ISSN 0304-1042

Japanese Journal of Religious Studies

VOLUME 51, NO. 2 2024

Half a Century of the *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*

ARTICLES

Japanese Journal of Religious Studies 51/2: 119–124

dx.doi.org/10.18874/jjrs.51.2.2024.119-124

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Editors' Introduction

Half a Century of the *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*

For over half a century, the *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* (*JJRS*) has shaped the study of Japanese religions. Since the first issue was published in March 1974, the *JJRS* has produced almost one thousand articles, reviews, research notes, and editorials on a variety of themes related to religion in Japan, the former Japanese Empire, or the Japanese diaspora, as well as the connections between Japanese religions and religions in other cultural and geographical regions. In honor of the editors, authors, and readers of the *JJRS* past and present, we are excited to publish this special "golden" issue celebrating the journal's achievements and foretelling its continued success.

Although the *JJRS* dates to 1974, the journal is itself a continuation of a previous publication, *Contemporary Religions in Japan* (*CRJ*). Founded by Hideo Kishimoto and William Woodward at the International Institute for the Study of Religions (IISR) in 1960, the *CRJ* published statistics on religious affiliation in Japan, studies of "new religions," and translations of articles by renowned Japanese scholars and philosophers such as Nishitani Keiji. The purpose of the *CRJ*, as Kishimoto and Woodward (1960, 4) note in the editors' preface to the inaugural issue, was "to provide material and information that will assist foreign religionists, scholars and other interested persons in understanding religions in Japan." There was, as the editors state, a "need" for such a journal in postwar Japan, presumably to advance research on religion that had previously been conducted

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under the supervision of the Religions Division of the Supreme Commander of Allied Powers (SCAP) during the US-led Occupation from 1945 to 1952.

Kishimoto and Woodward had both been members of the Religions Division: Kishimoto as a consultant in his capacity as a scholar of religion at the University of Tokyo and Woodward as a Christian missionary who returned to Japan after expulsion during the war. Kishimoto in particular was instrumental in the crafting of "The Shinto Directive" under the supervision of William K. Bunce, the head of the Religions Division (THOMAS 2019, 146–149; MULLINS 2021, 42–45, 55). The networks of scholars forged during the immediate postwar investigation of religion in Japan continued well after the Religions Division was dissolved and, over the decades, developed into an international cohort of scholars researching all aspects of Japanese religions. The *CJR* and *JJRS* have served as hubs for these networks. Thus, one could say that the *CRJ* and its offspring the *JJRS* were and are part of the legacy of the US-led Allied Occupation of Japan.

After Kishimoto passed away in 1964 and Woodward returned to the US to teach at Claremont Graduate School, the production of the *CRJ* began to decline. The journal published its final issue in 1970, although the issue seems to have been delayed considering that it includes an obituary for Woodward who died in 1973. One year after Woodward's death, David Reid revived the journal and renamed it the *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* to reflect the broader historical scope of its contents.

Some time between the summer of 1980 and the spring of 1981, management of the *JJRS* was transferred from the IISR to the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture (NIRC) in Nagoya. In his editor's preface, REID (1980, 82) writes that while he was in the US, "the editorial responsibilities will be in the capable hands of our new Associate Editor, Jan Swyngedouw." Although Reid later returned to Japan, the *JJRS* remained at the NIRC. As SWYNGEDOUW (1981) notes in the editor's preface to the 1981 issue, "As already announced in a letter accompanying the previous issue, the *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* has changed publishers and, at least to a certain extent, has acquired a new editor." The contents of this "letter" are uncertain as it has been lost to history (or in the boxes of files in the NIRC basement). However, the reason for the permanent relocation of the journal appears to be the fact that the IISR was suddenly closed soon after Reid left Japan.

During Swyngedouw's tenure as editor, the *JJRS* primarily published social scientific studies of religion in accordance with his own research interests and in keeping with the original vision of Kishimoto and Woodward when they founded the *CRJ*. However, the journal was forever transformed when Paul L. Swanson, the longest-serving editor of the *JJRS*, joined the NIRC in 1986. First as associate editor and then as editor, Swanson broadened the scope of the journal considerably, standardized the style and format, and expanded distribution by

making the journal available online at an early stage and through databases such as JSTOR. It was under his leadership that the *JJRS* has become the leading international journal for research on Japanese religion.

Symposium

The content of this special issue stems from a symposium held in June 2023. In celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the *JJRS*, the NIRC hosted a two-day international symposium entitled "The Study of Japanese Religions Past, Present, and Future: Fifty Years of the *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*" (UGORETZ 2024). Scholars and friends of the *JJRS* from around the world gathered to reflect on the history of the journal, recent developments in Japanese religious studies, and the future of the field. Many of the hands who have worked tirelessly to make the *JJRS* the cutting-edge publication in Japanese religious studies it is today participated, including former editor Paul L. Swanson, longtime advisors Hayashi Makoto and Jim Heisig, former associate editor Clark Chilson, and current editor Matthew D. McMullen. They were joined by an energetic group of discussants, presenters, and audience members, many of whom have contributed to the *JJRS* as previous guest editors, editorial consultants, and article authors.

The first day of the symposium was dedicated to reflection and discussion on the history of the journal and the field of Japanese religious studies as a whole. Swanson and Hayashi gave stirring keynote presentations in which they shared many milestones and moments of growth in past decades. One highlight was the ceremonial passing of a golden baton from Hayashi and Swanson to current editor McMullen. These talks gave valuable context for the panel discussion that followed on the subject of "The Study of Japanese Religions," involving Clark Chilson (University of Pittsburgh), Hoshino Seiji (Kokugakuin University), Keller Kimbrough (University of Colorado), and Jacqueline Stone (Princeton University, Emerita). The discussion covered a wide range of topics, such as impact the *JJRS* has had in their careers and the field of Japanese religions, opportunities and challenges to research in the field's current state, and visions of the future of the study of Japanese religions. Key themes included changes within the academy; the impact of AI on research, publication, and teaching; how best to support Japanese scholars to publish their research in English; and the need for scholars to engage more with the public. The panelists' comments led to a lively discussion with all in attendance.

On the second day of the symposium, Emi Foulk Bushelle (Western Washington University), Orion Klautau (Tohoku University), Jolyon Baraka Thomas (University of Pennsylvania), and Aike P. Rots (University of Oslo) gave thought-provoking research presentations challenging contemporary conceptions of the study of Japanese religions. Anyone interested may watch the recordings of

the full symposium available on the NIRC's YouTube channel (@NIRC-nanzan), with thanks to the hard work of Van Bragt Fellows Ishihara Yamato and Suemura Masayo and associate editor Kaitlyn Ugoretz.

Summary of Articles

This very special special issue is the culmination of research presented during the fiftieth anniversary symposium. The topics for presentations and subsequently the enclosed articles explore the origins of the study of Japanese religions, the factors leading to the current state of the field, and prospects on where the study of Japanese religions is heading (or should be heading) in the decades to come. We invited speakers and solicited manuscripts from scholars whose research we thought best represented these topics.

Chronologically, the first article in this special issue to address the origins of religious studies in Japan is Emi Foulk Bushelle's "Speech, Text, and Reality: *Kokugaku* and the Buddhist Roots of Japanese Philology." In this article, Bushelle considers how the debates within the *kokugaku* movement regarding a proper methodology for the study of texts led to the development of a modern philological tradition in Japan. This tradition, based on the writings of the Shingon monk Keichū, was rooted in a religious understanding and ritual usage of language. Therefore, despite the efforts of modern reformers to purge the religious elements from the history of *kokugaku*, the methodology of textual interpretation that defined this movement was inseparable from its religious origins.

The second article also addresses the modern formation of the study of religion in Japan, in particular the study of Buddhism as an academic discipline. In "The Politics of Essence: Towards a History of the Public Study of Buddhism in 1880s Japan," Orion Klautau discusses how Buddhist intellectuals in the late nineteenth century sought to develop a modern study of Buddhism that could engage with the global study of religion as an academic field, while maintaining what they believed to be the "essence" of their own Mahayana Buddhist traditions. The results of their efforts can be seen in the formation of Buddhist studies departments such as the Department of Indian Philosophy and Buddhist Studies at the University of Tokyo and related academic societies in Japan.

In "Why Teach Religion?: Scholars of Religion and Education Policy in Postwar Japan," Jolyon Baraka Thomas examines the role that Kishimoto and Woodward and the journals that resulted from their collaboration (the *CRJ* and *JJRS*) have played in shaping the contemporary field of Japanese religious studies. Specifically, Thomas focuses on the agenda of religious studies scholars in the decades following the Allied Occupation to influence policymakers regarding religious education in Japan. More than mere reporters on religion in Japan, as the early issues of the *CRJ* were purported to be, scholars of religion have been

consequential players in defining religion in Japan. Thomas calls on scholars to acknowledge how their research affects policy and political rhetoric regarding religion.

In the final research article for the special issue, Aike P. Rots offers a critical assessment of the state of the field and suggests that scholars of Japanese religions should expand their methodological and geographical perspectives in their research. In his article "Crossing Boundaries: Rethinking 'Japanese Religion' in the Anthropocene," Rots highlights the nationalistic presumptions in many studies of Japanese religions that tend to marginalize minority communities and disregard the transnational aspects of religion in "Japan." With an eye toward the future and a concern for the sustainability of the field in dire times of dwindling research funds, political uncertainty, and accelerating environmental catastrophe, scholars of Japan must not insulate themselves from these global problems by relying on the deceptive comfort posed by the geographic distance and relative economic stability of the Japanese nation-state. Rather, scholars must cross such traditional borders if the study of Japanese religions is to remain relevant.

In addition to these four research articles, this special issue celebrating half a century of the *JJRS* includes four personal essays by long-time editorial board members. Swanson and Hayashi discuss the history of the *JJRS* and the role the journal has played in shaping the study of religion in Japan. Kawahashi Noriko discusses how the *JJRS* has been an outlet for feminist critiques in studies of religion over the years, noting her own experience working with the journal, as well as pointing out the remaining challenges for achieving gender equity in the study of Japanese religions. R. Keller Kimbrough provides a lively account of how the *JJRS* has served as a venue for scholars of Japanese literature to engage with religious topics. As a whole, these essays point to the diversity of scholarship that the *JJRS* has produced over the years.

We, the editors of the *JJRS* past, present, and future, are confident that readers will enjoy this selection of articles as a reflection of half a century of *JJRS* publications. In the editor's preface to the first issue of the journal, David Reid (1974) explains his reasons for reviving the journal and changing the name, writing, "To say that we desire to carry forward the high ideals of our predecessors means first and foremost that we, like them, are concerned to raise the standards of this Institute's publications.… The name change is not intended to suggest that this Institute has now 'come of age,' that we have 'arrived.' On the contrary we are only too keenly aware of the long road ahead and the meagerness of our resources." Fifty years later, "the meagerness of our resources" notwithstanding, I think we can confidently say that the *JJRS* has indeed "arrived." It is our hope and mission to continue the tradition of publishing high-quality articles on the myriad aspects of Japanese religions for decades to come.

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Japanese Journal of Religious Studies 51/2: 125–134

dx.doi.org/10.18874/jjrs.51.2.2024.125-134

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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.

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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 *IISR* between 1960 and 1970. The *CRJ* cum *JJRS* continued to be published by the *IISR*. 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 and 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 demytholygizing 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 Shugendo 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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Japanese Journal of Religious Studies 51/2: 135–144

dx.doi.org/10.18874/jjrs.51.2.2024.135-144

Hayashi Makoto 林 淳

The *JJRS* and the Study of Japanese Religions

I would like to start by recalling some memories from when I first arrived in Nagoya many years ago, when I was assigned my new position at Aichi Gakuin University in April of 1985. At the time, Akaike Noriaki 赤池憲昭 was also a faculty member of the Religious Studies Department there, and Jan Swyngedouw was a Permanent Fellow of the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture. Both scholars shared the experience of studying as graduate students in the Department of Religious Studies of the University of Tokyo under the supervision of Yanagawa Kei'ichi 柳川啓一. They also collaborated in translating Thomas Luckmann's work on *The Invisible Religion* into Japanese (Luckmann 1976). They were birds of a feather and took me under their wings. Swyngedouw is well known as a scholar of the sociology of religion who introduced the topic of secularization into Japan. He was quite familiar with the current discussions on secularization and also well acquainted with scholars in this field such as Bryan Wilson, Karel Dobbelaere, and Thomas Luckmann, who were mainstays of the Société Internationale de la Sociologie des Religions (sisr, International Society for the Sociology of Religions). The idea of secularization, which to a certain extent fit the situation in parts of western Europe, had not caught on in Japan. Swyngedouw was aware that Japanese scholars had their doubts about the applicability of "secularization," especially in Japanese culture.

