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Christian Wedding Ceremonies “Nonreligiousness” in Contemporary Japan

Christian wedding ceremonies have, since the mid-1990s, displaced the Shinto rite and continue to remain Japan’s wedding ceremony of choice. In apparent contrast, the vast majority of Japanese individuals claim to be “nonreligious” or *mushūkyō*. Using the Christian wedding ceremonies of contemporary Japan as a context, this article explores the way in which claims of “non-religiousness” are used to both reject and affirm religious behaviors. Most typically, nonreligious attitudes reject religious positions perceived as abnormal, foreign, unusually intense, deviant, or unhealthy while simultaneously affirming the importance of religion to affective acts of belief. Furthermore, nonreligious individuals tend to rely heavily on religious professionals and to vicariously entrust specialized acts of prayer and ritual to religious authorities when desirable and appropriate.

KEYWORDS: *mushūkyō*—Christianity—wedding ceremonies—nonreligiousness—contemporary Japan—vicarious religion

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NOBUKO, a single Japanese woman in her twenties, dreamed of getting married and, although she was not seeing anyone at the time, that did nothing to hinder her ambitions. When I interviewed her she was actively involved in a search for a possible partner, a practice frequently described as *konkatsu* 婚活 or “marriage activities.” Not only did Nobuko have a fairly precise image of the kind of person that she wanted to marry, she had already imagined many of the details of her marriage to a level that was remarkable. Curiously, although Nobuko did not consider herself Christian or even religious, she already knew she wanted a Christian wedding ceremony. During the interview, Nobuko expressed an avowed disinterest in the traditional Shinto marriage ceremony (*shinzenshiki* 神前式) which, at first, seemed to confirm her dispositions toward religion. However, she expressed a similar disinterest in secular options for marriage (*jinzenshiki* 人前式) that exist widely throughout Japan despite the fact that a secular wedding would give her an opportunity to don the white wedding dress that seemed to be a crucial part of her marriage day plans. In Nobuko’s mind there was only one form of marriage ceremony for her—a Christian wedding. For Nobuko, secular weddings were “just made up” (*tsukuri-mono* 作り物) and “not authentic” (*honkakuteki ja nai* 本格的じゃない) marriages.

Nobuko dreamed of appearing, along with her future husband, before a Christian minister in a church to make their vows before God and witnesses who would respond by blessing their union with the sincerity of their prayers. To Nobuko, such a wedding was the perfect embodiment of happiness, it would set her marriage off properly, and propel her happiness and the happiness of her husband into the future. A Christian marriage ceremony meant a happy, prosperous, and above all, successful marriage in a future that might be fraught with troubles and uncertainties but also filled with hope and promise. Furthermore, it was backed by the guarantee of authenticity afforded to it as part of the Christian tradition. According to Nobuko, in these respects the secular wedding could not compare. Moreover, in contrast to her statements regarding her personal identity in which she described herself as “nonreligious” or *mushūkyō* 無宗教, Nobuko felt that Christian weddings were religious and that they should be because no marrying couple would expect anything less.

Nobuko and her dreams of a Christian wedding are not a rarity in contemporary Japan where, for at least the last decade, the majority of individuals wed in a Christian ceremony. Although widely popular, the Christian wedding ceremo-

nies of contemporary Japan are frequently discussed as unequivocally secular,¹ mere scenery,² or evidence of the Japanese obsession with fashion and conspicuous consumption.³ Moreover, Christian weddings are frequently treated as religiously inauthentic based upon the fact that those participating (particularly the bride and groom) claim to be “nonreligious.” Undoubtedly, the widely televised celebrity weddings of actor Miura Tomokazu and vocalist Yamaguchi Momoe in 1980 and that of the superstars Kanda Masaki and Matsuda Seiko in 1985 did much to inspire consumer trends and generate interest in Christian weddings. The church used in Kanda Masaki and Matsuda Seiko’s wedding ceremony even became the setting of the 1991 Japanese television series *Itsu ka, sarejio kyōkai de* いつか、サレジオ教会で and one of the more popular venues in the early years of the rise of Christian weddings. In the following, I hope to restore some balance to the argument surrounding the religiosity of Christian weddings by further exploring statements of “nonreligiousness.”

In 1991, one particularly striking example of the debate over authentic religion and the role of faith claims appeared in two articles in the *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* entitled, “What Constitutes Religious Activity?” One of these articles was written by Richard ANDERSON (1991) in response to an earlier article produced by Ian READER (1991a) on *ema* 絵馬 and a rebuttal produced under the same title by Reader as a counter-response (1991b). In the first article, Anderson presents a very concise critique of the position taken by Reader regarding the purchase and inscription of *ema*, plaques for writing one’s prayers which are ubiquitous and found at most temples and shrines. In particular, Anderson’s experience with informal statements made by Japanese that either downplay or deny the religious dimension of purchasing and inscribing an *ema* led him to conclude that these statements were convincing evidence that much, if not all, of the activity surrounding *ema* possessed no religious character.

