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Gateways of Power: 21st Century Religion and Ritual in China, Tibet, and Japan

“Gateways of Power”, a day-long symposium whose keynote address and summary are published here, was organized by John Nelson and the Center for the Pacific Rim to honor Peter J. Coughlan, president of the Kiriya Pacific Rim Institute. Held on March 2, 2001 at the University of San Francisco’s Lone Mountain campus, the event was cosponsored with the USF Department of Theology and Religious Studies, the Institute of East Asian Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, and the Japan Society of Northern California.

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What's So Powerful about Ritual?

by Catherine M. Bell, Ph.D.



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One of the great 20th century theories of religion and society predicted that the forces of modernization and secularization would undermine religion as the world has known it—even cause its eventual disappearance. This theory was very compelling in the early decades of its life, both to those who would readily acquiesce to the demise of religion and to those who would mourn its loss. By the second half of the last century, however, the theory had acquired a very mixed record of evidence to support it. Some scholars attempted to retrench, arguing that though religion was not disappearing, it was fundamentally reorganizing itself in social life. Yet others began to doubt there could be any one process called ‘secularization’.

On the one hand, we can point to some forms of religious affiliation and activity that do appear to have suffered from new economic and social patterns. On the other hand, more than a few forms of religion have ridden out the century relatively intact. It is easy to observe around the world today the viability of many old traditions, as well as new and energetic forms of religiosity. Often during the closing decades of the 20th century, scholars had to sit back and wonder just how much we actually know about religion. So we begin the 21st century with some humility—perhaps a little less quick to see a corpse we can dissect (as a pioneering sociologist once put it) and maybe more patient with the reciprocity basic to understanding.

In retrospect, it seems that we exaggerated certain qualities of religion so that it appeared particularly static and monolithic, allowing us to neatly chart the head on clash of the ‘traditional’ with the ‘modern’.

We may not have sufficiently noticed how adaptable and mutable religion has been as far back and as far afield as we have been wont to find it.

Of course, most religions do not present themselves as particularly mutable or protean. They prefer to see themselves as guardians of a long tradition that understands how things really are and can speak fully to both the present and the future. Despite this stress on stability, religions change all the time. It is possible that in our theorizing we have taken some religions too much at their word—what they say—without paying as much attention to what they do.

A focus on ritual facilitates just that. It enables us to see how religions do what they do, to grasp to some extent the internal dynamics of religiosity—not just the beliefs, or doctrines, or institutions—but the way a ritually generated cosmology is experienced as a very tangible world in which one can act more fully and more effectively.

For those of us interested in ritual today, East Asia is a particularly rich area of focus. We see a wide variety of forms of ritual life—and they can tell us something, I believe, about ritual, power, and maybe even about the unfolding of this new century. Some ritual strongly reflects a globally interconnected world; other rituals clearly maintain strong and explicit links to the oldest cultural traditions. In both cases we can marvel that ritual is today, as it has been for millennia, a very central medium of human activity. Contrary to 20th century theories, ritual is not giving way across the board to more so-called ‘rationalized’ forms of behavior. Indeed, I would argue, that ritual remains a very central medium for human activity because it is a direct and practical, if subtle, form of personal empowerment. At one end of a possible continuum, we can see the empowerment of radical self-transformation, often joined to a vision of the world as it should be; while at the other end there is the empowerment gotten through more modest strategies to deal with the world as it is, to try to shape it in the manner it seems to shape us.

The direct yet subtle empowerment of ritual is not essentially a function of passionate conviction or symbolic density or even politically corrected language references. Rather ritual empowerment is tied to the movements of the body in space and time. Through these movements—many inherited, others innovated—ritual participants attest to the presence of a dominant cosmology. By bowing, kneeling, making offerings, or intoning prayer, participants are positing this cosmology even as they are reacting to it. Rituals enable people to understand themselves as moving about within a cosmos of complex powers that can be addressed, propitiated or cultivated. The body may dance and sing to call down particular spirits; or it may sit perfectly immobile to empty the mind. In either case, however, the orchestration of the body is intrinsic to the efficacy of the action.

