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Why Teach Religion?

Scholars of Religion and Education Policy in Postwar Japan

This article examines how scholars of religion attempted to influence education policy after World War II. Building on the clout they had gained during the Allied Occupation of Japan, some religious studies scholars capitalized on a series of moral panics to argue that their style of teaching religion could contribute to society, experimenting with terminology such as “religious knowledge education,” “religious sensitivity education,” or “religious culture education” as they did so. These attempts to affect how schools taught about religion reflected the orientations of the International Institute for the Study of Religion, established in 1953 by former occupier William P. Woodard and University of Tokyo Professor of Religion Kishimoto Hideo. Because the *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* also emerged from this Kishimoto-Woodard collaboration, I invite readers to reflect anew on how scholars of religion can best contribute to policy, both in terms of education and more broadly. I conclude that our strength is not that we have “the answers” about religion, but that we specialize in questions: Who calls what “religion,” why, and with which effects?

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WHY SHOULD public schools teach about religion? Or, more precisely, why have some scholars of religion been so invested in getting public schools in Japan to teach about religion? In this article I investigate how scholars of religion contributed to educational policy in Japan from the end of the Asia-Pacific War through the early part of the twenty-first century. By focusing on “religious education” as a hotly contested policy issue deeply entangled with broader concerns related to democratization, moral suasion, economic growth, and public security, I provide a new angle on an abiding ethical question for religious studies as a discipline: what specific responsibilities do scholars of religion have as public policy actors?

I proceed by describing how the Allied Occupation (1945–1952) birthed key orientations that continue to characterize religious studies in Japan up to the present. I then introduce four discrete moments when intellectuals with degrees in religious studies (*shūkyōgaku* 宗教学) collaborated with policymakers, education theorists, and practicing schoolteachers to develop new categories and concepts that could allow for “teaching *about* religion” without “teaching religion” in Japan’s public schools. Although the historical circumstances differed, these scholars used social crises such as the confusion caused by military defeat (late 1940s), a perceived rise in “juvenile delinquency” (the 1950s), the human resource demands of rapid economic growth (early 1960s), and the domestic terrorism perpetrated by Aum Shinrikyō オウム真理教 (late 1990s) to advocate for the inclusion of religious studies expertise in public school curricula. In each of these moments, scholars experimented with combinations of nouns and adjectives—religious *knowledge*, religious *sentiment*, religious *sensitivity*, or religious *culture*—to ensure that a specific kind of religious studies expertise, not clerical authority, informed school curricula.

Specifically, I show that religious studies experts, like others, *make religion* by tactically defining terms to secure an advantageous position: this is religion, that is not (MANDAIR and DRESSLER 2011, 20–24). Even though religious studies experts are clearly aware that the concept of religion is mutable and subject to political contestation, they have often reified the category at moments or in contexts that seemed to promise increased clout for the discipline. This paradoxical relationship between the intrinsically contingent category of “religion” and the reifying impulses of “religious studies” should naturally interest readers of the *JJRS*. That is, just as Aike ROTS (2023; 2024) has rightly decried the problematic portrayal of “Japan” as a *sui generis* polity and “Japanese” as a commonsensical

adjective, I aim to highlight the uncritical use of “religion” and “religious,” including the modifier that appears in this journal’s title. I conclude by arguing that our best contributions to policy come from embracing the question of *who* calls *what* religion rather than trying to monopolize “the facts” about religion as our unique province of expertise.

Religious Studies in Post-Defeat Japan

Scholars of religion teaching in nominally nonconfessional departments of religious studies, Buddhist studies, folklore studies, and “Oriental studies” (*Tōyōgaku* 東洋学) had enjoyed some political influence in the early twentieth century, as the expansionist Japanese state relied on their expertise for a range of projects related to both domestic and foreign policy (HAYASHI 2013; 2014; MAEKAWA 2015). But these experts gained new influence when the American-led occupiers arrived in Japan in late 1945 and began to diagnose the dynamics that had led the nation to war. Drawing on religious studies research, Occupation officials quickly determined that an unhealthy mix of politics and religion had been the source of Japanese militarism (THOMAS 2019, 140–247).

University of Tokyo Professor of Religious Studies Kishimoto Hideo played a major role in structuring the occupiers’ narrative. Kishimoto, the son-in-law of University of Tokyo Professor of Religious Studies Anesaki Masaharu 姉崎正治 (1873–1949), had studied at Harvard in the 1930s and was fluent in English. When the Occupation began, Minister of Education Maeda Tamon 前田多門 (1884–1962) appointed Kishimoto as a liaison between the Ministry of Education and the Civil Information and Education Section of the occupying government (KHS, 3–9). Kishimoto served as tutor for Religions Division staffer William K. Bunce as the latter researched and drafted the 3 December 1945 “Staff Memorandum on State Shinto,” which informed the 15 December 1945 “Shinto Directive” that separated Shinto from governance (THOMAS 2019, 141–165).

Scholars of religion capitalized on the moment by touting the importance of religious studies expertise for Japan’s new democratic order. For example, in a 15 December 1945 article in the journal *Shūkyō kōron* 宗教公論, Kishimoto’s University of Tokyo colleague Oguchi Iichi attributes the problems of Japan’s war-time past to a dearth of religious studies expertise, surmising that the previously marginalized field would become the definitive discipline of the future. His closing statement signals the stakes:

In addressing the upcoming efflorescence of vulgar religions that will likely accompany the abolition of the [1939] Religious Organizations Law, it will be necessary to enlighten the religious knowledge of the general populace. Religious studies as a form of cultured refinement (*kyōyō* 教養) must not be overlooked.

(OGUCHI 1945, 4)

Oguchi's essay is representative of the somewhat high-handed tone that scholars of religion adopted during this watershed period. For example, Kishimoto regularly argued in op-eds and other public-facing essays (including articles in clerical newspapers and magazines) that scholarly expertise could correct "mistaken" understandings of religious doctrine, insinuating that clerics did not understand their own traditions (THOMAS 2019, 212–214). This supercilious attitude informed Kishimoto's subsequent attempts to preserve "religious education" as the exclusive province of religious studies scholars.

After the Occupation ended in April 1952, Kishimoto continued to work closely with former Occupation official William P. Woodard (1896–1973). Woodward returned to Japan in 1953 to help Kishimoto establish the International Institute for the Study of Religion (Kokusai Shūkyō Kenkyūjo 国際宗教研究所, IISR hereafter), an "independent, nonprofit, nonsectarian foundation" (KISHIMOTO 1960, 3). The IISR promoted religious studies expertise through public programming, holding roundtables and lectures on issues of public concern and publishing *Kokusai shūkyō kenkyūjo kiyō* 国際宗教研究所紀要.¹ In 1960, Woodward and Kishimoto established the immediate predecessor of the *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* (JJRS), the Anglophone journal *Contemporary Religions in Japan* (CRJ).²

Although the Occupation ended nearly a decade before, a close reading of CRJ shows that Woodward and Kishimoto continued to pursue their favored policy objectives via academic publication, even if they no longer enjoyed the coercive power of governmental fiat (THOMAS 2019, 226–230). During the Occupation, Kishimoto's proximity to the occupiers and his facility with English gave him the ability to speak authoritatively to his compatriots about ideal "democratic" practices for postwar Japan; his post-Occupation collaborations with Woodward provided him a new platform for disseminating his ideas to an international audience even as he expanded his domestic clout. Kishimoto served twice as President of the Japanese Association for Religious Studies (Nihon Shūkyō Gakkai 日本宗教学会) and held a leadership role in the Afro-Asia Secretariat of the International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR) (THOMAS 2019, 227). For his part, Woodward was one of the leading non-Japanese figures in the

1. For a first-hand recollection of the early days of the Institute, see TAKAGI (1999; 2000a; 2000b; 2000c; 2000d). *Kokusai shūkyō kenkyūjo kiyō* was published biannually from 1955 to 1959, when it was retitled *Kokusai shūkyō nyūsu* 国際宗教ニュース and published bimonthly until 1979. It briefly resumed publication from 1988 to 1990 and was replaced by the *Kokusai shūkyō nyūsuretā* 国際宗教ニュースレター in 1994. Notably, my historical cases of scholarly activism on the question of religion and public education roughly map onto the periods when the Institute seems to have been most vigorous.

