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BULLETIN
of the
Nanzan Institute
for Religion & Culture

Lectori benevolo!



At the end of 2019, Paul Swanson retired after his term as senior research fellow came to an end. We are extremely grateful for his many years of service to the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture. Paul was appointed the Roche Chair fellow in 2020, so we have been fortunate to receive his continued engagement at the institute.

Due to the global pandemic of COVID-19, the research activities of the institute were limited during the 2020 academic year. Researchers and staff were temporarily restricted to working from home, and visiting scholars from abroad were unable to enter Japan. Foreign researchers scheduled to join the institute this year had to change or cancel their plans. Obviously, overseas excursions were canceled for institute members as well. In an effort to avoid gathering people together, meetings and workshops were hosted online. This year was the first time the institute has encountered such conditions.

I think that the year 2020 provided us with the challenge of finding ways to continue our research activities in spite of these circumstances. In other words, this was a year in which we sought out new ways to potentially conduct research that differed from traditional methods. If these challenges lead to the discovery of multiple research opportunities, then I guess this period can be said to have been meaningful.

Seung Chul Kim, *Director*
Nagoya, Japan
1 June 2021

CALENDAR OF EVENTS

April 2020–March 2021



2020

- 23 Oct. A Nanzan Salon was held with presentations by Iseki Daisuke of the Nanzan Institute on “Theories of Statecraft and Religion in Early Modern Japan,” and Andrea Castiglioni of Nagoya City University on “Principal Key Terms and Ideas in the study of Mount Yudono.”
- 7 Nov. Matthew McMullen presented a talk on “Translation of Kūkai’s Secret Key to the Heart Sūtra” at the Tokyo Buddhist Discussion Group.
- 21 Nov. Kim Seung Chul presented a talk on “Things Violent in Religion and Politics” at the international conference *Conflict, Co-existence or Symbiosis? Religion and Politics, Past and Present*, Fu Jen Catholic University, Taiwan.
- 4 Dec. Kim Seung Chul presented a talk on “One’s Mouth, Someone Else’s Voice: On Translation” at the Nanzan University Center for Area Studies.
- 11 Dec. Tim Graf gave a presentation for the Nanzan Institute on “Prayer Zen: Meditation, Disaster Prevention, and Crisis Management at a Contemporary Japanese Prayer Monastery.”

2021

- 2 Feb. Paul Swanson gave a presentation for the Research Center for World Buddhist Cultures (Ryukoku University) on “What is Translation? Reflections on 40 Years of Translating Tiantai Buddhist Texts and Future Goals” as a Toshihide Numata Book Award Lecture.
- 15 Feb. Robert Roche, Jr., joined the staff for six months as a Research Associate.
- 2 Mar. Tim Graf participated as a commentator in the symposium *On the Forefront of Studies on Religion and Gender III* at Ryukoku University.
- 5 Mar. Tim Graf gave a presentation on “The March 2011 Disasters in Japan and Buddhism” at the second meeting of the Society for Japanese Studies at Tohoku University.
- 10 Mar. Tim Graf was awarded a research grant by the Promotion and Mutual Aid Corporation for Private Schools of Japan in sponsorship of a research project on the impact of the novel coronavirus and Buddhism.

- 19 Mar. A Nanzan Salon was held with presentations by Gotō Haruko of the Nanzan Institute on “The Experience of *ojihi*: A Study of *Collected Stories of Oyabutsu Experiences* by Nakayama Shingo Shōshū,” and Saitō Takashi of the Nanzan Institute on “Religiosity of Horror: Grand-Guignol as Abjection.”

Other visitors included:

2020

- 23 Dec Itō Tatsuya, Professor, Nagoya University of Foreign Studies

ANNUAL UPDATE

Japanese Journal of Religious Studies



Matthew D. McMullen

Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture

The following is a summary of activities and circulation of the Japanese Journal of Religious Studies during the 2020 academic year. This update includes table of contents for published issues, an overview of online engagement with articles, and notes on present and future plans for the journal.

William Woodward and Hideo Kishimoto, among others, established *Contemporary Religion in Japan* in 1960 to provide scholars of religion with data on postwar Japan. After a brief hiatus, the journal was revived by David Reid in 1974, and the name was changed to the *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* (JJRS) to reflect a broader scope of historical and methodological approaches in the study of Japanese religions. Since its relocation to the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture in 1981, the JJRS has become widely recognized as a top journal in the fields of Japanese and Religious Studies.

Publication was slightly delayed in 2020 due to COVID-related schedule changes, but we managed to produce two excellent issues. In the spring, we published a special issue on “Esoteric Buddhist Traditions in Medieval Japan” edited by yours truly and featuring articles from an international group of early career scholars. The fall issue includes five superb articles covering a range of topics and time periods, from twelfth-century Buddhist monastics to Christian advocacy in post-World War II Japan. The latter issue also includes a review of recent research on Ainu religion as well as reviews of three recent books on Japanese religions.

Online activity for the JJRS increased from the previous year, with 55,071 successful DOI searches between April 2020 and April 2021 (see the JJRS update in *Bulletin* 44 for an explanation of DOIs). On JSTOR, which collects its own data for searches in their database, JJRS articles were accessed 107,124 times between April 2020 and April 2021, doubling the number views from the previous year.

These numbers do not include direct engagement with the journal from the Nanzan Institute or JJRS (jjrs.org) websites, and, of course, readership of the print copy of the journal is not reflected in these numbers. Sales of print-on-demand copies of the journal increased by two-thirds in 2020.

Editing is currently underway for the spring 2021 issue, which promises to be the largest single issue we have ever published. An “at-large” issue, 48/1 includes six articles on topics related to religion in medieval Japan and one on the contemporary problem of conducting festivals during COVID-19. The issue also includes several provocative reviews that engage controversial debates in the study of religion. A special issue edited by Haruo Shirane and Michael Como of Columbia University is planned for the fall, which is the culmination of a collaboration between Columbia and Nagoya Universities. At the time of writing this summary, the spring 2022 issue is almost fully booked. A special issue is scheduled for fall 2022, which will be edited by veteran guest editor Peter Nosco of the University of British Columbia and includes articles from an all-star cast of scholars in the field of Japanese religions. In 2023, we will celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of JJRS publications. A special issue edited by editor emeritus Paul Swanson and yours truly is in the works. We also hope to host a conference to celebrate half a century of the JJRS and to invite advisory board members, authors, and friends of the journal.

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PUBLICATION ANNOUNCEMENT

NANZAN LIBRARY OF ASIAN RELIGIONS AND CULTURES



Matthew D. McMullen

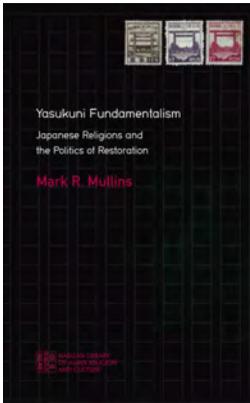
Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture

*The following announcement is an overview of the most recent publication in the Nanzan Library of Asian Religion and Culture series, *Yasukuni Fundamentalism: Japanese Religions and the Politics of Restoration* by Mark R. Mullins. The book was published in July 2021 and is available for purchase from the University of Hawai'i Press, the Nanzan Institute, or wherever academic books are sold.*

The Nanzan Library of Asian Religion and Culture was established in 1995 in collaboration with the University of Hawai'i Press with the aim of publishing scholarship on topics related to religion and culture in Asia. Since its inception, the series has produced sixteen volumes on subjects including translations of Chinese Buddhist texts, Japanese philosophy, and Christianity in contemporary Japan as well as several edited volumes such as the *Nanzan Guide to Japanese Religions*.

The newest addition to the series is *Yasukuni Fundamentalism: Japanese Religions and the Politics of Restoration*. The author, Mark R. Mullins, has published several books on religion in contemporary Japan as well as Christianity, including a previous volume in the Nanzan Library, *Christianity Made in Japan: A Study of Indigenous Movements* (1998). He is currently Professor of Japanese Studies and Director of the Japan Studies Centre at the University of Auckland in New Zealand and previously held positions at Shikoku Gakuin University, Meiji Gakuin University, and Sophia University.

Mark's most recent publication examines the complicated relationship between religion and politics in post-World War II Japan. Focusing on Yasukuni Shrine, the book demonstrates how Shinto institutions, nationalism, and the policy agenda of the ruling party of Japan (Liberal Democratic Party) intersect in a backlash to the separation of religion and state enforced by the US Occupation and mandated in the Constitution of Japan.



Mark R. Mullins

Yasukuni Fundamentalism: Japanese Religions and the Politics of Restoration.

Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, July 2021. 270 pages.
Hardback \$64.00. ISBN-13 9780824889012.

Author's Summary

Although religious fundamentalism is often thought to be confined to monotheistic “religions of the book,” this study examines the emergence of a fundamentalism rooted in the Shinto tradition and considers its role in shaping postwar Japanese nationalism and politics. Over the past half-century, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and the National Association of Shrines (NAS) have been engaged in collaborative efforts to “recover” or “restore” what was destroyed by the process of imperialist secularization during the Allied Occupation of Japan.

Since the disaster years of 1995 and 2011, LDP Diet members and prime ministers have increased their support for a political agenda that aims to revive patriotic education, renationalize Yasukuni Shrine, and revise the constitution. The contested nature of this agenda is evident in the critical responses of religious leaders and public intellectuals, and in their efforts to preserve the postwar gains in democratic institutions and prevent the erosion of individual rights. This timely treatment critically engages the contemporary debates surrounding secularization in light of postwar developments in Japanese religions and sheds new light on the role religion continues to play in the public sphere.

Words of Praise for the Book

This well-researched and gracefully written book brings us inside the worldview surrounding the ardent veneration of the war dead at the Yasukuni Shinto Shrine. It brilliantly details the resurgence of sectarian patriotism in Japan exemplified by the shrine and illumines the controversies around its xenophobic adoration. In doing so it not only provides an important case study of Japanese religious politics, but also portrays a significant example of a global

phenomenon. For that reason, it should be required reading for those interested in Japanese religion and society, and for anyone concerned about the rising tide of religious nationalism around the world.

— *Mark Juergensmeyer, University of California, Santa Barbara*

Mark Mullins's study, *Yasukuni Fundamentalism*, goes well beyond the issue of Yasukuni to explore religious nationalism in Japan in all its forms. Set in the context of a sophisticated view of the nature of secularization in Japan, as essentially an elite, top-down project, he examines the Association of Shinto Shrines and its close ally the Japan Conference. Association leadership, he writes, acts out of a sense of having been unfairly deprived by the Occupation of Shinto's public status and a determination to restore lost privileges. He shows that in fact, however, support for nationalist campaigns such as constitutional revision is weak among Shinto shrine priests and parishioners. This book is a major contribution to the study of religion and nationalism.

— *Helen Hardacre, Harvard University*

Professor Mark Mullins reveals the complex political process during the US Occupation of Japan that resulted in the transformation and survival of Shinto, before presenting a comprehensive analysis of the close relationship between the postwar Shinto restorationist movement and the revisionist political initiatives of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party. A huge contribution to the fields of Japanese studies, sociology of religion, and the comparative politics of nationalism, this book is a must read for those interested in modern Japan as well as those who study the contemporary and global phenomenon of religious nationalism from a comparative perspective.

— *Kōichi Nakano, Sophia University*

REPORT

RELIGION AND GENDER WORKSHOP



Kawahashi Noriko

International Research Center for Japanese Studies

Kobayashi Naoko

Aichi Gakuin University

The following is a summary of the third meeting of the “Forefront of Religion and Gender,” a workshop hosted by the Gender and Religion Research Center at Ryukoku University on 2 March 2021. This article is a translation of the Japanese version of the summary available in the Shohō (2021).

We would like to begin by briefly touching on previous gatherings of the “Forefront of Religion and Gender” workshops held at the Nanzan Institute of Religion and Culture (NIRC). The first workshop, held on 2 March 2018, was inspired by the 2017 publication of a special issue of the *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 44/1 (JJRS) entitled “Gendering Religious Practices in Japan,” which was in turn based on the 2016 publication of *Religion and Gender Politics: A Feminist Anthropological Perspective* (Shōwadō) edited by Kawahashi Noriko and Komatsu Kayoko. The special issue of the JJRS, edited by Kawahashi and Kobayashi Noriko, includes articles and book reviews examining Buddhism, Christianity, mountain worship, new religions, and spirituality from a critical perspective regarding gender. This dissemination of recent studies on religion and gender in Japan made an impact on the fields of Religious and Gender Studies, but our activities continued beyond the publication of the special issue. The JJRS volume made us realize that we needed to be more active in promoting the ongoing study of religion and gender. For this reason, we decided to hold a workshop at the NIRC to provide an opportunity for scholars involved in the special issue to present their research. This was the beginning of a series of workshops on the “Forefront of Religion and Gender.”

The first workshop featured presentations by Heawon Yang, then a visiting researcher at NIRC, on the topic of “Can Religion and Feminism Really Meet? Some Thoughts on the Recent Discussions in the US,” and Murayama Yumi, who contributed a book review for the JJRS special issue, on “From Fashionable Gods to Missionaries: Shifts in ‘Religion’ and Konkōkyō Female Missionaries.” The two presentations provided an opportunity to rethink the effectiveness of various strategies for mainstreaming critical perspectives on gender into the study of religion without being swallowed up by the backlash. For more on this issue, see Murayama’s essay “Is Feminism Necessary for Us?” in the *Nanzan Shūkyō Bunka Kenkyūjo Kenkyū Shohō* 29, especially the concluding section.

The second workshop, “Forefront of Religion and Gender II” held on 27 June 2019, featured a talk by Kudō Marie, who also contributed to the JJRS special issue, on “Grappling with Christology: An Attempt at a Feminist and Queer Theology,” and Yokoi Momoko, a postdoc researcher at NIRC, who presented on “Considering Buddhism and Gender through an International Comparison: Being Aware of the Roles of Women in Temple Families.” In their responses to the talks, Murayama and Kawamata Toshinori discussed how women can practice religion, which is often restrictive and oppressive, while resisting and sometimes overcoming it from within.

As mentioned above, the publication of *Religion and Gender Politics* and the editing of the special issue of the JJRS led to two workshops at the NIRC. Along with these activities, Kawahashi and Yokoi also contributed to the volume *Buddhism and Women in Modern Japan: Crossing Cultural Boundaries and Gender* (Hōzōkan, 2019) edited by Nasu Eishō, Honda Aya, and Ōmi Toshihiro as part a series organized by the Ryukoku University Center for Buddhist Culture in Asia. Kawahashi and Kobayashi also contributed to a special issue of the Nihon Shūkyō Gakkai’s journal (*Shūkyō kenkyū* 93/2) along with Inose Yuri and Komatsu Kayoko, who also wrote for the JJRS special issue, as well as Minesaki Hiroko, who contributed to the volume on *Religion and Gender Politics*. It has been thirty years since the first special issue on “Religion and Women” was published in 1989, and this publication has brought renewed attention to the study of religion and gender.

In the middle of this activity, Ryukoku University called for applications for the “2020 Priority Research Promotion Project,” and we decided to apply to establish the Research Center for Gender and Religion (GGRC) with Iwata Mami (Shinshū Studies) as its representative. The application was accepted, and the GGRC was founded in April 2020. In addition to Iwata as the director and Kawahashi, Kobayashi, Komatsu, Inose, Murayama, and Minesaki as researchers, Anna Ruggieri Takeshita, who presented at the “Forefront of Religion and Gender III” workshop, and Honda Aya, one of the editors of the

aforementioned Buddhism and Women in Modern Japan volume, were added as researchers based in the Kinki region.

As the above overview demonstrates, the decision to co-sponsor “Forefront of Religion and Gender Studies” with the GGRC was not a matter of chance. The result of the steady accumulation of research on religion and gender, such as the publication of the JJRS special issue in 2017 and previous workshops, led to the establishment of the GGRC and the decision to host this year’s workshop jointly with NIRC.