In the importance of the body moving around an orchestrated space, ritual is certainly akin to theater, perhaps even its progenitor. In his commentary on the dynamics of the modern world (*Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, 1936), Walter Benjamin suggested that the theatrical does not simply convey or communicate the political. Rather politics is theater. Politics happens in and through the theatrical. One has only to watch a Senate hearing or a member of Congress orchestrating a one-minute sound bite to find this view quite compelling. But it should also remind us that the dynamics involved in ritual are not simply over-codified conventions that may or may not have intent or meaning or empirical utility. They are a performative—often theatrical—medium of action on the world.

This description deliberately leaves the nature of ritual morally ambiguous. I certainly cannot imply, with simplistic enthusiasm, that all ritual and religiosity are humane. Without too much effort we can all think of indefensible examples of things done in the name of religion. Rituals are not neutral. As a medium of action, they can be used for good or ill. Think, for example, of one of the more frightening forms of religion to emerge in our day, the Japanese apocalyptic movement, Aum Shinrikyo, under the leadership of the man known as Shoko Asahara. The bread-and-butter of Aum life was an elaborate and graded series of initiatory rituals of ‘discipline’, training, and self-cultivation explicitly designed to purify one of human frailties, to instill special abilities, and to remake a person as nothing less than an agent of a future that is waiting to be born. We can chart in these rituals and the community life that maintained them a type of ‘reverse education’ in which the overwhelming and frustrating complexity of the world is gradually reduced, step by step, to simple dichotomies—good and evil, with us or against us, now or never. It was, perhaps, a grand idealism dangerously run amuck and desensitized to human life on a smaller and personal scale. But it was alluring to relatively well-educated young people eager to transform who they were and aware that to do so the world itself would have to change as well.

While very different in most ways, the ritual activities of the Falungong also address self-transformation, and as such may also be addressing much more. They teach meditative exercises to circulate and renew vital *qi*, the inner energy of the body. These exercises draw on long Daoist traditions of ‘inner alchemy’ in which the body is understood to be a microcosm of the larger universe and, as such, an immediate ritual focus for affecting the macrocosm. They also draw on the very modern and widespread development of qigong societies in the 1960s. Their exercises not only enable one to dispel negative, debilitating *qi*, they can also transmit positive *qi* to others or unblock obstructions of their *qi*. The most immediate benefits are realized in one’s own health, of course, but other abilities are sometimes mentioned, such as the ability to heal others or develop forms of telekinesis. And the newspapers make us all well aware of the type of personal empowerment that could lead previously non-belligerent people to face down the Chinese government in the most theatrical arena in the country. One of my colleagues has wondered if the Falungong is not the ‘Ghost Dance of the new millennium’.

In the Ghost Dance of the American Plains Indians at the close of the 19th century, personal, social and political healing were all wrapped up together, and the ritual dance was experienced as conferring the power to make all this healing happen in the here and now.

There is another take on the rites of the Falungong that comes to mind. In her 1978 essay, “Illness as Metaphor,” Susan Sontag detailed how metaphors of illness—from the medieval plague through leprosy, tuberculosis and syphilis to our modern imagery of cancer—have been regularly invoked to describe a society that is corrupt, unjust, or morally incapacitated. Falungong and many other qigong societies in China are very concerned with the illnesses that afflict people whose *qi* is blocked, corrupted, or weakened. But their philosophy also addresses what they see as the sickness and anomie of modern Chinese society, and for this reason they may have been readily motivated to render, more explicitly than anyone might have predicted, an indictment of the repressive apparatus of the state on both the local and national level. Not only does the corruption of the social body correlate with the illness of the individual body, but the obstructions mounted by the state can and must be removed—just as the Falungong’s rituals remove obstructions of *qi*.