2. The CRJ was in print 1960–1970. All extant CRJ articles are maintained on the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture website: <https://nirc.nanzan-u.ac.jp/journal/15>.

study of Japanese religions in the 1950s and 1960s; his book *The Allied Occupation of Japan 1945–1952 and Japanese Religions* remains a must-read for anyone interested in that formative period (WOODARD 1972).

Although Woodard and Kishimoto explicitly disavowed sectarianism and eschewed the idea of promoting religious “propaganda” (WOODARD 1960, 6), both used IISR journals as venues for advancing their ideas about proper relationships between religion and the state, including ideas about religion and public education (KOKUSAI SHŪKYŌ KENKYŪJO 1956a; 1956b). The IISR continues to be a major center for thinking about religion and public life in Japan to this day, publishing standalone edited volumes and the annual journal *Gendai shūkyō* 現代宗教 (2001–) on topics of contemporary concern. While the 1981 relocation to the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture in Nagoya distanced the *JJRS* geographically and intellectually from the Tokyo-based IISR, the *JJRS* has continued the tradition first established by *CRJ*, even as successive generations of editors have continued to modify the journal’s aim and scope. Holding this legacy in mind, below I describe how leading religious studies scholars’ treatment of “religious education” has changed since the Occupation, highlighting how orientations first established by Kishimoto and Woodard during the Occupation have continued to affect discussions about religion and education to the present.

Democracy: Debating the Pros and Cons of “Religious Education” during the Occupation

The topic of religious education (*shūkyō kyōiku* 宗教教育) was hotly contested in the immediate wake of Japan’s defeat. The occupiers saw education as one of the best ways to reform Japanese society, while Japanese political leaders saw education as an effective way to recover autonomy after Japan’s defeat and military occupation. In this context, words like “democracy” and “culture” were potent signifiers that signaled the sort of society Japan might become. The question for everyone involved was whether religiosity was a necessary component of democratic political subjectivity or a hindrance to its development.

Because the occupiers accepted the notion that Japanese militarism and imperialism were intrinsically religious problems, pedagogical and ritual practices at schools were early targets for their reforms. In the first four months of the Occupation, the occupiers abolished courses in self-cultivation (*shūshin* 修身), history, and geography on the premise that these subjects had religious orientations (RCR box 5773, folder 27; WPW box 13, folder 4; RCR box 5791, folder 12). Occupation officials also prohibited Shinto-style ceremonies such as bowing in the direction of the Imperial Palace or bowing before shrines housing the imperial portrait (*hōanden* 奉安殿). These policies were implemented under the direction of Religions and Cultural Resources Division Chief William K. Bunce, who saw them

as necessary for protecting religious freedom in a fledgling democracy (WPW box 13, folder 4, 1; RCR box 5793, folder 8, 3).

However, Occupation officials and the American consultants who advised them disagreed about whether commitment to religion-state separation necessitated the wholesale abolition of confessional instruction. For example, a team of American education experts known as the United States Education Mission to Japan released a March 1946 report that decried Japan's past pedagogical practices as spiritually stultifying but nevertheless signaled that religion should form some part of Japan's postwar democratic life (*Report of the United States Education Mission to Japan*, xiii–xiv). Similarly, education experts who had traveled to Japan to advise the Civil Information and Education Section (CIE), such as Paul H. Vieth of Yale Divinity School, had coauthored books saying that religious education was indispensable in the American public school; Vieth brought a similar perspective to his advisory work in Japan (*The Relation of Religion to Public Education: The Basic Principles*, 29–30; VIETH 1947, 252).³

Meanwhile, the heads of two branches of CIE, Mark Orr (1914–2010) of the Education Division and Bunce of the Religions and Cultural Resources Division, vehemently disagreed with one another over the meaning and propriety of religious education in Japan's public schools (THOMAS 2019, 180–182). This conflict was not simply a matter of philosophical differences over how to define “religious education.” It reflected contemporaneous debates then raging in US schoolrooms and courtrooms, as Jews, Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses, and atheists called Protestant supremacy into question, demanded equal treatment, and filed lawsuits to prove the point (GORDON 2010, 15–55; GREEN 2019, 58–146; 2022, 142–164).

Ultimately, the occupiers' differing opinions and conflicted messaging on the topic of “religious education” mattered less than what Japanese constitutional and civil law had to say about the issue. The new constitution, drafted by occupiers and then revised by Japanese legislators, included a strict prohibition on “religious education” (Article 20, Clause 3).⁴ The 31 March 1947 Fundamental Law on Education (FLE; Kyōiku Kihonhō 教育基本法), drafted by Japanese hands with minimal input from the occupiers, includes a similar prohibition (Article 9). Thus, both constitutional and civil law reflected a new commitment to separating confessional instruction from public education.

Just because the new laws clarified that religion and education should be separated did not mean that the mechanisms for separation were obvious, nor did

3. Vieth worked at Yale Divinity School, but it was his expertise as a leading theorist of education, not as a theologian, that led to his work in Japan.

4. The Fundamental Law on Education was passed after the constitution was promulgated on 3 November 1946, but before it was enacted on 3 May 1947.

it mean that everyone immediately accepted the new normal. Principals were clearly concerned about their ability to foster well-rounded citizens without the aid of religion, and instructors had practical questions about how to handle religious topics that would inevitably come up when teaching history. Religious advocacy organizations were also upset by the legal shift. As the new constitution was being drafted, for example, chairperson of the newly established Japanese Religions Federation (Nihon Shūkyō Renmei 日本宗教連盟) ANDŌ Masazumi 安藤正純 (1946) wrote angry articles decrying the proposed prohibition on religious education.⁵ After the constitution came into effect, the Federation published a short tract outlining how religious education could still be conducted while staying within the law (YOSHIDA 1948).

