gods co-exist in Japan and there is a proverb "When one god deserts you, another will pick you up." Therefore, Japanese do not feel anything wrong with the co-existence of Christianity and Buddhism with these gods.

At present, the majority of Japanese wedding ceremonies take place in churches or hotels offering chapel-style weddings. However, after getting married, only a small number of Japanese couples actually visit a church. They will visit a shrine for their children's celebration ceremony called "*Shichi-go-san*," and on the New Year visit. Funerals and Buddhist services take place at temples. Therefore, most Japanese use churches, temples and shrines for different occasions as a ceremony hall.

Some people claim that Japanese peoples' attitude and actions towards religion are sometimes indiscreet, but when you consider the global situation and count the number of disputes and wars caused by religion, Japanese peoples' frivolity and indifference towards religion are ironically playing an important role in making Japan one of the most peaceful countries in the world. From this point of view, "frivolity" and "indifference" of Japanese should be replaced with "open-mindedness" and "flexibility."