This Year’s Workshop

The GGRC is organized into four units. The purpose of the first unit, represented by Shimizu Kōsuke (Professor, Faculty of International Studies, Ryukoku University) is to promote the study of religion and gender from a global perspective, and as a part of this agenda was charged with organizing this year’s workshop hosted by the GGRC and the NIRC. The two presenters of the workshop were Anna Ruggieri Takeshita of Kyoto University of Foreign Studies and Fujimoto Takuya, Deputy Director of the Konkōkyō International Center. Tim Graf of the NIRC and Komatsu Kayoko of Tama University served as respondents.

In the first presentation, “The Rinzai Zen Position on Gender in the Edo Period,” Ruggieri Takeshita analyzed the works of Hakuin Zenji (1686–1769), reviver of the Rinzai school in Japan. Based on Hakuin’s terminology in these works, Ruggieri Takeshita discussed the issues female Zen practitioners encountered during the Edo period. The early modern period in Japan was a status-based society, with the basic unit being the patriarchal “household.” In this context, women could not represent such a “household” but were subordinated to a male patriarch. Moreover, with the proliferation of Confucian thought, male domination over women became a pillar of society, and women were unable to act on their own will.

Religion was also responsible for the creation of such social conditions, and some Buddhist concepts were directly involved in the oppression of women. In particular, the presenter pointed out that doctrines such as “the five hindrances to meritorious rebirths for women,” “the three subordinations of women to father, husband, and son,” “the transformation of women into men,” and “impure water” (an euphemism for menstruation) led to discrimination against nuns, thus contributing to their suffering. Furthermore, the so-called “Nun’s Palace,” established in the latter half of the fourteenth century by elites at imperial nunneries, played a major role in the social function of nunneries in the Edo period. In this context, the presenter noted the important role that temples such as Hokyōji, which was associated with Hakuin, and Tōkeiji, which

was known as an *enkiridera* (a temple where women could “cut off” connections with their husbands) or a *kakekomidera* (a temple for women “fleeing” their husbands), had for women at the time. This presentation as well as Tim Graf’s response can be found in the *Bulletin’s* Japanese-language counterpart, the *Shohō* (2021).

In the next presentation, “Aspects of Gender/Sexuality in Konkōkyō,” Fujimoto Takuya utilized the theory of “interpellation,” specifically as articulated by Louis Althusser and Judith Butler, to examine the conversion of Ogihara Sugi during the founding of Konkōkyō from the perspective of religious subjectivation. According to Althusser, power calls to the individual. The individual is drawn to this power, submitting and becoming subordinate to its ideology; that is, it subjectifies the individual. Butler redefined this process as a reflective turn toward the self, the formation of a sense of guilt, and the construction of an ethical subject. Fujimoto stated that if we apply both of these notions of interpellation to religion as a turning toward a transcendental call, we can understand Ogihara’s transformation into a religious person as a submission to transcendence. Moreover, the fact that her husband, who was converted prior to Ogihara, did not determine the object of worship on behalf of the household but was urged by the founder of Konkōkyō to consult with the family demonstrates that Ogihara maintained her own religious identity. Furthermore, Yasumaru Yoshio found the emergence of popular religion and the formation of the ethical subject from the practice of common morality located where autonomy collapses in the face of the transcendent. The presenter suggested that this line of reasoning can be applied to a discourse on rethinking the religious subject as subjugated to the transcendent. At the same time, Fujimoto pointed out that Yasumaru’s theory of common morality is an ideology derived from the male-dominated model of village leadership, and that its lack of a gender perspective should not be overlooked.

In response to Fujimoto’s presentation, Komatsu questioned the use of the terms “approved” and “tolerant” in reference to Konkōkyō’s approval of the LGBT Association and the fact that it is said to be a tolerant religion because it has many female missionaries and female church leaders. If we are to have mutual recognition as God’s children, it means that we should reconsider the validity of the term “approval” as a directive from above. Komatsu was also concerned that wording such as “the first religious organization to approve” could send a message that Konkōkyō differs from other religions. In this regard, Komatsu noted an essay by Sunagawa Hideki, a gay rights activist and cultural anthropologist, who wrote a review of the symposium “Buddhism and the SDGs II: Thinking from a LGBTQ Perspective” sponsored by the All Japan Buddhist Association and published in the 14 January 2021 issue of the *Buddhist Times*.

Sunagawa pointed out that LGBT and gender issues are adjacent, and that by taking up LGBT issues there is a danger of sending the message that matters of gender are no longer an issue.

While evaluating Fujimoto's point that a conversion through a call from God can lead one to change from a life based on secular moral values or see a possibility of transcending the gender system, Komatsu raised a couple of issues. First, in response to the argument that sexism arose out of an accommodation to secular values in missionary work rather than Konkōkyō's own values, Komatsu posed the questions of whether or not the founder, as a human being, was free from the influences of the world at the time, and if the fact that women have been asked to do the supporting labor has kept them from roles in the administration of the religious organization. Furthermore, Konkō Daijin exerted human efforts of conflict and compromise among various relationships. When these efforts are interpreted as the postmortem activities of the founder, Komatsu stated, the possibility that some people may fall outside the norms in the name of God is undeniable and the interpretation of the founder's words must be carefully reviewed in relation to gender norms.

Second, regarding the theory of interpellation and subjectivation, Komatsu stated that we should not overlook the question of how to discern whether or not the call from God is entangled with the bonds of power and community. Considering that originally the word "call" in Althusser's work meant "interrogation," we must also consider the dangers involved in forcing the self-awareness of evil people and entrusting them to what seems to be transcendence but is actually dependence and obedience. Komatsu emphasized that we must also look at whether we can make a clear distinction between the tendency to praise women who have chosen to do the supportive labor of the religious institution as the result of perceived gender norms within the faith community and turning to the call as a recognition of power.

Kawahashi concluded with some brief comments. She began by noting that the NIRC is a center for interreligious dialogue, and that in 2004 it hosted a lecture entitled "Gender and Interreligious Dialogue" by Ursula King, a leading feminist scholar of religion. King has consistently criticized the lack of feminist perspectives in interreligious dialogue, and in this sense, she pointed out that it is significant that the NIRC has hosted workshops on gender and religious studies for the past three years. She went on to state that it has been fifty years since the "liberation movement" and less than forty years since a similar movement began in the religious world in the mid-1980s. However, the so-called "Mori comments," which made headlines in the media and at academic conferences, were all too familiar to people in religious orders. There are so many memories

of hearing ranking male priests at Buddhist institutions say in their opening remarks at training sessions for women, “You need to know your place.”

Regarding the former Olympic Organizing Committee Chairman Mori Yoshiro’s comment about “women knowing their place,” Komatsu criticized those who have invested interests in maintaining the old value system, which is an attitude toward dismissing those who do not accord with the status quo. This sense of misogyny, which trivializes the problem as the fault of “noisy women,” is deeply rooted in Japanese culture.

In many aspects of society, misogyny and the backlash against gender equality are now on the rise, punishing women who challenge male-supremacy and glorifying submissive women. In this regard, we, the authors of this essay, are concerned that a distorted image of feminism is spreading across the field of religious studies. For example, a summary highlighting the reasons for awarding the 15th International Institute for the Study of Religion (IISR) Research Prize praises the awardee for discussing the subject of women in religion without taking an intransigent feminist perspective toward patriarchy or inequality. The term “intransigent feminism” is used to refer to the problem of power structures. The summary was later appended with a correction after Komatsu and Kawahashi raised concerns with the IISR (www.iisr.jp/award/2019/folder/index.html). The tendency to approve of gender studies scholars who are “women who know their place” but exclude “women who do not know their place” is deeply problematic. The fear of allowing entry of people with different opinions into a homogenous and homosocial community is understandable, but the low percentage of women on the board of the IISR, which is composed of leading figures in religious studies and representatives of various religious orders, is disconcerting.

The Gender Equality Planning and Youth Support workgroups, whose members include Kawahashi, Kobayashi, Inose, and others involved in the study of religion and gender, were established at the Japan Association for the Study of Religions. Although the association has begun to work towards overcoming disparities based on gender by empowering such activities, it is clear that one reason for the slow progress on gender equality in religious studies is the patriarchal structures of the religious institutions upon which it was founded. In other words, the problem is the complicity of religious institutions and scholars.

Future Endeavors

In conclusion, religion and gender studies is a group effort, the success of which is inconceivable without the networking of female scholars and female religious

leaders (as well as male scholars and religious leaders who are allies of gender issues). However, we are now in a situation where sporadic movements for gender equality are scattered throughout the world of religion. Recently, we can see such movements even among Buddhist institutions. The “Women’s Association for Thinking about Discrimination against Women in the Ōtani Branch of Shinshū,” for which Fujiba Yoshiko who presented at the GRRC workshop is a member, petitioned the religious organization to establish a committee for teaching and learning about sexual discrimination. A committee for the promotion of lateral SDGs that include a gender perspective was established in the Sōtōshū, for which Kawahashi was involved. The ratio of female members in the various committees of the All-Japan Buddhist Association has increased. The significance of the GRRC is that it can connect these movements within disparate organizations and spool them into a single trend.

Gender and religious studies are often said to be indifferent toward each other, but we are beginning to see an effort to cross the divide between these two academic fields. The *Encyclopedia of Gender*, scheduled to be published by Maruzen by next year, will include a section on “Religion and Faith” with approximately twenty entries (Komatsu and Kawahashi serve on the editorial board for this section). Such publications are a welcomed development and suggest that feminism and gender studies are reconsidering their indifference toward religion.

Sexual violence among clergy is a frequent occurrence, and it goes without saying that gender training is essential in the education of chaplains in order to prevent such events. I have heard that there are editors in religious-affiliated media who are prejudiced against gender issues, stating that they do not want to write about gender because it is annoying. A female journalist from the *Buddhist Times* wrote an excellent article about the workshop (*Buddhist Times*, 18 March). In the future, it is important for there to be more female journalists writing from a gender perspective in the religious media. We will continue to hold workshops to examine the diversity and commonality of gender in religion, and hope that it will gain the sympathy of many more people in both academia and among religious practitioners.

JAPANESE TEMPLE BUDDHISM DURING COVID-19



Tim Graf

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Based on the observation that some Buddhist temples were able to profit from the COVID-19 epidemic while others suffered catastrophic losses in income, this article examines Buddhist responses to the novel coronavirus across an economic divide. In introducing case studies, I outline a broad spectrum of practices, soteriologies, and temple management styles. The first part on divine protection focuses on Banshōji, a popular prayer temple in downtown Nagoya. Banshōji experienced record sales in prayer rituals during the pandemic. I then situate these findings within the broader context of discourse on religion after the March 2011 disasters, which leads me into questions regarding post-pandemic religious innovation and Buddhism's role as a social contributor in times of epidemics and crises. The final part suggests that the priests most vulnerable to COVID-19 related disruptions, namely social distancing measures, are those who used to make a living by participating in larger funerals at various temples and sites without managing a temple or parish community of their own.

In exploring Buddhist responses to COVID-19 in Japan, this paper illustrates how the pandemic affected individual temples and practitioners in different ways. While prayer temples recorded a thirty to forty percent increase in sales of *kitō* 祈祷 (prayer rituals) for good health, a long life, and the extraction of evil, the majority of Japan's 70,000 to 75,000 *danka* 檀家 (parish) temples that derive their income mainly from participation in funerals and ancestor veneration expect a significant dip in revenue. Based on interviews, I suggest that the priests most vulnerable to societal change in the wake of COVID-19 are those who primarily made a living by participating in larger funerals at various temples and sites without managing a temple or parish community of their own. The Japanese term *yakusō* 役僧 describes priests who function as assistants under the leadership of officiating clergy during rituals. Due to the downsizing of funerals and participant limitations in mortuary rituals, both occasioned by social distancing measures, some of the priests who previously

relied on income as *yakusō* now depend on the support of their families, monetary loans by fellow priests, and even food donations to survive.

The novel coronavirus epidemic has both accelerated and otherwise altered the ongoing simplification and individualization of funerals and their postwar transformation into private events (see Rowe 2000). It also brings our attention back to densely populated areas as they are the centers of the outbreak. Recent economic struggles and problems of temple succession are most visible in depopulated regions, where it is not uncommon for priests to administer two or more temples to prevent them from closure. But urban temples are also undergoing change. To date, little is known about the phenomenon of urban priests that work primarily as *yakusō* at various temples and sites. Studies of urban prayer temples and their means of providing and mediating the promise of divine protection in response to the pandemic are also virtually non-existent.

By introducing several case studies at different ends of this economic divide, I aim to outline the broad spectrum of practices, soteriologies, materialities, and management styles in contemporary Japanese temple Buddhism, research on which is still often focused on historic monuments in Kyoto and Nara. Tōdaiji in Nara was arguably the most frequently featured temple in discussions of divine aid since the first wave of the coronavirus epidemic swept Japan in 2020. While the study of these sites is important, for this essay, I chose to interview priests representing different Buddhist sects at less well-known temples in different urban and rural regions instead.¹

The first part of this article focuses on divine protection through the lens of Banshōji 万松寺, a popular local prayer temple in downtown Nagoya that, in the wake of the pandemic, recorded an unprecedented demand for prayer rituals for certain worldly benefits.² In exploring Banshōji's adaptation to COVID-19, I ask a rather straight-forward question: What is it that makes prayer temples attractive? And how portable or adaptable are the rituals utilized to evoke and mediate the sensation of divine protection found in these sites?³ Based on a

1. I interviewed clergy of different genders and age groups in rural and urban parts of the Tokai and Tohoku areas, who were affiliated with Sōtō Zen, Pure Land Buddhism, True Pure Land Buddhism, and non-denominational (formerly Sōtō Zen). At this stage, my study is still only partial and a work in progress. Funding for this research has been granted by the Promotion and Mutual Aid Corporation for Private Schools of Japan (日本私立学校振興・共済事業団). Content presented in this article also draws on findings of a research project on disaster prevention among temples and shrines in the Tokai area, sponsored by the Shikishima Foundation for the Promotion of Science and Culture (シキシマ学術・文化振興財団の研究助成). Most interviews for this project were conducted in the spring of 2021.

2. A short documentary film on Banshōji's response to COVID-19 is available for free via vimeo.com/598900412.

3. The concept of religious sensation draws on Birgit Meyer's idea of sensational forms as "relatively fixed authorized modes of invoking and organizing access to the transcendental" (Meyer 2008: 707 (quoted in Prohl 2015: 12). See also Meyer 2006.

decade of research on Buddhist prayer monasteries, this part of the article emphasizes that prayer rituals enable a dialogue with the gods that involves the body and the senses. The promise of divine aid draws our attention to the material culture of prayer temples, the training of priests, as well as spatial and logistic concerns that may explain why some temples are successful in offering worldly benefits while others are not.

Following the discussion of *kitō* at Banshōji, the second part of this essay situates recent discourse on divine protection and COVID-19 within the broader context of religion after the March 2011 earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear disasters in Japan. Here I suggest that the sustained interest in cases of ghost possession in post-2011 media reports, novels, and academic studies may have set a precedent for the notably curious reportage on “folk belief” during the pandemic, which I briefly summarize. In so doing, I aim to show how this take on “folk belief” works to justify *kitō* against the backdrop of modern criticisms of these rituals as “superstition” or “magic.”

The latter half of the article examines Buddhism’s role as a social contributor, the impact of COVID-19 on Buddhist volunteer initiatives in care for the elderly and their families, and the question of religious innovation. In Japan, religious innovations in response to COVID-19 made headlines. The novel coronavirus motivated religious groups to reach out to their communities and new followers online. I detail this trend and further explore the amalgam of practices temples will need to adapt even in the post-pandemic world. However, I emphasize that these practices and their marketing are founded in developments that preceded the pandemic and that the enthusiasm to develop innovative practices overshadows social realities of priests who are unable to utilize these innovations for various reasons.

The importance of voluntary and experimental practices in response to modern epidemics and disasters can hardly be overstated, regardless of whether we consider the means of outreach and activism as “new” or “established.” To illustrate Buddhist responses to outbreaks of epidemics in past and present, I turn to Unjōji 雲上寺, a local temple near Sendai in northeast Japan. Unjōji’s priests were successful in modeling grass-roots disaster aid initiatives into important platforms for multi-religious volunteering and interfaith dialogue. However, COVID-19 put many of these activities on hold, and it is yet unclear as to how clergy will be able to continue their services.