Even as transdenominational religious lobbies tried to secure a continued place for “religious education” under the new legal regime, scholars of religion and their allies encouraged schools to transmit “knowledge about religion” without engaging in confessional instruction. For example, in an October 1947 article in the Ministry of Education journal *Religion Times* (*Shūkyō jihō* 宗教時報), University of Tokyo Religious Studies graduate and Ministry of Education official Fukagawa Tsunenobu explains how teachers could weave “content about religion” (*shūkyō ni kan suru kotogara* 宗教に関することから) into the social studies courses that had been introduced recently as a replacement for the old war-time courses in self-cultivation, geography, and history (FUKAGAWA 1947, 18–19). Using learning objectives for third graders as his first example, Fukagawa argues that because the curriculum dictated that students should learn about “national rites and religious festivals” (*kuni ya shūkyō jō no shukusai gyōji* 国や宗教上の祝祭行事), teachers could use local events to discuss differences in local, regional, and national ritual calendars. Students could also sing appropriate songs for the festivals in question, become acquainted with relevant cuisine, or study crafts made by participants (FUKAGAWA 1947, 20). He offers similar lessons related to fourth grade objectives (“What role did shrines and temples play for our ancestors?”) and ninth grade objectives (“What influence has religion had on social life?”) (FUKAGAWA 1947, 21–25).

Fukagawa closes his essay with a list of recommendations about how to conduct social studies instruction while holding religion in mind. For example, while it was appropriate for younger students to learn about the external form and function of religion through objective social studies lessons, FUKAGAWA (1947, 30) argues that older children would naturally face “spiritual problems” (*seishinteki*

5. The Japanese Religions Federation was established in 1946 to advocate for religious causes with the Occupation and Japanese governments. Although it ostensibly represented all of Japan’s Buddhist, Shinto, and Christian denominations, the Federation excluded recently established religions. Several formed their own organization, the Shin Nihon Shūkyō Dantai Rengō Kai 新日本宗教団体連合会, in 1951 (THOMAS 2019, 182–188, 230–236).

na mondai 精神的な問題). Because teachers were typically unprepared to handle such issues, he urges them to partner with clerics who could directly foster students' spiritual development. But Fukagawa's vision went beyond a mere public private partnership. In a telling postscript, he laments that he lacked space to address how curricular materials could also be used to "cultivate religious sensibilities" (*shūkyō jōsō no tōya* 宗教情操の陶冶).⁶ He concludes by asking others to collaborate with him on researching the subject (FUKAGAWA 1947, 31).

FUKAGAWA (1965a, 2) would eventually find the collaborator he sought in Kishimoto, when the two worked on a "committee on religious cultivation" (*shūkyō kyōyō iinaki* 宗教教養委員会) under the auspices of the Japanese Association for Religious Studies in the late 1950s. This partnership emerged because Kishimoto, too, had already been exploring the possibilities of inculcating "religious sentiment" when Fukagawa published his October 1947 essay. Whereas Fukagawa had been careful to treat the new social studies curriculum as coming from the Ministry of Education, it was obvious that the new guidelines were a direct result of legal changes that the American occupiers had required. Kishimoto leaned into this dynamic rather than downplaying it. He drew on contemporaneous educational practices in the US, but he did so to show that even that supposed bastion of religion-state separation allowed, and even encouraged, some degree of religious cultivation in tax-funded schools.

For example, in a December 1947 article on "The Relationship between Religion and Education in America: A Comparative Glimpse at Japan," Kishimoto argues that both countries were confronting the problem of trying to protect religious freedom while simultaneously establishing the appropriate relationship between religion and public education (KHS, 279–290).⁷ Operating from the premise that cultivating religious sentiment and fostering general knowledge about religions was ideal for democratic life, Kishimoto suggests that America's religious organizations operated in a synergistic relationship with public schools. Citing a 1946 study published by the American Council on Education, Kishimoto describes a trend in which American municipalities supplemented traditional Sunday school religious training with "weekday religious education" (KHS, 280).

6. The phrases *shūkyō jōsō* and *shūkyōteki jōsō kyōiku* 宗教的情操教育 that appear here and below are difficult to translate directly, especially when contrasted with similar phrases like *shūkyō jōcho kyōiku* 宗教情緒教育 (translated below as "religious sentiment education"). *Jōsō* 情操 can be understood as "appreciation" (as in "art appreciation"), but proponents aimed to foster not only *appreciation*, but also a kind of *sensibility* or *receptivity*. I therefore translate this as "religious sensitivity education" or "religious sensibility" as appropriate.

7. The Supreme Court of the United States had just ruled earlier that year in *Everson v. Board of Education* in favor of a controversial program in the State of New Jersey that allowed public funds to be spent on transportation expenses for students attending Catholic parochial schools. Ironically, the strict wording of the decision established a new separationism in American constitutional law that had far-reaching effects (GREEN 2019; 2022).

Kishimoto was referring to a policy in which American schoolchildren were released from normal coursework on designated days to receive formal sectarian training in religion, either in school (“released time”) or out of it (“dismissed time”).⁸ While he thought that such a system worked in the US context, Kishimoto flatly stated that Japan’s religious organizations were unprepared to take on such an important role. But even as he dismissed the ability of Japan’s religious organizations to conduct extracurricular confessional instruction, Kishimoto advocated enhancing religious literacy training in schools. “In cases when one [comes to] stand as an independent member of society, religious ignorance is far scarier than religious prejudice,” he wrote. Citing the recently revamped social studies curriculum as the perfect venue for instruction about religion, Kishimoto made his pitch: “Especially because the coexistence of many religions in Japan makes for complicated social circumstances, social scientific study of religion is indispensable” (KHS, 289). Thus, while arguing that schools should not teach students to *be religious*, Kishimoto claimed that they could and should teach students *about religion* to prepare them for full participation in democratic life. This argument took on new urgency and a different direction in the mid-1950s.

Delinquency: Inculcating Religiosity without “Religion”

Japan in the mid-1950s was in crisis. Demobilized soldiers had brought methamphetamine addiction back to the metropole, and kids were increasingly getting hooked (KINGSBERG 2013). Young people had been caught in sensational acts of larceny (UCHIYAMA 2021). Educators, psychologists, and police worried about the negative impact of films and magazines; teens’ precocious sexual experimentation was a constant cause for concern. Influential commentators, including Ministry of Education officials, suggested that Japanese youth needed more guidance from religious leaders (TERANAKA 1954). Scholars of religion indulged in this handwringing discourse about the “kids these days” like everyone else, but they redirected the conversation away from the commonsensical notion that confessional instruction could fix the problem.

For example, in a 1956 essay published in the IISR journal *Kokusai shūkyō kenkyūjo kiyō*, Kishimoto expands on the comparative argument he had first

8. American weekday religious education practices varied widely in 1947, with a major distinction between “released time” and “dismissed time.” Released time, which involved a suspension of normal instruction so that clerics could come onto school campuses to provide sectarian instruction to students, was ruled unconstitutional in *McCullum v. Board of Education* 333 U.S. 203 (1948), just a few months after Kishimoto’s article appeared. Four years later, the US Supreme Court upheld “dismissed time,” a practice in which students were released from school early to attend their individual places of worship, as constitutional. See *Zorach v. Clauson* 343 U.S. 306 (1952).

advanced in 1947. He argues that even though many people wanted to introduce confessional instruction in schools at a time when youth seemed out of control, few were paying sufficient attention to the question of whether conducting confessional instruction in schools was legal. While it was desirable for citizens to have some grounding in religion, the constitution clearly prohibited sectarian education. And whereas countries like the US benefited from a robust Sunday school system, in Japan Sunday school programs were largely limited to Christian churches. Thus, the public school was the only place for students to learn about religion in a substantive way (KHS, 296). The pragmatic question was therefore how schools could teach *about* religion without violating the paramount principle of religious freedom.