In his response to Anderson, Reader reaffirms his original standpoint that the use of *ema* takes place in a religious setting (not just a religious location) and involves processes and actions that can and should be discussed as religious—a position with which I agree. However, one cannot help but feel that his response

1. See FISCH (2001). Fisch describes Christian weddings as “hyper-reality” and despite the seemingly religious character of these weddings concludes that they are ultimately “unequivocally secular.”

2. See INOUE (2004, 85–89). Inoue suggests that Christian weddings have been accepted as merely “a type of fashion” (*isshu no fashon to shite ukeirarete iru* 一種のファッションとして受け入れられている) and are best understood as *fūkei* 風景 or “scenery.”

3. GOLDSTEIN-GIDONI 1997, 43 and footnote 14. Goldstein-Gidoni states flatly, “To young Japanese, churches symbolize Western modernity, and having their wedding ceremony in a church has nothing to do with religion,” but, rather, “is related to the ongoing search for increasingly expensive and elegant venues for weddings.”

does not exactly satisfy one of the issues raised by Anderson—namely, Anderson’s discomfort in instances where Reader presents the activity surrounding *ema* as religious when the Japanese themselves state that these activities are not. Anderson’s claim that statements of “nonreligiousness” must be taken both literally and at face value goes partially unchallenged and largely unremedied. Although the context will be weddings, it is precisely these statements of “non-religiousness” which will be the focus of this article.

As AMA Toshimaro (2007b, 13) suggests, to be properly understood, statements of “nonreligiousness” must be properly contextualized. As such, developing an understanding of what exactly Japanese individuals attempt to articulate when describing themselves as “nonreligious” is perhaps the only way to gain insight into the perplexing juxtaposition of Christian wedding popularity and statements that disavow religious faith and affiliation. As I demonstrate through the use of a combination of socio-metric and ethnographic information, Japanese individuals do consider Christian wedding ceremonies religious and statements of “nonreligiousness” can rarely be taken as wholesale rejections of religion. Rather, statements of “nonreligion” have developed and are deployed as means to assert religious normalcy and to describe eclectic religious attitudes among members of contemporary Japanese society. “Nonreligious” individuals are not only aware of “religious” persons, places, and behaviors around them, but often clearly approve of their existence and expect to have ready access to “religious” entities and services in a manner that may best be described as “vicarious.”⁴

In the following, I intend to use Christian and, in some cases, other types of wedding ceremonies as a context for exploring “nonreligiousness” in contemporary Japan. In so doing, I discuss religious behavior in terms of cognitive and affective belief—a methodology used by Ian READER and George TANABE (1998) in their exploration of contemporary Japanese religion. According to this model, cognitive belief is composed of “content that is cognitive in nature and can therefore be explained and discussed in the mode of theology or its secular counterpart philosophy” (READER and TANABE 1998, 129).

Affective belief is described as belief of a more emotive order and is characterized by “affective sincerity” when engaging in rituals and acts of prayer that involve interactions with culturally postulated supernatural agents or their earthly representatives (READER and TANABE 1998, 129). Affective sincerity dur-

4. See DAVIE (2007, 21–35). Generally speaking, vicarious religion is “the notion of religion performed by an active minority on the behalf of a much larger number, who not only understand, but, quite clearly approve of what the minority is doing” (DAVIE 2007, 22). Specifically, religious vicariousness is most evident when religious institutions and religious professionals perform rituals on behalf of others, religious institutions and religious professionals believe on behalf of others, and that religious institutions and religious professionals embody moral codes on behalf of others.

ing acts of prayer and ritual allows Christian weddings to be discussed as religious phenomenon and not strictly emotive or aesthetic experiences. Separation of belief into cognitive and affective forms provides a methodology more capable of unraveling seemingly contradictory statements of “non-religiousness” made by participants who simultaneously attest to the religious character of Christian weddings.

Methodological Parameters

In the discussion that follows I am indebted to a series of field interviews I conducted and of which Nobuko is representative. These in-depth interviews provide much of the key data upon which this inquiry into the religious character of Christian wedding ceremonies and “nonreligiousness” relies. In total, I performed interviews with sixty-seven different individuals. Included in these interviews are statements taken from twenty married individuals (each of whom has had a Christian wedding or was planning a Christian wedding) and twenty single individuals who have either attended the ceremony of a friend or relative, or were considering marriage. Of the married group, eight of the interviewees were male and twelve were female. The single individuals consisted of nine males and eleven females. In addition, I also conducted interviews with several groups of people who are involved in producing and conducting Christian marriage ceremonies. These include statements from six chapel ministers, ten choir members, ten musical performers, and the owner of a company which is subcontracted by venues to provide ministers, vocalists, and musicians who conduct Christian wedding ceremonies. Although the interviewees themselves came from a variety of locations and backgrounds, all interviews took place with individuals who live and work in the Kantō area and each typically took between one and a half to two and a half hours to conduct.