Around this time it was popular among young researchers of religious studies in Japan to focus on so-called "new religious movements" (*shinshūkyō kenkyū*

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新宗教研究), and they had a different perspective than that of secularization, which was based on the assumption that religion was in decline (Yamanaka and Hayashi 1995). The publishing industry was experiencing a boom in sales of books on "spirituality" (*seishin sekai* 精神世界), with special corners in large bookstores dedicated to this topic. Researchers on new religious movements sought to capture generational changes by examining topics such as "new new religions" (*shin shin shūkyō* 新々宗教), "new religious movements using spiritual techniques" (*reijutsukei shinshūkyō* 霊術系新宗教), and "new spiritual movements" (*shin reisei undō* 新霊性運動). It is not surprising that the idea of "secularization" was not popular among scholars of these new religious movements. Japanese scholars did not accept the theory that secularization was a universal trend; rather, they understood it to be applicable only to western Europe and even limited to some societies within those countries.

While Swyngedouw was the editor of the *JJRS*, many articles concerning secularization were published, including articles by Yanagawa, Morioka Kiyomi 森岡清美, and Shimazono Susumu 島薗進. The journal served as a place for both Japanese and international sociologists of religion to mix and share their research. This tendency changed radically when Paul Swanson took over as editor of the *JJRS*. Swanson is a specialist in Chinese Tiantai Buddhism, but he is also familiar with the history of religion in Japan through his studies on Shugendo and has always been sensitive to current trends in religious studies in those fields. Swyngedouw laid the groundwork for international cooperation through his contacts with the SISR, and Swanson built on this foundation through active participation in various scholarly associations such as the Japanese Association for Religious Studies (JARS; Nihon Shūkyō Gakkai 日本宗教学会) and the American Academy of Religion (AAR). Thus, a new variety of articles began to be published in the *JJRS* reflecting the work of the newest scholars of Buddhism in the West and young Japanese researchers on religious studies.

Research on the Medieval and Modern Periods

In looking at the special issues published during the period when Swanson was editor of the *JJRS*, I was struck by two points. The first is the plethora of special issues and articles on the influence of exoteric-esoteric Buddhism (*kenmitsu taisei* 顕密仏教) in medieval Japan. The collection on "The Legacy of Kuroda Toshio" (1996), which contained several articles by Kuroda translated into English, played a key role in informing Western scholars about Kuroda's influential research and ideas. In Japan, many scholars—Taira Masayuki 平雅之, Sasaki Kaoru 佐々木馨, Matsuo Kenji 松尾剛次, Satō Hiroo 佐藤弘夫, and so forth—took up the discussion of *kenmitsu taisei*, sometimes in a critical way, to rethink the history of medieval Japanese Buddhism. The following chart shows

the various special issues of the *JJRS* that were in some way connected with the theme of *kenmitsu taisei*.

1. Esoteric Buddhism	Vol. 14/2–3, 41/1, 47/1
2. Kamakura New Buddhism	Vol. 26/3–4, 33/2
3. Medieval Literature	Vol. 9/2–3, 36/2
4. Shugendo, Shinto, Onmyodo	Vol. 16/2–3, 29/3–4, 40/1
5. Ritual	Vol 43/1, 49/2

The historiography of medieval Buddhism in Japan used to focus on the so-called schools of "new Kamakura Buddhism," such as the Zen, Pure Land, and Nichiren schools. After the appearance of the *kenmitsu taisei* analysis, however, the themes of esoteric Buddhism, ritual, Shugendo, Shinto, and Onmyodo also became foci of attention. By sharing an interest in Kuroda's research, scholars of many fields both in Japan and in the West were able to stand on the same ground to proceed with their research.

A second feature that developed in the pages of the *JJRS* under Swanson was a focus on modern and contemporary religion, with topics as shown in the following chart.

1. Gender and Religion	Vol. 10/2–3, 30/3–4, 44/1
2. Early Modern Buddhism	Vol. 25/1–2, 31/2, 37/1
3. New Religious Movements	Vol. 18/2–3, 22/3-4, 39/1, 50/2

"Gender and Religion" and "Modern Buddhism" are topics of increasing interest in the twenty-first century. The *JJRS* was ahead of the curve in publishing special issues on these topics. In contrast, interest in new religious movements reached a peak in the 1980s through various research projects from the perspective of the sociology of religion, but the tragedy of the Aum Affair in 1995 cast a pall on the subject and the number of studies in this area declined. From around 2010, articles that could calmly reflect on the Aum Affair began to appear, as well as research growing out of the study of folk or popular religion. The *JJRS* continues to respond to emerging trends.

A Turning Point for the Humanities in the 1970s

It is my belief that the rise of research on topics such as new religious movements and gender studies can be attributed to the academic turning point that occurred in the 1970s. This idea occurred to me when reading the work of

Yasumaru Yoshio 安丸良夫, and my impression was strengthened when I chaired a symposium that included panelists Komatsu Kazuhiko 小松和彦 and Shimazono Susumu at the annual meeting of the JARS in 2022. YASUMARU (2015) pointed out that as the Marxist historicism and the political theories of Maruyama Masao 丸山眞男 that influenced academia collapsed after the postwar era, the anthropological theories of Yamaguchi Masao 山口昌男 gained a broad influence in various fields. This point is right on target regarding the long-term influence of Yamaguchi on the history of academic studies.

However, the weakness of this explanation lies in the singling out of Yamaguchi. The turning point in the 1970s occurred not only in anthropological studies but also in folk studies, mythology, religious studies, and the sociology of religion, and all related academic areas were invigorated at this time. It was not a matter of Yamaguchi's influence alone. Yasumaru's insight does not see far enough to include the influence of the baby-boomer generation, who enthusiastically consumed the writings of scholars such as Yamaguchi and Yoshimoto Takaaki 吉本隆明. The appearance of Yamaguchi did not solely bring about the collapse of Marxist historicism and Maruyama's political thought; the rise of the student's movement in the late 1960s also played a critical role. Yasumaru's scholarship is based on a careful reading of the works of representative scholars of the age but leaves out a consideration of their readership. The irreplaceable actors in the turning point of academic knowledge in the 1970s were the students who participated in the radical student movement of the time (see HAYASHI 2023).

Why did the generation of students who participated in the student movement read works by Yamaguchi, or why were they attracted to the writings of Yoshimoto? Among these students were many who came to bear the burden of the next generation of academia. At the risk of over-simplification, it could be said that the goals of these people, both men and women, were to deny the view of history as a direct line of progress and to object to a simple rationalism. YAMAGUCHI's (1969) very first article, "Ushinawareta sekai no fukken" (recovering a lost realm), garnered significant attention from people in related academic fields. It cannot be denied that the ideas of "returning to the primordial" and "the resurgence of magic" appealed to members of the baby-boomer generation. Books like Carlos CASTANEDA's *The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge* (1969) and MIYATA Noboru's *Genshiteki shikō* (the primitive way of thinking) (1974) were published one after the other and read widely.

Knowledge Gained at the Barricades

The student movement at the end of the 1960s was influenced by the "new left," but there were many who attempted to keep their distance. There was a shift from the Zengakuren 全学連 (All-Japan Federation of Students' Self-Governing

Associations) groups to that of the "joint struggle committees" (*zenkyōtō* 全共闘). A sect of the "new left" movement centered around the Zengakuren group that had taken control of Japanese university community associations was defeated in their struggle against the renewal of the US-Japan Security Treaty and began to decline in the latter part of the 1960s. Instead, "joint struggle committees" were organized in opposition to university authorities in an attempt to address problems within various individual universities. This movement influenced the so-called apolitical students of the age who showed no interest in political activism, and it also gained a measure of support from society in general. It was the activists of the "new left" who directed the student movement, but students who did not belong to any specific sect or avoided such sectarianism—and many free-spirited apolitical students—also participated in these activities.

Here we find both revolutionary members of the "new left" and representatives of the counterculture who sought changes in thinking and culture and a free lifestyle. The era of "joint struggle" at various universities saw the closure of some universities through the creation of physical barricades, creating a space for open discussions. This also created a clear space that promoted a festival-like atmosphere. For students of the baby-boomer generation who had attended lectures by old-fashioned professors in temporary and constricted classrooms in inadequate buildings, the free and open discussions on politics and ways of thinking with fellow students was like a breath of fresh air. This could also be described, to borrow a phrase from Kosaka Shūhei (2006, 206), "a meaningful commotion" (意味のある空騒ぎ). The discussions and ideas batted back and forth by numerous students while working the large barricades were a phenomenon perhaps never before seen in the history of Japan. This was also probably true for those involved in student movements at the time around the world, such as the anti-Vietnam War and civil rights movements in the United States. There were also movements in Eastern Europe among those young people who sought freedom from the authorities who tried to suppress free discussion. The influence among baby-boomers from the experience of "manning the barricades" was incalculable, yet the influence was so strong that there is a tendency to overlook it.

The armed confrontation of the Asama Sansō Affair (Asama Sansō Jiken あさま山荘事件) by members of the Red Army in 1972 and the murder of fellow members by lynching were the disastrous culmination of the "new left." The student movement lost the support of society in general and quickly came to an end. The student movement, however, was not limited to a political dimension; it also included an intellectual dimension and counterculture that intersected with a turning point in the realm of academia. This academic revolution in Japan consisted of at least three aspects. The first was the women's liberation movement. Within the student barricades the men insisted that the women fix

them rice balls and serve them tea, which was severely criticized by the women. They called out and criticized the androcentric structure and gendered division of labor among the student movement, which gave rise to women's studies and feminism (see Onnatachi no Genzai o Tou Kai 1996).

Second was the critical research on scientific technology by figures such as Takagi Jinzaburō 高木仁三郎 and Yamamoto Yoshitaka 山本義隆. Yamamoto, for example, interprets the strife at the University of Tokyo as follows:

> In the twentieth century science was an essential element supporting society, and this support and its development were structurally guaranteed by the state. The historian of science Hiroshige Tetsu 広重 徹 called this the "systematization of science" 科学の体制化. The actual situation with regard to research involves a structural cooperative relationship among government bureaucrats, industry, and universities, or a complex of government, industry, university, and military. The lines of power are reflected in the distribution of research funds, and in a highly developed industrial state the decisions are made by high government officials in response to requests from industry and the military. *It was in the strife at the University of Tokyo in 1968 and 1969 that we began to problematize the education and research of universities as being taken in by the state.* (Yamamoto 2018, iv; emphasis added)

Third was the coming together of related fields in the humanities as represented by Yamaguchi Masao. Sociologists of religion became concerned with related fields in the humanities such as anthropology, folklore, and mythology, as well as new religious movements.

Society for the Study of the Sociology of Religion

Research on new religious movements that arose in the 1970s, including academic associations for the study of religion and society, can be understood as one example of the interdisciplinary study of humanities. Kōmoto Mitsugu 孝本 貢, one of the central scholars in this area, explains the situation as follows:

> The strife that had raged at the universities was reaching an end by the early 1970s, and young researchers were in danger of falling into a catatonic state. At that time there was a movement to sponsor voluntary gatherings as a new type of research and educational organization, wherein one sought a commitment to society. The Society for the Study of the Sociology of Religion 宗教社会学研究会 was one of the progeny of this period.
>
> (Shūkyō Shakaigaku Kenkyūkai 1992, 1)

The sociologists of religion of the baby-boomer generation criticized Weber's theory of rationalization and disenchantment, as well as the theory of secularization that was popular at the time among sociologists of religion in Europe.

If Weber's theory of rationalization is deficient, then the theory of secularization that indicates the rationalization of the religious dimension also contains a weakness in its analysis of religion in modern society. This criticism of the theory of secularization is based on opposition to the assumptions of Weber's sociology that rationalism is the unique shift of the modern era. Nishiyama Shigeru 西山 茂, another prominent figure of this period, comments:

> The "vitalistic view of salvation" is found not only among the new religious movements, but it is a view of salvation that appears as typical among the new religious movements. *Again, "salvation" (emphasized by religions) and "practical benefits" (emphasized by magic) that were considered separate matters in the one-sided theories of the West are not really separate but are concepts that can be shown to be connected*…. The concept of "spiritual practice-type new religious movements" is a way to question the role of "non-rational" religion within a highly rationalized society.
>
> (Shūkyō Shakaigaku Kenkyūkai 1992, 89; emphasis added)

The critique of rationalism, the restoration of magic, and the theory of non-differentiation between religion and magic are motifs shared by scholars of the sociology of religion of the baby-boomer generation in Japan. At this time the phrase "folk religion" (*minzoku shūkyō* 民俗宗教) came into use, with a tendency to understand "religion" and "folk beliefs" as a continuum. It is clear now that this is also a variation of the "non-differentiation between religion and magic." Sociology of religion concerning new religious movements was sensitive to changes in society based on the critique of theories of rationalization but was not very interested in the themes of power and politics emphasized by Marxist historicism or Maruyama's political theories. On this point it was different from women's studies, feminism, and studies critical of scientific technology.