As a work in progress, this article focuses on temple responses and initiatives, but it also calls for further research and investigation to be done on the sub-group of priests who do not have temples or parishioners of their own. In closing this essay with a preliminary reflection on these former *yakusō* priests, I question the feasibility of volunteering for all priests. Whether in the flesh or

online, volunteer practices and free services are a privilege that not all priests can afford. Acknowledging and observing the economic divide in Japanese Buddhism through the lens of the unfolding coronavirus pandemic promises to contribute to theories of religion and religious practice, the recent history of Japanese temple Buddhism and interreligious dialogue, and the role of Buddhism as a social contributor.

Providing the Religious Sensation of Divine Protection

Considering the causal relationship between disasters and “stabilizing” rituals designed to overcome the upheaval caused by them, it is not surprising that Banshōji registered a thirty to forty percent increase in sales of wooden *goma* 護摩 plaques for a long life, health, protection, and the extraction of evil since the outbreak of the novel coronavirus. This pattern seems to hold true for other prestigious sites concerned with divine protection. Citing an *Asahi shimbun digital* article of 1 May 2020, Bryan Lowe (2020) reported that Yakushiji in Nara “has seen a threefold increase in requests to send sutra copying materials for in-home transcription.”

Two findings of my previous research on divine protection may explain why I was nonetheless surprised about this increase:⁴ First, no data available to me proved a substantial increase in prayer rituals for disaster prevention or related worldly benefits in the wake of the 2011 disasters in Japan. The 3.11 tsunami put a spotlight on exorcisms and *kitō* in response to ghost possession, and otherwise altered discourse on religion and “folk belief,” as I will outline below in light of more recent reportage on the novel coronavirus. However, sustained media attention and a newfound interest by scholars do not necessarily reflect an increase in prayer practices or amulet sales in the disaster-affected areas. The second reason is that in most situations, *kitō* works independently from an actual crisis. As my book will show, *kitō* also functions as a means of crisis evocation. In other words, the sensation of prayer as found in prayer monasteries evokes a sense of crisis, danger, and urgency, even when there is no crisis to speak of. Judging by my informants’ reactions, Banshōji did not expect such a substantial increase in *kitō* sales either.

4. I have been researching the promise of divine protection in Japan for more than ten years. I conducted ethnographic fieldwork on the subject at multiple sites in Japan before, during, and after the March 2011 earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear disasters. Only weeks ago, I submitted a book manuscript on the subject to the editors of an academic press. *Zen at Prayer: Meditation and Disaster Prevention at a Contemporary Japanese Prayer Monastery* is under review with the University of Hawai‘i Press. The monograph covers new ground in showing how meditation, prayer rituals, and monastic training work together in the making of worldly benefits (*genze riyaku* 現世利益) at Kasuisai, a prayer monastery (*kitō jiin* 祈祷寺院) noted for promising fire protection.

For temples that represent a contested religious promise, idea, or practice like *kitō*, success in times of crisis may become a source of legitimacy. My study on Buddhist responses to previous disasters found that priests were discouraged from promoting rituals for divine aid in times of crisis. This was especially the case after the Hanshin Awaji Earthquake disaster of 1995, as my forthcoming book will discuss. By contrast, religious professionals are often among the first to offer “mundane” help within and beyond their affiliated communities in times of disaster (McLaughlin 2011). The case study of Unjōji below in this essay will illustrate this point in the context of epidemics.

But disasters nonetheless alter how priests see themselves and their role in society more broadly. Many if not all priests that I interviewed after the March 2011 disasters found new purpose and meaning in their everyday actions as priests. The Sōtō Zen priest Kaneta Taiō from Kurihara in Miyagi Prefecture, for example, was surprised that a prayer ritual, along with a counseling session, showed the intended effect of curing a parishioner who suffered from guilt after visiting the March 2011 tsunami zone out of curiosity.⁵ Ten years later, the pandemic put a spotlight on aspects of prayer that were not apparent before, not even to experienced ritual specialists. The same undertone of responsibility for the general public that I noticed during interviews in 2011 echoed in conversations about prayer at Banshōji in 2021.

When visitors to Banshōji purchase *goma* plaques for protection, health, or wealth, priests take note of these wishes. Then, priests with the necessary training burn the wooden plaques in prayer rituals dedicated to the god Fudō Myōō, a sword-wielding protector of the dharma, whose potentially dangerous powers are negotiated for worldly benefits. The interviews presented in my forthcoming book reveal a broad range of interpretations of these prayer rituals that act as a means to dialogue with different gods involved in these rituals. Some consider *kitō* and its surrounding activities as a form of civic-religious volunteering. Others understand *kitō* as a petition to the priests or to the gods directly. The defining characteristic of *kitō* as found in prayer temples, however, is that it is a formalized ritual involving one or more priests. The notion of prayer is thus different from a personal dialogue with God in the Christian sense, although distinct understandings of prayer as a ritual, dialogue, or petition coexist in Christianity, too, notably in the Roman Catholic church.

In Japan, patronage by those wishing for protection, success, and good fortune have sustained temples like Banshōji for centuries. Prayer rituals typically take place within dedicated prayer halls, where five to fifteen priests embody

5. I recorded this conversation with Kaneta on video for a documentary film on *Buddhism after the Tsunami* (Graf 2013). On the same case discussed in greater detail, see Parry 2014.

the concept of divine aid in elaborate ritual performances. Describing these rituals as cognitive endeavors would only downplay the involvement of the body and the senses in evoking the religious sensation of prayer as found in temples that specialize in these rituals. Limitations on space, a lack of environmental characteristics and special buildings, and a dearth of both ritual artifacts and participating clergy may explain why most ordinary family temples are unable to become popular prayer temples, as my forthcoming book will discuss. Banshōji's prayer hall, for example, is equipped with a ventilation system designed to burn *goma* indoors.



Ritual accoutrements for the burning of *goma* at Banshōji. Photo by the author.



Banshōji's main entrance under the arcades of Ōsu. Photo by the author.

Banshōji stands out on many levels. With its main entrance located under the roof of a bustling historical shopping arcade in Nagoya's popular Ōsu district, the independent, formerly Sōtō Zen-affiliated facility is surrounded by shops, cafés, and eateries. The front resembles an ordinary temple—save for the digital screen where one would expect the roof to be. Guarded by water-spitting dragon gods (*ryūjin* 竜神), Banshōji extends into a multistory building behind the arcade. Large basements and four upper floors accommodate prayer rooms, meditation halls, and high-tech indoor graves (access to which is controlled via facial recognition); offices and a bar are located in a neighboring building.

For prayer temples that are local tourist attractions like Banshōji, most visitors are coming as recreationalists simply looking for ludic entertainment, and this leads many to interact with prayers and divine aid in playful ways.⁶ Banshōji's best-known event, the annual Sujāta festival, illustrates this point. The unique festival is held in combination with a *jōdōe* 成道会 ritual commonly practiced at Buddhist temples in commemorating Buddha Shakyamuni's great awakening on 8 December, otherwise known as Bodhi Day. What stands out in Banshōji's rendering of Shakyamuni's great awakening is its focus on the princess Sujāta, who reportedly gave milk to the fasting Shakyamuni. Legend has it that Sujāta's intervention marked a watershed moment in Shakyamuni's life, as he gave up on austere asceticism to develop the middle way, which according to the Buddha legend led him to his great awakening.⁷

6. Jolyon Baraka Thomas (2015) uses the term "just in case religion" to describe "ritual activity that is performed on the off chance that it might have efficacy even though the practitioner acknowledges that the action itself is inherently irrational."

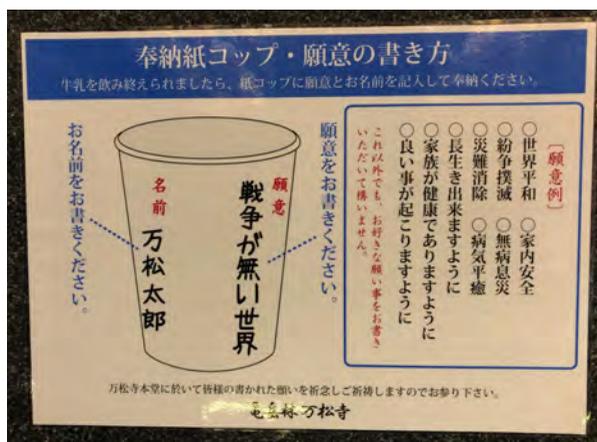
7. See Auerback (2016) on the legend of Buddha Shakyamuni's biography in Japanese history.

Every year as part of the festival, Banshōji offers one thousand free cups of hot milk to festival visitors waiting outside in the cold. First, participants are given empty cups and are told to write their names and wishes on the cups. Then, on the yard near the front gate, local schoolgirls dressed in colorful kimonos pour milk into the cups. Once the milk is consumed, participants hand their cups over to members of a local girl idol group who collect them for a wish-fulfilling prayer ritual to be performed by the priests.



Participants in the 2018 Sujata festival return their milk cups with wishes. Photo by the author.

A poster showing participants how to write their names and wishes on the milk cups. Photo by the author.



I attended Banshōji's Sujāta festival in 2018, but as one would expect, the spread of COVID-19 rendered the public staging of Banshōji's 2020 Sujāta festival impossible.⁸ Following the spread of COVID-19, Banshōji was quick to digitize many of its services, activities, and products online. Some of these that ended up on the news included the distribution of free digital templates for sutra copying (*shakyō* 写経) of the *Lotus Sūtra* and for the coloring of buddha images (*shabutsu* 写仏). Banshōji offered these materials to help those cope with isolation during lockdowns, particularly to make up for temple visits that had to be canceled or restricted.⁹ Access to the Banshōji grave remained open to registered members by appointment at all times during the pandemic. But lecture series, Buddhist study groups, sutra copying, *shabutsu*, and *zazen* (ritual sitting, also understood as meditation) were briefly cancelled between March and May of 2020. The priests rushed to move these practices online.

Around the same time, prayer rituals began to include practices that people could perform at home. A news report in the *Asahi shimbun digital* of 29 April 2020, goes into detail about the option of submitting the sutra copies and colored buddha images to Banshōji, where priests would burn them in a *kitō*. In return, participants may receive a special amulet after the ritual is over. Talismans and other material objects designed to protect from COVID-19 have since been offered for sale on the temple's website.¹⁰

The increase in the demand for wishes and the resulting increase in wooden *goma* being burned in response to COVID-19, along with the burning of sutra copies and buddha images has increased the time Banshōji's priests spend in performing prayer rituals by three, when compared to their pre-pandemic days. In the words of temple staff:

A prayer ritual that priests were previously able to finish in thirty minutes now takes them 1.5 hours, perhaps even longer.... Our priests are quite exhausted afterwards [laughs]. Not to mention that the fire gets really hot.... I think that Buddhism and religion are changing. Compared to before the spread of the coronavirus, it seems that the number of people who want to be able to rely on and hold on to something, like Buddha, have increased.

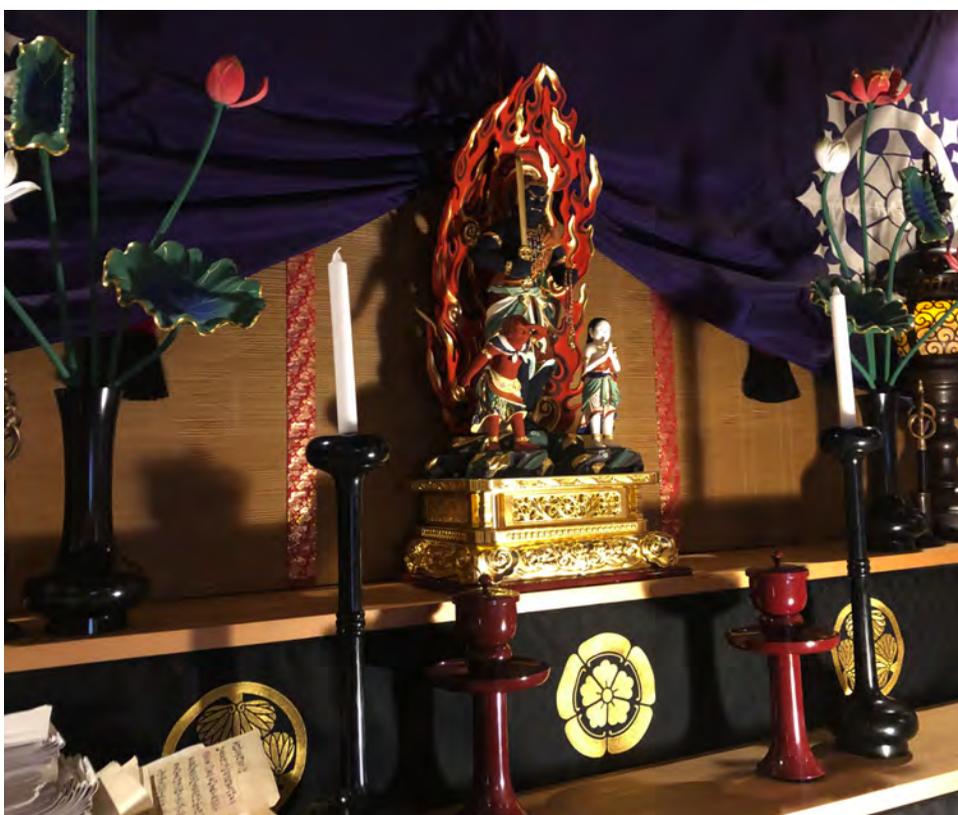
The ritual's length magnifies the sense of urgency that the performance conveys. Underlining this urgency, Banshōji has also placed a statue of Fudō

8. The festival's cancellation was announced on the temple's public Facebook page on 20 November 2020, see www.facebook.com/banshoji.temple/.

9. See Banshōji's website, <https://www.banshoji.or.jp/sen-dl>.

10. See *Asahi shimbun digital* of 29 April 2020. See also Banshōji's website: <https://www.banshoji.or.jp/>, accessed 9 June 2021.

Myōō on the altar in the prayer hall, open to public view. Under normal circumstances, no statue is shown, as is also common practice at prayer monasteries only displaying their “hidden Buddhas” (*hibutsu* 秘仏) on exceedingly special occasions, during public exhibitions (*kaichō* 開帳), or in response to a crisis. This proximity is key, as exposure to the gods is what gives prayers their sense of seriousness and even danger. Contrary to what the above description of the Sujāta festival might suggest, interactions with local gods are not always playful or humorous. This is not to say that practitioners of prayer rituals would describe themselves as believers in divine punishment, but to many devotees, the promise of divine protection is a serious matter that demands an earnest religious commitment and respect for the gods.



Banshōji's statue of Fudō Myōō for display. The god is hidden under normal circumstances.
Photo by the author.

Reimagining “Folk Belief”

Prayers for divine aid have a long-standing history in Japan (Reader 1991; Reader and Tanabe 1998; Williams 2005; Lowe 2017). Because of the backdrop of modern criticisms of *kitō* and that generations of scholars and intellectuals tried to separate *kitō* from “real” Buddhism, research and discussion on prayers for divine aid is not necessarily neutral or unbiased.¹¹ The involvement of local dragons, mountain ghosts, and other “unmodern” creatures elicited in attaining worldly benefits has long been downplayed by sectarian elites, particularly in True Pure Land Buddhism, where *kitō* is officially forbidden, but also in Sōtō Zen, where *kitō* is neither prohibited nor accepted as orthodox practice.

The legitimacy of *kitō* thus remains contested within Japan’s Buddhist institutions, even today. Prayer temples are also frequently judged by the particular benefits they promise, and by their business and marketing acumen. While many visitors understand a temple’s material success as a marker of ritual efficacy, sectarian scholars have criticized prayer temples as money-making machines. The more altruistic a prayer, and the less rooted in desire for individual success, the more easily it will be acknowledged by those that aim to separate Buddhism from practices like *kitō* that are seen as symptoms of decline and degeneration, or even superstition.¹²

A crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic offers an opportunity to reexamine the boundaries set around current prayer practices. Divine protection was initially met with increased public interest. An influx of media reports and scholarly essays on Buddhist means of protection and on “folk belief” emerged in response to COVID-19.¹³ In 2020, NHK launched a series of documentaries

11. For studies of the negotiation of categories like religion in modern Japan, see Josephson (2012) and Krämer (2015). Belief in magic did not disappear in the modern West either, as Josephson Storm (2017) explores in *The Myth of Disenchantment*.