It would not be outside the bounds of reasonable speculation to wonder if the ritual disciplines of the Falungong regimen may also be a subtle response to the chaotic and dislocating economic forces of the new capitalism that is changing the face of China. If so, the Falungong is

diagnosing a social illness and providing an ethic for curing it. It is not at all uncommon to hear many concerns with illness and physical well-being in China today, especially as the once strong health care system is proving to be increasingly inadequate. In discussions of the threats of illness, one can see some of the links suggested by Sontag in which the image of cancer as unregulated, abnormal, and incoherent growth is also an apt one for an emerging market economy marked by unregulated growth and burgeoning consumerism. It is feared that “energy—like savings—will be used up, the body will start consuming itself, the patient will waste away” (Sontag, p. 63). Physical health and economic survival require a new style of disciplined control. The social need to “regulate spending, saving, accounting and the rational limitation of desire” may also be effectively addressed by rites to control the breath and to insure the fluid and measured flow of *qi*. Hence, health-restoring rites of physical control and mental balance that promise to give one control over energy that is blocked, corrupted or even stolen may be powerfully addressing much more. The personal is political, as we learned in the women’s movement of the 1970s.

There are many other examples of the power accorded ritual today. For the sake of cultural spread, I can briefly mention the current controversy in the exiled Tibetan community over worship of Dorje Shugden, a deity considered powerful enough to be threatening to some and particularly auspicious to others. Arguments about the nature of this deity and the efficacy of ritually invoking him is disrupting and dividing the Tibetan community more than any other single issue among the countless social and political ones being faced. There are, undoubtedly, political subtexts to the way the issue is being contested in an increasingly diverse community living on three continents. Perhaps the religio-political authority of the Dalai Lama is also being challenged by those backing the right of access to the power of this deity; and if that was not intended at the start, it may be a result of the controversy. In any case, ritual practice is the medium in which powers of the cosmos are identified and described—and that process is full of real political opportunities and consequences.

Rituals are gates of power. This is not a new role for or style of ritual. We should not be surprised at their appeal to so many people from different walks of life, nor should we be surprised that they can be the focus of so much contention and ambiguity.

Still, we can point to another form of empowerment intrinsic to most ritual activity. Not concerned much at all with self-transformation, this approach finds in countless modest practices a useful medium for dealing with the practical realities of the world as it is. These rites do not try to reinvent a person or society—just to mitigate personal events and round off the sharp corners of what is happening to us. These are the rites by which we contour our domestic and communal worlds, in which we can place both our minor and major tribulations, and discover how to address them—that is, how to have agency in the face of so much that might render us passive.

In these sorts of rituals, we still see the chemistry by which familial values and communal loyalties are reinforced. The grave-cleaning rites of Qingming in the early spring can still empty out much of a Taiwanese town and cover the surrounding hills with families tending to themselves as they tend their dead.

The resurgence in the last two decades of the local festival in many Chinese villages and small towns not only identifies and invokes the power of local deities as something to be reckoned with, the festival also unifies a community in ways that can better weather, and take advantage of, the demands of a multi-layered economy and social structure. Similarly, the Japanese *matsuri* today, even superficially, articulates local traditions and identities, but also ties them into a national cultural map now defined in part by the circulation of tourists.

Some Japanese Buddhist temples have come to offer rites to manage, and perhaps heighten, the ambiguities of abortion, *mizuko kuyo*. And there are rites to address the concerns of an aging population afraid of debilitating disease and senility, rites to *Pokkuri-san* (*pokkuri-shinu*) in which the elderly pray for an easy death.

Many of the so-called ‘new’ religions of Japan, particularly active since the 1950s, are popular because they explicitly address the practical realities of life in the postwar period. Their rituals for *genze riyaku*, or material benefits, do not simply promise a middle-class lifestyle; their focus on materiality is closely tied to the traditional family values that must reinterpret themselves in every generation. A study of the flashy Japanese wedding halls, where one bridal party rolls through after another, finds that the elaborate commercialism does not overpower the way distinctively Japanese values about the person and the family are evoked and handed on.

And in Shinto shrines, old rites continue that presuppose the deepest bonds of humankind with nature. Historians tell us that concerns with purity and pollution are very ancient in Japan, indeed, that such concerns are a very Japanese way of understanding the order of cosmos and society. Yet it is interesting that the most technologically advanced societies today are increasingly regarding their environment, food, and entertainment in rather similar terms—as clean or polluted, pure or contaminated, healthy or unhealthy. In this new century, one in which we have to reconceive the relationship between human beings and everything known as ‘nature’, we might well find some insights for shaping human behavior in this tradition of ritual.

