

Paul L. SWANSON

The Study of Japanese Religions Past, Present, and Future Reflections on the History of the *JJRS*

THE TITLE suggested for my essay originally was “Thirty-five Years of the *JJRS*,” reflecting my years as actual editor, but I prefer to think in terms of “Fifty Years of the *JJRS*.” My first association (or rather, a tenuous connection) with the *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* goes back to the very beginning of the journal. I was just finishing up my master’s-level graduate work at Sophia University in 1974, submitting my MA thesis on Yoshino-Kumano Shugendo—which eventually became my article in *Monumenta Nipponica* (1981)—when my advisor Fr. Maurice Bairy showed me a copy of a new journal, the *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, as something to keep an eye on. I remember being impressed with the article on “The Concept of *Upāya* (方便) in Mahāyāna Buddhist Philosophy” by Daigan and Alicia MATSUNAGA (1974), which clarified for me for the first time the concept of *upāya/hōben* in Buddhism. As I was about to finish my MA and wondering what to do next, I decided to visit the offices of the *JJRS* and talk to the founding editor, David Reid, and see if there was any possibility of gainful employment. I knew David Reid (somewhat) from summer days at Lake Nojiri in Nagano and monthly book club meetings in Tokyo. At the offices of the *JJRS*, in the International Institute for the Study of Religion (IISR) funded by Rissho Kōseikai in Nakano, Tokyo, David quickly dismissed my quest with a smile, pointing out the threadbare staff (only one employee, a part-time secretary). Such was the inauspicious beginning of my association with the *JJRS*, with little hope (or expectation) of the large part it would play in my life.

Paul L. SWANSON is Professor Emeritus at the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture.

In this short essay, I would like to reflect on the history and role of the *JJRS* in the study of Japanese religions in three parts. First, I take a quick look at the evolution of the *JJRS* over the past fifty years, commenting on how it has contributed to (and reflected) the development of the study of Japanese religions. Then, I examine some of the “controversies” that occurred in the pages of the *JJRS* and how they reflected issues in the field of Japanese religions. Next, I discuss the “special issues,” how they developed, and how they have been a feature of the *JJRS*. Finally, I close with some comments on current and future themes in the study of Japanese religions, especially the importance of *shinbutsu shūgō* 神仏習合.

History and Development

The *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* was founded in 1974 by David Reid, a missionary scholar with a PhD in sociology from Harvard University, as a revival of the journal *Contemporary Religions in Japan* (*CRJ*) that had been published by the *IJSR* between 1960 and 1970. The *CRJ* cum *JJRS* continued to be published by the *IJSR*. At this time it was a quarterly journal of seventy-five pages per issue, in the spring, summer (double issue of 150 pages), and fall. The articles had a strong emphasis on the sociology of religion, with input and contributions by sociologists of religion such as Jan Swyngedouw, Karl Dobbelaere, Brian Wilson, Thomas Luckmann, the faculty of the University of Tokyo Department of Religious Studies, and Akaike Noriaki 赤池憲昭 at Aichi Gakuin University, but also included some articles from the perspective of religious studies, fieldwork, and Buddhism.

Responsibility for editing the *JJRS* was transferred to the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture (NIRC) in 1981, which took over the production of the *JJRS* from volume nine with Jan Swyngedouw as editor. A crucial new addition upon moving to Nanzan was the introduction of a “copy editor,” one of the conditions insisted on by the NIRC for accepting editorial responsibility, and one of the keys to its future success. This responsibility was first filled by Michael Kelsey, a faculty member in literature at Nanzan University, who also edited one of the first thematic double issues in 1982 on “Religion and Literature in Japan.” When Kelsey moved to the US to start his own translation/publication business in Bloomington, Indiana, John Keenan took his place as the first copy editor assigned fully to the NIRC. After Keenan moved to a faculty position at Middlebury College, he recommended me—one of his former students at the University of Wisconsin—as his replacement, and I joined the staff as the third copy editor in the summer of 1986, just in time to work on the next double issue (vol. 13/2–3). As Jan Swyngedouw was not a “hands-on” editor and took delight mostly in the final proofreading, I soon took over the day-to-day running of the journal, searching for good contributions and evaluating submissions. I began

attending the major conferences of the American Academy of Religion (AAR) and Association of Asian Studies (AAS) as well as other conferences in Japan and around the world. When Jan Swyngedouw resigned from his position at the NIRC to focus on his global teaching career, I was promoted as a full permanent research fellow at the NIRC and editor of the *JJRS*.

