

What Constitutes Religious Activity? (II)

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I am grateful to Richard Anderson for taking the time to respond to my article on *ema*. I would like to take the opportunity to focus on one major and central question, that of whether buying *ema* can be seen as a religious activity.

First, however, I will look at a comparatively minor point, i.e., the issue of the shift in focus away from symbolic designs to the written word. In my view Anderson's implication that this decline has come about *because* most Japanese cannot understand the symbolic meanings of *ema* is wrong, and is based on a flawed logic and a misapprehension of the processes of cultural and linguistic change. People do not just lose the ability to use and understand a language, whether spoken or symbolic: that loss comes about gradually because the language itself falls into disuse for some reason or other. In the case of the symbolic language of *ema* that change has come because the need for it has gradually disappeared as more and more people came to be able to express their wishes in written form. As people have focussed on one linguistic form they have gradually lost their awareness of another, earlier form. To argue that they use written forms now because they have forgotten the symbolic pictorial meanings of earlier times is to get the process the wrong way round. Languages themselves change over the years to the extent that, for example, a twentieth-century Japanese may not be able to understand much of an eighth-century Japanese text. The extension of Anderson's assumption that the change from symbol to written medium occurs *because* the Japanese today cannot understand the symbolic language would be that it is because the modern Japanese person cannot understand eighth-century Japanese that the language has changed, rather than the reverse.

More importantly, however, I would like to take up the major theme of Anderson's critique, which centers on his question of what makes buying and inscribing an *ema* a religious activity. I am pleased that he has seen fit to challenge some of the implications of my article, because this involves — as his citation and criticism of the surveys carried out in Japan

shows—the whole issue of how we view and define religion in general. Obviously this is not an issue that can be settled here, but I am happy to take up the debate in a preliminary response that will, I hope, get others to voice their opinions.

Let me start with the contentious issue of surveys and statistics. I would consider some of Anderson's comments about Japanese academics making assessments based on mere possession of objects to be somewhat unfair, if only because much of the work I have read on such issues as the possession of *butsudan*, for instance, and on surveys connected with them, does show that there is a general awareness that attitudes towards them and to the whole issue of ancestor veneration has changed in the last few decades. I would accept that we also need to understand how people view these objects. After all, it is reasonable to say that the only two concrete pieces of knowledge we can draw from a survey in (say) 1983 that shows that 60% of Japanese households have a *butsudan* is that 60% of Japanese households have a *butsudan* and 40% do not. Equally, of course, the only concrete fact that can be gleaned from a survey that tells us that 16.8% of young people say they believe in the efficacy of wearing *omamori* is that only 16.8% of young people are prepared to make this statement. It does not necessarily tell us any more about their religious attitudes. I, too, have been critical at times of the ways in which many Japanese academics have written about and used surveys and statistics to imply decreased or increased religiosity at different times (see READER 1990, especially the section "Re-appraising the revival—or lies, damned lies and Japanese religious statistics?" pp. 63–65).

Yet this does not mean that I would jettison surveys and statistics altogether, for I would suggest that we can glean some information about aspects of Japanese religious behavior from them, provided that we use them in conjunction with other data and avenues of research. What surveys often do is provide an alternative focus to another commonly used yet equally fraught process of enquiry into religious behavior and attitudes: interviews of, and conversations with, a limited number of informants. I am no happier with the anthropological format of finding and questioning a number of (or a few) informants on the subject as a basis of analysis than I am with interpreting statistical data. It is my view that we need to use both these tools—and others, such as textual analysis, besides—in our research even if (as I am currently finding with my project on pilgrimage) it thereby causes us a lot more work in the process.

The more problematic issue altogether is how we define and categorize notions such as religion, religious expression, and religious activities. This, not the ways in which we interpret objects with a long historical tradition and connection to Japanese religion and culture, is the crux of the whole issue, and it is here that the essence of Richard Anderson's criticisms of my article (and by implication my general

approach to the study of religion in Japan) lies. It is equally here that my criticisms of his approach are bound to be situated.