Haven’t you been impressed by the migratory ability of *fengshui*, the Chinese system of ‘wind and water’ prognostications? Its ubiquity in California goes beyond the Asian-American community and New-Age dabbling. It is being used by many serious people as a type of back-up system of cosmic control and insurance. Its assumptions about negative and positive *qi* coursing through the environment are, in fact, providing a conceptual and ritual language for recognizing a power in nature to which we can orient ourselves, but never conquer or suppress.

Of course, we do not perform rituals primarily to address environmental, political, or economic causes. Political action groups are thought to be more effective. When is ritual the most effective thing to do? When the presence of a more encompassing cosmology of spiritual power provides avenues of personal agency that would not otherwise exist. Why do we seek these forms of agency—or why do we do ritual?

We do rituals because we want to be able to hope for healing.

Because we want to experience some sort of continuity between the living and the dead.

Because we want to see in condensed form the moral laws that we hope are ultimately directing human events.

Because we want to be part of a community that comes together with some meaningful destiny, not just the happenstance of temporary proximity.

Because we want to feel that our own activity counts for something, that we can affect the scheme of things at least in small ways.

In other words, we perform rituals because we are human.

Whether the goal is radical transformation of self and society, or modest contouring of the forces shaping our lives, ritual is the means by which we experience a compelling cosmology as the larger room embracing the day-to-day furniture of our lives. Its efficacy may be a particularly human efficacy: are we reacting to the forces named in our rites or are we creating these forces through our rites? Well, most ritual traditions seem to understand that a rite does a bit of both, it cannot be an either-or situation. The efficacy of ritual activity lies in its power to invoke a cosmos that can thoroughly dominate the day-to-day world. With this power for transformation or control, ritual can incubate many attitudes and pathologies, from apocalyptic annihilation to the relentless quest for harmony with the greater scheme of things, or the rigid maintenance of the social worlds in which we have grown comfortable.

The 20th century opened on the heels of the 1893 World Parliament of Religions, which attempted to bring together in Chicago representatives of the major religious traditions—not simply to present themselves in all their exoticism, but also to begin that long process of understanding each other and what the other means for who we are now. It is probably too soon to assess how well the century fulfilled these goals. But surely, at the beginning of this 21st century, when we come together to talk about our rituals and share the diverse cosmologies they invoke, we can feel some optimism about the future they are helping to shape.

At the end of the panel sessions and following Prof. Bell's keynote address, the symposium closed with a series of ritual performances: a Shinto prayer and ritual of purification, a Tibetan Buddhist guided meditation and chants, a prayer to Amida Buddha from the Japanese Pure Land tradition, and finally an Ash Wednesday rite widely practiced within China's Catholic communities.

These representative rituals not only resonated with Prof. Bell's remarks, but also provided an experiential dimension to the symposium, evoking a spirit of ecumenical pluralism.

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Conference Summary by John K. Nelson, Ph.D.



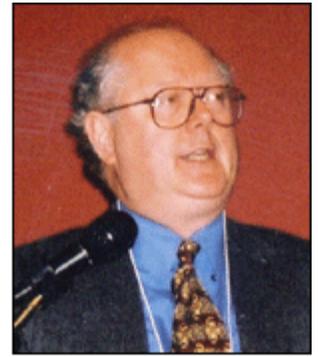
John Nelson is assistant professor of East Asian religions in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies, University of San Francisco.

He is the author of two books on Shinto in contemporary Japan (*A Year in the Life of a Shinto Shrine* [1996], and *Enduring Identities: the Guise of Shinto in Contemporary Japan* [2000]), which are the first extended ethnographies of important shrines in Nagasaki and Kyoto.

In the past year, Nelson has given invited talks related to Japanese religion and society at Kokugakuin University (Tokyo), the Japan Society (Manhattan), the School of American Research (Santa Fe), the Center for Japanese Studies (U.C. Berkeley), and the World Affairs Council of the Bay Area (Oakland).