Gradually the journal's scope and network expanded. In 1985 (vol. 12), the size of the journal grew beyond the heretofore average of three hundred pages per year. The NIRC—mostly at the instigation of James Heisig—was constantly improving printing methods and potential for developing a “desktop publishing” system before the term was *de rigour* or widespread. When I started at Nanzan in 1986, the final camera-ready copy was being printed out on a daisy-wheel printer (a computer-run typewriter where the keys are arranged in a wheel) in which the regular type was first printed out on a page, and then the daisy wheel changed by hand to an italic type to print out the italics on the same sheet. Kanji were typed out by hand on a separate sheet using a traditional kanji “typewriter” and then cut-and-pasted (*kiribari* 切り貼り) onto the English text.¹ The laborious necessity to retype a page due to some mistake (such as pasting in the wrong kanji) led to a time-consuming and stressful process in preparing the camera-ready copy for the printer. The advent of the laser printer (at 300 DPI [dots per inch]) allowed for greater ease in printing a clean English text. We still had to cut-and-paste the kanji, the printing of which we now outsourced to our publisher KWIX with its access to higher resolution printing.² Finally, the arrival of the 600 DPI (modified to be close to 800 DPI) laser printers allowed us to print kanji good enough for camera-ready copy, and the advance in wordprocessing software from Xywrite to Quark and finally to Adobe InDesign allowed us to send finished PDFs instead of hard copy printouts to the publisher. The effect on the editing process was immense, allowing for last-minute changes and eventually opening the opportunity to upload the PDFs online and make an early contribution to open access.

In 1995, the journal shifted from a “quarterly” (three times per year) to two issues (one thematic and one mixed), although we still maintained the numbering, for example, 22/1–2 and 3–4 (and a northern-hemisphere bias for “spring” and “fall”). As soon as it was technically possible, we provided online (for free) the PDFs of the *JJRS* content, usually even before the hard copy arrived from the printers. This, in effect, was “open access” before the term was well defined, and

1. I recall many occasions when we worked until 2 or 3 AM to prepare the physical camera-ready copy in time to hand to the printers by the deadline of the next day.

2. By the way, in the late 1980s we were not allowed to use our university research funds to buy computers or software; apparently the university administration at that time could not understand why any academic would need a computer (or *wāpuro*) except to play games (maybe space invaders or Pacman), so we traveled to Hong Kong and Taiwan at our own expense to purchase our early computer equipment.

yet different from what has come to be known now as “open access” that relies on subsidies from the author, their academic institution, and research funds. At Nanzan our original (and current) policy is to offer easy and free access to the *JJRS* contents; I am proud that we have never received payment from any author (or any sources) to publish articles in the *JJRS*, all of which were accepted for publication based on their academic merit and put online for free and open access. We finally stopped taking paid subscriptions, as it cost more to maintain the subscription list and mailing cost than income from subscriptions, which had been kept at the same level (\$35.00 for individuals, \$50.00 for institutions, for thirty-five years).³ For the few who still wish to have a hard copy, these can be ordered online at a minimum cost.

An important experience that convinced us to drop paid subscriptions and go all online occurred at our first seminar in Japanese for advanced PhD graduate students in 2013 (KAWAHASHI 2014). We had prepared a packet of materials for the presenters, including some hard copies of recent *JJRS* issues. However, the young scholars told me that this was the first time they had physically handled a hard copy of the *JJRS*, since it was openly available online and they always accessed the *JJRS* through the PDFs, and they did not need the hard copies we had prepared. In fact, it was a heavy burden to carry home. This was a clear indication that times had changed, and we were ready.

I have spent some time explaining the development of the editorial process and technical production of the *JJRS*, because I believe it has contributed to the role of the *JJRS* in the study of Japanese religions. The early online availability of the *JJRS* made it easily available to scholars (especially graduate students) who could not only keep up with the latest research but also access all of the increasingly large amount of past content.