The Popularity of Research Groups in the 1990s

The Society for the Study of the Sociology of Religion was founded in 1975 and shut down in 1990. The comradely union of scholars from the baby-boomer generation took delight in criticizing the previous generation, but criticism from the younger generation was their Achilles' heel. There have been many arguments and speculations about the dissolution of the Society for the Study of the Sociology of Religion, but it was replaced in 1993 with the more open organization of the Japanese Association for the Study of Religion and Society (Shūkyō to Shakai Gakkai 宗教と社会学会). The creation of this association was quite significant. Researchers had started many study groups for the study of religions here and there, and this association created a place for scholars of different cliques and specializations to gather and polish their academic research while each focusing on their specific research themes. It had been difficult to have an intimate

discussion or share common research interests with colleagues at the larger academic associations such as the JARS, the Japan Sociological Society (Nihon Shakai Gakkai 日本社会学会), and the Japanese Society of Cultural Anthropology (Nihon Bunka Jinrui Gakkai 日本文化人類学会). There was a need for small and middle-sized study groups, including: the Study Group for Japanese Women and Buddhism (Kenkyūkai, Nihon no Josei to Bukkyō 研究会・日本の女性と仏教) (1984–1989); the Association for the Study of Japanese Mountain Religion (Nihon Sangaku Shūgen Gakkai 日本山岳修験学会) (1980–present); Study Group on Japanese Buddhism (Nihon Bukkyō Kenkyūkai 日本仏教研究会) (1995–2001); Summer Seminar for Discussion on the History of Japanese Religions (Nihon Shūkyōshi Konwakai Samā Seminā 日本宗教史懇話会サマーセミナー) (1992–present); Society for the Study of Modern Japanese Buddhist History (Nihon Kindai Bukkyōshi Kenkyūkai 日本近代仏教史研究会) (1992–present); the Tōkai Network on Women and Religion (Josei to Bukkyō Tōkai Nettowāku 女性と仏教東海ネットワーク) (1996–present); the Kantō Network on Women and Religion (Josei to Bukkyō Kanren Nettowāku 女性と仏教関東ネットワーク) (1997–present); and the Study Group on Religion and Society in the Modern Period (Kinsei Shūkyō to Shakai Kenkyūkai 近世宗教と社会研究会) (1999–present).

The growing popularity of study groups beginning in the 1980s and taking off in the 1990s brought together people who were interested in the study of religions and provided opportunities for scholars of religious studies, sociology, folklore, anthropology, and so forth to meet. For example, the use of the conjunction "and"—as in "religion *and* society" or "gender *and* religion"—indicated the meeting of those studying religion with those of other fields of inquiry and revealed commonalities. It was no longer possible for religious studies to focus only on "religion" and objectify it as a privileged academic subject. This "and" indicates the parallel relationship between religion and other academic fields. It is said that a certain professor of religious studies at the University of Tokyo complained that this was merely "a second Association for Religious Studies." However, the Japanese Association for the Study of Religion and Society is an attempt to bring together scholars from other fields related to religion, not to take up the subject of "religion" as an isolated subject. The fields of the sociology of religion, anthropology of religion, psychology of religion, and so forth are not merely subfields of religious studies; these are areas intimately connected to religion. Originally religious studies intersected with many other fields. By focusing on these intersections, interchange and communication with other fields becomes possible. The name "Japanese Association for the Study of Religion *and* Society" was a challenge for our age and an attempt to bring new life to the image of religious studies.

To come back to the *JJRS*, I mentioned above that the special issues throughout the years have included many themes related to modern and contemporary

times and that this reflects the popularity of the many study groups outlined. Great progress has been made in the areas of "gender and religion," "modern Buddhism," and "new religious movements," based on the quiet yet steady activities of these study groups.

Translated by Paul L. Swanson

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Japanese Journal of Religious Studies 51/2: 145–150

dx.doi.org/10.18874/jjrs.51.2.2024.145-150

Kawahashi Noriko 川橋範子

A Feminist Religion Scholar's Tribute to the *JJRS* and NIRC

The *JJRS* has made major contributions toward the mainstreaming of gender studies in the study of religion in Japan. As a feminist scholar of religion and the current Executive Director of the Japanese Association for Religious Studies, I have had the pleasure of observing and participating in this endeavor. Still, there have been many difficulties and hardships along the way, and there is much more work to be done. Here I would like to briefly reflect on my fruitful collaboration with NIRC and the *JJRS* and my experiences in the Japanese academy and to raise issues that our field must address in the future.

After earning my PhD in Religious Studies from Princeton University, I was affiliated with NIRC for four years as a research associate from 1992, after which I took up a full-time post at the Nagoya Institute of Technology. What surprised me most when I returned to Japan was the strong tendency in the Japanese academy of religious studies not to recognize gender and feminist studies as a legitimate academic discipline, and unlike in the West, where the *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* already existed, there were few good publications on gender and religion. In this context, it was significant for my academic career that the *JJRS* published my article on gender issues in Sōtō Zen Buddhism in 1995 (Kawahashi 1995). I was also pleased that two of my esteemed friends, Jackie Stone and Ian Reader, wrote for this issue.

One of my most vivid memories of my time at NIRC is of the symposium on dialogue between Soka Gakkai and the Catholic Church in September 1995,

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where I was audacious enough to respond to a presentation by the current President of Nanzan University, Robert Kisala.[1] Later, in June 2013, I was a commentator at the Nanzan Seminar for junior non-native Japanese-language scholars of Japanese religion, and I have fond memories of Jolyon Thomas, my *kōhai* 後輩 at Princeton, being among the graduate student presenters at the seminar.[2] The NIRC has been crucial in providing a space for nurturing candid discussion and collaboration and the *JJRS* has always been a venue for forward-thinking, and at times controversial, scholarship.

Thanks to Yauchi Yoshiaki 矢内義顯, the *Journal of Religious Studies* (*Shūkyo kenkyū*) of the Japanese Association for Religious Studies published a special issue on "Gender and Sexuality" in 2019, which was said to be a groundbreaking publication. However, I would note that the *JJRS* led the charge in these efforts more than a decade earlier. I had the opportunity to edit two special issues on gender and religion for *JJRS* in 2003 and 2017, respectively. Paul Swanson helped make this possible, as he also questioned the androcentricity of Japanese religious studies. The first special feature was "Feminism and Religion in Contemporary Japan," which I coedited with Kuroki Masako 黒木雅子 in 2003. Then Kobayashi Naoko 小林奈央子 and I edited "Gendering Religious Practices in Japan" in 2017. This special issue led to the first "Frontiers of Religion and Gender" workshop, which was hosted by the NIRC on 2 March 2018. The NIRC subsequently helped to organize workshops on gender and religion in 2019 and 2021 (Kawahashi and Kobayashi 2021). In addition, while I was a visiting professor at the International Research Center for Japanese Studies (Nichibunken) in 2022, we organized a symposium on "Frontiers of Religion and Gender" with the NIRC's sponsorship. An expanded version of the symposium report, including personal narratives written by more than a dozen religious practitioners from diverse backgrounds and experiences, is forthcoming from the University of Hawai'i Press as part of the Nanzan Library of Asian Religion and Culture series. I cannot thank *JJRS* editor Matthew McMullen enough for his continuing support of research on gender and religions in Japan.

Thanks in part to these efforts, research on gender and religion is growing and no longer occurs on the margins of academic discourse and practice in Japan. However, there remain structural issues that inhibit gender from becoming a central theme in scholarship on religion. For example, it is often the case that a volume will include no more than one chapter focused on gender, thus regarding the topic as merely supplemental. Worse, there is a tendency in Japanese religious studies to trivialize and undermine the gender theoretical turn without properly considering its significance or showing respect for the sincere efforts by gender and religion scholars. For example, in a recent roundtable discussion

1. For a record of this symposium, see Nanzan Shūkyō Bunka Kenkyūjo (1996).
2. For more information on this seminar, see Kawahashi (2014).

on the reconstruction of the history of Japanese religions, one of the male participants stated that, although he did not quite disagree with the importance of gender as an analytical concept, he could not imagine a gendered history of Japanese religion. He went on to say that the term "gender" was simply added to existing empirical research, and the argument ended up being an argument for the sake of it. Such a hasty and impressionistic assessment perpetuates the status quo of imbalances and oppression in lived religions regarding gender.[3] Gender is a critical concept that articulates gender-related power structures as well as discrimination, and it exercises critical leverage on movements for social change.

About twenty years ago, I was invited to speak on a panel on the theme of lived Buddhism at an annual academic conference in Tokyo, where I presented a critique of the androcentrism of contemporary Buddhist organizations and the possibility of a gender-egalitarian restructuring of the religion. My criticism was dismissed by a senior male scholar in the academy, who was serving as a respondent to my presentation, as being purely emotional and lacking objective scholarship. I remember that Paul Swanson sympathized with me after the panel that the response was an inappropriate one, which only trivialized my presentation.

Even as gender is often a topic of academic events, these issues persist. At an ambitious symposium on Buddhist social ethics and gender held at a Buddhist university, an authoritative senior male scholar of religion (who is not an expert in gender studies) commented on the presentations of several female Buddhists, who are mostly activists. Disregarding the female presenters' argument that it is unfair that men unilaterally define women's roles in the temple and women are expected to conform to them, his comments implied that we should consider what the positive "role" of women in the Buddhist world should be. Moreover, despite the fact that the comments were obviously disappointing to the female presenters, the moderator (who was also a man) concluded the discussion by saying that they would continue to learn from the male respondent's wisdom as a guiding star in the field. As one might imagine, my colleagues and I were infuriated by these dismissive comments.

In 2017, the Japanese Association for Religious Studies established a Gender Equality and Young Scholars Support Committee. Kobayashi Naoko, Inose Yuri 猪瀬優理, and I among other members who work on religion and gender studies became involved in this committee. The committee had begun efforts to support gender justice. However, in 2007, when Komatsu Kayoko 小松加代子 took the lead in proposing that the association's policy should incorporate gender equality and submitted the proposal to the Japanese Association for the Study of Religion and Society, it was rejected for being too political.[4]

3. For a more detailed account, see Kawahashi (2019, 41).

4. For more on the background of this incident, see Kawahashi, Komatsu, and Kuroki (2013).

This is not solely a problem in the academy. As a founding member of a working group to promote gender equality and women's participation in the Sōtō school, I was surprised at the number of men in the organization who were unaware that women who do not enjoy the same privileges as men and are in fact disadvantaged by the male gender being the normative category in religion and society. We were concerned when, through questionnaires and other means,[5] we came across statements that seemed to shift the responsibility to women, suggesting that women should not be allowed to practice at the head monastery (*honzan* 本山) because joint practices between men and women would cause sexual problems. Some male priests also tended to distort the Gender Gap Index, an international indicator that focuses on elements of discrimination against women. According to them, rankings produced by foreign institutions are meaningless, as cultures vary between different countries and ethnic groups. Some even said that gender boundaries are being blurred, as evidenced by the fact that LGBTQ is now a topic of public discourse, and that the trend of "privileging women against men" is simply reverse discrimination.

One clear reason for slow progress on gender equality as well as resistance in religious studies is the patriarchal nature of religious organizations upon which the academy is largely founded. It makes sense then that religious institutions and some male scholars are complicit in such patriarchal enterprises. Furthermore, it is undeniable that behind this tendency to suppress criticism of religious institutions and religious specialists from a gender perspective lies the "public interest of religion" discourse—that is, the contribution of religious organizations to society—that dominates both the media and the academy.

Many religious organizations prioritize public relations and are more concerned with their portrayal in the media than they are with resolving structural problems. For example, many groups have recently launched media campaigns that celebrate their approaches to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). While such advertisements might serve to present these organizations in a positive light, they can also be cynical attempts to mask still unresolved social ills such as gender injustices that have long plagued religion in Japan. Furthermore, this type of discourse may come across as self-righteous attempts by male religious professionals in search of their own religious identities. Without critical assessment and reform, religious organizations will continue to have a negative impact on society at large in regards to gender equality policies, such as the promotion of separate surnames for married couples and protection of women's reproductive rights.[6]

5. The survey can be found at: https://www.sotozen-net.or.jp/post_sdgs/20240417_1.

6. The UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) has issued a statement recommending guidelines permitting the option of separate surnames for married couples in Japan. However, a faction of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), which is supported by the "religious right," continues to oppose it.