Anyone familiar with collecting sociological data will immediately recognize that this is not a random sampling. However, I am in agreement with David Reid who suggests that this is not necessarily a fatal flaw. Borrowing the distinction made by Glaser and Strauss between “theoretical sampling” and “statistical sampling,” Reid states, “Theoretical sampling, used to discover conceptual categories, their properties and interrelationships, is for the purpose of generating theory.” Whereas, “[s]tatistical sampling, used to obtain factual data on distributions of people among categories, is for the purpose of verifying theory” (REID 1991, 123). Theory verification requires stratified and random sampling to produce a set of data capable of serving as accurate corroborating evidence. However, in generating theory, “A single case can indicate a general conceptual category or property; a few more cases can confirm the indication ... the pressure is not on the sociologist ... to provide a perfect description of an area,

but to develop a theory that accounts for much of the relevant behavior” (REID 1991, 123).

I am attempting to develop a theory capable of simultaneously accounting for the religiosity of Christian weddings and the statements of “non-religiousness.” In-depth interviews afford more opportunity to clarify specific utterances made by informants—for example, those concerning “nonreligiousness”—which may otherwise go unexplained or misunderstood. I have depended on theoretical sampling as opposed to statistical sampling in this particular inquiry. Furthermore, within my sample of sixty-seven individuals, the consistency of my interviewee responses was striking. I also should clarify that these interviews are meant to be understood in conjunction with a variety of other sources to develop a richer textured understanding of Japanese religion and the Christian weddings within that context.

In the name of full disclosure, I should mention that I worked as a bridal industry insider—that is, as a wedding minister—for roughly three years. During this time, I performed hundreds of weddings and, although I do not possess any Christian faith, I am indebted to this experience for not only the access it afforded but the insights into religion that such an experience provides.⁵ However, I should mention that only three of the individuals that I interviewed—two ministers and the owner of a company—were aware of my employment as a minister during the time of the interviews. The remaining interviewees knew me only as a researcher conducting fieldwork in Japan.

The Statistical Evidence for “Nonreligiousness”

In 1998, a transnational survey carried out by the International Social Survey Program (ISSP 2008) revealed that the majority of Japanese are unlikely to exclusively identify with a particular faith (ISHII 2007, 182). This study was repeated in 2008 and, although the number of individuals who held a positive opinion of religion rose significantly, the results concerning faith were largely similar, with only 39 percent of Japanese claiming a religious faith (ISSP 2008). Similarly, an earlier survey conducted in 1981 by the Yoka Development Center as part of a broader initiative involving the European Value Systems Study Group showed that the Japanese—in addition to a low level of expressed or committed faith—also had similarly low levels of religious affiliation with less than 10 percent claiming membership in a specific religious organization (ISHII 2007, 176).

5. I should also mention that I am Buddhist by faith and, given the religious expectations that nonreligious Japanese possess, I eventually suffered a crisis of conscience. When I discovered that Christian wedding ceremonies were not merely commercial events for those involved I decided to stop performing wedding ceremonies because I felt I could not in all honesty meet the expectations of the couples and families involved or even those with whom I worked.

These 1981 findings were corroborated by two studies conducted by Kokugakuin University in 1999 and again in 2004 (ISHII 2007, 60–61). When asked about regular or active participation in religious organizations or institutions, over 70 percent of those surveyed stated that they had not been involved in such activities within the past three years, excluding events such as New Year's visits to shrines and temples (*hatsumode* 初詣), *obon* お盆, and practices such as obtaining amulets.⁶ Outside of a particular set of annual and life-cycle events and personal practices that remain popular, it was evident that the Japanese appear to lack any strong commitment to either a particular creed or a particular institution. Even these more popular practices seem to be losing their broader appeal. Ian READER (2012) made extensive use of roughly fifty years of survey material to demonstrate the clear decline in religious faith and affiliation in postwar Japan and a corresponding fall in the popularity of other religious activities as well. The “nonreligiousness” of contemporary Japan's religious mainstream is a statistically undeniable fact.

Christian Faith and Christian Weddings: A Difference in Numbers

Until recently, Christianity has had a rather tumultuous history in Japan. Since its introduction, Christianity's image has been problematized by its relation to foreign cultures or political bodies. With the political and cultural changes in postwar Japan, Christians have been freed from many forms of oppression, and the number of Japanese Christians has grown. Yet, despite the formation and expansion of transplanted churches, mission schools, and the birth of indigenous movements, the percentage of Japanese Christians has not grown dramatically even though Christian churches and organizations were largely concentrated in metropolitan areas and were in a good position to experience the benefits of urbanization. Japan's Christian population remains an extremely small minority (MULLINS 1998, 70). According to a survey carried out annually by the Japanese government, Japan's Christian population has been on the rise since 1948. In 2006 there were officially 3,032,239 Christians in Japan, but with corresponding growth in the Japanese population over that same time period, that amounts to roughly 2.4 percent of the Japanese population.⁷ Similarly, Christian religious organizations account for a mere 2.3 percent of Japan's 182,468 religious juridical

6. It should be noted that the exclusion of personal practices such as the possession of amulets and participation in annual and life-cycle rituals in any investigation of Japanese religion amounts to nothing less than an exclusion of affective religious behavior and will have disastrous results. At best, it would only present a distorted image of religiosity in Japan.