12. On the rhetoric of Buddhist decline, see Klautau 2012. Japanese Sōtō Zen intellectuals tend to assert or reject the legitimacy of prayer based on its underlying cause or need. Nakano Tōzen (2003: 1), for example, argued that a prayer ritual must be motivated by “genuine suffering.” However, we have to consider the difficult circumstances that scholars like Nakano were facing in pioneering the study of prayer amidst criticisms by fellow scholars and priest. Legitimizations of prayer purposes should be read with this difficult context in mind.

13. For academic essays, see Kozic 2021 on Amabie and Ryōgen; Lowe 2020 on Buddhism and divine aid; Cavaliere 2021 on Amabie and folk belief. The Tendai monk Ryōgen 良源, otherwise known as Tsuno daishi 角大師, was widely reported as a Buddhist guardian promising protection from disease. Local folk-related responses to the pandemic were also covered by the media. The *Asahi shimbun* of 14 December 2021, for example, featured an article entitled “‘Demons’ taking steps to prevent spread of virus at Akita festival.” See https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/13964448?fbclid=IwAR100H2brAofHXKymqDfS1wgnwBbUTURq421677IYCMVRwLLMS_LYojEgZI, accessed 10 July 2021.

On 16 October 2020, NHK reported on children in Kumamoto who had decorated a two-meter tall statue of Amabie with wooden plates, on which they wrote messages and wishes. See <https://www3.nhk.or.jp/news/html/20201016/k10012665751000.html>, accessed 10 July 2021.



Amabie by Tsuzuki Kazuaki 都築数明
(artist and restorer of Buddhist household altars).

on the role of amulets and gods noted for promising to ward off epidemics in its series *Core Kyoto*.¹⁴ Bryan Lowe’s article “Protection without punishment: Turning to Buddhist gods during COVID-19” (Lowe 2020) ranked fifth in a list of most-read essays in the journal *The Immanent Frame* in 2020.¹⁵

Spearheading the wave of disease-fighting gods was Amabie, a three-legged monster (*yōkai* 妖怪) noted for promising protection from plagues to those who share its image. Most contemporary Japanese had never heard of the half-human, half-fish creature that emerged from the depths of late Edo-period mythology and marketing. The point that Edo-period depictions of Amabie

14. The NHK documentaries on religion and COVID-19 have the following titles: “Warding off Epidemics: Heartfelt Prayers for Safety;” “Fudo Myo-o: The Enduring Power of a Wrathful Deity;” and “Kyoto Amulets: The Embodiment of Prayers for Happiness.” See <https://www3.nhk.or.jp/nhkworld/en/tv/corekyoto/>, accessed 7 July 2021.

15. Lowe, a specialist on ancient Japanese Buddhism, poignantly shows how political leaders today make use of the pandemic to justify drastic action without apologizing to the public, whereas in the Nara and Heian periods, disasters were seen as divine punishment for a failed leadership which politicians needed to answer for. As Lowe (2020) explains: “The celestial realm was itself a moral surveillance state patrolled by the four heavenly kings.”

make the monster look cute rather than frightening has arguably helped its rise to social media stardom, which started in the spring of 2020.¹⁶ Since then, images of Amabie have graced posters, masks, and other objects designed to raise awareness of the three “Cs,” or *mitsu no mitsu* 3つの密 that are to be avoided during the pandemic: confined (poorly ventilated) spaces (*mippei* 密閉), crowded places (*misshū* 密集), and close-contact settings (*missetsu* 密接). Japan Airlines even painted an image of Amabie on its aircraft, effectively turning its plane into a flying *fuda* 札 amulet.

A large part of Amabie’s success can be attributed to social media. Newspapers like *Asahi shinbun* picked up the story only after the monster had trended on Twitter. However, the overall media’s interest in divine aid cannot be explained through Amabie alone, nor should its resurgence be taken for granted. Open discourse on any form of religious care by “magical” means, including prayer rituals, was all but muted after the Hanshin Awaji Earthquake of 1995. It was only after the March 2011 tsunami that such rituals in response to disasters were reported on favorably on a broader scale in newspapers and on television. A major reason for this shift was the widely shared reports of ghost possession, to which Japanese Buddhist priests responded by offering prayer rituals and exorcisms (*kaji kitō* 加持祈祷; incantations) along with counseling services, and how these cases were discussed by scholars and the media.¹⁷

It is well-known that the rise of spiritual care from multi-religious disaster relief initiatives has shaped a new public image of religion as a social contributor in post-2011 Japan. As Levi McLaughlin (2016) has shown, the positive image of religion in the media balanced suspicion against religions and their representation as dangerous cults after the Aum Shinrikyō attacks of 1995.¹⁸

16. The idea of sharing Amabie images for protection facilitated a global Amabie drawing competition by social media users who shared their Amabie images online. The *Asahi shinbun* of 13 June 2020, picked up on this trend by featuring an article on Amabie titled “Plague-fighting monster Amabie goes viral amid COVID-19 crisis.”

17. *Sankei shinbun* published one of the first media reports on January 18, 2012, but the topic did not reach an international audience until 2014 with Richard Lloyd Parry’s article “Ghosts of the Tsunami Dead” in the *London Review of Books* (Parry 2014) and his subsequent best-selling monograph *Ghosts of the Tsunami: Death and Life in Japan* (Parry 2017). The new interest in ghosts is not only evident in journalistic works and academic research (see Takahashi 2016; Rambelli, ed. 2019) but also in fictional writing and novels. Itō Seikō (2013) emerged as an early prominent author of post-2011 literature concerned with ghosts. His book *Sōzō rajio* 想像ラジオ (“Imagination Radio”) earned him the Noma Prize for New Writers. Itō was also short-listed for the Mishima Yukio Prize and the Akutagawa Prize for *Sōzō rajio*. Scholarly works include a 2016 article by sociologist Kanebishi Kiyoshi (2016). Journalist and writer Udagawa Keisuke (2016) also authored a monograph about “Curious Post-Disaster Stories,” including widely publicized tales by taxi drivers, who claim that ghosts of the tsunami – often unaware that they have died – requested to be taken home.

18. In 1995, members of the New Religion Aum Shinrikyō committed a series of crimes that peaked in the sarin gas attacks on the Tokyo subway (see Reader 2000; Kisala and Mullins, eds. 2001). The attacks resulted in a lasting suspicion against religions in Japan, targeting modern religious

It is less well-known that the de-stigmatization of ghosts (*yūrei* 幽霊) and the practices in response to ghost possession were carefully negotiated and framed within the same networks of teachers and practitioners that first enabled the success of clinical religion in post-2011 Japan. Here I suggest that clinic-inspired religious care and “folk belief” form two interactive components of a working definition of religion in post-2011 Japan.

In any case, it is safe to say that an interest in supernatural means of healing and protection, prayer rituals, and local gods under the vague category of “folk belief” was already present by the time COVID-19 first spread around the world. It is therefore likely that media representatives anticipated the coming interest in folk religious activities in relationship to the pandemic, and that journalists had ready-made templates to draw on and informants to turn to.

Questioning Innovation

Innovation is a concept often tied to religion in popular culture, and religious innovation made headlines during COVID-19.¹⁹ Facing government lockdowns and social distancing restrictions, religious professionals employed digital technology to reach their communities remotely (see Cavaliere 2021). My preliminary findings suggest that live-streams of religious services and other hybrid forms of religious participation promise to outlive the pandemic. One interesting effect of this change is the highly visible and searchable traces these services now leave online. By showing how some of these pandemic-related innovations actually have a long-standing history, I aim to demonstrate that these changes have not spread across all practices equally. This raises a more important question: Which practices and social realities are not represented online? And how representative are the responses that we find online for Japanese temple Buddhism more broadly?

The coronavirus epidemic changes the context and significance of digital technologies. But prayer monasteries, for example, have offered application forms for their rituals via the internet, postal services, and phone for many years.²⁰ My previous research conducted at prayer monasteries before the pandemic finds that almost all individual prayers, as opposed to group-based requests by temple support associations (*kō* 講), are requested by actors who

organizations in particular.

19. An article in the Japan Times of 20 March 2021, for example, was titled “Leap of faith: Japan’s religious institutions get innovative in pandemic.” See <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2021/03/20/national/social-issues/religious-institutions-get-innovative-amid-covid-19/>, accessed 10 July 2021.

20. I was able to observe remote forms of prayer applications since 2009, although the history of this practice is likely much older.

choose to experience a prayer ritual in person. In other words, ordering a ritual from afar without attending it in person has never been popular for these practitioners. One reason for this preference for on-site participation is found in the material culture, architecture, and sacred space of prayer temples, as outlined above. It is within the designated prayer halls that performances evoke the religious sensation of prayer and protection.

In the new age of COVID-19, requesting prayer rituals online has become increasingly popular at Banshōji. However, Banshōji's rituals are still not streamed beyond the temple's system of indoor speakers. The material and conversational aspects of ritual practice are not easily mediated online. Conversations with priests and temple staff before and after the ritual are also limited. Under normal circumstances, casual encounters with temple staff before and after a ritual provide important moments for emotional exchange.²¹ The consideration of these moments of emotional care before, during, and after a ritual motivated Banshōji to keep its doors open, even if only on a limited basis and for a limited number of visitors by appointment. On-site participation was temporarily canceled during government-ordered lockdowns but is currently back in full swing, albeit with restrictions. Moreover, at no point during the pandemic did Banshōji shut its doors completely, but, as mentioned above, they remained open for visitors by appointment. In the words of a Banshōji employee:

We believe that a temple must be accessible in times of insecurity. A temple is a place for people to find peace of mind and reassurance. These are difficult circumstances, and restrictions apply for visitors, but as a temple we still want to make people feel warm and relieved. That's what Buddhism and the Buddhist teaching is about, so we didn't completely close our temple to visitors at any time.

While stressing the importance of leaving its doors open, Banshōji also emphasized the need for safety measures and the need to open new doors, online. Enabling a pluralization of access to the temple, the employee described, reflected the head priest's preferred solution to a complex problem: different expectations and interpretations of risk.

21. My forthcoming monograph on the prayer monastery Kasuisai will elaborate on the significance of these interactions through the lens of participants who requested prayer rituals in response to (or expectation of) accidents and crises. Conversations with female temple staff in particular are often ignored in studies on prayer temples that tend to focus on specific prayer categories or benefits that a temple is best known for, like fire protection at Kasuisai.

Understandings of the coronavirus differ between age groups, families, and individuals. Some people cannot leave their homes, due to pre-existing conditions. Some people are very concerned [about COVID-19]. Others don't think about it so much. Some people even oppose vaccination. There are many different opinions, and there is not one way of responding to everyone's needs. We therefore give people a choice whether to participate on site or online. Many troubles can be solved via the internet indeed.... This is not a time for a temple to make all the decisions for all visitors; we want our visitors to have a choice.

Considering that access to prayer rituals on site had to be limited, and considering that prayer rituals were not streamed online, Banshōji's increase in *kitō* described above in this essay is even more remarkable. Here it is important to repeat how Banshōji combined its prayer rituals on site with practices for people to perform at home. Practitioners may send their copies to Banshōji, where priests burn them as part of a prayer ritual.

Contrary to what *Asahi Shimbun digital's* news article on Banshōji's online innovations might suggest, the combination of *kitō* and sutra copying is not new nor unique to Banshōji. The prayer monastery Kasuisai, where I conducted extensive fieldwork in 2010–11, integrated sutra copying as a means of introducing prayer rituals to guests who did not visit the monastery for *kitō* but for other reasons. Banshōji had also offered sutra copying, *shabutsu*, and Buddhist lecture series before the pandemic, albeit on site at the temple. Yet it was only after the pandemic that these practices were reported on in the news, and only after social distancing measures facilitated the displacement of sutra copying to practitioners' homes.²²

In opening this section, I questioned how representative these online responses are to Buddhist practice in general. The Sōtō Zen sect, for instance, was quick to promote *zazen* as a means of stress reduction in times of social distancing and self-isolation on its official website on 3 April 2020.²³ Yet the sect struggled to move beyond mere promotion. Reverend Tanaka,²⁴ a male priest in his mid-fifties and member of the Sōtō Zen sect informed me that, with the

22. One could assume that the certainty of knowing that one's copy of a sutra or colored buddha image will be presented to the gods, along with one's wishes, creates a new mode of participation in the ritual from afar. Such a bond might help some participants overcome feelings of isolation. But field research and practitioner-focused approaches are needed to answer how these combinations between sutra copying and prayer rituals across different spaces are perceived and described by those who requested these services.

23. See https://www.sotozen-net.or.jp/syumucyo/20200403_2.html, accessed 10 July 2021.

24. I am using a pseudonym here.

exception of some temples, his sect was behind the times. Our conversation took place in June of 2021:

There are many priests who cannot use a computer. Us younger priests are fine with computers, but many local district officers (*kyōkuchō* 教区長) in their sixties, seventies and older have only had in-person meetings—never online. Only this year [2021] did we decide to move forward with the plan to build a framework for meetings on the internet. I myself had experienced online meetings through different associations, so they asked me for help.... As a matter of fact, there are still many priests who do not know that this online conference software even exists. In summary, it is still far from common to use such applications in our sect. I first started using Zoom in November of 2020, so I'm also relatively late.

There also was never a real need for administrative meetings to take place online, as Mr. Tanaka continued to explain. Following the death of a priest due to COVID-19 in Tokyo, the Sōtō Zen sect was among the first to launch far-reaching countermeasures in the spring of 2020. Sectarian headquarters in Tokyo urged priests to cancel local trainings, meetings, and temple events, including areas that were not initially affected by the spread of the novel coronavirus. The Sōtō Zen headquarter in Tokyo had practically shut down by April 2020, which put a halt on the sect's administration and communications with local districts.²⁵

My informants in rural Japan would often respond with a wry smile and long sigh when I asked about recent innovations in Buddhist temple practice in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. They had read the news articles and knew about the many exciting developments in prayer practices, sermons delivered via YouTube, and online meditation sessions. But the realities they faced in their parish were often incomparable to those in urban communities. A Pure Land Buddhist priest in rural Tohoku stressed that most parishioners of her temple were elderly people who did not have smartphones. Offering sermons or conversations online was simply not an option for her to engage with her community. Another Pure Land priest rediscovered the significance of letters and photos that he sent to parishioners via postal services.

Reverend Tanaka's first encounter with online streaming of a ritual service happened during a funeral in the wake of the pandemic at his temple, west of

25. See McLaughlin 2020 for details on the initial countermeasures by the Sōtō Zen sect, and for a discussion on religious responses to the coronavirus in Japanese religions more broadly, including so-called New Religions.

Tokyo. The deceased's granddaughter in Tokyo could not attend the funeral due to travel restrictions. Another younger family member then asked if she could live-stream the thirty-minute ceremony for the granddaughter via Line. A smartphone was placed on a chair next to other attendants. Witnessing the granddaughter's attendance from afar, along with her participation in the subsequent sermon, marked a moment of reflection for Tanaka:

What I felt in that moment was that sharing the same time, even if we are in different places, might still elicit legitimate feelings of mourning and ancestor veneration. I have experienced the effect of sharing the same space during a funeral, but this was new to me.

As this quote illustrates, the “feelings of mourning and ancestor veneration” (*tomurau kimochi*, *kuyō suru kimochi* 弔う気持ち、供養する気持ち) as desired by Tanaka relate to logistic, spatial, and temporal concerns. To him, live-streaming—not on-demand solutions—was key to enabling a religious sensation of memorial. Drawing from this experience, the priest now plans to use streaming technology to allow remote participation for events going on at his temple. The inspiration for this innovation, however, was first suggested by participants in the funeral, not by the priest. Further, he only considers it viable for communicating with parishioners, not to reach out to new groups of followers, as if often presumed in discussing religious response to COVID-19 online.