Kishimoto offers a tripartite typology of “religious education” as a way of finding a solution to this problem. The first category, “religious knowledge education” (*shūkyōteki chishiki kyōiku* 宗教の知識教育), investigates religion as a social phenomenon without evaluating religious doctrines as good or bad. Such religious literacy would not infringe on religious freedom, Kishimoto avers, but would become an “intellectual weapon” (*chiteki buki* 知的武器) for protecting it (KHS, 297). Kishimoto’s second category, “religious sentiment education” (*shūkyō jōcho kyōiku* 宗教情緒教育), prioritizes emotion instead of reason. He argues that although religious practices and commitments were diverse, the basic methods for addressing matters of ultimate concern were similar. “For example, even if intellectual interpretations are incompatible at the level of doctrine, [ultimately] there is no differentiation because there is a shared human foundation in terms of emotion. If one grasps this point of connection and takes care not to depart from it, one can bring it into an educational setting without worrying about infringing on religious freedom,” Kishimoto asserts (KHS, 297).

Finally, some people would see religion as an indispensable aspect of character formation. Kishimoto dismisses this approach as too close to the third category of “sectarian education” (*shūha kyōiku* 宗派教育) to be of use in public schools. But the first two categories were different. Kishimoto advocates introducing “religious sentiment education” in primary and “religious knowledge education” in secondary schools. “Within Japan’s cultural traditions, religion occupies an extremely broad shared foundation. If we fully understand this point, I think that we might be able to boldly add religious education to public education without becoming trapped by the religious freedom imported from the West,” he optimistically concludes, blithely ignoring the constitutional prohibition that he cites just pages before (KHS, 300).

Kishimoto’s essay appeared in the second of two issues that the IISR’s journal devoted to the topic of religion and education that year (KOKUSAI SHŪKYŌ KENKYŪJO 1956a; 1956b). The extended coverage reflected the fact that people across the political spectrum had been calling for something to be done about

Japan's misbehaved youth in the mid-1950s; many clearly saw "religion" as part of the solution. However, the Ministry of Education ultimately approached the juvenile delinquency panic by sidestepping religion altogether. If Japan's violent, sexually precocious, drug-addled youth reflected a decline in proper comportment, then "moral"—not religious—instruction seemed a fitting solution. This fix was attractive to Ministry bureaucrats because it allowed them to gesture toward religion without violating the postwar taboo on confessional instruction. Instituted over the vehement protests of the Japan Teachers' Union (J TU; Nihon Kyōikuin Kumiai 日本教職員組合), a new policy called "morality time" (*dōtoku no jikan* 道徳の時間) set aside one instructional hour a week for "moral lessons" drawn from a variety of sources. Teachers bristled both because the new policy was half-baked (there was no established curriculum) and because the newfangled policy suggested that teachers were not *already* providing moral guidance to students (MASHITA, YOSHIKAWA, and YOSHIMURA 1958).⁹

Once again, Kishimoto responded, but now he subtly reframed the question of why schools should teach religion by indicating that students needed something akin to confessional instruction, albeit conducted in a nonsectarian mode. In an April 1958 article titled "The Topic of Religious Education" (*Shūkyō kyōiku no kadai* 宗教教育の課題) published in the J TU magazine *Kyōiku hyōron* 教育評論, Kishimoto argues that religion is a fundamental aspect of human life that serves to answer existential questions. Because young people tended to be drawn to such questions, religious education could satisfy their curiosity. But Kishimoto quickly clarifies: "Religious education is not at all to preach the doctrines of an existing religious group in the classroom, nor is the school a mere storefront for such groups" (KHS, 302).

If proper "religious education" was neither sectarian nor confessional, what was it? Kishimoto acknowledges that various religions had competing answers to the big-picture questions of life, complicating the process of introducing students to these various approaches without infringing on the principles of freedom of thought and freedom of religion. At the same time, denying students opportunities to reflect on such questions would do them a disservice (KHS, 303). Providing a space for teachers and students to reflect together on such existential questions would prove to students that they were not alone and enable them to encounter a "true happiness" that exceeded mere momentary pleasure (KHS, 304–305). Kishimoto concludes, "Religious education in schools is not teaching established religious organizations' doctrines. It is not merely inculcating knowledge

9. Since the Occupation, the Ministry of Education had been promoting a kind of training called "lifestyle guidance" (*seikatsu shidō* 生活指導) that spread moral instruction across the curriculum via concepts like "hygiene" and "culture" that euphemized sex and sexuality. This followed a contemporaneous American practice known as "life adjustment education" that aimed to accommodate students to their class and gender roles (HARTMAN 2008, 55–72).

about established religions. It is, rather, cultivating the foundational fortitude to handle these existential problems” (*jinsei no mondai* 人生の問題) (KHS, 305).

The moral panic around juvenile delinquency and the ensuing “morality time” initiative had prompted a subtle shift in Kishimoto’s messaging, from arming students with facts to fostering their religious feelings. He maintained his vehemence about the inappropriateness of teaching sectarian doctrine in schools. But he exhibited renewed focus on what he had previously termed “religious sentiment education.” He now saw the public school as a place for students to not only gain facts about religion as informed members of a democratic society, but also for them to collectively pursue existential questions in a nonsectarian mode. That same year, Kishimoto led a Japanese Association of Religious Studies committee investigating how to cultivate religious sentiment in students (FUKAGAWA 1965a, 2).

Thus, although scholars of religion like Kishimoto continued to express skepticism about the wisdom of allowing “sectarian education” in schools, when the Ministry of Education introduced ostensibly *non-religious* “morality” as a way of combating juvenile delinquency, Kishimoto and other scholars of religion suggested refocusing classroom practices on cultivating a sort of nonsectarian religiosity. Kids needed religion, and Japanese society, now entering a phase of rapid economic growth, apparently needed religious kids.

Development: Japan’s “Protestant Ethic” and “Religious Sensitivity Education”

Under Prime Minister Ikeda Hayato’s 池田勇人 (1899–1965) administration (1960–1964), lingering concerns about “delinquency” became negatively linked with a newfound focus on economic productivity. Ikeda poured considerable energy into a plan to double Japan’s GDP in the short space of a single decade (KAPUR 2018, 106–107). Drawing on a buzzword then circulating in Japan’s corporate world, the prime minister described his new agenda as “making persons” (*hitozukuri* 人づくり).¹⁰ For Ikeda, this meant fostering the human resources who would assiduously contribute to corporate profits and therefore to national prosperity, but it also meant inculcating in citizens the sort of moral probity that would prevent dissolute behavior that could distract them from participating in the glorious national plan. In his public speeches, Ikeda treated religiosity as a “necessity” on par with public housing projects (YAMANAKA 1962, 11). He also explicitly described *hitozukuri* as a way of fostering religiosity: “Whether it is the kami or the buddhas or the sun, whichever is fine.... Sincerely praying and reflecting—we’re going to make that kind of person” (ASAHI SHINBUN 1962, 2).

10. This term was popularized by Panasonic founder Matsushita Kōnosuke 松下幸之助 (1894–1989) based on his notion that business could be “like religion” insofar as it provided the necessities of life (McLAUGHLIN, ROTS, THOMAS and WATANABE 2020, 694).