7. It could also be argued that the rise in the number of Christians has more to do with immigration than with successful missions among the Japanese. A major influx of Catholics from Brazil should not be overlooked.

persons (ISHII 2007, 59). This data, along with the data on the low rate of baptisms and aging church population, has led some researchers to suggest that an already marginal Christian population is scheduled for rapid decline in the years to come.⁸

However, this is not the entire story. For example, the Survey of Japanese Religious Consciousness carried out in 1981 by the Japanese Broadcasting Corporation (NHK) and published in 1984 shows that, while only 2 percent of Japanese identify themselves as Christian, 12 percent felt empathy for Christianity (data on the NHK survey can be found in MULLINS [1998, 192]). This broader empathy for Christianity appears to be more characteristic for younger members of Japanese society. Out of the youngest age bracket surveyed, ages 16–19, 29.7 percent expressed a favorable attitude toward Christianity but this attitude gradually declines with age, reaching a mere 5.4 percent for those over seventy years of age. Christianity held more appeal for those who claimed not to be believers in any religion than for those who claimed adherence to a particular faith and 14 percent of these “nonbelievers” expressed empathy toward Christianity—a percentage that nearly equals the interest displayed toward Shinto among that same social group. The International Social Survey Program (ISSP 2008) investigation also reported that 13 percent of respondents felt an affinity for Christianity. Clearly there are indications that Christianity may have a much broader appeal than the membership of struggling churches initially suggests.

Arguably the most striking indication that Christianity has significantly penetrated Japanese society is the widespread popularity of Christian wedding ceremonies. In 1982, the Shinto wedding rite was the dominant form of wedding ritual and had replaced traditional communal wedding ceremonies and accounted for over 90 percent of wedding ceremonies as a whole. At the time the Christian ceremony represented only about 5 percent of the total number of wedding ceremonies (FISCH 2001, 58). However, according to several surveys (see ISHII 2005, 31), by the mid-1990s, the Christian wedding had surpassed the Shinto wedding and has, since 1999, continued to be the wedding ceremony of choice among roughly 60 to 70 percent of couples in Tokyo and the surrounding areas, with similar trends in popularity in most other regions throughout the country. The majority of Japanese are “nonreligious” and the majority of these individuals wed Christian. Dwarfing indicators of “empathy” among younger Japanese, statistics concerning the prevalence of Christian wedding ceremo-

8. According to Saitō Zenkyū who uses statistics for the United Church of Christ in Japan (Japan’s largest federation of Protestant Churches), on average churches only possess around thirty-five regularly attending members and perform only one or two baptisms a year. Consequently, Saitō believes that as death claims more and more of Japan’s aging Christian membership, Japanese Christianity may not survive the impending population decline; see SAITŌ 2005.

nies reveal that the majority of all Japanese are, as Ian Reader has stated, “Born Shinto, die Buddhist,” but they also “Live nonreligious, wed Christian.”

Interview Results: “Nonreligion” as Affective Belief

My interview with Yumi, a single, twenty-six-year-old female office worker engaged in the search for a marriage partner (*konkatsu*), began with a question for me: “Why do you want to interview me about Christian weddings? I am not a priest or anything. I am not even Christian. I am just a normal Japanese person—I am nonreligious.” (*Dō shite watashi o kirisutokyō no kekkonshiki ni tsuite intabyū shitai no? Watashi wa shinpu nanka ja nai. Kirisutokyō demo nai. Futsū no nihonjin, mushūkyō da yo. どうして私をキリスト教の結婚式についてインタビューしたいの？私は神父なんかじゃない。キリスト教でもない。普通の日本人、無宗教だよ。*)

Despite her “nonreligiousness,” Yumi enthusiastically discussed the wedding ceremonies she had been invited to, readily attested to their religious character and stated that she “did not reject religion” (*shūkyō o hitei shinai* 宗教を否定しない). During the more than ten Christian marriages she attended, Yumi claimed to have been sincere in her prayers for the couple and to have prayed either directly to God (*kami-sama* 神様) or to the priest (*shinpu-sama* 神父様), who then gathered the prayers made by her and the other people in attendance and passed them on to God. According to Yumi, these acts would be far less meaningful without the appropriate Christian context.

As seen with my interviewees, neither the denial nor the affirmation of faith served as a reliable way to predict or analyze their behavior, attitudes, and expectations.⁹ Yumi said her prayers were not just for show and, although she knew that Christian weddings originated in the West, she did not feel that her participation or her prayers made her more “Western” and less “Japanese.” Moreover, she believed that these wedding ceremonies were not performed to flaunt one’s economic prosperity. Despite the absence of a particular faith or affiliation, Yumi was an affective believer within the context of the weddings she attended.

Another respondent named Kaori, a twenty-nine-year-old female sales representative for a pharmaceutical company, also considered herself to be

9. The current discussion of “nonreligiousness” refers more specifically to my Japanese informants, however; even with the five non-Japanese interviewees (five chapel ministers), statements of faith or statements denying faith were hardly straightforward. For example, four of the individuals employed as Christian ministers denied the Christian faith (three were not religious, one was Buddhist). The remaining minister, who was a Christian, frequently considered quitting her work as a minister because, even though she felt as though it was bringing God into people’s lives, she felt she was being deceptive because they had never received any official training from a religious institution or order.

