Syncretic Interpretation of Islam in Japan: Mahayana Islam

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Abstract

The objective of this study is to analyze the historical development of Islam in Japan and the syncretic forms of religious interpretation that emerged in this process. The Japanese religious structure is characterized by its multi-layered, flexible, and open nature with respect to simultaneous affiliations. In this framework, the research focuses on the question of how Islam is received and reshaped in the Japanese cultural context. The present study provides a comparative analysis between Mahayana Buddhism and Islam in terms of fundamental theological elements, including the conception of God, the understanding of the holy person, the doctrine of salvation, and worldview. In this context, the approach conceptualized as "Mahayana Islam" is examined, and unique interpretations of Islam that emerged as a result of interaction with Japanese cultural and spiritual values are explored. The historical development of Japanese religions can be understood through the lens of syncretic structures that have emerged over time from the intermingling of Shintoism and Buddhism within the shinbutsu-shūgō tradition. This historical backdrop has facilitated the development of a religious mindset; wherein diverse religious traditions can coexist. In a classic metaphor employed to describe Japanese religious life, Shintoism is likened to the roots of a tree and the foundation of national identity, while Confucianism is analogous to the trunk and branches, and Buddhism is akin to the flowers. The metaphor posits that religious traditions constitute a unified whole that functions in a cohesive manner, devoid of any interference from external factors. Despite the apparent intertwinement of Shintoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism within the moral and spiritual fabric of Japanese society, these traditions have not coalesced to form a singular syncretic religion. The institutional framework encompassed these teachings within distinct structures. However, at the individual level, these teachings were experienced in a unified manner, devoid of discernible boundaries. The Japanese individual, on average, displays a natural flexibility in embracing diverse faith practices at various stages of life. In the late 19th century, a number of Japanese intellectuals, including Tanaka Ippei and Ariga Amado, advanced the concept of reinterpreting Islam in a manner compatible with Japanese belief systems. This reinterpretation was based on the establishment of conceptual parallels with Mahāyāna Buddhism and Shintoism. This was predicated on the belief that the integration of Islam with established Japanese beliefs would engender greater levels of acceptance. Consequently, the harmonization of Islam with other religions, such as Shintoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism, would facilitate its comprehension and enhance its integration into society. Since the 1970s, the institutional representation of Islam has been strengthened by the activities of institutions such as the Japanese Islamic Congress (JIC) and Nihon Isurāmu Kyodan. Concurrently, the understanding of “Mahayana Islam,” which establishes theoretical ties with Mahayana Buddhism, has emerged as an internal and integrative interpretation of religion. Consequently, this study explores the historical, intellectual, and institutional dimensions of the interpretation of Islam in Japan. The analysis examines the manner in which Islam has adapted to Japanese society and the social and cultural factors that have contributed to the development of religious synthesis in this context. This phenomenon underscores the role of religious diversity and the flexibility of belief systems in Japan in fostering the emergence of novel interpretations of Islam.

Keywords: Islam in Japan, Mahayana Buddhism, Mahayana Islam, Syncretism, Interreligious Interaction.