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## Editor's Introduction

### Religion and Identity in Japan since 1940

**T**HIS special issue has its genesis in an offhand query of a sort that the reader has almost surely received: to wit, a neighbor asked me over drinks if Japanese people are religious. For years I have answered these perennials with a variety of yes-and-no responses, and to be sure, there is ambivalence regarding the contribution of religions and religious ideas to modern and contemporary Japanese society, culture, and politics. On the one hand, one finds public opinion polls in which the majority of Japanese deny having religious sentiments, as in a recent (2019) International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) poll on “How Have Japanese Attitudes and Behavior on Religion Changed?” Respondents concluded that:

- (1) While the percentages of believers of different religions remain almost the same, religious faith is weakening, and people pray to the gods less frequently;
- (2) There is a decrease in those who feel that “the sun (God) is watching them,” that “supernatural powers exists [*sic*],” and that “deities dwell in nature”—notions that have long been regarded as traditional religious values, beliefs, and practices of the Japanese; and (3) those who expect religions to play certain roles such as “providing comfort” are decreasing, while those who find religions dangerous outnumber those who do not.

([www.nhk.or.jp/bunken/english/research/yoron/20190401\\_7.html](http://www.nhk.or.jp/bunken/english/research/yoron/20190401_7.html))

In a similar vein, contemporary post-Aum (post-1995) Japanese society regularly comes across as hostile toward unorthodox religious expression, and at

the same time seems to encourage orthodox ritualized spirituality. The authors in a recent special issue of *Japan Review* (2017) made a persuasive case for present-day Japanese secularism, but even here contrary voices can be found. For example, Thierry Guthmann (207–226) argued for the impossibility of total Japanese secularization under a nationalist government that directly or indirectly supports the Yasukuni Shrine and promotes sympathy for an imperial cult.

One actually finds much evidence to support the contrarian perspective that contemporary Japanese are remarkably spiritual and receptive to the rituals of organized religion. Some 70 percent of Japanese consistently profess identification with Shinto or Buddhism, which jointly enjoy pride of place in ceremonies celebrating birth, maturity markers, and marriage, or providing comfort over death and opportunities for ancestral veneration. To be sure, participation in the rituals assigned to these moments does not assure personal faith or belief either inside or outside Japan, but it does argue against a thorough rejection of religious concerns. Further, an aging population continues to turn increasingly to spiritual concerns after a half-century of infatuation with materialism, and over the last half-century the proportion of Japanese people placing priority on spiritual fulfillment rather than material richness has risen steadily since the first polling was taken in 1972. Foreign observers of Japan continue to find fundamental connections among contemporary Japanese with Shinto's views of nature and, especially in its Zen variants, Buddhism's views on emptiness and no-self. Among many examples, a recent one is the documentary by James Fox on the "Art of Japanese Life: Nature" (produced by Ben Hardin) which elegantly spiritualizes Japanese attitudes toward nature by rooting them in Shinto and Zen Buddhist traditions. Such spiritualizations of Japanese attitudes toward the natural world have become an almost unchallengeable orthodoxy when writing about Japan.

Is there a way to reconcile these conflicting perspectives? Let us begin by asking whether it is possible for an irreligious person to have their identity shaped by religious assumptions or perspectives. I believe that most would agree that it is. Some years ago I had the honor of guest editing with Mark MULLINS (2007) a special issue of the *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* on the theme of Christians in Japan, that is, Christians in Japan but not Christianity in Japan. The intention was to address Japanese Christianity in terms of how it has been experienced by individuals and groups in both older and more recent times. One might question whether it is possible to fully comprehend the experiences of another even in similar times and places, as James E. Ketelaar does in his article in this issue when he touches on the historicity of emotions, but the exercise itself of trying to enter another's shoes can have great value so long as one remains mindful of the potential pitfalls.

The approach of the current special issue is similar, in that the intention is not to examine the contributions of religion or religious thought to Japan and Jap-

anese people broadly, but rather to focus on the various ways that religions and religious ideas have contributed to the construction of collective and personal identity in Japan since roughly 1940, by assuaging post-World War II malaise, by embracing popular culture and its tactics, and by providing answers to the perennial questions of origin and destiny.

To examine these issues requires asking a constellation of questions, which in turn lend themselves to varying interpretations. To take just one example from a tradition not represented in this collection: is Confucianism's contribution to Japanese identity the belief that education is transformational, that self-cultivation works, that relationships are essentially hierarchical, and that households are paramount? Some have argued that the religious dimension of Confucianism has roots in precisely this belief in the human potential for transformation in the direction of a moral absolute, while others have suggested that Confucius's own reluctance to discuss ghosts and spirits confines Confucianism's contributions to the secular realm.