“nonreligious.” Kaori had attended several Christian and secular wedding ceremonies as a guest. As with my other interviewees, Kaori felt Christian ceremonies were religious and secular ceremonies were not. During the Christian ceremonies she frequently prayed with sincerity to both God and the minister, who she believed would amass and deliver the collective prayers of the people present at the event—expressing positive affective belief.

At the time of my interview with her, Kaori had recently spent a great deal of time considering marriage and the ceremony she hoped to one day have. After considerable deliberation she decided on a secular wedding ceremony. Despite the fact that Kaori believed that the Christian wedding was religious and therefore probably more effective at representing and ensuring an ideal marriage, she had always felt close to Buddhism and, although she could not remember the last time she had been to a temple or to what sect of Buddhism she belonged, she felt that a Christian wedding was incompatible with her Buddhist inclinations. She did not have a problem praying sincerely at Christian weddings for others because the couple in question had selected the ceremony which they must have felt was best for them. But she felt that at her own wedding she could not pretend to be sincerely Christian when she considered her feelings toward Buddhism. Her affective belief in Buddhism trumped her affective belief in Christianity, illustrating the very real power of affective religious dispositions.

Discussing this choice of wedding ceremonies did not change Kaori’s position on her faith—she continued to assert that she was “nonreligious” and that she did not reject religion or Christianity. This is evidence that affective belief in the form of sincerity cannot only account for the affective participation in religious acts but also serves as a reason to abstain from certain religious activities. Kaori’s statements also illustrate how individuals who decide on secular weddings may have religious motivations for doing so.¹⁰

Another remarkable example of how crucial it is to investigate statements of denial or affirmation of faith comes from an interview I conducted with a twenty-five-year-old unmarried civil servant named Yōhei who told me that he considered himself to be a member of the religion Shinnyo-en 真如苑. Yōhei was one of the few interview respondents to claim a particular faith. He was originally invited to a Shinnyo-en gathering by his ex-girlfriend’s parents, but he confessed that he could not and still did not completely believe what he felt to be Shinnyo-en’s “fishy” (*usankusai* 胡散臭い) teachings. Nonetheless, Yōhei

10. According to statistics gathered annually by the bridal industry giant Zexy, secular weddings remain a consistent alternative to “religious” marriage and typically account for 10 to 20 percent of marriages each year; see <http://bridal-souken.net/souken/research.html> (accessed 11 November 2015).

was impressed by the *sesshin* 接心 rituals¹¹ and the sincerity of the practitioners. Following the breakup with his girlfriend, Yōhei slowly began to end his visits to any Shinnyo-en location, but he remembered fondly his time there and felt that the Shinnyo-en members he encountered were sincere in their practice and were morally better people than those he had encountered at work, school, or the Nichiren temple to which his mother belonged. Even after his visits to any Shinnyo-en place of worship ended, he continued to recite the mantras he had learned because he felt they helped him with his efforts to improve himself but said he would probably never completely believe the teachings.

Yōhei has also been a guest at several wedding ceremonies (the majority of which were Christian; one was Shinto), and at each of these ceremonies Yōhei described these affairs as religious and prayed sincerely for the happiness of the couple. Moreover, these prayers were not directed toward a divinity from the Buddhist pantheon but toward the Christian God in cases of Christian marriage and the kami during the Shinto ceremony he attended. Yōhei's Shinnyo-en faith did not prevent him from praying sincerely to other divinities under other circumstances. Faith, belief, and action are clearly subject to dynamic complexities of place and time, and do not necessarily possess a clear or consistent relationship by which scholars would be able to use a simple statement of faith or its denial to make judgments on the religious nature of a particular action or thought.

Whether at their own or another's Christian wedding, all interviewees stated they prayed sincerely.¹² Sometimes these prayers were made in an unfocused and undirected way but most often they were entrusted directly to God or to the presiding minister or priest. Without fail, the nonreligious Japanese whom I interviewed displayed the tendency to be affective believers—to engage sincerely in religious activity even in the absence of cognitive affirmations.

“Nonreligiousness” as Normalcy

Takako and Kōjiro both work in the information technology industry. They started dating in college and after several years decided to wed and move in together. During my interviews with them, they admitted that wedding preparations brought

11. *Sesshin shugyō* 接心修行 is a form of spiritual guidance and practice particular to Shinnyo-en. Shinnyo-en states that there are two types of *sesshin*. The first type is “structured” (*usō* 有相) *sesshin* which consists of face-to-face guidance between trained spiritual guides and members. The second type is “unstructured” (*musō* 無相) *sesshin* where members apply the advice they received in the first type to everyday life. The *sesshin* discussed here is “structured” *sesshin* and not to be confused with the Zen practice of the same name.