Gender issues recently have attracted media attention, especially after the assassination of former Prime Minister Abe Shinzō 安倍晋三 (1954–2022). That is, there has been public criticism of the rightwing religious organization Tōitsu Kyōkai 統一教会 (Sekai Heiwa Tōitsu Katei Rengō 世界平和統一家庭連合; Unification Church) for promoting misogynous campaigns and backlash against gender equality (Inose 2023). It can be said that progress has been made in that this incident has allowed criticisms of religion from a gender and feminist perspective—which traditionally have been silenced—to be recognized to a certain extent in the field of religious studies. Surprisingly, even male scholars who until now have been indifferent to gender issues have suddenly begun to be critical of genderbashing by rightwing religions.

The influence of religion on the maintenance and construction of gender is powerful, and therefore there is a need for us as researchers to take seriously the task of critically interrogating the relationship between religion and gender. Rather than irresponsible affirmation of religious organizations, accountable research on how to realize gender equality and equity in religion is required. Without fulfilling this responsibility, how can we advocate for the importance of the study of Japanese religions in Japan, a country that is no longer the shining star of area studies that it once was? Furthermore, while the study of Japanese religions is evolving and transforming in ways that are out of the hands of native Japanese researchers, it is not possible to engage in honest dialogue and criticism with the rest of the world from an equal standpoint if we are siloed by the Japanese language and engage in inward-looking discussions that circulate only within Japan. In this regard, it is of great significance that my colleagues and I have been able to collaborate with the NIRC and use the *JJRS* as a valuable venue to disseminate the results of religion and gender studies in Japan in English. I give the *JJRS* my unreserved compliments.

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Japanese Journal of Religious Studies 51/2: 151–169

dx.doi.org/10.18874/jjrs.51.2.2024.151-169

R. Keller Kimbrough

Buddhism in Medieval Japanese Fiction

Personal Reflections

I am one of those former English majors who loved college but never really wanted to work, which may be why the prospect of graduate school was so appealing when I was ejected into the post-baccalaureate world of financial obligations and responsibilities in 1990. Four years later, as a graduate student at Yale (where, ironically, I found myself working all the time), I had the privilege of taking classes with the late Stanley Weinstein, a specialist in Japanese and Chinese religions who trained many of today's leading scholars of Buddhism. I am not one of them. At the time, I was already studying Japanese literature under the supervision of Edward Kamens in the Department of East Asian Languages and Literatures (though Ed was himself one of Stanley's students, finishing his PhD in 1982). Nevertheless, on Ed's advice, in the fall of 1994 I began auditing Stanley's three-semester undergraduate lecture course on Indian, Chinese, and Japanese Buddhism. I enjoyed it so much that in three years I audited it twice, much to Stanley's surprise. At the graduate level, I took Stanley's course on *kanbun* 漢文 (Sino-Japanese), in which we read excerpts from Gyōnen's 凝然 (1240–1321) thirteenth-century *Hasshū kōyō* 八宗綱要 as well as a seminar focusing on Japanese Buddhist tales in *Konjaku monogatarishū*.

My interest in literature has always tended toward the sensational—stories of monsters, thieves, animals, murders, and miracles, rather than the more "serious" works that Stanley and Ed assigned. I once suggested to Stanley that if I had been a graduate student in the Department of Religious Studies, I would have

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written my dissertation on medieval Buddhist tale literature.[1] He laughed and asked if I meant stories of lascivious monks and that sort of thing. To him, the idea was preposterous. The study of Buddhism was the study of sutras and commentaries, sectarian founders, institutional histories, and philosophy. What was to be learned from those kinds of salacious, fictional sources? At best, what I had suggested was frivolous.

But looking back some thirty years later, it seems that I did just what I had proposed to Stanley: I made a career out of studying fantastical, inspiring, and sometimes shocking Buddhist tales and their uses in medieval and early-modern preaching, temple fundraising, and the quasi-religious performing traditions of *sekkyō* 説経, *kōwakamai* 幸若舞, *kojōruri* 古浄瑠璃, and noh. Two of the chapters in my first book (Kimbrough 2008), which was closely based on the dissertation, are titled, "Incest and Enlightenment: the *Otogizōshi Izumi Shikibu*" (about a monk who mistakenly sleeps with his own mother, leading to her enlightenment) and "Sex and Salvation: Izumi Shikibu and *The Tale of Jōruri*" (about a beautiful poet who achieved Pure Land rebirth for herself and her parents by fulfilling a vow to sleep with one thousand men). It was exactly the kind of work that Stanley feared I might produce. I sent him a copy when it was published, and I can only suppose that he was amused. After all, what was the harm? I was Ed's student, not his.

It is a truism that one can tell a lot about a person from the stories that they tell (or, as Stanley might have observed, from what they like to read), and I would argue that as an approach to the study of Japanese religions, the exploration of non-traditional textual sources—that is, the kinds of works that tend to be studied by scholars of literature today—can provide insights into the nature of Buddhist praxis and belief that more reliably historical, doctrinal, or philosophical sources may not. That said, drawing conclusions about medieval Japanese religions based on a corpus of lowbrow, sensational, historically inaccurate, and highly entertaining (yes!) prose fiction is a bit like trying to understand twentieth-century British boarding school culture through a reading of the *Harry Potter* series. There are things to be learned and things that probably should not. Nevertheless, in what follows I share some of the things I have discovered about medieval Japanese religious culture in my years of reading, translating, and writing about medieval Japanese fiction, particularly works in the oral-narrative genre of *sekkyō* "sermon ballads" (Matisoff 1992).

The term *sekkyō* is written with characters meaning "sutra explanation," but *sekkyō* stories have almost nothing to do with the sutras. Rather, they are popular Buddhist tales of miracles, monks, the workings of karma, celebrity Buddhist

1. I use the term medieval as a translation for *chūsei* 中世 ("middle age"), which is widely used by Japanese scholars to refer to the period 1185–1600 CE.

icons, and many cursed, tortured, enslaved, branded, sacrificed, or otherwise mistreated children. The stories were circulated in the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries by mendicant, pseudo-monastic preacher-entertainers who would tell their sad and wondrous tales to small audiences in public gathering spaces, including crossroads, bridges, and the open grounds of temples and shrines. In the early seventeenth century, under the influence of the emerging *kojōruri* puppet theater, *sekkyō* was adapted to puppet performance, transforming it from a streetcorner storytelling art into a major theatrical genre with celebrated chanters and dedicated urban venues. It is from this period, starting from around the 1630s, that most extant editions of *sekkyō* stories survive as woodblock-printed *shōhon* 正本 ("true text") playbooks, so named for their purported fidelity to the narratives of particular chanters. The most famous works in the repertoire include *Karukaya* かるかや, *Sanshō Dayū* さんせう太夫, *Shintokumaru* しんとく丸, *Oguri* おぐり, *Sayohime* さよひめ (also known as *Matsura Chōja* まつら長じや), and *Aigo no waka* あいごの若, all of which are named after a character in the tales.[2]

What can we learn about medieval Japanese Buddhism from these stories? To answer this question, I will trace the plot of *Aigo no waka*, one of the most disturbing works in a disturbing genre (and, yes, one of my personal favorites), with reference to other *sekkyō* narratives and relevant stories in related literary and performance genres. Here is a short list of some of the things that I have come to know.

Possessions are Good, but Children are Better

This first lesson is not a particularly religious one, but I include it here because it is central to understanding *Aigo no waka*, which is named after the young male protagonist of the tale ("Little Aigo" in my translation). *Aigo no waka* survives in at least three woodblock-printed editions published in Kyoto in 1661 and Edo in ca. 1670 and 1708; they are tentatively attributed to the chanters Higurashi Kodayū 日暮小太夫, Tenma Hachidayū 天満八太夫, and Tenma Hachidayū II.[3] The story begins with an introduction to the second avenue chamberlain Kiyohira 清平, a wealthy noble who is said to have lived during the reign of Emperor Saga 嵯峨 (r. 809–823). Kiyohira takes great pride in his possessions, which include an heirloom Chinese saddle and an heirloom "*yaiba* sword" やいばの太刀.[4] We are told,

2. These works are translated in KIMBROUGH (2013). For a discussion of *sekkyō* and the related genres of *otogizōshi*, *kōwakamai*, and *kojōruri*, see KIMBROUGH (2016).

3. For information on these and other extant *sekkyō* manuscripts, playbooks, and chanters, see KIMBROUGH (2013, 249–265).

4. MUROKI Yatarō explains that although *yaiba* 刃 refers to a method of hardening steel in cold water, the term is used here to indicate a kind of magical sharpness (*Sekkyōshū*, 301, n. 8).

> Once when the emperor was seven years old, the imperial mother fell ill. After graciously setting Kiyohira's Chinese saddle on a two-year-old horse and strapping the *yaiba* sword to his waist, the emperor paraded to the Shishinden 紫宸殿 Ceremonial Hall and back again. The demon king of the sixth heaven was struck with fear, and the imperial mother revived. Recognizing the rarity of Kiyohira's treasures, the emperor showered him with boundless favor.
>
> (*Sekkyōshū*, 301; Kimbrough 2013, 192)

Thus, because of the awe-inspiring magnificence of Kiyohira's possessions, dazzling to even an otherworldly demon king, the emperor is said to have held Kiyohira in the highest regard.

In the early spring of a certain year, the emperor instructs his ministers to amuse him with a "contest of treasures": a formal, competitive event to determine who owns the best stuff. The chancellor, the minister of the right, the minister of the left, and many others bring their most prized possessions, and in a scene resembling an episode of *Antiques Roadshow*, they lay them out for examination. Predictably, the emperor decrees that there are no greater treasures than Kiyohira's Chinese saddle and *yaiba* sword. Seemingly drunk on his victory, Kiyohira gratuitously berates the sixth avenue lord for his arrogance and poverty before taking his leave. The lord vows revenge, which he later achieves by convincing the emperor to hold a "contest of children," of which he has many, and Kiyohira, none. Upon observing the sixth avenue lord with his five strapping sons, the emperor declares with the utmost admiration that there is in fact "no treasure greater than a child." Possessions are good, but children are better. It is a lesson that Kiyohira would do well to remember, but he does not.

Karma Matters, but It Isn't Everything

Humiliated by his loss in the contest of children, Kiyohira informs his wife that he intends to slit his belly and do himself in. But having more sense than her husband (or perhaps having read more medieval fiction), she suggests that instead they visit the statue of the bodhisattva Kannon 観音 at Hasedera 長谷寺 in Sakurai to pray for a child—a standard course of action in situations like these. The Hase Kannon is well known for granting miracles in works of Heian and medieval literature, including *Hasedera Kannon genki* 長谷寺観音験記 and the *setsuwa* 説話 anthologies *Nihon ryōiki* 日本霊異記, *Konjaku monogatarishū*, *Kankyo no tomo* 閑居友, and the like. In *Genji monogatari* a character known as the Bungo deputy (Bungo no Suke 豊後介) explains that "among the buddhas, the Hase Kannon is famous even in Cathay for vouchsafing the mightiest boons in all Japan," suggesting the extent of the statue's reputation in

the early eleventh century (*Genji monogatari*, 98; TYLER 2001, 414).[5] In addition to *Aigo no waka*, the *sekkyō* entitled *Sayohime* attributes the gift of a child to the Hase Kannon, and in the *otogizōshi Chigo Kannon engi* 稚児観音縁起, the Hase Kannon is said to have granted a lovely and compliant young acolyte (*chigo* 稚児) to a lonely monk.[6]

It is common knowledge in the world of medieval Japanese fiction that if you want to get something done—good or bad—then you should visit the statue of Kannon at Kiyomizudera 清水寺 in Kyoto, Hasedera in Sakurai, or Ishiyamadera 石山寺 in Ōmi Province.[7] In the fifteenth-century *sekkyō Shintokumaru*, for example, a particularly evil stepmother travels to Kiyomizudera to place a curse on her innocent stepson, Shintokumaru.[8] She entreats the Kiyomizu Kannon to either take Shintokumaru's life or "cripple him with a repulsive disease," after which she pounds eighteen nails—the number of the festival day of Kannon—into a living tree at the temple. The Kiyomizu Kannon does as he is asked, causing the boy's eyes to rupture and his body to "burst into festering sores" (*Sekkyōshū*, 181; KIMBROUGH 2013, 110). Later, when Shintokumaru visits the temple to pray for a cure, the Kiyomizu Kannon explains that "since the distant past, people have called on me to do various things" and that because he is in the business of granting requests, he is not to blame for the results (*Sekkyōshū*, 202; KIMBROUGH 2013, 120).

