

pressions and sentiments of respect owed to the divine imperial personage. In addition, the government promoted Shinto ancestral traditions through systematic instruction in all schools and assumed responsibility for the administration and supervision of religious organizations, the priesthood, and religious ceremonies.

From 1868 to 1945, the government promoted Shinto as the national religion of Japan. The test of loyalty to the government was acceptance of State Shinto. Other religions, such as Buddhism and Christianity, were able to maintain a presence in Japan so long as they were willing to accommodate themselves to the government's views on State Shinto, which included beliefs in a land divinely created, in a succession of emperors descended in unbroken line from Amaterasu, and in a people of divine origin. Under the sanction of religious belief, the government maintained absolute political and military power.⁵

Belief in the emperor as the living incarnation of the sun goddess Amaterasu was based on longstanding traditions predating the twelfth century, but in the nineteenth century this belief was enshrined in dogma. Accordingly, the emperor was considered sacred, inviolable, and a manifestation of the Absolute. At its most extreme, the dogma incorporated the belief that the emperor was a god in human form who deserved the worship and devotion of his people. In addition, some believed that the emperor was not only the head of the Japanese nation, but also the ruler of the entire universe. By extension and another leap of faith, they also believed that the Japanese nation was destined to rule the world.

This edifice of state religion endured until December 15, 1945, when the supreme commander of the Allied forces of occupation ordered the emperor and the Japanese government to disestablish State Shinto, to

relegate rites performed by the imperial family to the status of private religious ceremonies, and to place all existing religions, including Shrine Shinto and Sectarian Shinto, on the same footing, with equal entitlement to support and protection. On January 1, 1946, the emperor publicly denounced the "false conception that the emperor is divine and that the Japanese people are superior to other races and fated to rule the world."

The impact, in both practical and theoretical terms, of this sudden reversal of Shinto hegemony was too widespread to document here.⁶ A few examples will have to suffice. Imperial portraits, which had been kept in sacred repositories in schools, were removed. The imperial chrysanthemum crest that had identified all court buildings was obliterated and banned from future issues of postage stamps and currency. Some 110,000 State Shinto shrines, which had been dependent on and supported by the national government, suddenly found themselves thrown back on their own resources and on the generosity of voluntary contributors. Fundamental Shinto doctrines and ideologies that had advocated ritual suicide as an honorable act of expiation were suddenly declared "myths, legends, and false conceptions." The emperor, who had been venerated as divine, was now regarded as a mere mortal.

Today, religion and state in Japan are completely separate. There is no compulsory national religion, religious instruction in public schools is prohibited, and freedom of religion is guaranteed to all. According to the postwar constitution, the emperor is considered "the symbol of the state and of the unity of the people." His function as the high priest of Shinto is restricted to officiating at traditional ceremonies in one of three shrines within the imperial palace grounds. State Shinto is—at least for the present—dead.

Shinto