Buddhism as a Social Contributor

Reverend Shōji died battling the outbreak of an epidemic disease for his local community. When overcrowded hospitals turned patients away at the door, the Pure Land Buddhist priest prepared beds to accommodate the sick at his temple Unjōji near Sendai. In making these arrangements, he accepted the risk of contracting the illness at home, and did so without asking whether or not those in need of a bed were members of Unjōji.

Local family temples like Unjōji are mostly known as providers of mortuary rituals for affiliated *danka* households (see Rowe 2011). Their individual and practical responses to social crises have hardly been explored. Shōji's death occurred in 1886 in Shiogama, when a cholera wave took his life along with 100,000 others in Japan. When the March 2011 tsunami buried the streets below Unjōji's driveway in rubble 125 years later, Shōji's great-grandson Shōji Ryōshō mobilized aid just as decisively. Both priests aimed to support the local community within and beyond Unjōji's parish. Both priests' actions compensated for their government's inability to adequately handle the epidemics and disasters of their time.

Over the past ten years, I joined reverend Shōji on many of his tours to temples along the tsunami-stricken coast of Tohoku, where he delivered relief goods and helped coordinate the activities of clerical volunteers. Shōji was constantly on his phone when not driving or chanting, never losing sight of activities back home, where he organized funerals and memorial services for those lost during the tsunami (see Graf 2013). On several occasions we also met in Tokyo, where Shōji helped facilitate dialogue between religious leaders and scholars who collaborated to convince government officials that Japan's constitutional separation of religion and state should not bar temples, churches, or shrines from public recognition as disaster emergency shelters. One of the temples that I first visited with Shōji in the spring of 2011 functioned as a refuge center for several months. About 300 survivors found shelter at Jōnenji in Kesennuma, where 1,357 residents died (see Graf 2016). The temple provided shelter for families who lost their homes, but Jōnenji wasn't registered as a shelter, which delayed the delivery of disaster relief goods.

Disasters lead to change. Meiji-period cholera pandemics accelerated the urgent modernization of public health in Japan.²⁶ In recent times, Buddhist temples like Unjōji are no longer needed as makeshift hospitals, nor are priests allowed to officially make a declaration of death, as was common practice in premodern Japan. But while modernity marked the beginning of an ongoing de-professionalization of Buddhist priests (Horie 2006), Buddhism's potential as a social contributor has not gone unnoticed. Since the March 2011 disasters, the number of officially recognized religious facilities in Japan that secured agreements with local governments to function as emergency shelters has more than doubled.²⁷

To keep intensive care beds vacant during the coronavirus epidemic, the Japanese government continues to rely on the private sector. Designated business hotels function as temporary healthcare units for asymptomatic coronavirus patients to self-isolate and heal. Social problems occasioned by a rapidly aging population, moreover, have long since necessitated the recognition and inclusion of non-political and non-governmental organizations in local policymaking. The Community-based Integrated Care System, which was first promulgated by the Japanese government in the early 2000s, relies heavily on home-based nursery care.

26. On the history of Cholera and the modernization of healthcare in Japan, see Suzuki and Suzuki 2008; Yamamoto 1987.

27. According to an article based on research by Inaba Keishin, published in the *Bukkyō taimuzu* (21 January 2021), 192 religious facilities were registered as long-term shelters in 2020, while 469 religious facilities were registered as temporary shelters. The article states that both numbers doubled within six years and are expected to continue to grow.

Since 2011, religious professionals like Shōji have expanded their disaster relief initiatives and networks into healthcare-related projects aimed at contributing to society at large. The most visible and widely reported-on projects prepare priests to embark on their missions as spiritual caregivers in hospitals, hospices, and other public venues (see McLaughlin 2013; Graf 2016). Other grassroots initiatives focus on temples as venues for civic-religious activism in care for the elderly. By 2020, I had long since started documenting a nationwide collaboration between medical doctors, care professionals, and Pure Land Buddhist priests—among them Shōji—who turned their temples into info care cafés for Alzheimer’s patients’ families, until the spread of COVID-19 put these activities on hold. The pandemic placed new health risks on the elderly in particular, causing challenges for religious and secular caregivers alike that have yet to be researched in full detail.

Up until 2020, when the spread of COVID-19 interrupted volunteer efforts, Shōji had frequently and increasingly engaged in interfaith dialogue. In 2015, I accompanied Shōji and other Buddhists to meet Catholic leaders in Cologne, Germany. In Wipperfürth, we attended an interreligious panel discussion at the Nichiren-Buddhist temple Daiseionji. He also traveled to the US to engage in conversations with religious leaders there. By 2017, Shōji had promoted dialogue between different Buddhist sects as the president of the All Japan Young Buddhist Association, and as an active participant in the World Fellowship of Buddhists. All this effort was rooted in his experience as a disaster volunteer. At the same time, he continued to visit parishioners and survivors on a regular basis, including on islands off the coast of Shiogama that could only be accessed by boat.

Priests without Temples or Parishioners

While temples throughout Japan resumed their core operations as funeral providers, the spread of the novel coronavirus necessitated restrictions of everyday Buddhist practices. Survey data shows a sharp decrease in attendance and a simplification of funeral ceremonies during the pandemic.²⁸ Unfortunately, no data shows the regional spread of priests that used to make a living by

28. A survey on temples of different sects all over Japan, conducted by Taishō University’s Chiiki Kōsō Kenkyūsho (Research Institute for Regional Planning) in May 2020, shows that 458 out of 517 responding priests (88.6 percent) experienced a decrease in participation in funerals as a result of the coronavirus epidemic. The percentage is even higher (92.9 percent), if we exclude twenty-four respondents who had not yet conducted a funeral under COVID-19 at the time. See Ogawa Yūkan’s research report online: https://chikouken.org/report/report_cato4/11296/, accessed 9 July 2021. https://chikouken.org/report/report_cato6/11572/, accessed 9 July 2021.

participating in funerals at multiple temples and sites. Some of my informants had family members who used to make a living by helping out in larger funerals at different temples and sites while others knew of such priests in their circles. All of my interlocutors agreed that the ongoing simplification of funerals in recent decades resulted in a decrease in the number of larger funerals much before the spread of COVID-19. It seems that the outbreak of the epidemic accelerated this trend.

The simplification of funerals is area specific. The same seems to hold true for priests that made a living as *yakusō*. By May 2020, the practice of limiting funerals to one-day events became most prominent in the Tokyo metropolitan area.²⁹ Funeral companies contributed to this trend, arguably due to fears of having to temporarily close in the event of an outbreak at their facilities. But not all urban areas are known to be working grounds for *yakusō*. For urban Pure Land priests in Kyoto, for example, it has long since been the norm to conduct funerals with only one priest, as one priest informed me; *yakusō* were uncommon. In Shizuoka Prefecture, by contrast, *yakusō* seem to be more common among Sōtō Zen funerals. It was also a Sōtō Zen priest who first brought the issue up during an interview regarding the downsizing of funerals. I asked how priests perceived of this change, to which the Sōtō Zen priest from Shizuoka Prefecture replied:

In May last year [2020], we had a funeral during lockdown where only close family members were allowed to participate. Under normal circumstances, that funeral would have been attended by fifty to one hundred relatives and other guests. Yet it is actually difficult for families to say farewell at larger funerals. It struck me to see that with the funeral being limited to a small scale, the family members were actually able to take their time. Up until now, funerals like these were social events designed to be accessible not only to the families of the deceased but also other social circles and people. I found it important to see how beneficial it may be for families to be able to spend more time with the departed during a funeral in an intimate way, without rushing things.

As this interview reveals, smaller-than-usual funerals were not always viewed negatively. My following question was whether these smaller funerals resulted in less income for temples, to which the priest responded:

29. The aforementioned survey by Taishō University's Chiiki Kōsō Kenkyūsho shows that 79.4 percent of respondents in Tokyo noticed a simplification of funerals to one-day events during COVID-19. The national average was 41.0 percent. See https://chikouken.org/report/report_cato4/11296/, accessed 9 July 2021.

At my temple, I did not experience any differences in income [as a result of the pandemic]. However, during a funeral with many guests, we are normally assisted by three to four other priests, called *yakusō*. These priests participate in other funerals when they don't have affiliated households to conduct funerals for. Some of these priests made a living by participating in larger funerals organized by various temples, but they are now losing their income and livelihood.... Moreover, if a memorial ceremony of a deceased gets canceled or postponed, that temple's income decreases. For these reasons, I think that there are various effects that the spread of the coronavirus has on Buddhist temples' income.

As the above conversation shows, not all parish temples suffered losses in income as a result of having fewer funeral guests. Rather, postponed and canceled funerals and memorial services place a heavy financial burden on temples.³⁰ When COVID-19 causes unemployment among parishioners, the temples suffer, too. But none of my interviewees reported critical losses in income as a result of the pandemic so far. In discussing the financial situation of Buddhist temples and monks in this current epidemic, I therefore suggest making a clear distinction between priests who rely on work as *yakusō*, considering that these priests are generally more vulnerable to the implications of social distancing measures than priest with a stable *danka* membership.³¹

All of my interviewees were to some extent aware of the unique problems facing specific subsets of priests: priests without temples; priests at temples with only few parishioners; priests working at sectarian head monasteries who were not born into temple families and did not have a temple to maintain; part-time priests; and what one priest termed “salary man-style priests” (*sararī man-teki na sōryo* サラリーマン的な僧侶). Yet there is no organized response to the problems that these and various other priests face under COVID-19. As the Sōtō priest quoted above explained:

30. The aforementioned survey by Taishō University's Chiiki Kōsō Kenkyūsho shows that 247 priests had received requests to discuss the effects of COVID-19. The great majority of these priests were asked if ancestor veneration rituals could be postponed or canceled. 373 priests expressed fears about the effects of the novel coronavirus on the discontinuation of monthly visits to the homes of parishioners, the cancellation of temple festivals and events, and losses in revenue, etc.

31. In this article, I only focus on temples and priests. Concerning funerals, grief centers (*saijō* 齋場), where most funerals are held in Japan, are also affected by COVID-19 in various ways. On one hand, grief centers were able to benefit from social distancing measures, as they could rent bigger rooms to smaller groups of guests. On the other hand, affiliated or in-house providers of meals and drinks for funeral guests suffered catastrophic losses. Future research should therefore clarify the impact of funeral providers more broadly.

On the sectarian level, there is nothing that our sect can do as an organization. Of course, there are also regional differences and different understandings of and approaches to this problem. What I do is, I deliver pizza to the *yakusō* priests that are now really struggling. I also think of ways to support them financially.

Conclusion

The coronavirus epidemic affected temples in various, mostly negative, ways. Though, as the case of Banshōji showed, some temples made record profits in prayer ritual sales, most other temples, and particularly individual priests, suffered tremendous losses. Recent innovations and shifts in demands raise interesting questions regarding the place of divine protection and the role prayer rituals and Buddhist objects like talismans and amulets will play within different Buddhist sects. I am particularly interested to know if religious discourse on COVID-19 has any effect on Jōdo Shinshū, a sect that officially rejects such rituals and objects.

The case of Unjōji exhibited the important role Buddhist temples play as local hubs to coordinate volunteer activities in response to disasters—sometimes even as makeshift hospitals during epidemics, and this value can hardly be overstated. The question of what priests are doing to contribute to society, however, rarely (if ever) turns to intra-clerical support and ways that priests rely on help by each other and for each other, financially or otherwise.³² Compared to outreach that promises to enhance the image of Buddhist sects by contributing to society at large, individual actions of priests in aid for fellow clergy are not likely to make the news. It is therefore important to provide on-the-ground perspectives on religion-related volunteering based on multi-methodological approaches.

Research on religion-related volunteering rarely considers that providing volunteer services is a privilege that not all priests can afford. As a result, the voices of practitioners that don't fit the framework of social engaged Buddhism are not likely to be heard by scholars concerned with civic-religious activism. The case of Shōji illustrated how the pandemic put many volunteer efforts on hold, but the situation of *yakusō* also makes me wonder about the costs and fea-

32. Extant research on civic-religious activism deepened understanding of Buddhism beyond the grave and beyond priests' involvement in temple-based communities in Japan (Nelson 2013; Watts and Okano 2012). More recently, Buddhist social activism was also explored in light of the coronavirus pandemic. In discussing a Pure Land Buddhism-based aid initiative in care for the homeless in Tokyo, Levi McLaughlin (2021: 25) points to a rise in homelessness among migrant workers in Tokyo. Yet little has been introduced about the significance of local temple networks in the care of unemployed priests.

sibility of volunteering more broadly. Whether in the context of the pandemic or beyond, in-person or online, free services and altruistic practices, like food deliveries or web-based meditation sessions, are time-consuming activities that require a specific set of skills and material resources. Who has access to these resources and networks? Who does not? And how representative are the case studies on volunteer initiatives for contemporary temple Buddhism?

The coronavirus epidemic gives us an opportunity to sharpen our understanding of the economic divide in Japanese religions, and of social inequalities more broadly. It also has the potential to establish long-lasting dialogue among religious leaders and scholars, and on the local level, between temples, churches, and shrines. Here I wonder how the pandemic will further change civic-religious volunteering, and also how dialogue between religions, as promoted by Shōji, will further change in times of travel restrictions during COVID-19. Future research should tell if or how the pandemic will be reflected in this dialogue on a theoretical level.

This essay introduced prayer and divine protection as topics to explore the theme of post-pandemic religion in Japan. Different approaches to understanding prayer as a dialogue, ritual, and petition form vital yet understudied aspects of contemporary religiosity that should be further explored through multi-methodological approaches and interdisciplinary collaborations. Future research should also investigate prayer and divine protection through the lens of space. As I have shown, the portability of prayer rituals is limited for various reasons, but the pandemic elicited a creative displacement of other religious practices, like sutra copying, to practitioners' homes. The idea of intersecting prayer rituals for divine aid with sutra copying is not new nor unique to responses to COVID-19, and the distribution of protective amulets for home-use has been a part of prayer rituals for centuries. Associating *kitō* at temples with people's homes is therefore not new. What stands out is rather the amalgam of temple-based prayer rituals with the temple-based distribution of materials for home-use, and the specific ways that utilizing these materials at home actively involves the body and the senses in physically demanding practices that require a certain amount of time, concentration, and dedication. Whether through the ritual consumption of milk at ludic pre-pandemic temple festivals or during physically demanding practices to be performed at home in times of isolation, it is within this context of active engagement that the Buddhist message and the promise of divine aid become tangible in bodily practices, across space and time.

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NISHIDA'S PHILOSOPHY AND MY CHANGING IDEA OF GOD



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The following is a translation of the 70th Sunshin Memorial Lecture delivered in June of 2018 at the Kitaro Nishida Memorial Museum of Philosophy in Kanazawa and subsequently published as 「西田哲学と神概念の行方」. The argument is basically a montage of things drawn from other writings, stitched together with some personal memories of my way to the question of God and to Japanese philosophy.

I was born and raised in a Catholic family where the word “God” was a part of everyday life. Before each evening meal we thanked God for the blessing of home and family. My father was quick to reprimand us every time we used the name of God to curse. Only my mother could get away with it. I think her earthy language was part of what attracted my father to her. The only time I can remember discussing theology at home was the grilling our father would give my sisters and me about the Sunday sermon, of which we understood almost nothing. To defend ourselves from reproach, we all learned to memorize short phrases and pretended we knew what we were talking about. You might say this was my introduction to theological method and served me well on any number of occasions in the course of a Catholic education that carried through high school, university, and major seminary. At school, the nuns talked about God all the time, but it was only those who were not afraid of being labeled “pious” that ever dared repeat any of it outside of school.

In a word, belief in God was like good manners for a child: a perfunctory compulsion we put up with to co-exist harmoniously with an adult world and its rules for survival. But it was a compulsion with dire consequences for those who misused the name of God in the presence of those who seemed to know more than we did about the mysterious world beyond. In weekly confession as grammar school children, we were periodically threatened with divine wrath and the “pains of hell” if we did not repent of our sins, but not even the goriest images we were served up in catechism class did much to bring this vaporous will-o’-the-wisp idea any closer to our everyday existence. Like most of my

friends, I was far more afraid of what the teachers and parents could dole out than the eternal flames that awaited those who disobeyed.