In *Aigo no waka*, Kiyohira and his wife travel to Hasedera to pray for a child, and after a seven-day vigil they receive an oracle in a dream. "Dear Kiyohira," the Hase Kannon explains, "although there are more children in the world than there are stars in the heavens, for you and your wife there are none. Go home now, quickly!" Upon awakening, Kiyohira and his wife are incensed. "If you won't give us a child," they declare, "then take our lives instead!" Refusing to budge, they remain inside the temple for another three days, whereupon the Hase Kannon appears to them again. "Although I had no child for you," he says, "I am moved by your desperate pleading at the risk of your lives." He then offers them a child on the condition that either Kiyohira or his wife will die after three years, to which the wife readily agrees. It is clear from this exchange that in order

5. Translation modified from TYLER (2001, 414).

6. *Chigo Kannon engi* is translated by Paul Atkins in KIMBROUGH and SHIRANE (2018, 243–249).

7. That said, the statue of Shakyamuni 釈迦牟尼 at Seiryōji 清涼寺 in Saga, the great bodhisattva Hachiman at Iwashimizu Hachimangu 石清水八幡宮 on Mt. Otoko 男, and the statue of Bishamonten 毘沙門天 at Kuramadera 鞍馬寺 north of the capital might give these Kannon statues a run for their money. The images of the buddha Amida at Zenkōji 善光寺 in Nagano, Seiganji 誓願寺 in Kyoto, and Taimadera 当麻寺 in Nara are ideal for achieving Pure Land rebirth, and the statue of Jizō at Kongōsenji 金剛山寺 (or Yatadera 矢田寺) in Nara is useful for escaping hell.

8. The name is rendered as *Shuntokumaru* 俊徳丸 in the noh play *Yoroboshi* 弱法師, which was composed prior to 1429.

to be successful, supplications can require time, energy, and a great deal of perseverance. In addition, we can see that in some cases, miracles may entail negotiation and sacrifice.

We find a similar episode in *Shintokumaru* (*Sekkyōshū*, 155-163; Kimbrough 2013, 96–101). A great and wealthy lord by the name of Nobuyoshi 信吉 suggests to his wife that they visit Kiyomizudera to pray for a child because, as he explains, people say that the Kannon there is the best in India, China, and Japan. After hours of supplication, they also receive an oracle in a dream. "Dear couple," the Kiyomizu Kannon declares, "that you've traveled such a distance to ask me for a child is truly very moving. However, I shall tell you now about the karma from your previous lives." The Kiyomizu Kannon reveals that in his former existence, Nobuyoshi was a woodsman who set a fire that consumed a mother pheasant and her unborn brood. Having witnessed the death of his wife and children, the father bird pronounced a terrible curse before killing himself in anguish:

> Whoever set fire to this field today, he shall surely pay a price! If he's reborn as a stone, then he shall be a paving stone on the Kamakura highway, trampled by horses as they pass on their way. If, because of some good deed in a former life, he's reborn as a human, then he shall be a wealthy lord. Even the poor have children, but this one—he will have none! He will long for a child in the daytime and long for a child in the night, suffering on in this way until death!
>
> (*Sekkyōshū*, 158–159; Kimbrough 2013, 98–99)

The Kiyomizu Kannon then explains that in her previous life, the wife was a great river snake that ate a clutch of swallow's eggs and then consumed the heartbroken mother and father birds after they threw themselves into the river to drown. It is because of this that the wife can have no child.

Refusing to recognize the constraints of their karma, Nobuyoshi and his wife leap up in anger. "You cruel Kannon," Nobuyoshi shouts,

> Even if our karma is bad, you should give us a child anyway, as an expedient means! If you don't, I won't leave. I'll cut open my stomach right here, rip out my guts, and throw them on you. I'll become a demon god and gobble up anyone who comes to see you! Maybe not in a week, but within three years I'll have weeds growing in here. This place will be a deer wallow!
>
> (*Sekkyōshū*, 160–161; Kimbrough 2013, 99)

When a servant cautions against making threats, Nobuyoshi and his wife resort to bribery: they write out a pair of formal petitions listing the many things that they will donate to the temple if the Kiyomizu Kannon will grant them a child, including a new temple hall constructed of precious wood from India; a new altar stage decked in silver and gold; a new sacred summoning bell cast in silver and gold; a new sacred shrine fence; and various other things. Nobuyoshi and

his wife place their petitions within the inner sanctum, after which they pray for another seven days. The Kiyomizu Kannon again appears to Nobuyoshi and his wife in a dream. "I had no heir to give you," he explains, "but because you've taken such a vow, I have obtained one after all. When the child is seven, one of you—the mother or the father—will be in mortal danger. But be unstinting in your love!" Nobuyoshi and his wife gladly accept this condition, and nine months later the wife bears a son, whom they name Shintokumaru.

As we might extrapolate from this story, karma exercises a powerful, tangible force on our lives, but it can also be overcome through divine intervention. As places for supplicants to toss a coin, donation boxes (*saisenbako* 賽銭箱) are ubiquitous at temples and shrines throughout Japan, and although it would be inappropriate to call them "bribery boxes," it is natural to imagine that the contribution of a small amount of money might help to have one's prayers heard. Nobuyoshi and his wife take that principle to an extreme, and it pays off for them. The lesson of their story may be that karma is real, but prayers work if you work them.

Don't Disparage the Buddhas

It may seem obvious that we should avoid slandering the buddhas, bodhisattvas, dharma, and monastic community, but for some characters in medieval fiction and drama, it is not. In its "Parable" chapter (Hiyuhon 譬喩品), the *Lotus Sūtra* warns that those who disparage "such scriptures as this" will fall into the Avīci hell (Hurvitz 2009, 72), the deepest and worst of the eight burning hells. Some medieval Japanese sources are more specific. For example, in the *otogizōshi Chōhōji yomigaeri no sōshi* 長宝寺よみがへりの草紙 (Back from the Dead at Chōhōji; composed prior to 1513), a nun who received a guided tour of hell reports that she witnessed the punishment for people who commit sins of speech, including "slandering the buddhas and sutras" and "disparaging priests." She says that she watched as "a demon pulled a man's tongue far out of his mouth. Then, after stretching it wide and staking down the edges, he used a team of horses and oxen to plow it apart. Insects seized upon the man's tattered flesh, stinging and gorging themselves in a way that was impossible to describe" (*Muromachi monogatari sōshishū*, 432).

With that in mind, we can return to *Aigo no waka*. The wife to whom the Hase Kannon promised a child soon bears a son, the eponymous Little Aigo. Time quickly passes until the boy is thirteen, and despite the terrible stipulation of the Hase Kannon's gift, nothing yet has happened to the wife or her husband. Then one day, "in her idleness," the wife makes an awful observation. Addressing the people in her household, she says:

> Hey, everybody, listen. Back when we received our Little Aigo from the Hase Mountain Kannon, the bodhisattva said that when the child turned three, either Kiyohira or I would be in mortal danger. But he's thirteen now, and still nothing's happened! It just goes to show that even the gods and buddhas are liars. So it's only right that people should lie to get by in this world. How about that, everyone? (*Sekkyōshū*, 312–313; Kimbrough 2013, 197–198)

The Hase Kannon hears her words, and he isn't pleased. He summons his "pestilence demons" (*yamō no misaki* 病の御先) and sends them in the form of an evil wind to kill the wife.

Again, there is a similar scene in *Shintokumaru*. Having escaped the consequences of the Kiyomizu Kannon's gift for thirteen years, the wife recklessly declares that "even the great Kiyomizu Kannon is a liar." The Kiyomizu Kannon is enraged. Fuming, he says,

> That odious wife with her impudent talk! It was because I had feelings for the child—my special charge—that I stood on top of Nobuyoshi's roof, beckoning good and driving evil off a thousand leagues. And now she calls me, her guardian, a liar! People won't revere the gods as gods and the buddhas as buddhas if I let this one stand. I'll take her life tonight.
>
> (*Sekkyōshū*, 176; Kimbrough 2013, 108)

Like the Hase Kannon, the Kiyomizu Kannon keeps pestilence deities at his beck and call, and he quickly sends them to take the wife's life. (Kannon the "Goddess of Mercy?" Give me a break.)

One of the problems that the Hase Kannon and Kiyomizu Kannon seem to have with the wives' slander is that it is so very public; it sets a terrible precedent, encouraging irreverence in others. Shakyamuni is faced with a similar problem in the *kojōruri* puppet play *Amida no munewari* in which he is compelled to address the ostentatious and potentially contagious immorality of a great wealthy man named Kanshi Byōe かんし兵衛 and his wife. Shakyamuni reasons,

> It's already hard enough to get people to do good, what with their natural tendency toward evil. If I leave that man alone there, everyone in the four directions will fall into wicked ways. If that's the way it's going to be, then right or wrong, I'll have to do something about it.
>
> (*Amida no munewari*, 391; Kimbrough 2013, 217)

After summoning a host of demons from hell, Shakyamuni tells them to "grab Kanshi Byōe and kill him for me. And be sure to make him suffer." They do. As the narrator explains, "they took their time killing Kanshi Byōe and his wife. They boiled a pot of molten iron and then poured it down the couple's throats, burning up their five and six internal organs. Then they dropped them into hell" (*Amida no munewari,* 393–394; Kimbrough 2013, 219–220). The wanton cruelty

of the scene, which in the seventeenth century would have been acted out with puppets on a stage, emphasizes its moral message: avoid doing evil and never, ever disrespect the buddhas—especially in public.

Beware of Stepmothers!

In both *Aigo no waka* and *Shintokumaru*, the surviving husbands quickly take new wives, who then become stepmothers to Little Aigo and Shintokumaru. Stepmothers in medieval Japanese fiction are always evil, and these two are particularly bad. There is a pervasive misogyny that runs through many works of Japanese Buddhist literature—*Konjaku monogatarishū*, for example, warns that we should all be aware of "the strength of the evil in the female heart" (*Konjaku monogatarishū,* 289; Ury 1979, 96), while the *otogizōshi Fuji no hitoana sōshi* 富士の人穴草子 explains that "women's thoughts are all evil" (*Muromachi jidai monogatari taisei* 11: 440a; Kimbrough and Shirane 2018, 207)—but the unwavering antipathy toward stepmothers that we see in *sekkyō*, *otogizōshi*, and even sectarian Buddhist commentarial sources is more extreme. There is an abusive stepmother in *Taima mandara sho* 当麻曼荼羅疏 who has her pious stepdaughter Chūjōhime 中将姫 abandoned in the mountains (Tokuda 1988, 371; Kimbrough 2008, 174), and there is a stepmother who sells her two stepchildren to human traffickers in an illustrative tale in the *Lotus Sūtra* commentary *Hokekyō jikidanshō*, suggesting the prevalence of the trope in Buddhist preaching (*Hokekyō jikidanshō* 3: 229–232). Although there are many brave, loyal, and otherwise outstanding female characters in medieval fiction,[9] there are no good stepmothers as far as I am aware. The reasons for this are unclear, but the lesson is not. (My own stepmother's name was Joy, and at the age of six or seven, I think I found this to be ironic before I understood the concept of irony.)

In any case, Little Aigo's stepmother, Kumoi no mae 雲居の前, is the worst of the worst. And that is saying a lot, given that Shintokumaru's stepmother places a curse on her stepson and then has him abandoned at Tennōji 天王寺. Kumoi no mae marries Kiyohira, and in no time at all she and her husband are "like birds that fly with wings as one or like trees with branches entwined." Nevertheless, upon first glimpsing her teenage stepson, Kumoi no mae is smitten with desire. She confides in her servant, Tsukisayo 月小夜, who is appalled. "My lady," Tsukisayo blurts, "this is all too rash! That child is Master Aigo, Lord Kiyohira's heir! What you're saying is outrageous!" Nevertheless, when she sees how much it means to her mistress, Tsukisayo agrees to help her try to seduce the boy. Kumoi no mae composes a love letter in which she speaks of her swelling passion, her

9. There are Sayohime さよ姫 in *Sayohime*, Terute no hime 照天の姫 in *Oguri*, and Anju no hime 安寿の姫 in *Sanshō Dayū*, to name a few.

"sumptuous brocade bed of desire," and her pillow "soaked with terrible tears." "When," she asks, "might I speak to you about my love?" Little Aigo is aghast. "Oh, how awful!" he exclaims. "A stepmother falling in love with her stepson! It's unheard of!" (*Sekkyōshū*, 317–319; Kimbrough 2013, 200–201). Pondering the shame of it, he tears up the letter and throws it away.

Kumoi no mae is stirred to even greater longing by the boy's rejection, and abandoning all caution, she sends him seven letters in a single day. Her behavior is egregious by any standard. There is no term in classical Japanese for the sexual harassment of a minor, but the great bodhisattva Asama 浅間 explains in the 1603 text of *Fuji no hitoana sōshi* that those who lust after their stepchildren will be reborn in the animal realm. In addition, the bodhisattva declares that the punishment in hell for a woman who falls in love with a man while being involved with another is to be sawn in half at the crotch for 405,000 years—a suggestively fitting punishment for a woman with divided sexual loyalties (*Muromachi jidai monogatari taisei* 11: 446a, 439a; Kimbrough and Shirane 2018, 206, 212). Little Aigo is distressed, and after the seventh letter he says, "Look, Tsukisayo, if my father gets a glimpse of this, he'll have you tortured for sure. What do you think about that?" Tsukisayo conveys this to her mistress, who is enraged. "I'll break into the buddha hall tonight," she cries, "stab Little Aigo to death, and then kill myself, too! I can get over it in the course of my future lives. How about it, Tsukisayo?"