For Ikeda, religion was indispensable in creating the people who would make Japan's prosperous future. The policy orientation prompted a new educational initiative, which—like the “morality time” initiative before it—attracted novel theorization from scholars of religion.

Ikeda's *hitozukuri* policy prompted a Ministry of Education study that focused on the end product of the “making persons” process. A subcommittee of the Central Education Council (Chūō Kyōiku Shingi Kai 中央教育審議会) spent eighteen months generating a policy report focused on cultivating the “human figure we can hope for/count on” (*kitai sareru ningenzō* 期待される人間像) via secondary education.¹¹ The subcommittee's interim report, publicized in January 1965, regularly deploys the adjective “spiritual” (*seishinteki* 精神的) while also implying that religiosity was key in resisting the dehumanizing “animalization” and “mechanization” that supposedly accompanied industrialization. For example, the subcommittee laments how the introduction of new “ideologies” (*shisō* 思想) after the war had contributed to the erosion of the proper “spiritual climate” of Japan's citizenry. Similarly, in a section titled “Be a Happy Person” that matched the imperative tone of the document as a whole, the authors state that while life was full of dissatisfaction, one should nevertheless develop a sense of gratitude to one's parents, one's ethnic group (*minzoku* 民族), the human species, and the cosmic life force (*uchū no seimei* 宇宙の生命). Respect and awe for the “spiritual life force” (*seishintekina seimei* 精神的な生命) within all humans constituted true religious sentiment and was the source of human dignity and happiness (NDKR, 486). According to the authors, “To only pursue satisfaction of animalistic cravings will not at all satisfy the spiritual desires of the heart.” “Originally, holidays and weekends had the significance of having been established to worship deities,” the committee writes. “Leisure time must [therefore] not be used to pursue animalistic desires, but rather to recover our humanity” (NDKR, 488).

Even as the subcommittee was generating this interim report, religious studies specialists collaborated with education experts in thinking aloud about this process of “making persons” and the ideal “human figure” that education could create. Because the new policy aimed at creating citizens who engaged in acts of dutiful self-abnegation in support of rapid economic growth, these intellectuals drew on concepts of social cohesion advanced by French sociologist Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) as well as Max Weber's (1864–1920) notion of the “Protestant

11. The Central Education Council is an advisory body to the Minister of Education. Members are experts drawn from civil society, including university presidents, prefectural governors, municipal mayors, and chairs of NGOs and for-profit corporations. My translation of the policy is deliberately awkward: I intend to capture how the passive construction simultaneously signaled the human figure “that can be hoped for” (*kitai sareru* 期待される) and also the human figure “who can be counted on” (again, *kitai sareru*).

ethic” as the “spirit” of capitalism (WEBER 2002). For them, the Weberian thesis was not an explanatory model, but a how-to manual: Japan just needed to find its own analogue to the internalized Calvinist doctrine that had spurred capitalist flourishing in Western Europe and North America to experience similar economic success.

For example, in an essay on “The Japanese Figure that Contemporary [Society] Requires” published as part of a series in the May 1964 issue of the journal *Sōgō kyōiku gijutsu* 総合教育技術, education historian Karasawa Tomitarō suggests that with the inevitable transition from the agrarian economy of the past to the tech-driven economy of the future, the ideal “human figure” would also naturally change. With increasing automation and higher enrollment in secondary and postsecondary education, Japan would soon witness a transition from the white collar “salaryman” to the highly educated “producer” or “technician.” In a section describing how this Japanese citizen of the near future should take pride in their work, Karasawa writes: “A desirable work ethic would first of all regard one’s profession as a concrete path to perfecting their very humanity.” Citing Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Karasawa claims that a Christian sense of vocation (*tenshokukan* 天職観) had driven the rise of capitalism in modern Europe and the US. A similar sense of higher calling could do the same for Japan. “In this view,” Karasawa writes, “one’s profession is not a simple means of making a living but is rather a concrete method for personal perfection and demonstrating one’s contributions to society as a citizen” KARA-SAWA (1964, 18).

Karasawa’s essay appeared adjacent to another essay in the same special issue of *Sōgō kyōiku gijutsu*, in which President of the Japanese Association for Religious Studies Ishizu Teruji describes religion as the essential aspect of being human (ISHIZU 1964).¹² He begins by offering a typology of “established religions,” “undeveloped religions,” and “ethnic religions,” arguing that despite superficial differences in institutional organization, geographic reach, or temporal longevity, all religions essentially fostered social cohesion (ISHIZU 1964, 22). Having established this functionalist understanding of religion for his audience, Ishizu turns to the question of what it meant to “live religiously” (*shūkyōteki ni ikiru to iu koto* 宗教的に生きるという事), arguing that religion helped humans confront difficult moments in which both scientific inquiry and common sense utterly failed.

12. As TAKAHASHI Hara (2008, 163) has argued, a series of deaths of leading lights placed several 1926 graduates of the University of Tokyo Department of Religious Studies in leadership roles in the 1950s. Ishizu was Kishimoto’s contemporary; both were born in 1903 and graduated from the very same department in 1926. While their approaches differed in terms of emphasis (psychology for Kishimoto; philosophy for Ishizu), they shared a functionalist approach premised on religion as a universal aspect of human existence.

With this compensatory model of religion echoing Karasawa's point about fostering a sense of vocation, Ishizu turns to the practical question of how to conduct religious instruction in schools. For Ishizu, it was vital that students acquire proper knowledge about religion and the essential part it played in human life. After all, he suggests, the ideal of religious freedom required that human beings have enough awareness to properly discriminate between "true" and "false" religions. Confusingly, ISHIZU (1964, 26) then signals that efforts to "cultivate religious sensitivity" (*shūkyōteki jōsō o yashinau* 宗教の情操を養う) in public schools must avoid sectarianism even as they acknowledged religion's crucial role in constructing the diligent, resilient self. He does not reconcile the evident contradiction between his disavowal of "sectarianism" and his arguably sectarian distinction between "true" and "false" religions.

In the context of contemporaneous obsession with the ideal "human figure" and ongoing debates about the propriety and feasibility of religious education, Ishizu's essay identified religion as both quintessentially "human" and capable of fostering exactly those traits that the Ikeda administration's "human figure" policy aimed to capture and inculcate. Writing in a prominent journal targeting education leaders, the President of the Japanese Association for Religious Studies argues that cultivating religious sentiment was essential to making the humans who could support the broader project of rapid capitalist growth.

The "human figure" initiative also invited a renewed focus on the concept of "religious sensitivity education" in professional education circles, not least because the final report on the "human figure," released in October 1966, repeatedly used the phrase "religious sensibility" (*shūkyōteki jōsō* 宗教の情操) to outline educational ideals (CHŪO KYŌIKU SHINGI KAI 1966). Educators picked up on the new talking point. For example, in the foreword to his co-edited book *Dōtoku kyōiku ni okeru shūkyō jōsō no shidō*, FUKAGAWA (1965a, 1) cites a 1963 report produced by the Ministry of Education's Education Curriculum Council: "Because cultivating rich human sentiment and heightening human nature is fundamental in morality education, from this point forward there is a need to devote attention to content and pedagogy that even more thoroughly enhances the religious or aesthetic aspects of sensitivity education."