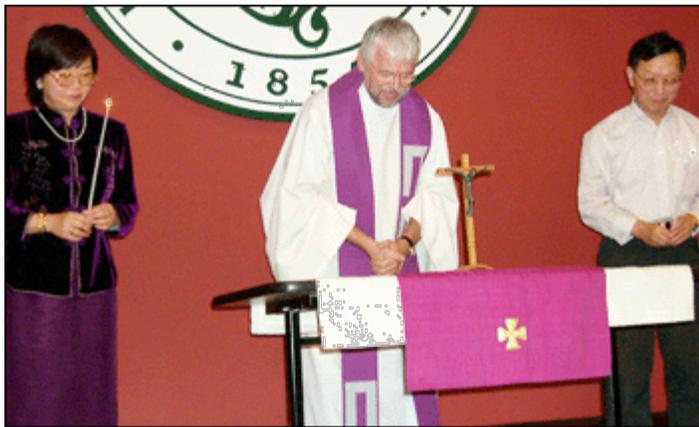
Like religious traditions elsewhere, those in East Asia animate and influence millions (and possibly billions) of people in ways we rarely hear about because most traditions are so well integrated with daily life. Continually responding and adapting to their social moment, these religious traditions provide for their practitioners a variety of spiritual and ritual resources that help individuals cope with the challenges and anxieties of their lives. Religions such as Buddhism, Christianity, and Shinto attempt to remain relevant by innovating and reconfiguring themselves, but sometimes their rate of change lags behind the rapidly shifting landscapes of popular culture, the ebb and flow of transnational economies, and demographic shifts from rural to urban lifestyles. And yet there are also examples where these mainstream religious traditions not only keep pace with contemporary life but provide challenges to conventional patterns of thought, custom, and social privilege, creating new paradigms for the reach of the spiritual into politics and human rights. These are the 'Gateways of Power' the symposium seeks to explore.

The first panel, "Christianity in Contemporary China," chaired by Dr. Xiaoxin Wu, (Ricci institute, University of San Francisco), began with Prof. Richard Madsen (University of California, San Diego) who



Kiriyama Pacific Rim Institute president Peter Coughlan delivers opening remarks at the symposium.

provided an overview of the social contexts for religious development within a modernizing China. Even though the state does not loom as large in people's lives as it once did, the global market economy and popular culture present both exciting opportunities as well as terrifying new pressures. Traditional family allegiances, such as the obligatory veneration of family ancestors, are being undermined by new attitudes that such allegiances are not necessarily an inevitable part of the cosmic order. Once individuals are set free from the restrictions of the past, they find themselves adrift in a world where meanings are fluid, motivated only by money. The Catholic Church is helping to provide orientation and direction, but there appears to be a challenge between what the leadership believes should constitute religious practice and what the common person hopes to find to heal, empower, or direct him or her towards greater material prosperity.



Rev. Michel Marcil, S.J. performs an Ash Wednesday blessing from the Chinese Catholic liturgy assisted by members of the San Jose Chinese Catholic community.

Prof. Philip Wickeri (San Francisco Theological Seminary) then spoke about three overlapping social expressions of Chinese Christianity: institutional, popular, and intellectual. The first of these holds to a familiar pattern of church activity, consisting of congregations meeting on Sunday to listen to sermons and join together in prayer. However, a strong teaching function and a growing concern for social outreach is also developing, perhaps in response to a legacy of years of isolation. Popular Christianity, with its wide variety of social expression in rural and urban contexts, may or may not be under government regulations. Sixty to seventy percent of worshipers—many of whom are uneducated women or the elderly—come to church for healing. Finally, intellectual Christianity represents a significant trend because it promotes a way of life that leads to thoughtful reflection and deepens theological reflection in and about the Chinese Church. And while each of these categories has challenges ahead—ranging from an aging leadership to their relation to political force—they help to identify an inward spiritual element that will ultimately be

constructive.

