

Japanese prime minister, party leaders seek policies that revive Shinto religion

by [Michael Holtz](#) in the [January 20, 2016](#) issue

[\(The Christian Science Monitor\)](#) Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe's deep adoration for the Ise Grand Shrine, the most sacred Shinto site in Japan, is no secret. He visits each January for the New Year and plans to host the 2016 summit of the Group of Seven industrialized nations in the nearby resort city of Shima.

"I believe it has something to do with his Shinto beliefs," said Satoru Otowa, a spokesman for the shrine, recalling a visit from the prime minister. "Everyone saw how passionately he prayed."

Ise, about 200 miles southwest of Tokyo near the Pacific coast, enshrines the sun goddess Amaterasu, who is believed to be an ancestral god of the imperial family.

"I wanted to choose a place where world leaders could have a full taste and feel of Japan's beautiful nature, bountiful culture, and traditions," he told reporters after announcing the location of the G7 summit, scheduled for May 26-27.

Abe's commitment to Japan's indigenous religion has also led him and his Liberal Democratic Party to pursue a wide range of Shinto-inspired policies—including more openly embracing Japan's imperial heritage, reforming aspects of Japanese education, and re-evaluating the country's wartime record.

Perhaps as old as Japan itself, Shinto has no explicit creed or major religious texts. Its adherents pray to *kami*, spirits found in both living and inanimate things, and believe in a complex body of folklore that emphasizes ancestor worship. As Japan modernized in the late 19th century, officials made Shinto the state religion and gave the emperor divine stature. The religion became closely associated with Japanese militarism, leading to its separation from state institutions after World War II.

Some critics see the country's newfound interest in Shinto as a sign of simmering nationalism at best. At worst, they describe it as a reprise of the ideology used to promote Japanese superiority and a presumed right to govern Asia.

But among conservatives it reflects a fear that Japan has gone adrift after two decades of economic stagnation, materialism, and the rise of neighboring China. Many believe the time has come for the religion to regain its rightful place in the public sphere.

Keiji Furuya, who serves in Abe's cabinet, considers the three years he spent as an exchange student in New York as a teenager among his most formative experiences. Furuya recalls marveling at America's displays of patriotism. He was astonished to see flags billowing from front porches and students reciting the Pledge of Allegiance in school.

Growing up in Japan, Furuya never saw such displays. Emperor Hirohito renounced his status as a "living god" in 1946. The country's new constitution, drafted by U.S. occupation forces, enshrined pacifism as national policy and mandated the separation of state and religion. The U.S. occupation inaugurated a period when Shinto began to disappear from Japanese society.

"For people like me who went through the postwar education system in Japan, raising a flag was not a popular thing to do," said Furuya, whose office conference room is adorned with three flags. "But as time went by . . . I came to believe that it was natural to have respect and pride in one's own country."

Interest in reforms has been building for the past decade. Introducing patriotic education in public schools was one of Abe's top initiatives during his first stint as prime minister from 2006 to 2007.

More recently, a new wave of conservatives helped the LDP win a landslide victory in 2012 and put Abe back in power. Their support helped him pass a package of laws this fall that allows Japan to send troops abroad in support of allies for the first time in its postwar era.

Abe and many of his top cabinet officials are longtime members of Shinto Seiji Renmei (the Shinto Association of Spiritual Leadership). Founded in 1969, it has become one of the most influential political lobbying groups in Japan. According to the most recent count, 302 parliament members are affiliated with the association, compared with 44 two decades ago.

The association supports efforts to revise Japan's pacifist constitution, encourage patriotic education, and return the emperor to a more prominent place in Japanese

society. It also calls for restoring the special status of Yasukuni Shrine, a controversial memorial to Japan's war dead, including convicted war criminals from World War II.

Iwahashi Katsuji, a spokesman for the Association of Shinto Shrines, which administers 80,000 shrines in Japan, said it's time for the Japanese to reevaluate their past.

"Even after the Meiji Restoration there are many good points," he said, referring to Japan's rapid transformation from a feudal farming society into an industrial power at the end of the 19th century. "Just saying that Japan lost the war and that Japan was bad and evil is not constructive."

Inoue Nobutaka, a professor of Shinto studies at Kokugakuin University in Tokyo, said it's far from clear how much of the past Abe and his supporters want to revive. But he contends that organizations such as Seiji Renmei and Nippon Kaigi, a like-minded nationalist group, hold more sway over the Abe administration than they did over its predecessors.

"These groups have been politically active for a long time," Nobutaka said. "Their influence has grown because Abe has turned to them for support."

Seiji Renmei launched a campaign this summer to encourage local education boards to adopt revised textbooks that eliminate negative depictions of Japan's wartime activities.

Abe's critics warn that the new textbooks could weaken an antiwar message they say has helped keep Japan peaceful for seven decades. In the eyes of China and South Korea, two targets of Japan's early-20th-century aggression, Abe and his supporters are historical revisionists who want to whitewash the country's wartime atrocities. —*The Christian Science Monitor*