But what was religious sensitivity education, exactly? Fukagawa's attempt to distinguish "sensibility" from mere "emotion" generated verbiage but not much clarity. For him "religious sensibility" suggested instinctive, long-lasting feelings of awe, respect, love, and devotion directed toward transcendental entities; he treated religious sensibility as an indispensable factor in moral formation (FUKAGAWA 1965b, 37–38). Fukagawa's essay appeared in a co-edited book with Chiba Hiroshi 千葉 博 (b. 1922), a schoolteacher based in Tokyo's Adachi Ward. Their collaboration marked a new marriage of religious studies expertise and classroom pedagogy, as seen in two additional edited volumes produced in 1966 and

1968 by the Japanese League of Education Associations (Nihon Rengō Kyōiku Kai 日本連合教育会), an umbrella organization that fostered collaboration between local education associations (SDK). Fukagawa was listed as chairperson of this organization in both publications, and Chiba was a key member. When writing for the school principals and classroom teachers who constituted the league's primary membership, Fukagawa argues that any teacher interested in cultivating religious sensitivity in schools needed to be familiar with the non-confessional academic study of religion. In his afterword to the League's 1968 volume, for example, Fukagawa (SDK, 233) touts religious studies theory and methods as fundamental to good pedagogical praxis.

Despite the energy that the Japanese League of Education Associations poured into the topic, religious sensitivity education seems to have sputtered as the Ministry of Education quietly retreated from the "human figure" initiative in the 1970s.¹³ However, several interest groups freshly embraced the concept of "religious sensitivity education" at the turn of the twenty-first century, when Japanese legislators considered revising the 1947 Fundamental Law on Education in response to perceived social crises. Intriguingly, many scholars of religion now rejected that previously favored phrase in favor of their preferred term, "religious culture education" (*shūkyō bunka kyōiku* 宗教文化教育). This semantic shift shows how scholars continued to experiment with combinations of nouns and adjectives to ensure that if any teaching were to be done about religion in Japan's public schools, it would happen quite literally on their terms.

Danger: The Revised Fundamental Law on Education and "Religious Culture Education"

When the marginal ascetic movement Aum Shinrikyō spread sarin gas on the Tokyo subway system in 1995, the incident introduced a crisis of legitimacy for scholars who had neither properly anticipated, nor warned the public about, Aum's capacity for violence (WATANABE 1997; DORMAN 2012). Scholars of religion were temporarily on the back foot, but the Aum Affair also provided an opportunity to frame the public conversation about religion and security as a problem of "religious literacy." As exemplified by a 1998 IISR volume on the topic, this rhetorical move situated scholars of religion as experts uniquely situated to help young people distinguish between "good" and "bad" religions (KOKUSAI SHŪKYŌ KENKYŪJO 1998). This sort of rhetoric continued well into the new millennium (SAKURAI 2007).

Coming just after the 1995 Hanshin Earthquake and coinciding with a prolonged economic recession, the security concerns prompted by the Aum Affair

13. Searching the National Diet Library website suggests that the few publications that appeared in the late 1960s–1990s were concentrated in sectarian Buddhist journals.

overlapped with contemporaneous journalistic tropes about violent boys and hypersexual girls (ARAI 2000; LEHENY 2006). New moral panics related to youth sexuality and violence prompted policy makers to securitize education: if Japan was in crisis, then extreme measures were warranted (FUKUOKA and TAKITA-ISHII 2021). Building on reform initiatives that had been instigated by the Nakasone Yasuhiro 中曽根康弘 (1918–2019) cabinet in the 1980s, Japanese leaders began considering newfangled approaches to education policy in the 1990s (GOODMAN 2003; TAKAYAMA 2009; 2010). The reform process was slow, but one key part of a raft of neoliberal reforms was a legal change that took place in December 2006, when legislators revised the 1947 Fundamental Law on Education (FLE). Given the panic induced by the 1995 Aum Shinrikyō attacks and the global attention to “terrorism” in the wake of the 9/11 attacks in the US in 2001, a key question was how the “religious education” clause might change.

The move to revise the FLE formally began when Prime Minister Obuchi Keizō 小渕恵三 (1937–2000) established an independent National Commission on Educational Reform in March 2000. After Obuchi’s untimely death, the Commission continued its work under new Prime Minister Mori Yoshirō 森 喜朗. Mori immediately got in hot water for stating in a 15 May 2000 meeting of the Shinto Association for Spiritual Leadership (Shintō Seiji Renmei 神道政治連盟, commonly known as Shinseiren) Diet Roundtable that Japan was a divine nation centered on the emperor. When forced to apologize, Mori contextualized the controversial remarks by saying that he had simply been thinking of Japan’s children: “[A]s we have seen again and again [in] criminal cases committed by youths in which it is clear that they pay little regard to human life, we must educate our children to understand the invaluable importance of human life, while deepening their natural religiosity” [*shūkyōteki na jōsō* 宗教的な情操].¹⁴ Although delivered in the context of a formal apology acknowledging his unseemly breach of the principle of religion-state separation, Mori’s explanatory comments doubled down on the project of cultivating children’s “innate religiosity” through tax-funded education.

True to Mori’s vision, the National Commission on Educational Reform’s December 2000 report *17 Proposals for Changing Education* describes Japanese society as in crisis and presented both moral and confessional instruction as potential solutions. The commission opines that “schools should not hesitate to teach morals” and explicitly links moral instruction to religious cultivation: “Concerning religious education, religion should be perceived as related to the existence of individuals [that is, existential problems]. It is necessary to discuss religion from the perspective of the human understanding and character

14. This translation is from the archive on the Prime Minister’s office website: <https://japan.kantei.go.jp/souri/mori/2000/0526press.html>.

building accumulated by religion through the centuries and fostering more in education these ideas and religious sentiments” (NATIONAL COMMISSION ON EDUCATIONAL REFORM 2000, 19).¹⁵ The commission calls for a new study on the state of educational policy.

Following this directive, in November 2002 the Central Education Council released a short pamphlet with a long title, *Atarashii jidai ni fusawashii kyōiku kihonhō to kyōiku suishin kihon keikaku no arikata ni tsuite: Chūkan hōkoku no gaiyō* 新しい時代にふさわしい教育基本法と教育推進基本計画の在り方について—中間報告の概要. The pamphlet highlights the loss of confidence among the people, moral degradation, violent crimes perpetrated by youth, declining academic ability, bullying, absenteeism, dropouts, the collapse of classroom order, and inferior household and community discipline (*shitsuke* しつけ) as problems facing Japanese society. In the words of the pamphlet, twenty-first century education must cultivate “Japanese people strong and rich in spirit” (CHŪŌ KYŌIKU SHINGI KAI 2002, 1). The remaining pages take a two-column approach, laying out the text of the 1947 FLE on the left, with possible revisions on the right. Under the heading “education about religion” (*shūkyō ni kan suru kyōiku* 宗教に関する教育), the council suggests adding a provision for inculcating “universal religiosity” (*fuhentekina shūkyōshin* 普遍的な宗教心) or “cultivation of religious sensitivity” (*shūkyōteki jōsō no kan'yō* 宗教的情操の涵養) (CHŪŌ KYŌIKU SHINGI KAI 2002, 5).