Prof. Steven Goodman (California Institute of Integral Studies) opened the panel on Buddhism in Tibet chaired by Mr. Tenzin Tethong. Dr. Goodman identified five factors that contribute to the study of survival strategies for cultural and religious practices in the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) of China. First is the age of globally linked telecommunications and the worldwide internet, helping to integrate regions that can be intimately portrayed despite their geographical isolation. Second, a linkage of economic institutions across national boundaries has encouraged capital and resources to flow towards Tibetan causes and Tibetans themselves. Next, and closely linked to the second factor, are non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and United Nations-based organizations that help implement policies for or encourage diasporic Tibetan communities (i.e. those displaced, through forced or voluntary exodus, from homelands in Tibet). Finally, there is what might be termed a 'spiritual vacuum backlash' against a felt sense of spiritual meaninglessness or marginalization of core values in Western countries, and a concomitant 'turning towards the East', in this case Tibet, as a cause, as a source of inspiration, and as a 'Lost Horizon' of true meaning.

There are many NGOs and not for profit institutions which are working to ensure the survival of Tibetan culture. Two examples are the "Tibetan Buddhist Resource Center," (www.tbrc.org) which makes available to the international community of scholars and practitioners the tremendous wealth of religious and philosophical texts in the Tibetan language, and the Italian-based NGO "Association for Solidarity in Asia" (A.S.I.A.) (www.tashi.org) which is engaged in many projects to ensure the medical, social, and cultural well-being of Tibetan communities within India, and the People's Republic of China (including the Tibetan Autonomous Region, Qinhai, and other areas with significant Tibetan populations).

The next speaker, Rimpoche Lama Kunga Thartse, was born in, Lhasa, the capital of Tibet. He spoke of the fact that Tibet is a land of religion and peace, where select Tibetan children are often sent to monasteries to learn and be trained as leaders. At the age of seven, Rimpoche was

recognized as a reincarnation of Sevan Repa, a heart disciple of Milarepa, Tibet's great 11th century poet-saint. Rimpoche entered the Sakya tradition Ngor Monastery at eight and was ordained as a monk at sixteen. In 1959, he was Vice-Abbot of Ngor Monastery, but fled Western Tibet with his countrymen at the time of the Chinese invasion. He mentioned the four major schools established by the monasteries, which became universities and where one would study Buddhist literature and texts, namely Nima, Sanhava, Jakabar, and Gujuvah. Buddhism in Tibet started around the 6th to 7th centuries and that compassion is a central teaching and value in Tibetan Buddhism. The Lama said that the Tibetan government and people are completely involved in the Dharma and that 65% of people take part in spiritual activities. Every person born has a priority to fix their problems internally and externally. Rimpoche concluded his talk with a slide show from a recent trip to Tibet that featured prayer wheels, figures and faces of the Buddha, and other sites and people.

The panel on Japanese Buddhism, chaired by Prof. Yoko Arisaka (Department of Philosophy, USF) first featured Prof. Chris Ives (University of Puget Sound) who advanced the idea that as Japanese Buddhism moves into the 21st century, it is moving across terrain determined by major social, political, and economic forces that have their origins in the mid-19th century. In some respects, the biggest challenge for Japanese Buddhism has been finding ways to respond to at least five crises of faith shaped by these forces.

Briefly sketched, the first of these crises has been the suppression of Buddhism in the mid-19th century when nationalist thinkers attacked it for its political role in the previous Tokugawa government and formulated State Shinto as an ideology and set of ritual practices for the new, ostensibly imperial regime. Buddhism's second crises, brought on by industrialization and urbanization, severed many Japanese from their rural family temples, ancestral graves, and the main family house as key sites of ritual practice and religious identity. Third, we must consider the loss of faith in the imperial system and Japanese cultural myths at the end of WWII, which Buddhism unfortunately had helped advance. The fourth crisis of faith comprises today's young and middle-aged Japanese, most of whom see Buddhism as a collection of dusty, antiquated rituals having to do with death and memorialization of the dead, topics best left to priests, grandmas, and other elderly folks with an interest in such things. Finally, since the late 1980s, there has been a loss of faith in the so-called 'postwar bargain' where Japanese should work hard and accept high prices, a mixed quality of life, and little say in public affairs, but receive in return employment, sustenance, and overall security through the efforts of the central bureaucracy, the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), and large corporations.