My mother had converted from Lutheranism to Catholicism, and this meant that from the time I was eight years old I was carrying her questions to school with me to confound the nuns or surprise the priest on his weekly visits. Looking back, I am a little surprised that her questions never became my own, even as I struggled to write down the answers and carry them home to her.

These were formative years, and it took far longer to replace these habits of thinking about God with something I could appropriate into my adult life. Pretty much everything I thought about God up until I began graduate studies in philosophy was a variation on one or the other of those habits. The two years I spent in meditation and spiritual exercises as a novice to the priesthood were divided between filling notebooks with accounts of my very ordinary life as part of a larger story in which God and the devil were fighting for my soul, and devouring every book I could find on psychology, religious experience, church history, and classics of spirituality. Gradually the latter began to eclipse the former.

By the time I finished university I realized that my initiation into the world of the “regulators” demanded more of me than simply changing places in the scheme of things to the enforcer of traditional thinking rather than the enforced. I consider it a happy stroke of fate that this took place in an increasingly self-critical environment and at a time when theology had moved out of the halls of the academy and into the streets where it was being debated fearlessly. During my first year of graduate school my interest in God was shaped by a movement known as “Death of God theology,” and in particular by a young Protestant thinker named Thomas J. J. Altizer who I had heard lecture and began to correspond with. His books were full of Hegel and Nietzsche and William Blake whom he called on to bolster his vision of a “radical kenosis” whereby the old God-in-the-sky had poured himself out, without remainder, into the simple carpenter’s son of Nazareth with his ethic of selfless love. I began to sleep less and spent my nights writing a comprehensive book about his ideas and those of others in the movement. I was consumed with the passion that the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen had put in the mouth of his Kierkegaardian anti-hero Brand:

“Paint him with crutches. I go to lay him in his grave.... It is time, you know. He has been ailing for a thousand years.” (Act 1)

I even did a dramatic presentation of the whole play in collaboration with a group of younger nuns and seminarians. By the end of the year I had finished my book and Martin Marty at the University of Chicago offered to intervene

for its publication, but I also faced expulsion from the seminary if I went ahead with it. I made copies for a small circle of friends and kept the original in my desk until two years ago when I handed it over to the Institute's librarian for cataloguing. The decision was not a hard one to make. I was not prepared to abandon the way I had chosen because of other people's ideas that had consumed my intellectual curiosity but had not resonated loudly enough in my breast to displace the void represented by the word *God*.

After ordination to the priesthood, I entered Cambridge for doctoral studies, and once again fate stepped in. My plans to write a dissertation on Karl Jaspers and Alfred North Whitehead were frustrated by the lack of a competent supervisor. The frustration over my studies fell into the same void as the idea of God and I decided it was time to face the matter squarely. Having already read through much of the *Collected Works* of C. G. Jung, I decided to do a critique of his idea of God and its accompanying idea of religious experience. While I did not find the same rigorous thinking I had grown accustomed to in philosophical literature, I was awakened to the world of myths and symbols. Ironically, thanks to just about everything that I found dissatisfying in Jung's approach, the idea of an *idea* of God thickened and I spent years thereafter trying to sort it all out, in the classroom and in my study.

After several years of teaching at graduate schools in Chicago and Mexico City, I was invited to help start the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture in Nagoya. The conventional wisdom of those with experience in such matters was that learning to read, write, and lecture in Japanese was the largest hurdle. I have to smile now when I think how wrong they were.

A greater challenge by far awaited me, and all the questions I had brought with me, in the writings of the Japanese philosophers whom the Institute director, Jan Van Bragt, persuaded me to read from the first week I took up residence—among them, Nishida Kitarō and others of his circle.



For the first few years, as my reading picked up pace and I branched further out into commentaries on the works of the Kyoto School, I had to question my initial sentiments regarding the superiority of Western philosophy as I knew it. At first, each time leading scholars in the field would pay homage to this group of thinkers, I tried to hold my tongue at what seemed to me the almost epidemic ignorance of the great variety of Western philosophy—not just a handful of ancient and nineteenth-century thinkers, but the whole of the field, including its gnostic, mystical, hermetic, alchemical, and literary branches. Even as I discovered that this was not the case, particularly in the case of Nishida, there was

something else not quite right. I remember, in the thick of it, stumbling upon a story in the ancient Chinese classic, *Strategies of Warring States*:

It seems that a certain Ji-liang who, hearing that his master, the Lord of Wei, intended to launch an attack against the capital city of Handan, interrupted his journey and rushed back to the palace. Dusty and disheveled, he threw himself at the feet of the Lord of Wei, and eager to convince him that he would not become a true leader by trying to enlarge his kingdom at the expense of others, told his lord this story:

I met a man in Daxing Mountains. His chariot was facing north and he told me that he was going to Chu. "But if you want to go to Chu," I asked him, "why are you headed north?"

"I have a good horse," he told me.

"Your horse may be good, but that does not make this the road to Chu," I replied.

"I have plenty of provisions," he retorted.

"However great your provisions, this is still not the way to Chu," I insisted.

"Ah," but he replied, "my charioteer is first-rate."

"The stronger your horse, the better equipped you are, the more skillful your driver," I told him, "the further you will end up away from where you want to go."¹

I have to smile now when I think how wrong I was.

My respect for Kyoto School philosophers, including what they had to say about God, grew when I realized that I was mistaken about where they were headed. What I had missed in my preoccupation with their use of resources I was familiar with was their orientation. I had assumed they were using the same roads but headed in the wrong direction, when in fact their geography of the philosophical path was drawn very differently. Even Nishida's idea of God in his *Inquiry into the Good*, as naïve a critique as one can find anywhere, held a different place in his questioning than it held in the questioning of the Western authors I had grown up reading. It was *I* who was headed in the wrong direction with all my equipment because I could not imagine any other destination than the one I had been educated in. It was not the nature of reality that drove Nishida but the nature of what Buddhism called the enlightened mind and its experience of reality. If this question were asked in Western philosophy, it was

1. Taken from 『戦国策』安釐王, 712 (富山房刊『戦国策正解』).

asked at the fringes and piecemeal. Even so, there was nothing I knew to compare with Nishida's voyage to the heart of the awakened mind.

The possibility of a different mapping of the mind and its relationship to truth meant that my own questions about God might be in need of questioning and perhaps reframing. At the same time, I hold out the possibility of developing Nishida's idea of God a step further than he had been able to take it. I say this not only because Nishida never quite figured out where to fit God into his scheme or what kind of reality it was a name for, but because philosophies East and West find themselves faced with questions that go far beyond using each other's resources to answer their respective questions: questions that tug at the heart of the philosophical vocation itself.

Not everything Nishida wrote about God belongs formally to his philosophy. His lecture notes are clearly full of references to ideas that he explained or referred to without ever espousing them or relating them to his own ideas. In his writings, it is a little harder to know what to do with passing remarks, asides, or other isolated phrases. Reading his earlier works in light of the later might suggest that an idea had been stewing for some time before it ripened, but not always. *Inquiry into the Good* is a good example. He himself knew it was full of half-ideas strung along on a flimsy thread. Some of these ideas blossomed, some withered, but there is no way to predict what he would have done with them in advance. Similarities in phrasing are one thing. To claim that the earlier ideas are seeds of the later is very different. What I am trying to say is that the idea of tracing the growth of Nishida's thought from his first writings to his last is far from a straight line. It has sidetracks, changes of direction, even reversals. Far from being a negative, this is a sign that the vague goal he had in mind to explain—a critical explanation of the enlightened mind—was stronger than any particular route to it.

The idea of God is a peculiar part of this picture. As I said, Nishida could not shake free of the idea even though it never played a significant role in his thought. Somehow, he felt he *had* to come to terms with it. The question is, Why? He was not prepared to side with any of the ideas of God he had met in Western authors, and he knew that it did not have a key role to play in East Asian intellectual history. And then there is the more obvious problem. As with Tanabe and Nishitani, Nishida's idea of God—at least from his middle years—is a staunch ally of his idea of absolute nothingness. At first blush this seems a point-blank contradiction to Western philosophy's God of being, not to mention the God of Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. But the question of how the one locks out the other is not nearly as interesting as the question of why Nishida found it necessary to give God a place in his thinking at all. When we have understood that, we will have caught the genius of a philosophical par-

ticularity that opens out onto the wider field of questions to which I wish this lecture to lead.

There is every good reason for ideas of God bred in the bone of Western culture not to settle easily into Japanese intellectual history. Buddhist, Confucian, and Shinto modes of thought block the way at every turn. Nevertheless, Nishida realized that faint as the echo of the Western “God” is in the native religiosity of Japan, it clings too tightly to the routines of philosophical discourse to be ignored. Yet even this was not enough of a reason.

Nishida never answered his own question, preferring to refine his earlier comments in light of later developments in his thinking and as his familiarity with Western ideas on the subject grew more sophisticated with time. Earlier criticisms were allowed to fall away without retractions. In *Inquiry* he says that God is not an old man with a beard who lives in the sky but rather the foundation of the cosmos, in which every unity is an expression of God, and the unity of human consciousness attests to the presence of a divine personality at the heart of the cosmos. Fragments of the idea were to survive in later writings, but the turn to absolute nothingness would alter everything.

The most important question about God in Western philosophy, and one debated with great animus, is that of God’s existence or non-existence. Obviously, he was not going to submit his philosophy to the logic of faith by endorsing any version of Aquinas’ or Anselm’s arguments. His most obvious choice was outright atheism, dismissing belief in God as a simple delusion, an intermittently useful superstition with no basis in reality. Nishida could also have weighed in on the matter by taking the safe road of agnosticism and declared himself with those who avoided the question as unanswerable. Then there was Pascal’s wager that belief in God was a safe bet “just in case” the unprovable turned out to be true. Any of these options would have freed Nishida from having to fold God into his unfolding thought. He took none of them. Nor did he ever explain why. He just kept pulling God into the picture at every major turn without giving the philosophical date over God’s existence a second thought.

Of all the explanations that suggest themselves, it seems most likely to me that Nishida *did* entertain an unexpressed view about the ontological status of God, namely, as a symbol around which a great deal of philosophical thought had accumulated that might be siphoned off for his own purposes. Seeing God as a symbol had two advantages. First of all, it need only exist in the minimal sense in which any great idea is said to “exist”; and second, its meaning is inherently flexible and inexhaustible. I do not see any evidence in Nishida’s writings that contradicts this view and indeed find it reinforced at every turn.

The tendency in modern psychology to adopt a similar stance that straddles atheism and agnosticism, recognizing the power and utility of the God-image

while refusing to subscribe to a transcendent being corresponding to that image runs contemporaneously with Nishida. It is hard to know how aware he was of its early spillover into philosophy, though evidence of any serious knowledge of advances in symbolic theory and hermeneutics, let alone psychology of the unconscious, is lacking. No matter. What concerns me here is how he interpreted the image of God and what use it might be to us today.



I begin with two preliminary conclusions on the matter, not all of which there is time to defend here.

First, if all references to God were erased from Nishida's *Collected Works*, it would not affect the stability of his overall structure of thought. At the same time, without some other stimulus to expand his thought to cosmic proportions that came from including God as a "spiritual fact," Nishida's thinking would have turned out quite differently.

Second, there is no single, uniform idea of God to be found in Nishida. We would be poorer off if there were. Precisely because his idea of God was symbolic, his attempts to insert it at each stage of his development meant that it could take on new meanings.

This symbolic ambiguity and continued renovation suggests that dominant ideas of God in the Judeo-Christian tradition have something important to learn from Nishida. On one hand, to enter into Nishida's world of thought is a stimulus to draw forgotten aspects of that tradition closer to the center and liberate them from the fringes where mysticism and hermeticism have long languished in exile as heretical. On the other hand, already from Nishida's early writings, diaries, lecture notes, and letters we find additional stimulus to expose that tradition to the demands of a new perspective. Before turning to that problem, however, I would like to draw a hasty sketch of the various elements of Nishida's God as they unfolded over the course of his life.

In a letter dated 1909, Nishida speaks of God as Western philosophy's equivalent of "self-awareness." As a young man he had been attracted by "self-awareness" movements in Europe and wrote a short essay about it, but he found them too pessimistic and too infatuated with the very ego that the no-self of Zen aimed to overcome. The self-awareness he was trying to express rationally as pure experience could only be sustained, he wrote, by a "great self-awareness equal to God."² In his lectures on religion begun in 1913, we find a whole section

2. 1909, 19: 163. Nishida's works are cited with the date of publication, followed by the volume and page number in his *Collected Works*, 『西田幾多郎全集』 (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2002–2009), 24 vols.

of his notes devoted to God. While the fragments are choppy, they demonstrate the extraordinary breadth of reading that lay behind the first organized treatment he would give God in the pages of *Inquiry into the Good*.³

Although not formally giving God or Buddha that status of an Absolute, he attributes to each “absolute power,” in contrast to the power of human beings which is “finite” and “relative.” What unites the finite and the infinite is an inborn, cosmic urge to unite.⁴ Five years later, at the end of his *Intuition and Reflection in Self-Consciousness*, he absorbs that urge into a larger idea he was experimenting with: that of an absolute will acting with “absolute freedom.” Buddha is gone from the picture, but there is one odd passing reference to an acausal nothingness, a spiritual reality beyond subject and object, an absolute “desire” or will, fusion of being and non-being reflected in the idea of God.⁵ This sounds like a paraphrase of the treatment of God in *Inquiry*. There remains no question of a creative, provident, other-worldly transcendent, self-sufficient being who caused the world into existence, only the very God he had earlier decided was the equivalent of the enlightened mind. At the same time, Nishida felt the need to elevate the role of the cosmic urge to awakening by assigning it the status of a “divine will.” Years later, at the reprint of the book, he dismissed the idea as having “capitulated to the enemy camp of mysticism.”⁶

One element of his reformulation of the God idea after *Inquiry*, however, did survive, an attribute taken over early on from the image of the Christian God, namely love. Nishida could have made an allusion to Buddhist compassion, but he prefers to use the word *love* to express the idea that “it is only by actual conscious bonding with the outer world that we arrive at the true self.”⁷

In the years to come, all of Nishida’s reflections on the God of Western philosophy would mature into an idea of absolute nothingness which would then be the touchstone for all future reference to the absolute. Throughout it all, as far as I know, he never seemed even to hint at a direct equivalence between absolute nothingness and God, who was associated with a Western notion of an absolute being, which he was trying to supersede.

That said, Nishida *did* attempt to subsume the idea of God into both no-self or the abandonment of self and into the metaphysical reality of nothingness.

3. Cf. 2013, 14: 109–35.

4. 1911, 1: 133, 151, 158..

5. See 1917, 2: 241–52. The remark that “being is born of nothingness” (248) appears to be a direct quotation from a book of Hermann Cohen’s that he was reading at the time and which Joseph O’Leary has tracked down. See NISHIDA 1917, 183. The point here is only to dismiss a causal relationship between the experience of self-awareness and the natural world. Soon thereafter, however, he will state more directly that “the true I stands on the edge of being and nothingness” (1919, 2: 389).

6. 1941, CW 2: 3.

7. 1920, 2: 286, 289, 291, 326–7, 376–7, 387–9, 420, 426.

Simply put, he framed the God-man relationship as a metaphor of the relationship between nothingness and no-self, as when no-self is compared to submission to the will of God.⁸ Already in 1905 he had stated something similar in his private notes: “The true religious relationship between the human and the divine is an entry into the realm of no-self. It is to abandon self absolutely and turn to God.”⁹

It was there from the start, but gradually it became clear that it was not that self-awareness was participation in God's reality, but that God was a symbol of self-awareness. The God who had once united being and non-being is subservient to “the true I stands on the edge of being and nothingness.”¹⁰

I am tempted to trace all of this through what I know of his writings, but this would bore all but the specialist to tears. But there is one final curiosity I would point to. Until his late writings, Nishida by and large avoided Buddhist terminology in favor of a new philosophical vocabulary of his own device. Rather than speak of “no-self” he spoke of “seeing without a seer” and “overcoming the subject/object dichotomy.” Instead of “enlightenment” he spoke of “self-awareness.” Instead of emptiness or *śūnyatā*, he preferred “nothingness.” The equivalence is not in doubt, but the change in vocabulary allowed him to approach his questions philosophically rather than in the context of East Asian Buddhist thought.