Personal identity is inevitably active, developmental, and never fully static, which means that the target of our inquiry is always moving. Thus, no orthodoxy has been imposed on this issue's authors who have been encouraged to ponder the broad questions of religion and identity in terms of a particular tradition, legend, perspective, or practice and to arrive at their own informed speculation regarding its contributions to modern and contemporary identity. For every one of these examples, the thoughtful reader will think of others that might have been fruitfully explored in this special issue, but practical considerations of space limit our reach to seven articles and a highly personal epilogue. All of the articles reflect original research as well as thought and perspective, and it is hoped that when taken together the articles in this special issue will contribute to a more nuanced and informed discussion of the place of religions and religious ideas in contemporary Japan.

### *Overview of Articles*

Let us now turn briefly to the individual articles themselves. Discussions of Japanese religiosity and identity commonly begin with Shinto, whose generalized belief in a world animated by kami and ethical relativism, and its self-effacing tendencies, appear deeply embedded within contemporary Japanese consciousness. Helen Hardacre focuses on one moment in the long history of *misogi* 禊 (lustration) practice during the early 1940s, when it was embraced by zealots in the armed forces who saw it as a way to align officers with the divine intuition of *kannagara* 惟神 (in accordance with the mind of the kami). Their intention thereby was to resurrect the inspired valor of the primordial Japanese past as described in nativist writings. The testimonials of these recruits confirm their

sense of participation in something they believed to be quintessentially Japanese, but ironically their most basic leadership skills were seen as deficient by their less spiritually trained peers. With the end of the war, even the folklorist Orikuchi Shinobu 折口信夫 (1887–1953) who promoted *misogi* as a form of nationalist self-cultivation, was obliged to acknowledge the error of his ways.

Buddhist assumptions are at least as embedded as Shinto practices in Japanese identity. Buddhism's doctrinal emphasis on the ephemeral nature of reality in a world characterized by change, its fundamental distrust of emotions, and its assumption of karmic causation all figure prominently in this regard. Similarly, one can readily see how Jōdo Shin or Nichiren Buddhism's doctrines of salvation by faith as expressed through honorific recitation might be expected to contribute to its adherents' identity by strengthening their sense of individual and collective agency, bringing orthopraxis into equilibrium with orthodoxy, reducing the divisions between clergy and parishioner, and promising the reward of a blissful paradise at the end of one's days.

This special issue has two articles that consider the connection between sectarian identity and themes from the True Pure Land and Nichiren traditions. James E. Ketelaar's article examines those paragons of *nenbutsu* faith and exemplary virtue known as *myōkōnin* 妙好人, and specifically their use by Suzuki Daisetsu as an antidote to the malaise of the modern and as a cure for postwar defeat. Like the effect that legends such as those of Br'er Rabbit, Casey Jones, and Paul Bunyan had on the offspring of immigrant parents to the United States like me, or that didactic bedtime stories drawn from folklore might have more universally, the *myōkōnin* emerge as part of the reservoir of strength and cultural identity enjoyed by many among the latter-day followers of Shinran as well as by some Japanese non-Buddhists. Suzuki Daisetsu went so far as to see a potential for such moral exemplars to contribute to world peace, which of course became a perennial concern in postwar Japan.

Jacqueline I. Stone examines a comparable manifestation of the historical interplay between Buddhist and Japanese identities in her article on Soka Gakkai. As is well known, Nichiren tasked his followers with spreading faith in the *Lotus Sūtra* throughout the world, arguing that by doing so, they would bring everyone a step closer to a Buddhist millenarian realm. Twentieth-century Nichiren activists rejected the separation of church and state, and instead envisioned a government and society based on Buddhist law (*ōbutsu myōgō* 王仏冥合). Stone explains how Soka Gakkai historically justified its claim to be the true mantle of Nichiren's *Lotus Sūtra* dharma, especially under the leadership of its second President Toda Jōsei 戸田城聖 (1900–1958). Toda argued that if Japan's participation and subsequent defeat in World War II were the consequence of Japan's failure to embrace the true dharma, then restoring the dharma of the *Lotus Sūtra* and propagating it worldwide would be the solution not just

to Japan's postwar malaise and aspiration to reconstruct, but also to world peace. Soka Gakkai thus redefined the interplay of Buddhist and Japanese identities in ways that, like the *myōkōnin*, helped followers to address postwar angst while articulating a new international role for Japan.

If the relationship in Japan between individual and collective identity and religious ideas and religions is as intimate as we imagine, then we would expect to find evidence for this connection in popular spiritual practices and the popular culture, and four articles in this special issue explore just this connection. The first, by Ian Reader, explores the Shikoku pilgrimage, which has by and large retained its historical popularity and importance but with an important difference. Until relatively recent times, individuals in Japan joined groups of pilgrims in order to nominally demonstrate and deepen their Buddhist faith and to accumulate desirable karma for future reward. More recently, however, the pilgrimage has been advertised and promoted as an exercise in self-discovery and as a form of tourism to strengthen local economies. Even in such secular contexts as school field trips, group excursions with like-minded fellow travelers are transformative and contribute both to identity construction for the participants as well as financial benefits to their hosts. Phrased differently, one need not be a Shintoist to visit the Ise Shrines any more than one need be Catholic to visit Chartres or a pagan to trek to Stonehedge, but a visit to any of these will leave its mark on the individual.

