

A Rejoinder

Jan SWYNGEDOUW

Let me state first of all that I plead guilty to the charge of no longer being able to suppress a feeling of allergy whenever I come across the word “unique” as applied to things Japanese. When, however, this alleged uniqueness is presented as “the proper contribution of Japan to the enrichment of the outside world,” I must recant— and that right willingly. The paper under discussion takes precisely this standpoint, and I feel enriched by it.

The main thesis of the authors, if I read it correctly, is that (present-day) Japanese religion and society are so unique that they cannot be adequately explained by means of western sociological concepts. In other words, the uniqueness of the object of research requires a correspondingly unique conceptualization and methodology. The authors focus on the *ie* — and “ancestor worship” as its religio-symbolic expression — as the principle of integration of Japanese society, calling it the agency that has functioned in a manner roughly equivalent to that of institutionalized religion in the west.

So bold an assertion cannot, of course, be given sufficient substantiation in a limited number of pages. As a “search” it involves much hesitation, and part of the contribution it hopes to make is an invitation to what I would call “companionship” in the task lying ahead. The few comments that follow are no more than a humble response to this invitation and a continuation of research it has for some years been my privilege to undertake together with Messrs. Yanagawa and Abe. These comments are also questions directed to myself.

That religion in Japan differs from religion in the west is a truth nobody would dream of calling into question. But that traditional western sociological concepts are unfit to explain

adequately the “unique” Japanese case is a matter that more easily lends itself to discussion. Taken literally, this contention seems to constitute an outright denial of the universal value and applicability of at least some of the concepts we use in religious-sociological research. This problem, which relates to the more general one of particularism vs. universalism, has of course haunted our discipline for many a year, and a simple solution—fortunately for the dynamics of science—is not yet in sight. But I would like to add this observation: overemphasis on the peculiarity of the Japanese case, both in its actual state and in the conceptualization or framework this requires, seems to me to involve an underestimation of the fact, not only that many of the so-called typically Japanese elements bear a more universal character than is usually admitted, but also that the reality of western influences on Japanese society and ways of thinking, steadily increasing in scope and intensity, presents at least a *possibility* for making an approach in western terms to some aspects of Japan’s religious world. This matter is the more relevant in view of the authors’ intention to search out “contemporary” uniqueness.

Again, the authors’ rather negative stance toward the applicability of western theories seems to result in a sort of self-refutation when they base their own thesis on the need to discover a principle of social integration of a moral-religious order equivalent to (institutionalized) Christianity in the west. I wonder if the assumption of such a principle as a starting point is not already the application of a “western” theory, one that smacks, moreover, of Parsonian influence. Indeed, if I may be allowed to reverse my stand and take the side of the defenders of uniqueness, I would like to ask whether “integration” means the same thing for a highly diversified culture like that of the west and a highly homogeneous culture like that of Japan. Before trying to discover which agencies have functioned as integrators of Japanese society, I would like more information on the peculiar nature of the principle that integrates Japanese society and

culture and on the religious attributes of this principle. The assertion that religion is *the* key to understanding society, as most western sociologists claim, is based on the actual role Christianity played in the west. Whether something one can call "religious" performed an analogous function in Japan, or whether the country of Japan with its almost homogeneous population even needed a similar integrative principle is, to say the least, a moot question.

Keeping in mind the point that the concept of "integration" needs to be more clearly defined, we turn next to the question of integrating agencies. On this point it is difficult not to agree with the authors' contention that institutionalized religion did not perform this role. If socio-religious studies have hitherto been conducted in emulation of western models that attribute such a role to institutionalized religion, they are certainly open to revision. Yet it would be a mistake to infer that we are thereby released from the responsibility of carrying out research on institutionalized religion in Japan — a mistake for which I cannot blame the authors, though they at least give me occasion to point it out. On the contrary, do we not have here an excellent opportunity to develop a non-western sociological theory of religious institutions? How is it, for example, that various religious traditions have been able to live side by side, and what have been their respective relations— and contributions—to an overarching principle of integration? My hunch is that these and related questions can provide us with clues whereby to understand why the institutional specialization of religion in Japan did not lead to its privatization—as happened, according to Luckmann, in the west.

The suggestion that the *ie* and its symbolic expression through ancestor worship offer a key that may unlock the intricacies of Japan's religious world is more than to the point—though I shuddered a little at the remark that ancestor worship was selected "as a matter of convenience." Yet it is precisely here, I feel, that their argument does not, and perhaps cannot, avoid

ambiguity and thus leaves us somewhat in the dark. For example, it is not sufficiently clear whether they are speaking primarily about the *ie* itself or about the *ie* structure as applied to society as a whole. Again, the relation of the *ie* to ancestor worship, and of both to the wider society, not to mention the traditional connection between ancestor worship and Buddhism as the "religion of the household," are but hesitatingly enounced.

Perhaps the need for greater clarity could be highlighted by posing the following questions: Is the integrating agency the *ie*, the *ie* structure, or its symbolic expression in ancestor worship? And what does this agency integrate? Is it the household, the local community, or the nation as a whole?

Admittedly, the authors touch on all these different elements by referring to various theories propounded by well-known Japanese scholars. They did not succeed, however, in organizing them into a compact and convincing theoretical framework. The lurking ambiguity in the presentation comes to the fore particularly when they take up the subject of social change. After having argued that "the core structure of [Japanese] society has always been and will remain the *ie*," they seem to agree with the opinion that, under the impact of contemporary social changes, the *ie* is on its way out and that ancestor worship is consequently taking on new forms. Logically this leads us again to the question of the relationship between the *ie* and ancestor worship. If, moreover, we take into account the apparently emergent separation between the two, we are led to ask which is ultimately the more fundamental integrating agency in Japanese society and culture.

Should we proceed a step further and draw a conclusion the authors refrain from, namely, that ancestor worship, when it ceases to function as the religio-symbolical expression of the *ie*, also forsakes its integrating role? Then we are left with the same question presently posed with regard to western society: if religion, whether in the form of ancestor worship as in Japan or in the form of the church-centered institution traditional in

Jan SWYNGEDOUW

the west, is no longer able to provide a basis for the integration of society, what happens, then, to society? Does it fall apart, or do *other* agencies take over? This problem, which some refer to as the problem of secularization, is far from resolved.