On the positive side, some Buddhist temples have set up new mini-pilgrimage routes and are working with railroads and bus companies to offer new ways of going on pilgrimages traditionally done on foot. Some Zen temples have made the rigorous Zen regimen available for corporate training programs aimed at fostering discipline, perseverance, and self-sacrifice in new employees. And in an attempt to make True Pure Land (*Jōdo Shinshū*) teachings more accessible and meaningful to young people, a priest from that sect has opened a coffee shop in his temple in Kyoto. Some Buddhists have been trying to make their religion more socially relevant by engaging in new forms of service and activism, addressing such issues as discrimination against the burakumin, U.S. military bases on Japanese soil, nuclear proliferation around the world, and the environmental impact of golf courses in Japan. Prof. Ives believes that Buddhist leaders should draw on two of their most valuable assets in order to stay relevant to their constituencies: a continued near monopoly on funerals and memorial services and the liturgical skills that go along with those rites.



Rev. Yoshiharu Tomatsu recited the Nembutsu prayer to Amida Buddha, accompanying himself on the mokugyo.

Rev. Yoshiharu Tomatsu, head priest of Shinko-in temple in Tokyo, offered comments on the current state of the Pure Land tradition in Japan. One of Japan's largest Buddhist denominations, the Pure Land (*Jōdo Shū*) tradition is faced with challenges that mirror those already mentioned by Prof. Ives. Many priests perform the old rituals but they lack a clear understanding of symbolic meanings or their connections to Pure Land faith. The teachings priests impart during services aren't carefully synchronized with the rituals. To a large degree, a priest's level of belief in and understanding of the rituals he performs determines their followers' degrees of belief. The beliefs of present-day Japanese are disconnected from the Buddhist traditions of their families and Buddhism is having a tough time because its sacred writings (*sutra*) were translated from Chinese into Japanese and have generally failed to strike an emotional chord with people. In addition, religion has become overly formalized, and the focus has moved from spiritual concerns to business concerns, especially in urban areas.

On the positive side, Buddhism continues to maintain a near monopoly on funeral rituals and memorial services. This gives it great ubiquity throughout Japan and a close contact with people from all walks of life. In addition, Rev. Tomatsu noted that many Buddhist priests are trying new approaches to reconnect with people, to fortify existing beliefs and make Buddhism more accessible by developing new forms of rituals. He maintains that ritual remains a potent source for renewing the spiritual grounding of the Japanese people.



Rimpoche Lama Kunga Thartse led the conference attendees in recitations of Buddhist chants.

The final panel, chaired by Prof. John Nelson (Department of Theology and Religious Studies, USF) examined one of Japan's other dominant traditions, Shinto. Prof. Emeritus Delmer Brown (UC Berkeley) proposed a new paradigm to understand not only Shinto but Japanese religions in general since the end of the war. Calling this period unprecedented in the history of humankind, Brown suggested that the rush to affiliate with new and traditional organizations operated in ways similar to what in physics are described as 'fields of energy'. Shifting from the energies of 'folk religion' to 'Buddhist' to 'Imperial', 'economic', 'political' and so on, these fields are in constant interplay, greatly complicating the old 'mechanistic' view of religions operating in isolation from dominant social forces. He sees within Shinto's diversity—which ranges from the worship of deities called kami within the imperial household to these same kami at local and rural shrines—a kind of gravitational pull that will eventually reorient and revitalize Japanese cultural identity.

Providing an insider's perspective on Shinto, Rev. Chisato Uesugi from Suwa Shrine in Nagasaki, spoke first about the atomic bombing of Nagasaki and a group of religious leaders who conduct a yearly ritual service in honor of the victims. He noted that Shinto is often connected with World War II in East Asia, but asked the audience to consider the foundations of Shinto, which reach far in the past. Key principles include a belief in the goodness of this world, a sense of stewardship for the environment, care for ancestral spirits, and a concern with purity and morality. Not bound to a text, Shinto can accommodate many spiritual paths and traditions, much in the same way a Japanese kimono can wrap around differently sized bodies. This tradition of pluralism and accommodation, along with Shinto's emphasis on interpersonal and social harmony, and its long-standing veneration of the environment, can make valuable contributions to world politics and peace.



Rev. Chisato Uesugi and Rev. Norio Ninna (shown) performed a Shinto purification ceremony.