



**Mitsutoshi Horii, *The Category of 'Religion' in Contemporary Japan: Shūkyō and Temple Buddhism***

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THE LAST TWO decades or so have seen the rise of scholarship on the historical construction of the concept of “religion” (*shūkyō*) as a topic of research in the wider academic study of religions in Japan. Mitsutoshi Horii’s new monograph, *The Category of ‘Religion’ in Contemporary Japan: Shūkyō and Temple Buddhism*, can be seen as one of the latest contributions to this academic inquiry with a distinctive focus on contemporary Japan, a time period that, as Horii rightly points out, has received relatively less attention.

As clearly indicated in the introduction, Horii’s main argument has multiple layers involving both practical and theoretical implications. At the practical level, Horii’s book sets out to provide an outline of how and in what sense the category “religion” is used in contemporary Japan. Another practical aim is to explore how the category “religion” is negotiated among the professionals and organizations of Temple Buddhism. In addition to these descriptive aims, Horii seeks to achieve another goal at the theoretical level, which is, by contrast, articulated in a rather prescriptive tone: to argue how the category “religion” is “useless as a tool of analysis” (4) and should instead be studied as a “social category” that is used “to serve particular norms and imperatives” (17).

Horii’s claim for the need to drop the term “religion” as an analytical category to study Japanese society is directly informed by a body of scholarship known as “critical religion,” which is highlighted in a chapter entitled “A ‘Critical Religion’ Approach to Japanese ‘Religion(s).” Promoted by a network of scholars including Timothy Fitzgerald, Russell McCutcheon, and Naomi Goldenberg, among others, this approach critically examines the imperatives and normativity attached to the term “religion” as an essentialized analytical category, which MCCUTCHEON (1997, 3) named a “discourse on sui generis religion”—and instead calls for a need to study how the meaning of the category is constructed in a specific cultural and historical context. This “critical religion” approach is reflected in the way Horii avoids using the term “religion” as a generic category throughout his book and instead focuses on how “Japanese people classify their own social practices” (27).

Based on this theoretical underpinning, Horii begins his discussion by critiquing the ways in which the category “religion” has been uncritically used

among scholars of Japanese religions, particularly Ian Reader. The selection of Reader among others working on religions in contemporary Japan is a deliberate one, and readers will notice that this is not only because of his influential position in this field but also because of the debates that took place between Reader and Fitzgerald in the *Electronic Journal of Contemporary Japanese Studies* in 2003 and 2004. As a proponent of the “critical religion” approach, Horii revisits the debates between the two scholars as an example to show how uncritical use of *sui generis* discourse on religion is prevalent among influential scholars of Japanese religions.

This theoretical discussion is followed by chapters that analyze the contour of how the term *shūkyō*, as the translation of the category “religion,” has come to be used in Japanese society. In the chapter “Critical Reflections on the Category ‘Religion’ in Japan,” Horii proceeds with the discussion of the historical construction of the term “*shūkyō*” from the nineteenth century onward by drawing on extant literature on this subject and then extends the scope of his analysis to the postwar period. Horii’s main point is to demonstrate the normativity of the category “*shūkyō*” and its function to “naturalise the authority of the Japanese state” (80) both in prewar and postwar Japan. This analysis, which relies upon the critical reading of intellectual discourses, is supplemented by the investigation of more popular uses of the term “*shūkyō*” in contemporary Japan, as discussed in the chapter “‘Religion’ in the Popular Discourse.” Horii explores ways in which the term “*shūkyō*” is used by ordinary Japanese people in various social settings, including colloquial discourses, popular literature, and the online community known as “2channel.” Horii’s aim is to “outline the complexity of what ordinary Japanese people mean by the term *shūkyō*” (90). He claims this cannot be adequately addressed by social surveys, which tend to presuppose a particular meaning of the term *shūkyō*.

The remaining four core chapters of the book are devoted to an analysis of the construction of the category “religion” as it specifically relates to Temple Buddhism. The rationale behind the selection of Temple Buddhism as opposed to other traditions such as Shinto shrines or new religions, Horii contends, is that the institutions of Temple Buddhism existed before the category “religion” was indigenized in Japan and therefore face the need to negotiate their social classification. In the chapter “Temple Buddhism and the Japanese Social Classification: A Brief Historical Overview,” Horii outlines how Buddhist priests lost their status as a distinct social group from the modern period onward due to the drastic changes in legal and social classifications and were eventually reconfigured into the generic category of “religious professions” (142) in the postwar period. The analysis of this historical shift serves as the backdrop against which Horii discusses how Buddhist priests negotiate their positions in society in relation to the social expectation as “religious professionals,” or *shūkyōka*.

In the chapter “The Construction of *Shūkyōka*,” Horii draws on literature written by Buddhist priests to analyze the ways in which they navigate the unrealistic expectations imposed upon them, on the one hand, and the negative connotations attached to the term “*shūkyō*,” on the other. In so doing, Horii taps into the notion of *shukke*, or renunciation of one’s family, to frame their self-image as people devoted to altruistic causes. In the following chapter, “Life Stories and Identities of Nichiren-shū Priests,” Horii uses original empirical data from his PhD research to discuss how the category “religion” is negotiated by priests in Nichirenshū temples. By exploring how these priests construct the idea of authenticity of being a priest, Horii demonstrates the usefulness of avoiding the terms “religion/*shūkyō*” as an analytical concept so as to avoid making judgments about their claims of authenticity.