Fortunately for them, Tsukisayo has a better idea: she'll steal Kiyohira's Chinese saddle and *yaiba* sword, have her husband dress up as a peddler and hawk them at a public gate, and then, when questioned, put the blame on Little Aigo. Kumoi no mae is pleased: "Even if it dooms me to five hundred lives of torment, including the pains of serpent incarnations, I can't stand the thought of simply leaving my love unfulfilled! Oh, the cruelty of that boy's hateful heart! Slander him well, Tsukisayo." The plan works perfectly, and Kiyohira soon hears that his son has stolen and tried to sell his most valuable, prized possessions in a humiliatingly public way. Not having learned his lesson in the contest of children, Kiyohira beats Little Aigo and has him suspended with rope from the branches of an old cherry tree. Before returning to his duties at the palace, he forbids anyone from setting the child free. The narrator explains that "the boy wept as if to die" and that "Kumoi no mae and Tsukisayo laughed, and no one undid his bonds" (*Sekkyōshū*, 324; Kimbrough 2013, 203).

You Can Trust King Enma

If there is one thing that I have learned from reading medieval Japanese fiction, it is that after we die, we are all assured a fair hearing in the court King Enma 閻魔王, the great judge of the dead. Not everyone may believe this, given that

Enma has been so frequently satirized in early-modern literature. For example, there is a children's picture book from ca. 1661–1677 that depicts the august king leering at Datsueba 奪衣婆, the "clothes-snatching hag" of the afterworld.[10] And in Hiraga Gennai's 平賀源内 satirical *Nenashigusa* 根南志具佐, Enma is said to have fallen in love with a portrait of an *onnagata* 女形 kabuki actor, whom he seeks to abduct to the afterworld for his own personal pleasure.[11] Nevertheless, medieval sources tend to be consistent in their depictions of Enma as a stern yet just adjudicator. The king appears in countless *setsuwa*, and he is a major character in *Chōhōji yomigaeri no sōshi*, in which he explains to the nun Keishin 慶心 about karmic transgressions, punishments in hell, and the fundamental nature of people: "They tend to devote themselves to evil and plant few good roots" and are "always committing crimes, hardly ever storing up merit or establishing ties to the Buddha." Keishin reports that "when King Enma spoke, his voice was dreadful like thunder," but that he was reassuring to the righteous, telling them, "You planted great good roots! I'm not going to throw you into hell for something you didn't do" (*Muromachi monogatari sōshishū*, 422–423, 426, 433). In short, Enma is well suited to his position.

As *Aigo no waka* continues, the scene shifts to King Enma's court, where the narrator explains that "there was no one as pitiful as Little Aigo's mother." Despite being dead, she knows exactly what is happening to her son, who is now hovering on the edge of death. His pet monkey, Tejiro 手白, had tried to save him by loosening his lower bonds, but that only increased the pressure on his neck. The mother prostrates herself before King Enma and pleads: "You know, sir, I have a darling child back in the human world. His stepmother has slandered him, and because of that, he's about to die. Please let me return for a little while to save his life!" Moved by her love, the king decides to send her back to the human realm for a short time. However, there is a problem. Because she was cremated, and because no one has died recently, there is no physical form for her to take. Still, there is the body of a weasel that died three days before, and Enma allows her to reanimate its decomposing carcass. She soon finds herself at the old cherry tree on her husband's estate, and while Tejiro supports Little Aigo from below, she chews through his knots above. She is in fact a talking zombie-weasel, and before returning to the afterworld, she tells her son to visit her brother, the abbot of Saitō Kitadani 西塔北谷 on Mt. Hiei 比叡, in order to receive the tonsure.

King Enma's decision to return the mother to the human realm is not unusual in medieval fiction. In *Oguri*, for example, the king similarly allows the obstreperous hero Oguri 小栗 to return to the human world to seek revenge for his murder. Enma first explains that because Oguri died as a result of his karma, there is

10. The book is titled *Dōke ezukushi* どうけゑつくし (Kimbrough 2015, 118).
11. See Chris Drake's translation in Shirane (2002, 462–486).

nothing that he, the king, can do. Nevertheless, insofar as Oguri's ten retainers died unjustly, and insofar as they request to trade places with their master, Enma agrees to send Oguri back. In fact, he wishes to send all ten retainers back as a reward for their loyalty, but because they were cremated, he cannot (*Sekkyō shōhonshū* 2: 372; Kimbrough 2013, 145–147). Enma's decision is hardly the work of a cruel or capricious judge, and it fits well with his status as a popular cult figure in medieval and early-modern Japanese religion.[12] In summary, there are at least two lessons to learn from these episodes in *Oguri* and *Aigo no waka*: 1) we can trust King Enma to treat us fairly when we die, and 2) try to avoid being cremated too soon, in case you can work something out with the king.

Esoteric Rites Work!

Following his dead mother's advice, Little Aigo flees to Mt. Hiei to seek assistance from his uncle. On the way, he begs shelter for the night at the home of an artisan, and it is at this point that the story begins to reveal itself as a *honjimono* 本地物, a tale of the human origins of buddhas, bodhisattvas, and deities. Upon learning the boy's identity, the artisan invites him inside, where he constructs an altar by placing a plank on a mortar and spreading a rough straw mat on top. He takes out some rice, purifies it seven times in water from the Kamo River 鴨川, places it in an unglazed earthen vessel, and presents it to the boy. The artisan's actions are odd—inexplicable, even—until the narrator declares that "it was from this time that people began spreading rough straw mats as a way to purify the vicinities of gods." For readers who are familiar with *honjimono*, this is an ominous turn in the tale, because it is a well-established convention of the genre to recount the harrowing tribulations of human heroes before their apotheoses. For Little Aigo, this means that things are about to get worse.

Little Aigo arrives at his uncle's temple after nightfall. The gate is closed, and when the guards explain to their master that a boy claiming to be his nephew is outside without a carriage or a retinue, the abbot concludes that it is a *tengu* 天狗—a kind of shapeshifting, anti-Buddhist bird-demon known for harassing monks—that has come to trick him and steal his ascetic powers. The holy man is wise to be on the lookout for *tengu*, but in this case his caution is misguided.[13] Several of the monks beat the boy severely, and Little Aigo weeps and withdraws, whimpering pitifully. He tries to descend the mountain, but he loses his way and wanders lost for three days. Then, after a humiliating encounter with an old woman who beats him with an "invalid's stick" (*ireija no tsue* 違例者の杖)—a

12. For a scholarly overview of the cult of King Enma in China, see Teiser (1994). For an English-language discussion of Enma in Japan, see Wakabayashi (2009).

13. For a discussion of *tengu* and their danger to monastics, see Kimbrough (2012).

cane used by lepers and the like—he comes to a place called Kiryū きりう Falls, where he decides to kill himself. But first, he bites open one of his fingers and uses the blood to write a long and bitter explanation on his small-sleeved robe, which he hangs from the branch of a cedar tree. "Then," the narrator explains, "at the age of fifteen, Little Aigo threw himself into Kiryū Falls, where he finally met his end."[14]

Little Aigo's suicide is unusual in medieval fiction, and it would seem to violate the oft-repeated dictum that "it is the long-lived turtle that reaches Mt. Hōrai" (Mt. Penglai 蓬莱), the legendary island of Daoist immortals; in other words, because good things come to those who survive, we should all take care to preserve our lives. It is advice that is typically offered to characters in extremis, including the suicidal children in *Sanshō Dayū* and the *kōwakamai Shida* 信田 (Little Lord Shida; fifteenth century); the beaten, abducted, and soon-to-be-sacrificed daughter in *Sayohime*; and the sick and betrayed Yoshitsune 義経 in the *kojōruri Goō no hime* 牛王の姫.[15] In all of these cases, it is advice that the recipients take to heart, which makes Little Aigo's act all the more shocking.

Word reaches the abbot that a boy has drowned himself at Kiryū Falls, and when he is presented with Little Aigo's small-sleeved robe, he realizes his mistake. He sends the robe to Little Aigo's father, who is appalled to learn that his wife lusted after his son. In his grief, Kiyohira has Kumoi no mae rolled up in a reed mat and drowned. This turns out to be a very bad decision. Like the Floo Network in the world of *Harry Potter*, in which all fireplaces, everywhere, are connected and thus enable travel, all bodies of water in medieval Japanese fiction are understood to be connected underground. This is why the great serpent in *Sayohime* is able to dive into a lake in northern Japan and emerge in Sarusawa 猿沢 Pond in Nara (*Sekkyō shōhonshū* 3: 486; Kimbrough 2013, 187), as well as why the dragon lady of Seta 瀬田 Bridge in the *otogizōshi Tawara Tōda monogatari* 俵藤太物語 (The Tale of Tawara Tōda; ca. sixteenth century) is able to swim through Lake Biwa 琵琶 to the undersea palace of the Dragon King (*Muromachi monogatarishū*, 100; Kimbrough and Shirane 2018, 79).[16]

Kiyohira hurries to Kiryū Falls, but when he arrives, Little Aigo's body has strangely disappeared, despite having been left floating in the waves, we are told. Kiyohira summons the abbot, who, sensing that something is amiss, sends for a *goma* 護摩 prayer altar to perform an esoteric rite. Now if there is one more thing that I have learned in my time reading medieval fiction, it is that esoteric

14. The issue of Little Aigo's age is problematic; when he arrives at his uncle's temple, a guard takes him to be twelve or thirteen years old.

15. For relevant passages in *Sanshō Dayū*, *Sayohime*, and *Goō no hime* (woodblock-printed playbook of 1673), see Kimbrough (2013, 35, 173, 238). For the passage in *Shida*, see *Mai no hon* (80).

16. The narrator explains that "as for Tsukisayo, they cut her into pieces and threw them away," which poses no particular problem.

rites work. They can take a while—as in *Tawara Tōda monogatari*, in which the rites performed by the esoteric masters Son'i Sōjō 尊意僧正 and Jōzō Kisho 浄蔵貴所 seem to fail at first—but they are nearly always effective (*Muromachi monogatarishū*, 344; Kimbrough and Shirane 2018, 226). In *Shida*, the intendant of Kashima Jingū 鹿島神宮 performs a series of esoteric rituals to emplace a terrible curse (*Mai no hon*, 77–78; Kimbrough 2019, 224–225), and in *Sanshō Dayū*, a temple intendant erects a *goma* prayer altar to enact an elaborate oath that results in the character Saburō 三郎 being struck down by a blinding flash of light (*Sekkyōshū*, 123–128; Kimbrough 2013, 45–47). In *Aigo no waka*, the abbot's ritual is no less effective. The narrator explains:

> Miraculously, the water in the lake began to shudder and shake, and dark clouds descended to the north. A 150-foot serpent rose from the depths with Little Aigo's corpse on its head, and it placed it on the prayer altar.
>
> (*Sekkyōshū*, 341–342; Kimbrough 2013, 214)

It is relatively commonplace for women in medieval fiction to transform into serpents as a result of their anger, jealousy, or lust, and the serpent here is none other than Kumoi no mae. As a reptile,[17] she is able to travel freely from one body of water to another—that is, from the place where she was drowned to Kiryū Falls. In the late sixteenth-century *otogizōshi Isozaki* 磯崎, a young Buddhist acolyte explains to his mother how and why women transform, telling her that "when the wife of Mibu no Tadayoshi 壬生忠義 in Awa 阿波 Province became especially jealous, she sprouted scales on her back and a single horn from her brow. Her mouth split open from ear to ear, and she actually became a serpent in this very life" (*Muromachi monogatari sōshishū*, 344; Kimbrough and Shirane 2018, 226). And in a famous tale in *Konjaku monogatarishū*, a young widow transforms into a giant serpent after she is spurned by an attractive monk, and she chases him down and incinerates him in a temple bell (*Konjaku monogatarishū*, 286–290; Ury 1979, 93–96). Her story is retold in a large number of medieval and early-modern sources, including the fifteenth- or sixteenth-century picture scroll *Dōjōji engi* 道成寺縁起, the *otogizōshi Kengaku no sōshi* 賢学草子, and the noh play *Dōjōji* 道成寺.