Controversy

I hesitate to say that we “courted” controversy at the *JJRS*, but we were certainly open to and encouraged intense discussion of controversial and important themes. We hosted a number of back-and-forth discussions on various topics, especially in the 1990s, which still stand up to scrutiny today, since the issues are not settled but still open to debate.

In 1989, John Keenen published an essay on “Spontaneity in Western Martial Arts: A Yogācāra Critique of *Mushin* (No-mind)” (volume 16/4: 285–298), which called into question the “Zen” ethos of no-mind and its place in the practice of

3. I wish to thank and recognize the support of Nanzan University, including provisions for office staff, research funds, and the salaries of the NIRC fellows, which made possible the production of the *JJRS* and the freedom to provide the results freely online for true open access without relying on financial charges to individual authors or their institutions and research funds.

martial arts in the West. This elicited a response by Stewart McFarlane (a professor who was also teaching martial arts in the UK) on “*Mushin*, Morals, and Martial Arts: A Discussion of Keenan’s *Yogācāra*,” published a year later in the *JJRS* (1990, 17/4: 397–420), with Keenan’s counter-response, “The Mystique of Martial Arts: A Response to Professor McFarlane” (17/4: 421–432). A final response by McFarlane, “The Mystique of Martial Arts: A Reply to Professor Keenan’s Response” was published the next year (1991, 18/4: 355–368). This friendly and insightful exchange is of interest on many levels; it is an early glimpse into issues highlighted by what became known as “Critical Buddhism” and an early reevaluation of “Zen,” which was later expanded through the works of scholars such as Robert Sharf and Bernard Faure.

Ian Reader’s essay on “Letters to the Gods: The Form and Meaning of *Ema*” (1991, 18/1: 23–50) elicited a response from Richard Anderson on “What Constitutes Religious Activity (I)” (1991, 18/4: 369–372), to which Reader responded with “What Constitutes Religious Activity (II)” (1991, 18/4: 373–376). Simply put, Anderson objected to identifying *ema* 絵馬 as “religious activity” instead of just “custom” or “habit.” Reader reaffirmed that the use of *ema* fits the description of a “religious activity.” This was an early, and also quite friendly, debate on the ongoing issue of “what is religion” and, more specifically, what is religious activity, in Japan or anywhere.

Neil McMullen’s essay on “Historical and Historiographical Issues in the Study of Pre-Modern Japanese Religions” (1989, 16/1: 3–40) received a somewhat belated response by Jamie Hubbard in “Premodern, Modern, and Postmodern: Doctrine and the Study of Japanese Religions” (1992, 19/1: 3–27), to which was attached McMullen’s response, “Which Doctrine? Whose ‘Religion’: A Rejoinder” (1992, 19/1: 29–39). This discussion was an early appearance of issues raised in part by Kuroda Toshio’s *kenmitsu taiseiron* 顕密体制論 analysis of pre-modern Japanese religious, a topic that would be covered more fully in the special issue on “Kuroda Toshio and His Scholarship” (1996, 23/3–4) and numerous articles in the *JJRS* and elsewhere.

Susan Tyler’s critical review of Allan G. Grapard’s *The Protocol of the Gods: A Study of the Kasuga Cult in Japanese History* (University of California, 1993) was published along with “The Author Replies” (by Allan Grapard); and “The Reviewer Replies” (by Susan Tyler) in the first issue of 1994 (21/1: 93–110). Given the intense and acerbic nature of the discussion, I took editorial care to publish the entire debate simultaneously. Again, this discussion raised issues that reflected Kuroda’s *kenmitsu taiseiron* and the question of “what is religion.” I should add that as the editor of the *JJRS* I followed a general policy or editorial preference not to publish critical reviews of bad books, but this did not exclude critical reviews of important publications and those which raised issues that should inspire further debate.

William Bodiford's "Zen and the Art of Religious Prejudice: Efforts to Reform a Tradition of Social Discrimination" appeared in the pages of the *JJRS* in 1996 (23/1–2: 1–27). It was not overtly controversial when published in *JJRS* (at least we did not receive any direct feedback), but the essay kicked up a storm when it was translated and published later in Japanese.

