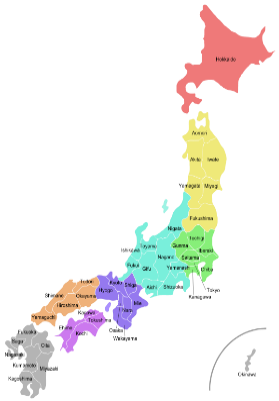
Is Japan 'the most religious atheist country'? – Knowledge Organiser

Key information - what religions are there in Japan?



- **Shinto** is the indigenous religion of Japan, and people have practised the religion there since before Buddhism and Christianity came to the country.
- **Buddhist teachings** came to Japan in the 6th century, with much stricter rules and teachings than Shinto had.
- In the 15th century, the shogunate requested that everyone in Japan should declare themselves Buddhist in an attempt to wipe out Christianity. However in the 1800s, there was an upsurge in anti- Buddhist sentiment across the country.
- **Christianity** became a large religion in Japan after it was brought over by Spanish missionaries in the 16th century.
- In the 1600s, Christianity was persecuted, but it later had a resurgence in the 1800s and has since been gaining popularity

Key words:

Atheist: a person who does not believe in a God

Buddhisms: One of the largest religions in Japan

Christianity: The most recent major religion to arrive in Japan

Multicultural: Multiple cultures coexisting

Multifaith: Multiple religions coexisting

Pilgrimage: A spiritual journey

Priest: Someone who has been *ordained* in a religion (e.g. committed to their faith and given special powers to lead services)

Shinto: The oldest religion in Japan

Why are Christian weddings so popular in Japan?

- After WWII, there was a big increase in Christianity and numbers grew exponentially.
- While still considered a 'foreign' religion by many, a great deal of Japanese weddings are Christian in nature.
- These weddings involve various 'traditional' Christian aspects such as the clothes and vows, and often happen in a church
- Some argue that, if you are not a Christian yourself, you should not be making these vows and partaking in a Christian wedding. However, 'traditional Christian' weddings are increasingly common worldwide amongst people who do not regularly attend church

"Born Shinto, marry Christian, die Buddhist"

A common phrase in Japan which highlights how many people in Japan are members of all three religions and practice them at different occasions in their life!

Why are Shinto pilgrimages important?

- Pilgrimages are very common among Shinto practitioners in Japan. People will travel across the country to different Shinto shrines, which demarcate the special mountains where the gods are.
- A famous example of a pilgrimage site is the **Kumono Kodo** trail
- People partake in pilgrimages for various reasons: exercise, to develop their spirituality, to sight-see, or do what their ancestors did
- It is debated whether these important pilgrimages have lost their original religious roots and are now much more about tourism

What do Japanese Buddhist priests do that is so controversial?

- Unlike in many other countries, Japanese Buddhist priests are allowed to marry, have children, drink and eat meat. This is considered controversial by some, as Buddhist rules are explicit against 'avoiding harming living beings'
- Buddhist temples' main source of income in Japan is holding funerals. While many Japanese Buddhists find merit in this, it is also seen to be 'un-Buddhist' by some, as it does not seem to fit with Buddhist views about rebirth and non-attachment
- Finally, Buddhist priests also engage in charity work which is widely praised

So what does this mean… is Japan *religious* or *atheist*?

Japan is often deemed to be an atheist country due to the high amount of people who declare themselves to have 'no religion'. However, there are also a high number of people who state they follow the main religions in Japan: Shinto, Buddhisms and some Christianity.
What makes Japan quite different, is that many people say they follow all three religions at once… this is shown by lots of people participating in festivals or traditions from each religion, as this topic has shown us!