CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

RELIGION IN POST-WORLD WAR II JAPAN AND SOCIAL AGEING

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1. JAPANESE PEOPLE’S CHANGING RELIGIOSITY

After World War II, Japanese society greatly changed its social system, including its politics and economy. It was not only politics and the economy that changed: the Japanese people’s way of life and religiosity were also transformed.

The Institute of Statistical Mathematics (Inter-University Research Institute Corporation) has carried out statistical surveys on the attitudes and feelings of Japanese people in daily life every five years since 1953, revealing the characteristics of Japanese people’s viewpoints and attitudes in a quantitative way. In 2000, the Institute prepared a report summarizing half a century of the “Survey on the Japanese National Character” (Institute of Statistical Mathematics 2000). The opening article, “How have Japanese people’s attitudes changed: 50 years of the survey on the Japanese national character”, indicates how the consciousness of the Japanese people has changed greatly since the war. A shift to prioritizing personal life becomes consistently apparent, with the opinion “the most important thing is the family” showing the greatest increase. The article also notes that a shift can be seen in religious feelings and personal relations in recent years, areas that have until now been exceptional in remaining more or less stable in the “Survey on the Japanese National Character”, in which changes in attitudes over the years have been the norm. The report observes a shift in recent years, noting that the numbers of people expressing the opinions “a religious mind is important”, and “if you had to choose, would you say that you are someone who venerates your ancestors or not?” are gradually falling. The percentage agreeing that “a religious mind is important” fell by 12 percentage points (from 80 per cent to 68 per cent) in 15 years, and the proportion saying that they did venerate their ancestors also fell by 12 percentage points (from 72 per cent to 60 per cent) in 20 years.
On the basis of other public opinion surveys, it is clear that the phrase “a shift in recent years” used in the Survey on the Japanese National Character is an extremely moderate one (Ishii 1997).

Since 1978, *Asahi Shimbun* has been carrying out regular public opinion surveys to find out about changes in Japanese attitudes and lifestyles. The 2003 survey marked the 25th anniversary, and it brought together a quarter-century of Japanese attitudes under the title “Japanese people’s value systems: big changes in the last quarter-century”.

In 1978, a combined total of 39 per cent of those surveyed said they were “interested in” or “quite interested in” religion and faith. This figure had fallen by 16 percentage points to 23 per cent 25 years later in 2003. The decrease was more noticeable among women than men. It was reported in the newspaper as “Large increase in those ‘not interested in religion’ to 77%” (Asahi Shimbun 2003).