12. The one partial exception was a groom who stated that he was nervous and so concerned about making a mistake in one of the ritual movements that he used the moments devoted to prayer to mentally rehearse the actions necessary to safely complete the ceremony and, therefore, did not pray. However, he did pray at the other weddings he attended.

out some differences in religious opinion of which they had not previously been aware. Both Takako and Kōjiro stated that they, personally, were “nonreligious” and that their wedding ceremony had done nothing to change that. However, their experience with selecting a ceremony made them doubt if their spouse was as “nonreligious” as he or she claimed.

Takako stated that she did not do anything religious and did not even like religion, but during our interview she mentioned that she had always been interested in Buddhism and that she enjoyed learning about the teachings of the historical Buddha Śākyamuni. She even mentioned taking up Zen meditation. Both her mother and father were distant relatives of temple families. Her father’s family was originally associated with a Pure Land temple and her mother’s was associated with a Dainenbutsu temple, both of which were located in Osaka and, although she and her parents had never really taken part in a Buddhist ritual outside of family funerals, she felt that Buddhism held a special appeal. Consequently, when she and Kōjiro began to discuss wedding plans, she suggested that, although rare, it was best to have a Buddhist wedding ceremony.

Kōjiro also claimed that religion held no importance for him and that he was “nonreligious” and “normal” (*futsū* 普通)—in the same manner as his wife. However, he had spent much of his youth in the United States and Europe, and said this had made images of churches and Christian culture particularly attractive. Additionally, his parents were longtime churchgoers and recently converted to Catholicism. Kōjiro admitted he thought Christianity appealing, but he had no desire to convert. Takako described the first New Year’s vacation she spent at Kōjiro’s parents’ house as one of “culture shock” (*karuchāshokku* カルチャーショック)—she just could not believe that they would have wine and cheese with their *osechi ryōri* お節料理 (the traditional Japanese New Year’s meal).

As discussions of the wedding ceremony progressed, it was apparent that Kōjiro was just as committed to a Christian wedding ceremony as Takako was to a Buddhist ceremony. Marriage became a forum for a debate over affective religious attitudes. Takako and Kōjiro doubted each other’s claims to be “nonreligious” but not their own claims to the same effect. Takako told me several times that Kōjiro would say that he is not Christian, but that he really is and simply would not admit it. She even referred to him as *kakure kirishitan* 隠れキリシタン, referring to the Christians who went into hiding during the Edo period following an official governmental proscription of Christianity, but she, on the other hand, was “normal” and “nonreligious” because most Japanese were still basically Buddhist.

In almost the exact same manner, Kōjiro asserted that he was “nonreligious” and that his attitude toward marriage and religion was “normal” because almost everyone had a Christian wedding—it was “common sense” (*jōshiki* 常識). However, it was obvious to him that his wife, contrary to her own statements, was really a Buddhist because there was no other way to explain why she would want

a Buddhist ceremony despite the fact that he had never heard of anyone actually participating in a Buddhist wedding.¹³

Ultimately, Takako lost out and agreed to a ceremony at the Yamate Episcopal Church because the Zexy ゼクシー (a bridal industry information and planning company) customer service window was unable to provide her with a location for a Buddhist wedding that had all the facilities they needed for the wedding reception. Takako also mentioned she had no intention of entering Kōjiro's family registry and giving up her family name—which was rare and a point of personal pride. As such, she was willing to compromise on the wedding ceremony.¹⁴

“Nonreligiousness,” in terms of Takako and Kōjiro's functional meaning of the term, was not a rejection of religion, but, rather, a rejection of the uncommon or atypical religious attitudes they perceived in one another. Stated inversely, “non-religiousness” was an affirmation of “normal” religious attitudes and behaviors. In each case where one of my respondents claimed to be “nonreligious,” these same individuals consistently substituted the term “nonreligious” with the terms “normal,” “typical” (*ippanteki* 一般的), or “commonsensical” (*jōshikiteki* 常識的), stating that these two positions were basically synonymous.

Another respondent named Yuka, a pianist and piano instructor, stated that the normal Japanese person was “nonreligious” and did not have strong feelings about religion in the same way that non-Japanese people did—especially Christians, Jews, and Muslims. Yuka felt that the “nonreligious” way of interacting with religion—with sincerity but a lack of extreme or exclusive devotion—was one of the reasons that Japan did not have religious wars, religious conflicts, and religiously motivated acts of terror.¹⁵ When I pointed out to her that the Tokyo subway gas attacks could be considered an act of religious terror, she responded by stating that those people were not normal and neither was their religion.

Similarly, during interviews with Maho and Taichi, a couple that had a Christian wedding, both stated that they were “nonreligious” but that this meant they accepted traditional religions, the belief in kami, “spirits,” (*reikon* 靈魂), “ghosts” (*yūrei* 幽霊), and “shamanism” (*shāmanizumu* シャーマニズム). Both stated that they did not approve of “religions that caused other people problems” (*meiwaku*

13. Buddhist marriage ceremonies are typically performed in the instance of marriage among Buddhist clergy and, according to Zexy, on average, only roughly one in every two hundred weddings is Buddhist each year. For more on the history of Buddhist marriage in Japan, see JAFFE (2001).