Hirota Ryūhei in his article examines the world of *yōkai* 妖怪 phenomena, asking whether *yōkai* are within the world of nature and subject to its laws, or are they supernatural and in this sense above, beyond, and outside nature? Let us consider for a moment the comparable world of ghosts and spirits in European folklore: was there a time when these were within the world of nature as it was understood in biblical times, and did ghosts and spirits then become supernatural or outside and above nature and the natural order sometime after the Enlightenment? Hirota historicizes the world of *yōkai*, arguing that the roots of the *yōkai* transition from the natural to the supernatural can be found in the writings of Hirata Atsutane 平田篤胤 (1776–1843) who, as many have argued, transformed the quest for an ancient Way (*kodō* 古道) in *kokugaku* 国学 into a contemporary religion. In the present, acceptance of a world that includes *yōkai* has been shown to enjoy international appeal and has been encouraged as a component of Japanese soft power, ideologizing and projecting the perspective as an aspect of Japanese identity.

Okuyama Michiaki's article examines the curious phenomenon of the success of religiously affiliated high schools, especially those sponsored by "new religions," in Japan's Kōshien baseball tournament. Okuyama explains how in the popular imagination, tournament success under the guidance of exemplary coaching comes from the sincere sacrifice and selfless dedication of everyone

affiliated with the enterprise. Remarkably, these values are much the same as those that Robert BELLAH (1957) found in a range of approved religious thought during the Tokugawa period and which he went so far as to characterize as “Tokugawa religion.” In the world of sports generally and Kōshien specifically, personal identification with the success of one or another team in the tournament aggrandizes the fan, as the individual fan is absorbed into the community and collective identity of the team writ large. A school’s tournament success traditionally enhances the school’s image, though as Okuyama indicates, there has been a backlash in the form of disenchantment with the extreme training believed to be essential for peak success.<sup>1</sup>

Yamanaka Hiroshi continues the theme of Japanese religion’s interplay with popular culture by examining the efforts used by the traditional religions to maintain and expand their following in post-bubble Japan. He examines the range of their marketing strategies, such as the emphasis among the traditional Buddhist denominations on mortuary services and grave visits, and various shrine-centered activities in the Shinto realm. Yamanaka notes how all of Japan’s traditional religions, seeking to maintain religious market share in the current environment, concentrate their efforts on maintaining their following among the urban elderly, targeting young women for new members in their campaigns, and promoting religious tourism, including visits to “power spots.” Yamanaka also focuses on the example of Ehara Hiroyuki 江原啓之 (b. 1964) who has garnered a substantial following in present-day Japan by championing an array of spiritual forms and exercises that represent a form of “light religion.”

The epilogue by Makiko Hamaguchi personalizes the themes of this special issue. Born and raised in Oita City in Kyushu, her upbringing rings familiar. She was raised with stories that she learned from her grandmother who was an important spiritual influence. Her mother, who was a graduate of Catholic Sophia University, sent Makiko to a Methodist kindergarten, but otherwise her upbringing was filled with familiar exhausting after-school secular activities. In terms of spiritual matters, only a handful of visits to a divination specialist loomed large in her late-teen days. Makiko then pursued a BA in art history and visual theory at the University of British Columbia, which was followed by matriculation in UBC’s MA program in gender studies. But it was attending her sister’s wedding at Meiji Jingū in Tokyo while taking a survey course in Japanese religions that opened Makiko’s eyes to the myriad ways in which religious ideas and even religions per se have contributed to forming who she is today and who she is likely to become in the future.

1. The debate regarding tennis star Naomi Osaka’s decision to give priority to her mental health over competition is one part of this discussion that has attracted much attention outside Japan.

By way of conclusion, let us recall that discussions of identity are often fraught with knotty problems, and that no orthodoxy of interpretation has been imposed or even suggested to the authors represented in this special issue. These issues notwithstanding, it is hoped that one can see in these seven articles and epilogue the start of a better answer to the question of whether or not Japanese people are more or less religious than people in other countries.

Discussions about the religiosity and spirituality of people in Japan will inevitably depend on how one chooses to define or understand religion per se, but as with the potential problems that attend discussions of identity, arguments over definitions can become distractions. A half-century ago J. J. SPAE (1972, 12, 30–31) opined that Japanese identity reflects the collectivist tendencies of Japanese society by regarding each person not as an autonomous individual but rather as the unique intersection of the myriad communities in which she or he participates. Perhaps we can now add that Japanese identity reflects a myriad of influences with roots in Japanese religions and religious ideas and practices, both old and recent. The articles and epilogue in this special issue have attempted to elevate the discussion by calling attention to religion's contributions to individual identity in all its varieties and for a variety of purposes in the Japan of the last eighty years.

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