The final core chapter, “Negotiating with ‘*Shūkyō*’ in the Context of the ‘Religious Corporation,’” highlights the question of the legal assumption of religious activities as *kōeki* (public benefit) and how Buddhist organizations and priests negotiate this expectation as they conduct their activities inside and outside their temples. By discussing various kinds of activities such as graveyard management, counseling, faith healing, and NGO and NPO activities, Horii effectively sheds light on the dilemma Buddhist priests face as they navigate the legal boundaries demarcating religious, commercial, and non-profit activities in their efforts to search for publicly beneficial activities.

Horii’s new work undoubtedly advances the academic knowledge concerning the construction of the category “religion” in the Japanese context on several fronts. The first contribution is his focus on what people in contemporary Japan mean when they use the category “*shūkyō*.” While the focus on the construction of the meaning of the term “religion/*shūkyō*” itself is not new (see HOSHINO 2012), Horii’s discussion of the category with a range of examples at various facets of contemporary Japanese society helps fill the vacuum in this particular strand of academic discourse, which has predominantly focused on the prewar period. Second, the application of the critical religion approach allows readers to clearly see the ambiguity of the term “religion” as an analytical category in academic discourse, as well as the normativity of the seemingly neutral category in contemporary social and legal discourses. Whether or not scholars can practically drop the term “religion” in any form of analytical or generic category is perhaps still open to debate, but the insights delineated in Horii’s book can be usefully applied as a meta-analytical approach to research on religions in post-war and contemporary Japan, particularly as it concerns the construction of the self-identity of religious organizations, professionals, and practitioners in relation to the category “religion/*shūkyō*.” Lastly, the selection of Nichirenshū temples as empirical data to illustrate his argument is itself a unique contribution, as the study of Buddhism in contemporary Japan has tended to focus on other

sects/denominations such as Jōdo Shinshū, on the one hand, as well as because Nichirenshū is normally mentioned in a contemporary context almost exclusively in relation to Nichiren-derived “new religions” such as Soka Gakkai or Rissho Kosei-kai. Moreover, the choice of this particular Buddhist sect/denomination is methodologically useful as it allows Horii to explore the intra-group dynamics (that is, Nichiren Buddhism) of how Nichirenshū priests construct their identities in relation to the leaders of Nichiren-derived lay Buddhist organizations.

As with the case in many important academic contributions, however, Horii’s book has several issues that need to be pointed out for potential readers. First of all, I agree with Ernils LARSSON (2018) that Horii’s rather provocative tone of language against scholars of religion in Japan is counterproductive to what he sets out to achieve in his book. In referring to the debate between Reader and Fitzgerald, for example, Horii notes that “[t]he belief in *sui generis* religion appears so deeply rooted in Reader’s pattern of thinking that Fitzgerald’s critique could not have any effect” (44). This contentious style of writing is further extended to scholars of Japanese religion(s) in general in the concluding chapter in such sentences as: “I can imagine an academic specialist in Japanese religion(s) claiming: ‘The religious custom of carrying a *mikoshi* is still widely practiced, even by children!’” (254). It would be unfortunate if these remarks, particularly those in the introduction, lead readers to stop turning the pages to subsequent chapters, which are much less polemical and full of important insights. Second, readers may find Horii’s tendency to overgeneralize certain categories and social groups rather ironic. As far as religious groups are concerned, one of the areas in which this particular weakness is identified is Horii’s treatment of the self-identity of new religions. For instance, while acknowledging that the label “religion” for these groups is an imposition by scholars, Horii quickly states that “[t]hey are also likely to have self-identity as ‘religion’” (248) without providing any details to support his claim. In another part of the book, he asserts that active members of these religious groups may “identify the value orientations of their groups and Shinto with the same category ‘religion’” and therefore “reject ‘Shinto’, represented by shrines” so as to “keep the purity of their ‘religion’” (252). Here, Horii is making an assumption that members of a new religion are equally exclusivistic toward other religious groups and are essentially different from other people in Japan, so much so that they do not engage with Shinto-related activities as cultural practices. In other words, Horii dismisses the possibility that these groups may also negotiate their identities in relation to the category “religion/*shūkyō*” and may even at times utilize Shinto identity for the purpose of legitimating their religious values, as, for instance, demonstrated by Chika WATANABE (2015) in her study of Ananaikyō and its NGO in Myanmar. Lastly, it would have been methodologically clearer if Horii had added some notes on the criteria for selecting the

primary sources he used for his analysis in the chapters “Religion’ in the Popular Discourse” and “The Construction of *Shūkyōka*.” For instance, the author does not explain the reasons for selecting Ikegami Akira and Sato Masaru for the discussion of popular literature, nor does he indicate the reason why “2channel” is the most suitable online platform for his analysis rather than other SNS platforms such as Twitter. The selection of these sources is understandable if the reader is familiar with these areas of popular culture and popular intellectual discourse in Japan, but even those readers may have no clues as to why the four Buddhist writers were chosen to discuss the construction of *shūkyōka* as opposed to many other potential ones. This is very unfortunate as the book contains very meticulous methodological notes on the fieldwork of Nichirenshū temples and priests in the appendix.

Despite these limitations, *The Category of ‘Religion’ in Contemporary Japan* is a great contribution to the academic knowledge of the construction of the category “religion” and effectively puts forward a new direction of research concerning social practices related to religious groups in contemporary Japan.

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