The Dōjōji woman is notorious for murdering the young monk, but what she is said to have done in her story is considerably less disturbing than what Kumoi no mae confesses to have done to Little Aigo's corpse:

> "Ah, how humiliating!" the creature cried. "I lightly set my heart on the boy, and now, at last, I have fulfilled my desire! The holy man's ascetic powers are strong, so I'll return Aigo's body now. Please pray for me in the next life." And

17. Snakes and dragons overlap in the medieval Japanese imagination.

> with that, the giant snake disappeared beneath the surface. It was enough to make a man's hair stand on end. (*Sekkyōshū*, 342; KIMBROUGH 2013, 214)

I'll pause now to state that I always enjoy teaching this work to undergraduates, and that I have found over the semesters that few of them seem to understand the implications of what the serpent says until I ask them, specifically, what the desire was that Kumoi no mae now claims to have fulfilled. From their changing facial expressions, I can usually tell who gets it and who does not. As I wrote before, Kumoi no mae is a really bad stepmother.

As we might imagine, Kiyohira and the abbot do not handle this revelation well. "How can this be?" they cry, clinging to Little Aigo's body, and they both jump into the falls and drown. Next, the abbot's disciples all jump in and drown, followed by the old woman with the invalid's stick, the artisan and his wife, and various others, for a total of 108 suicides. The monkey Tejiro runs away, and the *daisōjō* 大僧正 of Minamidani 南谷 comes to worship Little Aigo as Sannō Daigongen 山王大権現 of Hie Taisha 日吉大社, at the eastern foot of Mt. Hiei. To this day, Hie Taisha boasts of its own popular association with monkeys (although not with Little Aigo, alas).

Conclusion

So, what would Stanley Weinstein say? I think he might have recognized that since taking his courses in the mid-1990s, I have learned some interesting things about the nature of medieval Japanese religious culture. Fortunately, Stanley was never one of those people who liked to tell me, in no uncertain terms, that "Buddhism is a philosophical religion" or that "Buddhism is all about peace." Because in many cases, it's not. Judging from the vast non-scholarly textual record (works like *Aigo no waka*, *Shintokumaru*, and *Sayohime*), one could say that outside the major temples and monastic centers, Japanese Buddhism was a religion of miracles, celebrity icons, and competing and contradictory fundraising and proselytizing traditions. As we have seen, according to a widely shared medieval worldview, even the law of karma was negotiable. The lines between buddhas, deities, and bodhisattvas were blurry at best, and although those beings could be quick to anger, they could also be appeased. Supernatural dangers lurked around every corner, but steps could be taken to mitigate their threat. Stepmothers were always bad (for the child, at least), King Enma was usually good, and esoteric rites generally worked.

In the introduction to a special issue of the *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* published in 2009 on "Vernacular Buddhism and Medieval Japanese Literature," Hank Glassman and I sought "to consider premodern Japanese religious culture through the lens of literature, rather than more traditional Buddhist scriptural, historical, biographical, and exegetical sources"

(Kimbrough and Glassman 2009, 201). In the process, we coined the term "vernacular Buddhism" to describe a localized form of a much larger, trans-regional and trans-linguistic entity (Buddhism with a capital "B," so to speak). We had started with the term "popular Buddhism," but we abandoned it for several reasons, including Paul Swanson's acute observation that it implied its corollary, "unpopular Buddhism," which we wished to avoid. As we explained in our introduction to the special issue, like the term "popular religion," medieval vernacular Buddhism:

> [I]ncludes Buddhism as it was preached and experienced on the street, in the marketplace, and at busy crossroads and bridges, but it also includes temple preaching to lay and monastic audiences (*sekkyō* 説経 / *shōdō* 唱導), as well as some religious ceremonies conducted at court and private residences: wherever, that is, Buddhism was represented in a way that conformed to local interests and local forms. (Kimbrough and Glassman 2009, 204)

Since co-writing that introduction, I have increasingly come to think of popular Japanese religious culture—a subcategory of vernacular Buddhism—as being trans-sectarian. While it is true that many *otogizōshi* show clear sectarian proclivities,[18] it is also true that those and other stories tend to be far less concerned with doctrine or philosophy than with the miracles and benefits of specific temples, icons, and cultic figures. This bias toward blind faith and magic may be a result of the narrative genre in which we find it—after all, the stories were meant to be entertaining—but it may also reflect the nature of popular religious culture as it was experienced outside of the scholarly monastic communities of medieval Japan.

In conclusion, I would like to point out that there are many other things about medieval Japanese religious beliefs that are not included in *Aigo no waka* but that we can learn from popular Buddhist literature more broadly. For example, we can see that the buddhas, deities, and bodhisattvas routinely recognize and reward filial piety; that we can all put our trust in the *Lotus Sūtra* (literally, and not in an abstract, philosophical, or vaguely metaphorical way); that due to the karmic connections of our former lives (*tashō no en* 多生の縁), nothing ever happens by chance or coincidence except in cases of divine intervention; that the promise of Amida's Pure Land is real (and that with supernatural assistance, some people have visited it in the present life); that hell is real and definitely a

18. Most *otogizōshi* have a Pure Land Buddhist orientation: for example, *Chūjōhime no honji* 中将姫の本地, *Suzume no hosshin* 雀の発心, and *Ko Atsumori* 小敦盛. A few favor the practices and beliefs of the Zen schools, such as *Isozaki* and *Kurumazō sōshi* 車僧草子; others promote the *Lotus Sūtra*, such as *Hamaguri no sōshi* 蛤の草紙. In addition, there is at least one that favors Tendai *mikkyō* 密教 esotericism, *Tawara Tōda monogatari*. I translated *Chūjōhime no honji* in Shirane (2007, 1138–1150). All the other works are translated in Kimbrough and Shirane (2018).

place to avoid; and that as a result of "contrary causes" (*gyakuen* 逆縁), the most terrible deeds can sometimes lead to the most splendid results. The six realms of existence are always overlapping and interpenetrating, and for individuals making their way through the human and non-human planes, it is usually affiliation with a particular icon or institution that matters most. In the end, children are more important than possessions, and it is the long-lived turtle that lives to see Mt. Hōrai.

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dx.doi.org/10.18874/jjrs.51.2.2024.171-195

Emi Foulk Bushelle

Speech, Text, and Reality

Kokugaku and the Buddhist Roots of Japanese Philology

This article aims to overcome the longstanding dichotomy between religion and philology in scholarly discourse on *kokugaku*. Specifically, it argues that philology as it was practiced by the paradigmatic figure of the *kokugaku* movement, Motoori Norinaga, not only borrowed certain philological methods of analysis from the Shingon Buddhist cleric Keichū but also took for granted the esoteric Buddhist understanding of language that formed the context for the practice of those methods. Keichū, in turn, borrowed these from his fellow Shingon cleric Jōgon, a groundbreaking scholar of Sanskrit and leading figure in the early modern Japanese precepts reform movement. Already in his studies of Sanskrit, Jōgon formulated the basic principles and methods of Japanese philology as it came to be practiced first by Keichū and subsequently by scholars of *kokugaku*: a concern for recovering the sound of written graphs and a belief that the recovery of those sounds would restore a salvific use of language that had been lost to humanity. The motivation shared by Jōgon and Keichū to retrieve and revive a lost salvific language practice took shape in the context of their involvement in the early modern Buddhist precepts reform movement.

KEYWORDS: *kokugaku*—philology—precepts reform—Jōgon—Keichū—Motoori Norinaga

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The early modern Japanese intellectual movement known as *kokugaku* 国学, or national studies, has long been traced to the Shingon Buddhist cleric Keichū 契沖 (1640–1701). In a 1799 treatise on his scholarly method, *Uiyamabumi*, the paradigmatic figure of *kokugaku*, Motoori Norinaga 本居宣長 (1730–1801), describes his field of inquiry as "ancient studies" (*inishie manabi* 古学) and, in defining it, locates its origins in the works of Keichū:

> "Ancient studies" refers to a mode of scholarship that does not base anything on the theories of later ages but rather carefully casts light on the events (*koto* 事) of antiquity using only ancient texts and that which is found within them. This type of scholarship was invented in recent times. Although Dharma Master Keichū limited himself to poetic texts, it was he who opened this [scholarly] way and thus he who should be called the forefather of this field of study.
>
> (MNZ 1: 15)[1]

Norinaga thus praised Keichū for what we would today consider his philology. At the same time, however, he refused to attribute Keichū's philological excellence to his mastery of Buddhist theory and practice, preferring instead to understand it as a product of his "Yamato spirit" (*Yamato damashii* やまとだましひ) and what he saw as its corollary, a commitment to an ethic of "sincerity" (*makoto* まこと) (MNZ 1: 170).

The implicit dichotomy between philology and Buddhism that frames Norinaga's evaluation of Keichū's work has had an enduring legacy in the study of *kokugaku*. Even today, scholars tend to take for granted an opposition between the science of philology and the religion of Buddhism on the assumption that religion and science are mutually exclusive domains. Take, for example, the evaluation of Keichū in the work of Haga Yaichi 芳賀矢一 (1867–1922) and Muraoka Tsunetsugu 村岡典嗣 (1884–1946), founding figures in the disciplines of *kokubungaku* 国文学 (national literature) and *Nihon shisōshi* 日本思想史 (history of Japanese thought), respectively, as well as pioneers in the academic study of *kokugaku*. Both Haga and Muraoka (1975, 98) explicitly characterize Keichū as, to quote Haga, "the individual who established the scholarly method of phi-

1. "Ancient studies" was Norinaga's preferred term for his mode of scholarship. Although *kokugaku* was, of course, the term that ultimately gained traction, Norinaga himself believed it provincialized research into the Japanese past by unnecessarily qualifying it and implicitly favoring Chinese forms of thought, which by contrast were simply referred to as "scholarship" (*gakumon* 学問). As he writes in *Tamakatsuma:* "When we say *kokugaku* there may be some who think this is reverential, but the character *koku* is restrictive and not a term we should use" (MNZ 1: 48).

lology" in Japan (HYS 1: 171). Yet, like Norinaga before them, Haga and Muraoka divorced Keichū's religious commitments from his philological pursuits in no uncertain terms. MURAOKA (1975, 99) is representative when he writes of Keichū, "His education and tastes as a Buddhist in no way influenced his scholarship. As a scholar, he was able to distance himself from both Chinese thought and Buddhism and remain extremely pure" (*junsui* 純粋). To be philological, for Muraoka, meant also a rejection of ideology and religion—as represented by both Chinese thought and Buddhism—and the preservation of a kind of intellectual objectivity, or "purity." By thus opposing Buddhism to philology, Muraoka and Haga neglected the religious framework that formed the background for the emergence of what we might consider scientific inquiry in Japan.

This article seeks to overcome the longstanding dichotomy between religion and philology in modern scholarly discourse on *kokugaku*. As I demonstrate in what follows, Norinaga not only borrowed Keichū's philological methods of analysis but also adopted the esoteric Buddhist understanding of language that informed the practice of those methods. This understanding was "religious" insofar as it distinguished between profane and sacred uses of language and conceptualized the latter as a means for gaining insight into a transcendent reality—that is, a world that lies beyond what can be known in ordinary experience. It was through this insight, significantly, that one could attain liberation from a state of ignorance, or what in a Buddhist context is called enlightenment.

I begin the article with a brief overview of the dichotomy between religion and philology as it has been elaborated in modern scholarship on *kokugaku*, starting with Haga and Muraoka and continuing with more recent thinkers. I then turn to an examination of the genesis of Keichū's analytical methods and the understanding of language that underpinned them, calling special attention to the research of Keichū's close collaborator and fellow Shingon cleric, Jōgon 浄厳 (1639–1702). A groundbreaking scholar of Sanskrit and leading figure in the early modern Japanese precepts reform movement, Jōgon formulated the basic principles and methods of Japanese philology as it came to be practiced first by Keichū and subsequently by scholars of *kokugaku* after him: a concern for recovering the sound of written graphs and a belief that the recovery of those sounds would illuminate a salvific use of language that had been lost to humanity. For Jōgon, that language practice was Shingon mantra; for Keichū and Norinaga, it was *waka* poetry. Keichū and Norinaga's substitution of mantra for *waka*, I argue, does not represent a secularization of linguistic theory, at least not in the sense of an elimination of religion. To the contrary, I suggest that it marks its very opposite, the expansion and further elaboration of premises that were initially articulated and developed within the Buddhist tradition. For Keichū, who explicitly understood *waka* as a form of Shingon mantra, this expansion is clear. While Norinaga rejected his Shingon predecessors' commitment to mantra,

he nonetheless conceptualized the object of his philology as a sacred language practice: whereas mantra liberated its practitioners from cravings and accordingly revealed to them an enlightened realm of buddhas and bodhisattvas, *waka* redeemed those who uttered them from the "Chinese mind" (*karagokoro* 漢意) and restored for them the ancient Japanese way of the kami. As we will see, the motivation shared by Jōgon, Keichū, and Norinaga to retrieve and revive a lost sacred language practice originally took shape in the context of the former two men's involvement in the early modern Buddhist precepts reform movement. This article thus traces the roots of Japanese philology back to a broader milieu of religious reform.