14. Despite remaining in separate family registries, this marriage ceremony did allow Kōjiro and Takako to file for insurance and get a home loan together as though they were a married couple because it was accepted evidence of intent to marry—that is, enter a single family registry.

15. Certain scholars and popular writers such as Shimada Hiromi also herald “non-religiousness” as proof of a superior form of culture unique to Japan and one of the reasons that Japan is so successful in maintaining a peaceful and attractive society; see SHIMADA 2009.

o kakeru shūkyō 迷惑をかける宗教)—such as Soka Gakkai—with their exclusivity and incessant proselytizing. Also, Maho and Taichi both claimed to be very suspicious of religions that treated ordinary people as if they were gods, such as Aum Shinrikyo. They felt that those kinds of religions were not normal and should be avoided. They also hoped to clarify that they did not possess a relationship with such religions by stating that they were “nonreligious.”

Intense, exclusive religious faith or devotion can be perceived as only one stage from varying levels of antisocial and deviant behavior. As such, “non-religiousness” is a negation, not of religion, but of forms of religion that are typically considered dangerous to society or weird, foreign, or inappropriate. One of my interviewees, a married woman named Hiroko, claimed that she was shocked to find out that a coworker of hers was a member of Tenrikyō 天理教 because she had always just assumed that her coworker was “nonreligious” and a “normal person much like herself” (*watashi mitai ni mushūkyō da to omotta, jibun no yō ni futsū no hito da to omotta* 私みたいに無宗教だと思った、自分のように普通の人だと思った). She was glad she had never been that close to her coworker because she did not want to be associated with a person who was involved with “religion” (*shūkyō* 宗教). “Religion” is sometimes perceived as something that potentially divides people and results in social problems and, at its extreme, conflict and violence.¹⁶ However, religious acts that do not trigger this response are comfortably re-categorized as “culture,” “events,” “customs,” “traditions,” or “common sense,” and reformulated as normal or “nonreligious” in everyday conversation.¹⁷ In this context, Hiroko said that she felt “nonreligion” meant “safe religion” (*anzen na shūkyō* 安全な宗教) and “religion that was okay” (*daijōbu na shūkyō* 大丈夫な宗教)—or that the widely performed religious customs, community events, celebrations, and personal practices, along with their corresponding attitudes and levels of devotion, are generally perceived as acceptable, healthy, and appropriate.

“Nonreligiousness” as Non-exclusiveness

Masa, a single male working for an insurance company, stated that he was “non-religious” because he wanted to be able to participate in and enjoy a wide range

16. Hiroko is displaying very common post-Aum attitudes toward religion. The impact of the Aum Affair and the Tokyo subway gas attacks are more fully discussed by Erica BAFPELLI and Ian READER (2012).

17. It is worth noting that even the Japanese government makes this distinction regarding foreign and domestic religions. When the Ministry of Justice provides visas for individuals sponsored by religious corporations from overseas this is a “religious activities” (*shūkyō katsudō* 宗教活動) visa, but when the sponsoring institution is a religious corporation from within Japan the status of residence is considered “cultural studies” (*bunka katsudō* 文化活動) or employment (*shūrō katsudō* 就労活動), even if the content of the activities (prayer, religious rituals, proselytization, and so on) is identical.

of Buddhist, Shinto, and Christian religious activities. If he was “religious” he felt he would be compelled to devote himself to one of these religions to the exclusion of others.

Another example of this comes from a twenty-seven-year-old operatic vocalist named Eriko who worked as a professional choir member for Christian weddings. She also regularly sings in the choir at her family’s Buddhist temple. In her interview, she said that it was not problematic for her to engage in both these activities sincerely because she was “nonreligious,” by which she meant she was not obligated by any one religion in such a fashion that it would prevent her from participating in any other.

Regardless of the fact that she had not yet found a partner she wished to marry, Eriko had decided that she wanted to perform all the wedding ceremonies that were popularly available in Japan. If she could convince her parents to cover the expenses, she wanted to have a Shinto, Christian, Buddhist, and secular wedding. Other than the secular wedding she believed that all of these wedding ceremonies were (and should be) religious. Eriko felt that she had more options than a “religious” person who would be bound by an exclusive faith.

Masa and Eriko were not the only respondents who felt that being “religious” meant maintaining an exclusive relationship with only one religion.¹⁸ In fact, nearly every Japanese interviewee responded by stating that if an individual was “religious” that person would possess a relationship with a particular religion to the exclusion of others. In contemporary Japan, religious behavior is frequently *perceived* as exclusive, intense, and cognitive. “Nonreligious” is a convenient way to express a set of religious sensibilities dominated by personal choice and freedom of access without the regard to affiliation or commitment. The irony of “nonreligiousness” in this context is that “nonreligious” attitudes may actually facilitate more, rather than less, religious behavior.

“Religiousness” as Beneficial Specialization and “Vicarious Religion”

Naomi, a single woman in her twenties who performs and edits music for a living, participated in her family’s Buddhists funerals and the frequent trips her family made to their temple. Despite these activities, Naomi maintained that she was “nonreligious” because she did not have the same kind of specialized knowledge that the Buddhist clerics possess. Naomi stated that members of the Buddhist clergy knew how to perform the rituals, recite and read the sutras, and that they knew more about the gods and the Buddhas than “ordinary” or “non-religious” people.