While Prime Minister Koizumi Jun'ichirō 小泉純一郎 was unable to get the FLE revised while in office from 2001 to 2006, his successor Abe Shinzō 安倍晋三 (1954–2022) quickly pushed the revision through. The December 2006 revision included significant changes such as a renewed focus on inculcating love of country (*aikoku no kokoro* 愛国の心) in the opening “objectives of education” section (ARAI 2013, 188–189). But the controversial clause about religious education went mostly unchanged. The only relevant change was the addition of a phrase permitting instruction in “general knowledge about religion” to Article 15 of the revised law, which was otherwise an exact match for the 1947 clause on religious education (Article 9).

Scholars of religion were emboldened by this outcome. After all, the new version of the law carved out a space for teaching *about* religion that perfectly aligned with the nonconfessional academic study of religion as practiced in departments of religious studies at Japan's colleges and universities. As exemplified by the 2007 special issue of the IISR annual journal *Gendai shūkyō* 現代宗教, newly energized scholars of religion reacted to the revision by imagining what new phrasing could mean for their field (KOKUSAI SHŪKYŌ KENKYŪJO 2007). The contributions to this issue varied in terms of tone and focus, but it is fair

15. The phrasing is from the official English translation of the report.

to say that contributors generally saw some sort of religious literacy training as necessary, even as they still aimed to exclude confessional instruction from public schools.

Scholars of religion had been conducting globally comparative research on “religious education” even before the legal reforms of 2006 (INOUE 2020, 137–138), but the revision of the FLE provided new impetus.¹⁶ Aided by a government grant, a joint working group of scholars representing the Japanese Association for Religious Studies and the Association for the Study of Religion and Society (Shūkyō to Shakai Gakkai 宗教と社会学会) established seven teams to study various aspects of religious literacy training over a three-year period (INOUE 2020, 171–177). For project leader Inoue Nobutaka 井上順孝, previous attempts to introduce religious literacy into schools had failed because of a general taboo on introducing any sort of religion, confessional or otherwise, into public schools (INOUE 2009, 581). Inoue argued that the “religious sentiment education” concept that had been so fervently embraced by many people in the lead up to the revision had always been a nonstarter. According to him, many of the proponents of religious sentiment education had unrealistic expectations that did not accord with constitutional constraints and classroom realities; they also tended to assume that ideas such as “reverence for nature” or “respect for humans” were universal principles. Critics understandably saw these supposedly “universal” religious principles as redolent of the wartime self-cultivation courses, which had encouraged sacrifice of the self for the sake of the state. But even more importantly for Inoue, the quixotic attempt to teach students “universal” religious principles ignored the basic fact that religious groups can and do disagree about very fundamental ideas. Not only that, but few teachers were prepared to offer truly comprehensive instruction that could cover all information in an evenhanded and nonsectarian mode, especially in a society where antipathy to religion was widespread (INOUE 2020, 140–146).

Inoue’s solution to this conundrum lay in what he called “religious culture education” (*shūkyō bunka kyōiku* 宗教文化教育), which he describes in an English-language essay as “particularly necessary when considered in the context of globalization, the information age (i.e., Internet), and the ‘cults’ problem in the wake of the Aum affair” (INOUE 2009, 580). In Inoue’s telling, religious

16. For example, Fujiwara Satoko published two books on comparative approaches to “religious education” around this time. Fujiwara received her PhD in Religion from the University of Chicago and was familiar with the US case, but her research also included cases from the United Kingdom, Scandinavia, and Western Europe alongside Turkey, Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, and South Korea (FUJIWARA 2011a; 2011b). Like Kishimoto and Ishizu, Inoue and Fujiwara have served as President of the Japanese Association for Religious Studies; while both scholars regularly publish in English, Fujiwara is a rare figure who has matched and even exceeded Kishimoto’s international stature insofar as she has also served as President of the IAHR.

culture education “puts stress on the study of religion in its contemporary social *and* religious context, while including elements of religious sentiment as well. More concretely, it seeks to deepen comprehension of religious culture in other countries as well as that of students’ own religious culture” (INOUE 2009, 588). It could also be integrated into other subjects, obviating the “need to introduce a completely new religious culture subject into secondary schools” (INOUE 2009, 592). Religious culture education served “more to defend against troubles caused by the present social conditions... than to present some excellent model of religious values to students” (INOUE 2009, 592). To study religion was to reduce risk.

But for students to learn about “religious culture” in this way, there had to be teachers capable of teaching the subject. Inoue and his colleagues worked on creating a certification mechanism whereby teachers (and, crucially, college students graduating with religious studies degrees) could become “religious culture specialists” (*shūkyō bunkashi* 宗教文化士) overseen by the Center for Education in Religious Culture (Shūkyō Bunka Kyōiku Suishin Sentā 宗教文化教育推進センター). The focus on pedagogy was a pragmatic fix to the staffing problem Inoue had identified, but scholars working on the certification project quickly ran into problems. For example, the more precisely the team defined the scope of “religious culture,” the more likely they were to disagree on specifics. And although they had collectively decided to make the certification dependent on passing a multiple-choice test, conflicts quickly arose over the correct answers to exam questions (FUJIWARA 2010, 230). As a compromise, the task force “provisionally agreed upon three common learning objectives of [religious culture specialists]: (1) to understand the meanings of religious cultures, including beliefs, myths, rituals, and other practices; (2) to comprehend basic facts about different religious traditions; and (3) to be able to analyze the roles of religion in various contemporary issues and their contributions to public discussions” (FUJIWARA 2010, 233). Although members recognized that the multiple-choice format problematically implies that there could be a single correct answer to complex humanistic questions, they agreed to continue with their original plan of administering a qualifying multiple-choice exam.

A 2016 English-language translation of sample exam questions produced by Kokugakuin University reveals the solution that the task force ultimately adopted: Rather than having a single “correct” answer to each multiple-choice question, the questions were devised so that there were *two* correct answers (INOUE 2016).¹⁷ In a clever bit of test design, these answers typically demanded that examinees not simply be conversant in the history of one religious tradition, but be able to situate multiple traditions in comparative perspective. However,

17. I am grateful to the anonymous colleague who provided me with a copy of this document as well as several other valuable Center for Education in Religious Culture materials.

the limitations of the multiple-choice format lingered because the questions tended to reify religions as collections of static doctrines and associated ritual repertoires. Some questions also reinforced essentialist perceptions by, for example, asking examinees to describe “the traits of Shinto *kami* for an introduction to Shinto aimed at a country with a large Christian population” (INOUE 2016, 2).

A 2019 promotional brochure touts the religious culture specialist certificate as “the certification that will be sought out in the twenty-first century,” boasting that the program had already been adopted by thirty-six universities. The pamphlet indicates that certification was open to current graduate and undergraduate students (including those who had graduated in the previous two years), middle and high school teachers with at least three years of experience, and journalists with at least three years of experience. Certification tests would be offered twice a year, in June and November, for the cost of ¥4,000 (with the certificate costing an additional ¥6,000). The pamphlet emphasizes the credential’s usefulness for travel agents, civil servants, public school teachers, journalists, wedding planners and funeral directors, and members of neighborhood associations and parent-teacher associations (SHŪKYŌ BUNKA KYŌIKU SUISHIN SENTĀ 2019). In 2020, the Center for Education in Religious Culture also began offering online e-learning modules to match apparently growing interest (INOUE 2020, 179).