Yamada Shoji's essay on "The Myth of Zen in the Art of Archery" (2001, 28/1–2: 1–30) was a reexamination and demythologizing analysis of Eugen Herrigel's *Zen in the Art of Archery* (Pantheon Books, 1953). Herrigel's short book is a classic that had a great influence on the romanticization of Zen in the West, and Yamada points out many problems that should be addressed with Herrigel's presentation. It is one article for which the *JJRS* received many requests to reprint, though not a specific essay to publish in response.

These debates took place in the pages of the *JJRS* mostly in the 1990s and early 2000s. Why then and not now? Does this reflect a maturity in the field where there are fewer controversial issues to discuss? I think not. Perhaps such issues are now discussed more quickly and thoroughly through internet sites and social media, or there is more sensitivity and reluctance to express bold disagreements in print. The examples above, however, show for the most part that such debates (with careful editorial control) can be conducted in a friendly and constructive manner, and I hope that such discussions will appear again in the *JJRS* in the future.

Special Issues

One of the defining features of the *JJRS* is the production of special topical issues, many of which are, in effect, edited volumes. This tendency started early when the *JJRS* was still a quarterly journal edited by David Reid and became an established practice when—to avoid too many deadlines and mailing costs—the *JJRS* switched to two issues per year, one with a mix of articles and one thematic issue with a guest editor. The original pattern of pre-Nanzan special double issues—such as "Brian Wilson in Japan" (1980)—was followed at Nanzan first by people affiliated with Nanzan: the aforementioned issue on "Religion and Literature in Japan" edited by Michael Kelsey (1982), "Women and Religion in Japan" (1983) edited by Nakamura Kyōko, "Religious Ideas in Japan" (1984) edited by Jan Van Bragt, a "Tribute to Heinrich Dumoulin (1985) edited by James Heisig, "Tendai Buddhism" (1987) edited by Paul Swanson, a compilation of articles on "Folk Religion" by Japanese scholars (1988) edited by Hayashi Makoto and Yoshihara Kazuo, and on "Shugendo" (1989) coedited by Royal Tyler and Paul Swanson.

A new pattern developed spontaneously in 1989–1990. It was clear at the time that the Japanese emperor would soon pass away and that soon thereafter complicated enthronement ceremonies for the new emperor would take place for which there was little information in English. We saw the need to present recent

research on this topic and sought out a guest editor, resulting in “The Emperor System and Religion in Japan” (1990) edited by Peter Nosco. This experience inadvertently (but fortuitously) set a new pattern for involving an outside guest editor, which resulted in a wider inclusion of scholarship, and we also began to receive numerous proposals for special issues by guest editors. In other words, participation in editing special issues expanded outside of previous Nanzan contacts, and this also led to the production of monograph-worthy collections at a time when academic publishers were reluctant to publish such collections. The rest is history, leading to the publication of classic special issues such as “Conflict and Religion in Japan” (1994) coedited by Ian Reader and George Tanabe; “Kuroda Toshio and His Scholarship” (1996) edited by James Dobbins; “Pilgrimage in the Japanese Religious Tradition” (1997) coedited by Ian Reader and Paul Swanson (Reader, Swanson, and Nosco share the individual record for most edited special issues); “Meiji Zen” (1998) coedited by Richard Jaffe and Michel Mohr; “Revisiting Nichiren” (1999) coedited by Ruben Habito and Jacqueline Stone; “Mortuary Rites in Japan” (2000) coedited by Elizabeth Kenney and Edmund Gilday; “Local Religion in Tokugawa History” (2001) coedited by Barbara Ambros and Duncan Williams; “Tracing Shinto in the History of Kami Worship” (2002) coedited by Mark Teeuwen and Bernhard Scheid; “Feminism and Religion in Contemporary Japan” (2003) coedited by Kawahashi Noriko and Kuroki Masako; “Traditional Buddhism in Contemporary Japan” (2004) coedited by Stephen Covell and Mark Rowe; and so forth. I believe that the production of these special issues is an important part of the role *JJRS* plays in the current study of Japanese religions.