18. The exception to this was Yōhei, who felt that his faith did not necessarily prevent him from engaging in other religious activities.

When comparing her activity to the chanting and rituals of the clergy and imagining the devoted lifestyle that they lead, she felt their activity was the “real thing” (*honmono* 本物)—meaning (more) religious (*shūkyō*)—and more effective in the process of getting prayers answered. Naomi was thankful that these clergy were available because, without their expertise, she would not know what to do on her own at these special occasions. In the same way Naomi entrusted her prayers to the Buddhist clergy, she hoped to have a Christian wedding and she also hoped that a minister who lived a life devoted to God and the study of the Bible would perform her wedding ceremony.

Naomi’s use of the term “nonreligious” does express perceived normalcy but, when compared to the argument that Takako and Kōjiro had before their wedding, the relationship is inverted. “Religion” is not weird (or deviant) religious behavior but, rather, a superior form of religious behavior. In such cases, “non-religious” individuals are normal but only in the sense that they are “ordinary” (*futsū*) and do not possess any extraordinary religious identity, knowledge, or affiliation. Ordinary (“nonreligious”) people making prayers and vows, such as those made at secular weddings, are not guaranteed to end in failure but, with the vast majority of my respondents, religious weddings conducted by religious officials are believed to be more effective in obtaining a happy marriage and avoiding divorce. This means that “religious” people such as Christian ministers are not necessarily outlandish or deviant but may be people who possess special social capital which is believed to be good, beneficial, morally upstanding, and, in many cases, uniquely attractive.¹⁹

Although almost all respondents knew that Christianity was largely separated into two categories—Protestant and Catholic—few respondents were able to confidently distinguish between them. Beyond the nomenclature, most respondents did not know the difference between a Catholic priest (*shinpu*) and a Protestant minister (*bokushi* 牧師) and rules governing their behaviors. One respondent stated that she would not trust a Catholic priest who was not married and did not have a family of his own. Most respondents also had almost no knowledge of Christian theology or Christian history.

However, despite what would seem like a glaring absence of knowledge, each person knew that at a Christian wedding the couple in question received blessings from God, the presiding minister, and the invited guests. They believed that the Bible readings and messages were Christian and religious in nature and the vows took place before God. Furthermore, single and married Japanese interviewees alike did not find their own personal lack of specialized knowledge to be particularly problematic. They knew Christian weddings were “wonderful events” (*suteki*

19. AMA Toshimaro (2007a) mentions a similar phenomenon where people in Japan are likely to discuss religion as “fake” (*inchiki* いんちき) religion or “honest” (*mattō na* まっとうな) religion.

na ibento 素敵なイベント) that helped to ensure “happy marriages” (*shiwase na kekkonseikatsu* 幸せな結婚生活) and felt that the technical details of both Christian theology and ritual were areas that one could trust to the presiding minister. Japanese interviewees felt they knew Christian weddings were religious in nature and their goal was to celebrate and ensure the happiness of the marrying couple.

“Religious” people are much like Goldstein-Gidoni’s “repositories of tradition” who possess special skills and knowledge that people need and desire (GOLDSTEIN-GIDONI 1997). In much the same way as couples are dependent on photographers, wedding planners, and fashion designers, “nonreligious” members of the population are dependent on their “religious” counterparts as specialists. As such, contrary to INOUE’s assumptions (2004), ignorance does not necessarily imply a net loss of religiosity but, rather, illustrates how, along with other aspects of life in contemporary societies, people are more likely to entrust experts with the details if and when they believe that those experts are necessary and trustworthy.

In addition, providing rituals for individuals, regardless of their background or affiliation, may be considered one of the responsibilities of a religious professional in contemporary Japan. In the European context, Grace Davie suggests that religious institutions are often viewed in a manner similar to public utilities and should be readily available for anyone who desires to use them (DAVIE 2007, 32). In a similar vein, Ishii Kenji describes the access people expect to have to Christian weddings as similar to the access people expect for medical treatment (ISHII 2005, 190). All my informants believed religious professionals, as part of their religious identity, were supposed to make their services available to anyone regardless of that person’s faith or affiliation (or lack thereof).

Conclusion

Statements of “nonreligiousness” are used to express a wide variety of affective religious dispositions and behaviors while simultaneously relieving the cognitive burden of their eclectic nature. However, the issue is not religion versus secularization but more properly understood as religious attitudes that appear to be “normal” or “typical” versus attitudes that are perceived as deviant, atypical, or extraordinary. Given this association with normalcy, “nonreligiousness” is a rejection of religious associations and practices deemed unhealthy, strange, or foreign. Just as frequently, “nonreligiousness” is used to express an absence of extraordinary or specialized religious skills and knowledge but “nonreligion” is not the wholesale rejection of religion. Rather, “nonreligion” is better understood as the religious outlook of the average Japanese person who often engages in religious activity affectively and vicariously.

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