

# Shinto religion has long been entangled with Japan's politics - and Shinzo Abe was associated with many of its groups

Monday 18 July 2022, by [UGORETZ Kaitlyn](#) (Date first published: 18 July 2022).

**A scholar of Japanese religion explains the connections that Japan's political parties have with several religious groups and how religion is tied in with the legacy of Shinzo Abe.**

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Former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's alleged shooter, Tetsuya Yamagami, [told the police](#) that he was motivated by Abe's connections to the messianic new religious movement known as the Unification Church.

[Yamagami explained](#) that his mother had made a "huge donation" to the group, and he blamed the church for bankrupting his mother and ruining his family. In a press conference on July 11, 2022, the president of the Unification Church's Japanese branch [confirmed](#) that Yamagami's mother was a member, though the suspected killer and Abe were not.

The [Unification Church](#) was founded in 1954 by the late Korean religious leader [Sun Myung Moon](#). Moon claimed to have been sent by Jesus to save families and achieve world peace. His followers are colloquially called "Moonies."

Aside from his religious activities, Moon was very involved in [international business dealings](#) and conservative, [anti-communist politics](#).

The Abe family's [political connections to the Unification Church](#) go back three generations, including his maternal grandfather, [Nobusuke Kishi](#), and his father, [Shintaro Abe](#). Shinzo Abe appeared as a [paid speaker](#) at Unification Church-related events as recently as 2021.

The possible motive behind the shooting surprised many people who view Japan [as one of the least religious countries](#). As a [scholar of Japanese religion](#), I know that Abe and his political party, the ruling conservative Liberal Democratic Party, have [connections with several religious traditions and religious political parties](#). Yet somehow Abe's deep connections with Shinto religion rarely make the news.

Shinto has long been a part of Abe's politics and continues to be so for the LDP.

## What is Shinto?

Shinto is one of Japan's two major religions, along with Buddhism. [Like many religious traditions, Shinto can have different meanings for people](#). For some, it is the [central faith of the Japanese people](#). Others do not see it as a religion at all.

Shinto is typically translated as the "Way of the Gods." Simply put, Shinto is a collection of ritual traditions that focus on the worship of deities called "Kami." These powerful deities are believed to be responsible for many things, like helping crops to grow and protecting people's health.

A certain group of Shinto deities is known for [connections to the imperial family](#) of Japan. In particular, the sun goddess Amaterasu is revered as the ancestor of Japan's emperors and empresses and protector of the nation. She is worshiped at the Grand Shrines of Ise, often characterized as the holiest site in Japan.

Shinto rituals are performed by priests at shrines around Japan - [and the world](#) - on behalf of the deities and the local communities of people under their purview. The emperor of Japan also [performs Shinto rituals](#) yearly for a good harvest and at the time of his [enthronement](#) - and, sometimes, [abdication](#) - on behalf of the nation.

For some, participating in rituals is a sacred and spiritually uplifting experience. For others, visiting a Shinto shrine is simply a matter of tradition or national pride.

## Entanglement with politics

Shinto has a [long and complex history](#) of entanglement with politics and the state. The earliest surviving Japanese texts recalled the mythical deeds of the gods from whom the emperor and court officials claimed to descend, legitimizing their rule.

In his book "[Faking Liberties](#)," [scholar Jolyon Thomas](#) shows how Shinto was at the center of a centurylong debate over what constitutes religion in modern Japan. Until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, [there was no concept in Japan](#) of what is considered in the West as "religion," and there was no word in Japanese for it. But when the 1889 Meiji Constitution included the right to religious freedom, the government had to decide what traditions and groups were or weren't religious.

At that time, Shinto was officially split. Rituals concerning the emperor and his divine ancestors were categorized as nonreligious civil ritual - sometimes called "State Shinto" - and other matters of personal belief and practice as private religion.

After World War II, the Allies led by the United States formed an occupation government in Japan and [separated all of Shinto](#) from the postwar state by categorizing it as religion. But, like other religions, Shinto continued to be involved in Japan's politics.

One key group in Japan is the [Shinto Association for Spiritual Leadership](#). The SAS was founded in 1969 as the political arm of the Association of Shinto Shrines, an umbrella organization for around 80,000 member shrines.

According to scholar [Mark Mullins](#), the nationalist group's aims include [promoting the power of the emperor, revising the constitution and implementing Shinto moral education in schools](#). They also support government officials' visits to Tokyo's [Yasukuni Shrine](#) - a controversial space that represents Japan's past militarism. In this shrine, spirits of war dead - including colonial subjects

and war criminals – are enshrined as Shinto deities.

Abe and his administrations worked closely with the SAS for decades. [In 2016](#), 19 of the 20 members of Abe’s Cabinet were affiliated with the SAS. Fourteen were members of the Japan Conference, “Nippon Kaigi” in Japanese, which is another right-wing nationalist group with ties to Shinto groups such as the Society to Defend Japan, or “Nihon wo Mamoru Kai.” Abe served as a member and special adviser to the Japan Conference.

Abe and his family have also been associated with other right-wing religious projects outside of government. In 2017, Abe and his wife were involved in a corruption scandal concerning an ultranationalist private [Shinto elementary school](#). The Abes cut ties with it, and plans for the school were abandoned, when questions arose around the government’s [massive discount](#) for the land acquisition.

Apart from nationalism, Abe helped politicize other aspects of contemporary Shinto, such as environmentalism. In 2016, he invited the G-7 leaders to visit the Inner Shrine of Ise in Mie Prefecture, where Amaterasu is worshiped. The visit included a tree-planting ceremony. Scholar [Aike Rots](#) has written about how Abe used the event to [acquire legitimacy and promote Shinto](#) as a form of national public spirituality.

During his time as prime minister and even after, Shinzo Abe was a leader and a model for Shinto politics for a generation of conservatives, nationalists and adherents. This legacy lives on.<https://theconversation.com/republishing-guidelines> —>

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- The Conversation. Published: July 18, 2022 8.25am EDT.

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