Closing Comments

I close with some final speculations on what trends or issues will continue or begin to attract attention within the study of Japanese religions. The question “What is religion?” (or *shūkyō* 宗教) will certainly continue to be debated, as scholars of “religion” must always be aware of defining or explaining the subject of their research interest. The topics of gender; the use of AI and religion in “popular culture” (anime, video games, movies, and so forth) such as the increasing interest in *yōkai* 妖怪; trends in “new religions,” for example the emergence of new movements and, on the other hand, developments among early “new” religions (such as Soka Gakkai) that are now becoming “established” religions; religion and politics and education; and an increasing interest in Shugendō and *shinbutsu shūgō* can safely be identified as topics that will and should receive academic attention in the future.

This leads me to close with some final comments on the phenomenon of *shinbutsu shūgō* or, as some prefer, *shinbutsu yūgō* 融合, which, after a half-century of

study I take to be the most “common” and widespread religious phenomena of Japan. There is still much debate as to how to express this in English; “syncretism of Buddhism and Shinto” has been problematized as an ahistorical expression of mistaken essentializing of two supposedly separate traditions, “Buddhism” and “Shinto.” A better expression (popularized in the work of Allan Grapard) is “combinatory phenomena of kami and buddhas,” in a very broad sense, so that kami refers not just to “Shinto” gods but any mysterious or awesome figure: *yōkai*, dragons, foxes, spirits, mountains and trees, ancient historical figures, originally Indian or Chinese deities, and even the God and saints of Christianity and Islam. *Butsu* (buddhas) in a broad sense refers not just to buddhas like Amida or Shakyamuni, but to ancestors, including all those who have passed away (*jōbutsu* 成仏, literally “become a buddha”), which is actually the most popular meaning of *hotoke* in Japan. Here I wish to go further, beyond just “Japanese religions,” and point out that there is “explicit” *shinbutsu shūgō* and “implicit” *shinbutsu shūgō*; “explicit” *shinbutsu shūgō* is a distinctly Japanese (or other local) phenomena with its unique combination of various religious elements and practices in each time and place. But there is also an implicit *shinbutsu shūgō* that is common around the world as a universal phenomenon; I will stick my proverbial neck out here and state that there is no religion or society that is not “combinatory.” To give just one example, among American evangelicals many believe that they are following the pure and undefiled way of Jesus Christ, and yet they are not aware of the strangeness of having a large American flag on the church altar, or that they incorporate Christmas trees and Santa Claus for Christmas, or bunnies for Easter. I will not go into detail here except to state once again my premise that there is no religious activity or tradition that is not a combination of various historical and cultural practices, and that *shinbutsu shūgō* is the distinctly (and endlessly complicated) Japanese expression of this universal trait.

Here I give only one personal example that could be replicated almost infinitely with examples from throughout Japan. Recently I attended a local *matsuri* at a shrine in Nagano (FIGURE 1), what could be called a new-year “Bodhidharma festival.” Throughout the two days, families from around the local area came to the shrine carrying their “old” *daruma* dolls from the previous year to burn at the shrine in a bonfire that later included a fire-walking ceremony with local *yamabushi*, then they purchased a new *daruma* doll to bring back home for the new year. The popularity and history of the *daruma* doll, which is based on the legend that Bodhidharma sat in meditation in a cave in front of a wall for nine years until his legs atrophied and fell off, and its current use as a popular symbol for endurance and accomplishment, is well known. It would be very strange, even absurd, if I would accost one of these families and “explain” (“expat-splain”?) to them that Bodhidharma was a Buddhist patriarch who is considered the founder of Zen Buddhism and ask why it is the center of



FIGURE 1: A stall selling various types of daruma dolls at the Obuse New Year Festival. Photo by author.

a “Shinto” festival. They would rightly dismiss me as an ignorant foreigner who did not understand anything about Japanese culture and religion. This is only one example of a distinct combination of various religious and cultural elements that have developed into a unique pattern of behavior (and even “belief”) in one local society.

There is much more to be said about the history and contents of the *JJRS*, including the appearance of individual articles by many fine scholars throughout the years, and I trust that the back issues of the *JJRS* (now fifty years and counting) will continue to serve as a rich and inspiring source for understanding Japanese religions and the various ways human beings have acted in their historical and social conditions. But my time is up, in more ways than one, so I now “lay down my pen” and give way to the younger generation and watch from afar. Old editors don’t pass away, they just face a final deadline.

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