There was no such equivalent for “God,” a word he used from his earliest writings to his latest. Clearly the term was ultimately untranslatable—and undefinable—for him, a symbolic marker of a gap that he was not able to fill. Perhaps no other concept in Nishida's thought is as pliant to its context and as amorphous to reason as *God*.

Against this background, when we read Nishida's claim that in love God and the self unite to form a *coincidentia oppositorum*, we may conclude that when the *I* is converted to a great *I* that transcends the *I*, self and God are swept up into a nothingness beyond being where they can no longer be distinguished. This is like the *unio mystica*.

Nishida likens getting stuck in the awakened mind without bonding to the world to being absorbed into the universal, all-seeing eye of God, a statement that we may now infer he intends to apply as well to an enlightenment that does not return to serve the enlightenment of others.

In short, within the landscape of absolute nothingness, the true self of self-awareness and God are functionally indistinguishable and therefore in *direct*

8. 1905, 14: 546–7.

9. See 1905, 16: 216–7; 14: 104.

10. 1919, 2: 389.

correlation. For Nishida to relate God to nothingness, however, he must ignore talk of God as an *object* for the religious *subject*. Self-awareness in nothingness is longer awareness of anything. Along with everything it once contained, it is now in a place where there is nothing to see or anyone to see it. The language of a self standing *before God* and God standing *over the world* has been transcended—but only at the *ideal* level. In the historical world, the opposition between God and self, between ideal and fact, is a real part of human experience. The two must be mutually defining, or as Nishida has it in his last essay, in *inverse* correlation: the further apart the poles of the opposition, the stronger the correlation and the identity of the things correlated. This does not imply a bond between beings. It functions more like a bond between a being and an ideal, which then fuse in the final negation of both, that is, when they are inset in the absolute of nothingness.

To repeat, Nishida does not justify a simple equation of God and absolute nothingness, as if they were two names—one Christian and one crypto-Buddhist—for the same thing. As we saw, Nishida's earlier association of absolute will with God had hinted at a kind of creative force straddling being and nonbeing, a combination of Bergson's *élan vital* and a Fichtean *I writ large*. These positions were at least marginally compatible with Christian thought and also concur with the position he takes in *Inquiry into the Good*, where God is seen as “the ground of all unifying activity in the universe.” In the end, he broke abandoned that view through a rather abstract chain of ideas. Bear with me as I rush through his argument. I do so because I believe the break was unsuccessful and at the same time suggests a new way for the Judeo-Christian tradition to speak of God.

In his final essay Nishida states at the outset that “Without God, there is no religion.”¹¹ The context makes it clear that he understands *religion* as a type of experience within the historical world that straddles the borderlands with absolute nothingness. To see being as the final universal in which God is set as an objective transcendence, and the world as immanent, would therefore amount to a “denial of religion itself.”¹² With that qualification, Nishida can still argue that the God of absolute being who stands opposed to relative beings is indispensable to religion because the ultimate absolute of nothingness is only absolute in virtue of enveloping everything that is only relatively absolute. God is such a relative absolute precisely because the divine is only divine in its relation to what is not divine. This self-contradictory nature of God means that *God is only God in self-negation*, or that it is only as an absolute being that the

11. 1945, 10: 296.

12. 945, 10: 364. On the following page he calls this way of thinking “anachronistic.”

idea of God can be embraced within the idea of absolute nothingness. But the same is true of the self that comes to its true nature only in denying itself, like the *kenotic*, self-emptying nature of the Godhead.¹³ This is the exact inverse of grounding the affirmation of self in belief in a self-sustaining God. For Nishida, the self is a point at which the self-contradictory nature of the divine is projected into reality, transcending good and evil, angel and devil.¹⁴

The “reality” Nishida has in mind for God is not the realm of objective fact but the realm of “spiritual fact.” It is not an external realm towards which the self directs its reason and desire in search of higher meaning; it means paying attention to something that has been there all along “in the inner recesses of the mind.” Nishida insists that negating the reasons and desires of the self does not mean slipping into an unconscious state or losing one’s identity in a formless One, but becoming “more clearly conscious” as the inner recesses of the self become more intelligible.”

The only sense in which God can be said to *become* absolute nothingness is as a final negation of the absoluteness of the Godhead, which is to say, in the radical affirmation of its relativity to the world. Yet Nishida’s God is not a transcendent, omniscient, self-sustaining being or a creative cosmic force at work in a pantheistic or panentheistic sense. Only as a spiritual creativity does God become a proper focus of religious faith. As a living “ideal,” God cannot not be absolute in itself but only in forfeiting its absoluteness to the relativity of its realization in time and space. The same must be said of the true self: it *becomes* absolute nothingness only in negating the relativity of its relationship to the ideal of full self-awareness.¹⁵ Only in realizing the ideal of true selfhood is the dichotomy between God and self overcome. Consequently, God can only be understood as absolute nothingness when God forfeits Godhead and is united with the true self, and vice versa.

As I have been saying all along, it was not simply out of a sense of loyalty to Western philosophy that Nishida spoke again and again of God. To the last, the idea of God performed a function that neither absolute nothingness nor true self were able to. Now I have no problem with this, but it avoids an important metaphysical rethinking of God. For those who do not need to *believe* in God but only to incorporate the attributes and functions of the God idea—or at least to decide what to do with them—the metaphysical status of the Christian God does not matter. They can pick and choose and leave the rest aside.

13. See, for example, 1945, 10: 333, 335, 347–8, 361.

14. 1945, 10: 321, 324.

15. 1945, 10: 315–6.

As a mere mental ideal, God is able to yield to symbolic representation as perfect love or perfect freedom and yet remain open to the negation of all representation. God could as well serve to symbolize fulfillment of the self's desire for awakening as to expose that fulfillment as a permanently receding goal. The problem is that an ideal that is not grounded metaphysically in the real is always able to be dismissed as a superstition or a delusion.

Nishida's way around this is to assert that even if the universal ideal of no-mind does not exist objectively in the world, that does not mean that it simply transcends the world. It is a spiritual ideal that only becomes real in the negation of its status as an ideal. This is something we can call "no-mind," which is not irrational but a higher rationality in which, as he says, the mind "*becomes the self of things and of God.*"¹⁶ This affirmation-in-negation is enlightenment, the self that has seen its true nature as a no-self inset within the ultimate, absolute, all-encompassing universal of nothingness.¹⁷

Here Nishida draws a clear connection between Buddha and God. Like Buddha, the only way that God can embrace the multitude of created beings is as a universal ideal becoming real through the self-negation of being projected into the concrete experience of individual minds. Both are like a circle whose center is everywhere and its circumference nowhere.¹⁸ In both cases, the self and its ideas of the absolute are relatives set within the historical world as spiritual facts. In nothingness, their distinction is erased. In the world of time and space, the ideal and the real are always mutually defining contradictories, but it is only in absolute nothingness that "things are as they are" and that "we see the real God where there is no God,"¹⁹ no Buddha, and no self. With that, the guiding image of a "great self-awareness equivalent to God" is exposed as a philosophical expression of an "enlightenment equivalent to Buddha."

Nishida is aware that all this has strayed rather far from traditional ideas of God. Two pages from the end of his final essay he raises the unusual suggestion that it may be time for Christianity to break its ties with the God of objective transcendence and open up to a new mode of religion that thinks in terms of transcending oneself immanently, within the world. He then poses the rhetorical question: "From today's world-historical standpoint, will Buddhism have nothing to contribute to a new age?" So long as it remains bound to the specific

16. 1940, 9: 230. The term *no-mind*, or later *Oriental no-mind*, appears often in Nishida's writings as an expression of annulling the self, but care should be taken not to narrow it to any particular Buddhist meaning.

17. 1945, 10: 353.

18. 1945, 10: 316.. Nishida attributes the phrase to Cusanus, apparently unaware of the source of the image in the medieval pseudo-hermetic text, *Liber xxiv philosophorum*.

19. 1945, 10: 363. Nishida uses the Buddhist term *jinen hōni* 自然法爾 to express the idea of things as they are in their true nature.

historical condition that it was shaped in, he added, Buddhism will be “no more than a relic of the past.” But if it can regain its universal character, ideas like immanent transcendence might prove valuable for the self-understanding of Christianity, provided of course it had “a thoroughgoing rational foundation.”²⁰ Nishida was convinced that his own logic of *place* (*basho*) had an essential role to play in making room on both counts.

Nishida had all the pieces for a metaphysic of God. He just didn't know how to put them all together, or at least he never wanted to. But if he is going to suggest that the classical God be removed from Christianity in favor of Buddhist enlightenment, his talk of Christianity's “opening up a new mode of religion” becomes empty. I would like to suggest another tack.



I do not dispute the thrust of Nishida's conclusion about the God idea in Christianity. My whole life has been moving me in that direction. But “removal” is too vague and reactionary. Is there not another way to assemble the pieces of Nishida's kaleidoscope of ideas to rethink the Christian God? If so, this would help counter the idea that his philosophy is just for private. I believe that it not only aids in my personal search for an image of God coincident with our contemporary understanding of the place of human beings in the world, but also a contribution to Japanese philosophy.

In taking this on, I have no intention of leveling criticisms against Nishida's understanding of the God of Western philosophy and religion. There is much he did not appreciate in terms of theology, scriptural imagery, ordinary piety, and mystical thought and experience, not to mention the variety of philosophical interpretations of the idea of God. The diminished importance he gave to the figure of Jesus except as an embodiment of God's love deprived him of a valuable source of inspiration for his later thought, particularly his final essay. This is a lacuna that his disciple Nishitani Keiji would later step up to fill impressively. In any case, my interest in Nishida's idea of God is not to set the historical record straight on one or the other point or to highlight logical inconsistencies. I am interested because I think what he wrote is *genuinely useful* for a broader discussion of God.

I begin with three interlocking insights of Nishida's and two oversights.

First, Nishida spoke of the world as a “continuity of discontinuities.” Life gets its meaning from human perception and experience, which are by nature finite and discontinuous, but discontinuity implies the idea of continuity. Things that

20. 1945, 10: 365–6.

exist and work are connected to one another not as an unbroken, rational chain but as a continuity of discontinuities.”²¹ Each and every entity in the world is drawn in two directions at the same time: on one hand, to continuity and rationality; on the other, to discontinuity and irrationality.²² In other words, pure continuity exists only at the level of abstract reason; in the historical world, the only continuity is a continuity of discontinuities.

Second, the idea of a final, all-encompassing universal that Nishida pursued throughout his philosophy was not that of a uniform quality that defined the whole of reality. While he never explicitly broke with the classical philosophical vision of an *unus mundus*, his speculations suggested a description of reality as a series of ever larger concentric circles, each of them marked by internal inconsistencies or discontinuities that called out for resolution at a higher level. His goal was to reach the outermost circle of nothingness that nothing else could contain and that was itself a pure continuity. Far from imposing any uniform quality on the world of relative universals, final, absolute universality was the ground of the radical and irradicable pluralism of being. The historical world was not one, it was a dialectic of opposing forces, or what Nishida liked to call a “unity of absolute contradictories.”²³ In the end, the universal was not a “uniformity” but a “commons” that made room for everything and its opposite.

This flows naturally into the third insight, namely that absolute universality was not to be found in the world of being and becoming but only in the world of nothingness. He spoke of the world as the “self-limitation of nothingness,” meaning that nothingness is a kind of power that works out its own identity by transforming itself into the things of the world. It is the continuity that is revealed indirectly by the omnipresence of discontinuities.²⁴ This nothingness quickly rose to the status of an absolute more satisfying than the absolute he had met in German philosophy.

For Nishida, none of these insights relies on the idea of God, not even his own variations on that idea. But I believe there is an important link to be made. To do so, I have first to free these ideas from their native context and adjust Nishida’s vocabulary accordingly. I trust the associations will be self-evident.

To begin with, I suggest we speak of the “connected” and “disconnected” rather than of “continuity” and “discontinuity.” The context for this change of vocabulary is best made clear by an example. One day, around dusk, I stood and looked outside my research office window at a tree where small birds were fluttering about. As the light inside my room began to outshine the light coming

21. 1916 2: 100.

22. 1935 7: 15, 22.

23. 1945 10: 348, where he put the 2 in apposition.

24. 1935, 5:7.

in from outside, I could see my own reflection mirrored in the same window through which I was looking at the tree, the one image superimposed over the other. It was almost as if I myself were suspended in the tree and the birds were landing and taking off from my head and shoulders. Then it struck me: I am *connected* to the tree, not just as a subject perceiving an object, but I am *really* connected to it, no less than the tree is connected to the ground and the birds and the other trees... and indeed to everything, everywhere. I mean that literally, not metaphorically. Granted my connection was stronger and more direct than that of a jar of jam on the shelf in a grocery store in Paris, if it is possible to travel from my office to Paris, by whatever roundabout way, there *must* be a connection. And that goes for everything from here to the outer reaches of the outermost universe. Light itself could not travel through outer space if that universal connectivity were broken at some point.

But now, my connection to the tree, which is fairly direct even if only visual, is also fairly short-lived. But no matter how immediate and intense, all connection is still only “relative.” To be sure, there are degrees of relativity. My connection here to this podium and to all of you will last, more or less directly, for a short time and then fade. On the other hand, our joint connection to, say, the giant centipedes of the Amazon rainforest is very thin and even at the micro-biotic level all but immeasurable with our current technology. Yet in both cases there is something *equally non-relative* at work here. These connections *cannot* disappear altogether—ever. There is no way anything that exists can cut itself off from the fact of universal connectivity and still be said to exist. This connectivity is not just accidental. It is essential. Darwin wrote that, “Nothing exists for itself alone, but only in relation to other forms of life.” But we must add, “only in relation to everything else that exists.” This might seem to take us back to the same abstract language we were trying to escape. Still, we must reach higher before we return to the everyday.

At this point, there is no reasonable argument for positing an “ultimate reality” that holds the world of being and becoming together, or some transcendent agent who keeps this tangle of relationships working together. As comforting as it has been for human beings to imagine a caste of higher beings like us in all things but our imperfections and defects, there is no need for such a leap just yet.

Now even though Nishida himself did not identify God and absolute nothingness, I believe that we now have a way to draw a clearer line than he could.

To begin with, we have to ask if there is anything that is connected to everything else directly and all the time. Obviously, it would not be a “thing” like all the things that make up the universe since their identity is defined as a particularized web of relations. The only thing that could fulfill this demand

is *connectedness* itself. It is revealed in everything that exists and only exists in that revelation. It is, quite literally in line with Nishida's thinking, an indeterminate, unqualified nothingness. If beings in the world are real because they are a manifestation of nothingness, then connectedness is what grounds their reality. It is, I believe, a more suitable and suggestive notion than that of a great chain of being that extends from inanimate matter to the human. Moreover, this means that nothingness cannot be "absolute" in the sense of being cut off in its essence from all beings, but only "absolutely relative" in the sense that it differs from the reality of things by being directly and permanently present in all things that make up the world.

Next, there seems no way to associate a supreme Being with nothingness without falling into contradiction. But if we describe God in terms of connectedness, then "divine being" would be the philosophical equivalent of that whose essence is to be absolutely related to everything all the time, replacing the longstanding scholastic idea of God as a Being whose essence is pure being. To make God a name for nothingness would relate him to beings not as a *primus inter pares* but as that which the totality of existence reveals to be its common, metaphysical ground.

Before we address the question of whether or not this drains the life's blood from the idea of God, we need to indicate why such a shift needs to be made. Simply put, *very simply put*, moral and religious systems of thought and belief that define God as essentially personal are the mirror image of the idea that the primary spiritual concern of persons is with their own wellbeing and "salvation." The idea of God becomes tethered to the short history of human consciousness, as if all previous history were meaningful primarily as a prelude to human existence, and the history of our individual human lives were meaningful primarily as a prelude to an afterlife continuous with our own individuality. It should be obvious that any spirituality that puts interpersonal relationship with God at the center of moral action easily falls into collusion with blindness about what we, collectively and individually, have done to our planet and continue doing while we eke out our private salvation. My suggestion is that the idea of a personal Supreme Being be nudged out of the center of religions professing belief in God and replaced with a God who is revealed in the connectedness of our lives and of everything that surrounds us. It is not that the image of a personal God is a meaningless superstition, but only that its meaning is neither central nor literal. We are not moved to moral action and the betterment of the world by ideas like nothingness and connectedness. They need to become concrete, symbolic, and woven into the stuff of daily life, as meaningful superstitions. The proposal that we reject any but our own symbolic frame of

reference as superstition is naïve; the counter proposal that we dispense with all superstition seems to me spiritually suicidal.

