

## **“Japan is 80% Buddhist and 80% Shinto.”**

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This is one of my favorite sayings about Japan and about Buddhism. Unlike our monolithic Western Abrahamic religions of Christianity, Judaism and Islam, religion in Asia is **syncretic**. Buddhism is intertwined with animistic folk religion (Shinto being Japan’s version), as well as Confucianism and Taoism (in Sinicized or formerly Sinicized countries, which includes most of Asia), and with Hinduism in formerly Indianized southeast Asia.

Buddhism is like a sponge which readily absorbs other traditions - and it also allows itself to be readily absorbed by other traditions. In Japanese homes you often see Shinto shrines and symbols next to Buddhist spirit house ancestor-worship altars. Many of Japan’s holiest Buddhist temples have at their entry a *torii* gate and a *shimenawa* (woven rope demarcating a sacred spot in Shintoism). Buddhist temples will often have a *temizu-ya* - a Shinto purification ritual site with a large basin of water, called a *chozubachi*, to perform ablutions. Weddings in Japan are often Shinto in garb and ceremony, while funerals are often Buddhist.

Don’t let the duality confuse you - just remember ‘the 80% aphorism’ and above all understand that **religion in Asia is syncretic - not monolithic as in the West.**



A Shinto *torii* gate and *shimenawa* at the entrance to Rinnō-ji in Nikkō, one of Japan’s holiest Buddhist temples