By enumerating “general knowledge about religion” as a desideratum in public education, the revised FLE created an opening for scholars of religion to accomplish something some of them had envisioned since at least the 1950s, when Kishimoto had mused about “religious knowledge education” as an “intellectual weapon” against ignorance (KHS, 297). But it is an open question whether the religious culture specialist certification is something that school principals are encouraging teachers to pursue, and one can reasonably wonder whether teachers are looking to expand instruction about “religious culture” in their classrooms. Nevertheless, the comparatively recent “religious culture specialist” initiative shows that scholars of religion active in the twenty-first century have continued to use perceived crises to stake out political territory, land jobs for their graduates, and boost their field. I do not critique scholars for this, but I do want to close by addressing the question of how scholars of religion, both in Japan and elsewhere, might consider reframing what we offer to various publics.

Who Should Teach Religion, to Whom, Why, and How?

As Fujiwara Satoko has shown, scholars of religion working in Japanese universities have typically not had the compunctions about “doing theology” that have characterized the US religious studies academy in which I am personally situated (FUJIWARA 2025). Yet it remains important that key venues for publishing research about Japanese religions, in both English and Japanese, emerged

out of the inherently uneven Allied Occupation experience, reflecting both the American allergy to “doing theology” and the postwar concern that the Japanese state might again “do religion.” American perspectives and priorities dominated the Occupation, and the ensuing US-Japan Alliance (1951–) has indefinitely perpetuated that intrinsically uneven relationship. Accordingly, Japanese scholars continued to “look up” to US practices for models to emulate for decades after the Occupation ended, and theories that privilege the historical trajectories of the US and Western Europe have dominated discussions about “religion” and “religious education” in Japan as a result.

To be sure, the academic study of Japanese religions is a global endeavor, and I do not mean to overstate the influence of the US-Japan relationship on the sub-field. But because key institutes (IISR) and journals (*CRJ* and the *JJRS*) were established by scholars who aimed to perpetuate Occupation-era policy orientations in the newly independent Japan, I find it helpful to consider why anyone should pay attention to scholars of religion on matters of public policy, regarding education or otherwise.

I personally like the idea of exposing junior citizens to the methods and approaches of our discipline before they get to college because I think that religious studies research provides a unique perspective on the various problems that invariably attend collective life. Scholars of religion adopt an empathetic, non-reductive approach to empirically unverifiable ideas (karma, a chosen people, the afterlife), non-obvious or incorporeal entities (spirits, ghosts, religious juridical persons, for-profit corporations), and socially influential but sometimes poorly understood groups (churches, “cults,” multi-level marketing schemes). These ideas, entities, and organizations deserve careful attention because they have demonstrable impacts on personal flourishing and because they impinge on the public good (THOMAS 2024, 262). It is good for informed citizens to perk up and pay critical attention when a politician says that deities need to be placated to avoid disaster (McLAUGHLIN 2013, 295), when a religious juridical person exhorts visitors to engage in the political project of revising the constitution (LARSSON 2017), or when a group of academics calls for a religious juridical person to be stripped of tax-exempt status (SHŪKYŌ KENKYŪSHA YŪSHI 2022). These are all operations of power.

But I do not see it as the job of scholars of religion to make “religiously literate” citizens, nor do I see it as our job to help teachers inculcate ostensibly “universal” religious sensibilities in students.¹⁸ While sensitizing students to diversity

18. The longer I study religion, the less certain I am about what the adjective “religious” even means, including the adjective in the phrase “religious studies.” Like others, scholars of religion must carve some things off from the rest of social life to study them *as* religion; the adjective “religious” in “religious studies” performs this religion-making work. See MANDAIR and DRESSLER (2011, 20–24) on “religion-making from (a pretended) outside.”

is clearly important, I also do not find the vague category of “culture” to be a very helpful way of thinking about religion, if for no other reason than the essentializing impulse behind the notion of “religious cultures” tends to reify religious identities at the expense of acknowledging hybridity and change over time. Instead, I think that scholars of religion make our most valuable contribution to public policy—including to discussions about tax-funded education—when we emphasize the constructivist insight that interest groups *make religion* (MANDAIR and DRESSLER 2011, 20). Politicians make religion when they use terms like “the power to live” (*ikiru chikara* 生きる力) or “education of the heart” (*kokoro no kyōiku* 心の教育) to indicate the affective orientations they want junior citizens to develop through public schooling (ARAI 2013, 175–177, 187). Textbook authors and classroom teachers make religion when they decide what content is acceptable in courses on history, morality, social studies, or literature, not to mention how to frame it (NELSON 2002; BAMKIN 2018; 2019). Principals make religion when they decide which cultural heritage sites students should visit on field trips—the “secular resignification of religious sites by state actors” (TEEUWEN and ROTS 2020, 7). Children’s parents and peers make religion as they determine who can participate in extracurricular activities and what counts as a “normal” extracurricular obligation (LEMAY 2018; 2019). As this inexhaustive list of examples suggests, people can and do engage in religion-making without ever using the word “religion,” often to confounding effect.

Thus, if religious studies scholars want to influence education policy, our most effective contribution is not to tell teachers how to teach *about* religion as a kind of factual content. That just implicates us in the religion-making game, and as I showed above it too easily ensnares us in theological hair-splitting. Rather, I think we best contribute to policy by drawing attention to a paradoxical quality intrinsic to the tax-funded school: The legally prescribed “non-religious” aspect of this public space—both as a physical site and as a venue for subject formation—is precisely what makes it a religion-making factory. Operating under the legal injunction to avoid “religious education” in schools, parents, principals, politicians, and pupils must all decide that *this* thing is religion, *that* thing is not. This paradox reflects a lingering conundrum that has attended Japanese society ever since the late-nineteenth century adoption of “religion” as a category of governance (MAXEY 2014; ZHONG 2016; THOMAS 2019). This is not a “Japanese” problem, but a dilemma that affects secularist societies worldwide.

Teaching about religion-making, not religion, in public schools bypasses the quixotic attempt to endow junior citizens with perfect information about religions, and it eschews the futile attempt to make perfectly behaved citizens and maximally productive workers. Rather than giving students and teachers lists of answers to memorize, our unique strength lies in training them to habitually ask a series of questions: *Who* calls *what* religion, *why*, and with *which* effects

(THOMAS 2024, 263)? A person who asks these questions is prepared to see, for example, how a politician's designation of one group as a "cult" might enhance the state's monopoly on violence. A person who asks this question can see that when a policymaker emphasizes "patriotism," this superficially non-religious language can implicitly signal a willingness to advance the agendas of specific religious juridical persons or associated lobbies. When a student is approached on her college campus by a member of a group that disavows the category of religion but offers miraculous personal transformation, asking this question helps determine, empathetically but critically, what is at stake for this campus evangelist. Asking *who* calls *what* "religion," *why*, and to *which* effect sets aside the good/bad religion distinction while empowering citizens to make informed choices, both individually and collectively.

To my mind, this question represents the unique interpretive power of the religious studies discipline (THOMAS 2024). Asking it is a helpful reminder to pause whenever we are tempted to weigh in on any matter of policy: *Who* should listen to scholars of religion, *why*, and in pursuit of *which* political ends? And periodically asking it of ourselves seems a suitable way to honor the orientations that Kishimoto Hideo and William P. Woodard adopted when they first set in motion the processes that birthed this journal.¹⁹

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ABBREVIATIONS

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