The proposal to rebuild the image of God as a spiritual fact that can give meaning to life and morality by thinking in terms of connectedness rather than the traditional God of being is prompted by Nishida's logic of nothingness. As for the actual rebuilding, we can expect little help from Nishida's own writings. There are supporting fragments of ideas scattered across the Judeo-Christian tradition, not only mystical, hermetic, alchemical, and gnostic, but also in mainstream theology. It is time we gathered them up and moved them to the center of the religious worldview where they can answer the living questions that more and more are asking about their place on this ailing planet.

My braiding of three ideas from Nishida—the continuity of discontinuity, the contradictory nature of a pluralistic world, and a nothingness that defines itself in the world of being and becoming—has already hinted at what I called earlier his “oversights.”

Nishida's philosophy, from beginning to end, is a philosophy centered on human consciousness. No matter how much the subject of self-awareness is dimmed, the fact of self-awareness is the pivot of human life and history. The self-aware, awakened individual standing alone before the final *basho* of all *basho*, the unbounded darkness of absolute nothingness, and then turning around to return to the relative *basho* of human life and history with a heightened sense of compassion, is the goal of the philosopher's quest. The far older but now broken and sickly planet that is our home is not just one more philosophical universal embraced by nothingness. It is the very condition for the possibility of human life, civilization, and philosophy itself. When it is in danger, the short evolutionary experiment with human consciousness is in danger of coming to an end. I admit I do not see any place to graft these concerns naturally onto the corpus of Nishida's ideas, but I do believe they can help restore flow to ideas that have grown stagnant for want of attention to the questions that philosophers are asking today.

A second oversight has to do with the notion of desire. On emerging from his struggles with neo-Kantian thought and the conundrum of a self trying to know itself, Nishida was tempted by ideas of a cosmic impulse or will or instinct driving the world and human beings within it. Traces of the idea of an “urge” to reality surface intermittently in *Inquiry into the Good*. But never quite as explicitly. This was the same time he began to consider nothingness a replacement for the metaphysical ground of being. Before the relationship of nothingness and desire could be made, however, he let go of any role for desire in his philosophical schemes. This, too, I consider an oversight, particularly as it relates to what we have been saying about God. That is to say, in suggesting supreme

connectedness as preferable to supreme Being as a philosophical description of God, I am affirming a dynamic to nothingness. It is not necessary to see a *telos* or *design* but by its nature connectedness entails something like an innate urge or desire built into all things to perpetually connect with what is around them. In other words, if connectedness is universal—indeed, the universal of all universals—it is so not in virtue of the abstract notion but in virtue of the dynamic of connecting occurring everywhere with everything.

Calling this dynamic *desire* is not merely a romantic gesture, but a deliberate rooting of human desire, the primary analogy, with the fundamental force of reality. Religion and morality have their birth in that desire and owe it the reverence owed what is truly divine about reality. Put the other way around the desire for union with the divine is a human variation of the desire that moves all things. In that sense, God and the desire for God are ultimately indistinguishable. As the evidence for connectedness transforms our thought and our sense of right and wrong, the desire for God is transfigured from the desire for personal salvation of a spiritual soul to a desire for the protection of the rich, contradictory, haphazard of plurality that we experience as the world.

From Nishida, then, I have learned to imagine the fulfillment of human consciousness as awakening to the universal continuity that manifests itself as the contradictory unity of the world of being and becoming. From doubts about traditional theology raised against the backdrop of a shameless degradation of the earth in the name of civilization, I have learned to imagine God differently. From what I have said here today, it should be obvious that I think these two lessons are front and back of the same truth.

ACADEMIC CONTRIBUTIONS BY INSTITUTE MEMBERS



April 2020–March 2021

Gotō Haruko 後藤晴子

Reports

- 2020 「第5回日本宗教研究・南山セミナー報告」[Report on the Fifth Nanzan Seminar for the Study of Japanese Religious Studies], 『南山宗教文化研究所 研究所報』[*Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture Kenkyū Shohō*] 30: 45–52.
- 2021 「『講的なもの』としての女性宗教者の集まり: 沖縄の事例から」[Gatherings of religious women in *kō* associations: Case studies from Okinawa], 『宗教研究』[*Journal of Religious Studies*] 94 (supplement): 43–44.

Academic presentations

- 2020 「『講的なもの』としての女性宗教者の集まり—沖縄の事例から」[Groups of religious women resembling *kō* associations: Case studies from Okinawa], パネル「講と女性をめぐる研究—ジェンダー研究が拓く可能性」[Panel on research on women and religious support associations: New possibilities from a gender perspective], 79th Annual Convention of the Japanese Association for Religious Studies, Komazawa University, 18–20 September. (Online).
- 2021 「〈おじひ〉の体験—中山身語正宗の『親仏体験談集』に関する一考察」[The experience of *ojihhi*: A study of *Collected Stories of Oyabutsu Experiences* by Nakayama Shingo Shōshū], 12th Research Salon, Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture, 19 March. (Online).

Tim GRAF

Report

- 2020 “International Exchange: Reflections on the Fifth Nanzan Seminar for the Study of Japanese Religions.” *Bulletin of the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture* 44: 63–72.

Invited courses

- 2020 Undergraduate seminar: 「現代社会と仏教1」[Contemporary Society and Buddhism 1], taught at the Department of Religious Culture, Faculty of Letters, Aichi Gakuin University. (Course language: Japanese).

Undergraduate seminar 「現代社会と仏教2—日本の禅「ZEN」 仏教とそのグローバル化」 [Contemporary Society and Buddhism 2: Japanese Zen (*kanji* character) / Zen (roman letters) Buddhism and its Globalization,] taught at the Department of Religious Culture, Faculty of Letters, Aichi Gakuin University. (Course language: Japanese).

(approved; cancelled due to COVID-19) Co-taught graduate seminar: 「臨床宗教学1」 [Clinical Religious Studies Research 1], Graduate School of Letters, Aichi Gakuin University. (Course language: Japanese).

Graduate seminar: Topics in Japanese Humanities III: “Doing Fieldwork in Japan,” taught at the International Master’s Program (IMAP) in Japanese Humanities, Graduate School of Humanities, Kyushu University (Fukuoka, Japan). (Course language: English).

Conference presentation

2021 「東日本大震災と仏教」 “The March 2011 Disasters in Japan and Buddhism,” Second Meeting of the 日本学研究会 [Society for Japanese Studies], Tohoku University (Sendai, Japan), 5 March. (Online).

Academic presentations

2020 In-Class Presentation on “Film as Method,” moderated by Paulina Kolata at Chester University (Chester, England), 12 October. (Online).

(book talk) “Prayer Zen: Meditation, Disaster Prevention, and Crisis Management at a Contemporary Japanese Prayer Monastery.” Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture (Nagoya, Japan), 11 December. (Online).

In-Class Presentation on 「現代日本における震災と仏教」 [Buddhism and Disasters in Contemporary Japan], moderated by Hayashi Makoto, graduate seminar, Aichi Gakuin University (Nagoya, Japan), 22 December. (Online).

Conference and workshop participation

2021 Commentator for the workshop 「宗教とジェンダーの最前線 III」 [On the Forefront of Studies on Religion and Gender] with Kawahashi Noriko and Kobayashi Naoko, Ryukoku University (Kyoto, Japan), 2 March. (Online).

Radio

2021 Interview for German national radio Deutschlandfunk Kultur about Buddhism and Metal. “Die Meditation der Metal-Mönche” [The Meditation of the Metal Monks], program by Mechthold Klein, aired on 2 March.

Research grant

2021 Research grant awarded by the Promotion and Mutual Aid Corporation for Private Schools of Japan [日本私立学校振興・共済事業団] in sponsorship of a research project on the impact of the novel coronavirus and Buddhism, 10 March.

ISEKI Daisuke 井関大介

Articles

- 2020 “Kumazawa Banzan’s Ideas Regarding the ‘Great Way’ and ‘Shinto,’” *Religious Studies in Japan* 5: 29–52.
 「井上円了の妖怪学と〈宗教学〉」[Inoue Enryō’s study of monsters and “religious Studies”], Kubota Hiroshi, 久保田浩, Tsuruoka Yoshio 鶴岡賀雄, Hayashi Makoto 林淳, Fukazawa Hidetaka 深澤英隆, Hosoda Ayako 細田あや子, Watanabe Kazuko 渡辺和子, eds., 『越境する宗教史 上巻』[*The History of Religions Crossing Borders*] (Tokyo: Riton), vol. 1: 229–61.
- 2021 「『妖怪学講義』における「方便」について」[“Skillful means” in lectures on the study of monsters], 『国際井上円了研究』[*International Inoue Enryō Research*] 9: 64–84.

Conference presentations

- 2020 「近世日本の経世論と宗教論について」[Theories of statecraft and religion in early modern Japan], 11th Research Salon, Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture, 23 October. (Online)
- 「妖怪学の目的について」[On the Purpose of Inoue Enryō’s Mystery Studies], 9th Annual Meeting of the International Association for Inoue Enryō Research, 5 December. (Online)

KIM Seung Chul 金承哲

Essays

- 2020 “Homo Translator: Traditions in Translation: Philosophy of Translation. An Interdisciplinary Approach,” *Teoria* 40/2: 7–11.
 “A Journey to God: Endō Shūsaku and the Detective Story,” 哲學與文化 *Universitas: Monthly Review of Philosophy and Culture* 47: 41–56.
- 2021 「自分の口・他人の声 One’s mouth, someone else’s voice: 翻訳について」[On translation] 『翻訳と通訳の過去・現在・未来—多言語と多文化を結んで』[*The Past, Present, and Future of Translation: Joining Linguistic and Cultural Plurality*], 2020 joint research report of grants for the Nanzan University Center for Area Studies: 39–49.

Presentation

- 2020 “Things Violent in Religion and Politics” International Conference on Religion and Politics, Past and Present, Fu Jen Catholic University, Taiwan, 20–21 November.

LIANG Xiao Hong 梁 曉虹

Essays

- 2020 「以兼意「四抄」兩大系写本為中心考察平安時代漢字特色」[Special features in the use of Chinese characters as seen in Jianyi's "Four Transcriptions" as Reflected in Its Two Recensions], Wang Xiaoping 王曉平, ed., 『國際中國文學研究叢刊』[*Collected Research on Chinese Literature*] (Shanghai: Gu Ji Chu Ban She) 8: 67–85.
- “An Exploratory Survey of the Graphic Variants Used in Japan: Part Two,” *Journal of Chinese Writing Systems*, doi/full/10.1177/2513850220926260.
- 「天理本、六地藏寺本『大般若經音義』之比較研究:以訛俗字為中心」[A comparative study of the Tenri and Rokujizō recensions of the *Sounds and Glosses to Prajñāpāramitā sūtra*, with particular reference to vulgar, demotic characters], 『歷史語言研究』[*Journal of Historical Linguistics*] 14: 27–44.
- 「『大般若經音義』疑難異體字例考 上」[A study of obscure and intractable characters in the Mukyūkai recension of the *Sounds and Glosses to the Mahāprajñāpāramitā sūtra*: Part 1], 『東亞文獻研究』[*Journal of East Asian Philological Studies*] 25: 1–18.
- 「日本早期仏經音義特色考察—以『大乘理趣六波羅蜜經積文』為例」[An examination of some special features of sounds and glosses to early Buddhist sutras found in Japan: The case of the *Daijō rishu roku haramitsukyō shakumon*], 『文獻語言學』[*Linguistics in Philological Texts*] 11: 106–18.
- 「日本保延本『法華經單字』漢字研究」[A study of characters used in Hōnen's recension of *Individual Characters in the Hokkekyō*], Li Yunfu 李運富, ed., 『跨文化視野與漢字研究』[*Cross-Cultural Views of the Study of Chinese Characters*] (Beijing: Social Science Academic Press) 2: 127–52.
- 2021 「『大般若經音義』疑難異體字例考 中」[A study of obscure and intractable characters in the Mukyūkai recension of the *Sounds and Glosses to the Mahāprajñāpāramitā sūtra*: Part 11], 『東亞文獻研究』[*Journal of East Asian Philological Studies*] 26: 1–22.

Matthew D. McMULLEN

Edited volume

- 2020 Guest editor. “Esoteric Buddhist Traditions in Medieval Japan,” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 47: 188 pages.

Essay

- 2020 “Editor’s Introduction: Esoteric Buddhist Traditions in Medieval Japan,” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 47: 1–10.

Reports

“Annual Update: *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*,” *Bulletin of the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture* 44: 7–10.

“International Conference: *Homo Translator: Traditions in Translation*,” *Bulletin of the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture* 44: 58–62.

Academic presentation

2020 “Translation of Kūkai’s *Secret Key to the Heart Sūtra*,” Tokyo Buddhist Discussion Group. 7 November.

NISHIWAKI Ryō 西脇 良

Essays

2020 “Finding Religion in Nature: An Alternative Index of Religiosity,” M. Takahashi, ed., *The Empirical Study of the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality in Japan* (San Antonio, TX: Elm Grove Publishing): 102–17.

「児童学者・関寛之の生涯—宗教性発達研究の先駆者の生涯」[Seki Kanshi, a Japanese scholar of children studies: The life of a pioneer in the field of religious development], 『南山神学』 [*Nanzan Journal of Theological Studies*] 43: 99–124.

Book Review

2020 藤原聖子『ポスト多文化主義が描く宗教—イギリス〈共同体の結束〉政策の功罪』 [Fujiwara Seiko, *The Religious Depiction of Post-Multiculturalism: The Pros and Cons of Community Ties*], 『カトリック教育研究』 [*Studies in Catholic Education*] 37: 52–4.

SAITŌ Takashi 斎藤 喬

Essay

2021 「明治期日本における精神医学と狸憑き」 [Psychiatry and animal possession in the Meiji Era], 『アカデミア人文・自然科学編』 [*Academia: Humanities and Natural Sciences*] 21: 315–22.

Conference presentation

2021 「阿波の狸合戦における狸憑きの語り」 [Narratives of animal possession in the legend *Awa Tanuki Gassen* (Awa’s tanuki war)], 11th Conference of the West Japan Association for the Study of Religion, 27 March. (Online).

Academic presentation

- 2021 「ホラーの宗教性—唾棄物(アブジェクション)としてのグラン=ギニョル」 [Religiosity of Horror: Grand-Guignol as Abjection], 12th Research Salon, Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture, 19 March. (Online).

James W. HEISIG [emeritus]**Books**

- 2020 *Gli dei e la mente. Alla ricerca di risorse comuni teologiche*, trad. a cura di Carlo Saviani (Nagoya: Chisokudō Publications). 230 pages.
(with Yves Maniette). *Les Kanas au bout des doigts. Apprendre l'écriture des hiraganas et katakanas en deux fois trois heures* (Tokyo). 152 pages.

Essay

- 2020 “Nothingness as the Locus of Panikkar’s Divine,” *Bulletin of the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture* 44: 32–53.

Paul L. SWANSON [emeritus]**Essay**

- 2020 “Context, Logosyllabary, and Multiple Choices: Reflections on 30+ Years of Translating Chinese Buddhist Texts,” *Teoria* 40/2: 49–61.

Report

- 2020 “Thirty Years of Workin’ and They Put You on the Award List: Thoughts on the 2019 Toshihide Numata Book Award for Buddhism,” *Bulletin of the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture* 44: 54–7.

Academic lecture

- 2021 「翻訳とは何か?天台仏教関連文献英訳の40年と今後の課題」 [What is translation? Reflections on 40 years of translating Tiantai Buddhist text and future goals], Toshihide Numata Book Award Lecture, Ryukoku University Research Center for World Buddhist Cultures (co-sponsored by Bukkyo Dendo Kyokai), 2 February.

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