Undoubtedly many Japanese people, especially if asked in the right way, will describe actions such as acquiring an *ema* and writing a petition to a deity on it as a “custom”: so, by the way, do many of the people I have talked to who regularly attend church services on a Sunday in Britain. The point here is that customs, habits, and life patterns all play a part in religious behavior. Indeed, much religious behavior revolves around these things, and quite where we decide to draw the dividing line and categorize something as “religious” or not is to a great extent a matter of personal interpretation. It reflects on the argument of whether one should classify an event such as *hatsumōde* as religious, cultural, social, or all three. My argument remains that such an activity, performed in a religious center (and I doubt if we could classify shrines and temples as otherwise) and using forms of behavior (offerings, even if only of a coin tossed somewhat casually, bowing, and joining the hands in prayer) that are generally accepted elements in the religious action of worship and prayer, has to be seen as religious behavior.

The same is true for buying and writing a message on an *ema* – a message that is, as my article demonstrated, to the gods and buddhas – at a religious center, and placing that message there (often with an overt gesture such as prayer). On that level the man who makes *ema* and gives them to customers at a restaurant is not performing a religious activity but simply giving an object as a gift. If the customer were to then take the *ema* to a shrine, write a message to the gods or buddhas on it and put his or her hands together in prayer as s/he did so, this would, I consider, be within the realms of religious activity. Indeed, the question of who makes such objects and whether or not they are priests is as unimportant as is the question of who makes the crucifixes and other objects that are found on or above Catholic altars.

What is of concern is their use when placed in religious settings and centers, and this is an issue not just of place, but of the processes surrounding the actions connected with the objects. In such terms the question that Anderson poses about whether buying a set of postcards would constitute a religious action is rather extraneous to the whole argument. To some degree, too, so are the justifications used by priests who excuse their sales of *ema*, *omamori*, and the like on the grounds that the people want them, that they only sell them in order to maintain the upkeep of the temple or shrine, and that they are nothing to do with “real” religion (whatever that might be!). Might I just suggest that such responses might at least partially be conditioned by what the respondents think the enquirer wishes to hear, and hence they are dressed up in the form of rational framework that the respondent assumes the enquirer would like to hear? Quite often, too, as Anderson is no doubt aware, respon-

dents are keen to show that they are not “superstitious,” and this may also have the effect of coloring the way that they express their attitudes when talking to researchers.

It is important, of course, to investigate the attitudes of those who use objects such as *ema* as closely as possible. Here again, however, we are liable to come into problems with the murky and vague area of trying to define and quantify belief, an issue that becomes ever more problematic the more one delves into the realms of folk religion and into practices that may also be defined in terms of “custom.”

The problem here, I would suggest, is in trying to use the notion of belief as the basic criterion for determining what is or is not religious. This leads to the sorts of narrow and ultimately exclusivist and apologetic definitions implicitly expressed by Anderson’s priests, who use terms such as “‘real’ religion.” Strangely enough, I had thought that we had got out of that particular 19th-century theological cul-de-sac and that discussions about religion had gone beyond the confines of doctrines, beliefs, and ecclesiastical structures into wider and, it should be noted, more interesting realms.

I would conclude by reaffirming what I said in my previous article, in which I claimed that what those who inscribe *ema* at shrines and temples are doing is taking part in a religious activity. Indeed, I would strongly argue that the widespread nature of such activities as inscribing *ema*, taking part in *hatsumōde*, and praying for help, at times of stress, to gods one otherwise may cognitively not believe in tells us more about the nature, form, and structure of religion in Japan than do the comparatively small numbers of people who, if our much-maligned surveys are to be believed, actually affirm that they have any religious belief. It is my view that, whilst we should take account of the notion of belief when dealing with religion, we cannot limit religion, religious activity, and religious expression to a narrow field bordered and defined by belief. We also need to examine and understand, amongst other things, the roles of social and cultural customs, issues of identity, and the dynamics of circumstances, situations, problems and needs, as well as ludic behavior, and economics, as well. It is in doing so that we can come to understand the breadth and the subtleties of religion in all its forms and manifestations: it is such factors, too, I would suggest, that make studying religion so fascinating and enticing a subject.

REFERENCE

READER, Ian

1990 Returning to respectability: A religious revival in Japan? *Japan Forum* 2/1: 57-67.