The Religion/Philology Dichotomy

The question of philology and its relationship, if any, to native Japanese forms of thought first emerged in the late nineteenth century, as Meiji-period scholars endeavored to construct Japanese academic institutions modeled after their Western counterparts. Perhaps the earliest proponent of "philology" in Japan was Ueda Kazutoshi 上田万年 (1867–1937), a close contemporary of Haga's and the founding figure of *kokugogaku* 国語学 (national language studies) at Tokyo Imperial University. Writing in 1890, Ueda used the English word "philology" to gloss the neologism *hakugengaku* 博言学 (a precursor term to *gengogaku* 言語学, or linguistics), emphasizing that discipline's scientific linguistic underpinnings and placing it in explicit contrast to what he considered the hopelessly backward treatment of language by the older *kokugaku* tradition (Lee 2009, 73–74). It was not until Haga, who joined the faculty of Tokyo Imperial University in 1898 and was sent to Berlin to study German philology the following year, that philology—which Haga translated as *bunkengaku* 文献学—was placed in positive relationship to the scholarship of Keichū and Norinaga, as well as *kokugaku* more broadly. In Haga's hands, *kokugaku*'s academic legacy shifted from national embarrassment to a point of national pride, evidence of Japan's vibrant intellectual past and a tantalizing glimmer of an incipient modernization free from Western influence.

It was Keichū, Haga claimed, who had first laid the foundation for the philological study of the Japanese nation; and he had done so not only independently from his counterparts in Germany but decades before them (HYS 1: 153). While Haga did not consider Keichū as a scholar of *kokugaku* in the strict sense,[2] his heirs in the *kokugaku* tradition had taken Keichū's work and developed from

2. According to Haga, Keichū was not technically a *kokugaku* scholar because he did not foreground the "way of the nation" (*kuni no michi* 国の道). Haga pointed instead to Kada no Azumamaro 荷田春満 (1669–1736), a scholar working several decades after Keichū, as the founding figure of *kokugaku* (HYS 1: 168).

them a "science of nationality" (*Wissenschaft der Nationalität* ウイツセンシヤフト・デア・ナチヨナリテエート) (HYS 1: 159), a kind of philology that took an objective approach to the study of Japan's language and texts in order to explain the specific characteristics of the Japanese people (HYS 1: 149–153). As Haga put it succinctly at the end of his 1900 essay, "Kokugakushi gairon":

> What Western scholars call philology (*firorogī* フイロロギー) is research of the nation taking literature and text as its foundation. To put it in Japanese terms, this is to research the nation taking national language and national texts as its foundation. What *kokugaku* scholars have been doing for some two hundred years is, in other words, Japanese philology. (HYS 1: 45)

Even as he searched for the Japanese origins of the philological method in early modern *kokugaku*, however, Haga was also careful to distinguish his own modern approach from it. Specifically, he directed critical attention to what he identified as the religious dimensions of *kokugaku*. In his 1908 lecture series, "Nihon bunkengaku," for example, Haga characterizes *kokugaku* scholars as "religionists" (*shūkyōka* 宗教家) who used the scientific method of philology to confirm the religious dogma that they already believed *a priori* to be true (HYS 1: 144). For Haga, "religion" is a pejorative, signifying nothing more than a kind of prejudice and, thus, the antithesis of empirical science. Importantly, for Haga, the religious prejudice that contaminates *kokugaku* philology and renders it unscientific is specifically of an ethnocentric variety. He elaborates that, through their blind commitment to ancient Japan, *kokugaku* scholars were enmeshed in a narrow-minded tautology wherein all ancient Japanese things were considered pure and good simply because they derived from ancient Japan; likewise, anything originating in later periods of Japanese history, or in China, were deemed unworthy of respect. Elsewhere, he similarly criticizes *kokugaku* scholars for being inadequately "scientific," dismissing as they did any hint of foreign cultural influence from their reconstructions of ancient Japan even when textual evidence proved otherwise (HYS 1: 162).

Hailing from the generation of scholars immediately succeeding Haga, Muraoka explicitly took Haga's lectures on *kokugaku* and philology as inspiration in his first major published work, *Motoori Norinaga*, including especially the perceived tension between "religion" and "science." Reflecting on the book decades later in 1942, Muraoka would characterize it as an extended meditation on "why such a scientist (*kagakusha* 科学者) [as Norinaga] also possessed that kind of faith" (*shinkō* 信仰) (MIZUNO 2018, 88). For MURAOKA (1975, 228), much like Haga, the confounding problem of Norinaga's thought—and hence of *kokugaku* scholarship more broadly, of which he considered Norinaga's thought representative—lay in Norinaga's unqualified belief in the "primitive" (*genshiteki* 原始的) and "irrational" (*fugōri* 不合理) kami narratives depicted in the *Kojiki* 古事記 and

other ancient texts, despite his very rational methods for philologically uncovering those same narratives. Unlike Haga, Muraoka (1975, 109) would ultimately conclude that Norinaga's belief in the ancient texts was borne of a commitment to "truth" (*shinri* 真理), as opposed to what he categorizes as "religion." Thus what initially appeared to be irrational faith was not, in Muraoka's final estimation, faith at all, but rather the logical end product of a rational philology: because Norinaga read his source material *as is*, with no religious presuppositions, he could immerse himself wholly in the ancient world described by the texts he studied. This was an evaluation Muraoka (1975, 398) also extended to Keichū, whom he considered more accurately described as a "cleric of truth" (*makoto no sōryo* 真の僧侶) than a cleric of Buddhism. Even as they evaluated *kokugaku* thought and methodology differently, then, the founding figures of national literature and the history of thought in Japan agreed that religion was antithetical to the important task of philological explanation, which they understood as a purely objective and rational endeavor.

The opposition between religion and philology continued to persist in scholarly discussions of *kokugaku* in the decades following Muraoka's death and indeed lingers into the present day. For instance, Maruyama Masao (1974, 165) frames *kokugaku* as a combination of a positivist philological methodology inherited from Ogyū Sorai's 荻生徂徠 (1666–1728) Confucian school of *kogaku* 古学 and an "antipositivist worship of the [Japanese] past." Maruyama, however, follows in Muraoka's footsteps in explaining Motoori Norinaga's belief in the divine age, in contrast to his contemporaries in the *kokugaku* movement, as borne from an absolute commitment to the text, that is, to philology. Critiquing this general position, and Muraoka specifically, Koyasu Nobukuni (2000, 45–46) has argued that to describe *kokugaku* as a form of Japanese philology is to obfuscate its essential characteristic—namely, its ethnocentric nativism—and, in doing so, leave largely intact the nativist premises that continue to underpin the modern study of national literature. While Koyasu avoids the explicit dichotomy between science and religion laid out by Haga and Muraoka, he nevertheless reproduces its basic underlying assumption that the practice of philology is incompatible with nativist articles of religious faith.[3]

Much scholarship on *kokugaku* in English has also taken for granted this assumption even as its focus lies elsewhere.[4] In evaluating Keichū's philological investigation of the *Man'yōshū* 万葉集, for example, Peter Nosco (1990, 59–60) notes Keichū's "impressive ability" to distance himself from the "assumptions of his own Shingon Buddhist background," bringing instead an empirical eye to the

3. Hatanaka (1998) critiques Koyasu as fundamentally misunderstanding how philology was conceived, both by Muraoka and the German Romantics.

4. Murphy (2009) is a notable exception.

parsing of the text. Mark McNally (2005, 143, 146) likewise emphasizes Keichū's "methodological rather than ideological" contribution to *kokugaku*, invoking the nineteenth-century *kokugaku* scholar Hirata Atsutane's 平田篤胤 (1776–1843) appraisal that Keichū's philology lacked "greater purpose." Indeed, the standard scholarly characterization of Atsutane's own brand of *kokugaku* as an intensification of religious faith at the expense of philological rigor (for example, Bowring 2017, 283; Fujiwara 2021, 76; Harootunian 1988, 26) itself gestures toward the same dichotomy. In perhaps one of the most perplexing examples, Jason Ānanda Josephson (2012, 97–110) translates *kokugaku* as "National Science" and characterizes philology as a "specifically National Science scientific method" derived from the dual inheritance of Chinese evidential learning and "philological tools" original to Keichū.[5] According to Josephson, it was *kokugaku* scholars' scientific, as opposed to "Buddhist-Shinto," rhetoric that later enabled the Meiji state to plausibly present State Shinto as existing outside the category of religion. The religion/philology dichotomy is again tacitly reproduced here, even as Josephson takes the position that there was no such thing as religion in premodern Japan.

Keichū, Jōgon, and Precepts Reform

But was Keichū's philology really so ideologically empty, so distant from his Shingon Buddhist background, so "non-religious," as it were? In addressing this question, I find it instructive to consider Keichū's relationship with the Shingon reformer Jōgon, who, as I describe below, played an instrumental role in the development of Keichū's philology. Both men's philological work, I argue, is more properly understood when situated within the larger context of the early modern Japanese precepts reform movement.

The early modern Japanese precepts reform movement is often considered by historians to have been initiated by the Shingon cleric Myōnin 明忍 (1576–1610), when he, along with four other clerics, self-ordained at Kōzanji 高山寺 in Kyoto in 1602, claiming to have received the precepts directly from the buddhas (for example, Bowring 2017, 184; Deal and Ruppert 2015, 199; Nishimura 2018, 59). Myōnin and his companions subsequently reestablished the nearby Makino'osan Saimyōji 槙尾山西明寺 as a precepts temple. In doing so, they were consciously following in the footsteps of the medieval Shingon reformer and founder of the Shingon Risshū, Eison 叡尊 (1201–1290), who championed as a basis for ordination the code of conduct for ordained clerics, or *vinaya,* as formulated in the *Four Part Vinaya.* Understood to represent the *vinaya* as taught by Śākyamuni himself, the *Four Part Vinaya* contains numerous regulations

5. Contradictorily, Josephson (2012, 97, 110) at once places "the philological study of the Japanese language" under the rubric of "Western science" and indicates Keichū, who is not known to have had any exposure to Western science, as its pioneering figure.

and prohibitions regarding clerical life and behavior but was largely disregarded in Japan as unnecessarily prescriptive from the time of Saichō 最澄 (766–822) onward (Bowring 2017, 183–184; Groner 2000, 303). Precepts reform efforts, both in the Kamakura and Tokugawa periods, were thus conceived as a return to the correct practices of a pure, now bygone, Buddhism, which had since been corrupted by the worldly extravagances of latter-day clerics. While Myōnin died at a young age attempting to travel to Ming China to further research the *vinaya*, his disciples went on to establish precepts temples across Japan; by the eighteenth century these had spread to every province and to all schools of Japanese Buddhism. Precepts reform efforts were also supported by the shogunal promotion of doctrinal study and the publication and widespread dissemination of the Buddhist canon (*Daizōkyō* 大蔵経) by the Ōbaku Zen school in the mid-seventeenth century, both of which effectively promoted textual interrogation at the expense of medieval oral transmissions (Nishimura 2010, 207–211).

Neither Jōgon's nor Keichū's development as scholars and philologists can be adequately understood without consideration of this larger socio-intellectual context. Born one year apart in 1639 and 1640 in Amagasaki 尼崎, and Kawachi 河内, respectively, both men climbed Mt. Kōya 高野, the administrative headquarters of the Shingon school, at a young age—age ten for Jōgon and thirteen for Keichū—and spent their formative years there. Keichū's teacher during this time, Kaiken 快賢 (d.u.), is known to have had a close relationship with Jōgon through his teacher, Shinken 真賢 (d.u.), and may also have taught Jōgon himself (Hisamatsu 1976, 43). Keichū would remain on the mountain for a decade, descending in 1663 to take up a post as abbot of Mandarain 曼荼羅院 in Ikutama 生玉, Osaka. There, he would receive the rank of esoteric Buddhist master (*ajari* 阿闍梨) one year later. Three years into his appointment at Mandarain, at the age of twenty-seven, Keichū resigned and, after spending several months traveling to visit major centers of mountain ascetic practice in Japan, returned to Mt. Kōya. He would remain on the mountain for the following three years, descending for good in 1669, at the age of thirty. Jōgon, who had resided on Mt. Kōya for over twenty years, likewise left the mountain permanently two years after Keichū in 1671, at the age of thirty-three (Hisamatsu 1976, 44–46; Ueda 2019, 6).

From what can be gathered from Keichū's and Jōgon's own accounts and records of their activities on the mountain, both men came to view the Kōya establishment with ambivalence in their final years there. In his collection of *waka* poems, the *Mangin shū* 漫吟集, Keichū expresses frustration with the lack of commitment to Buddhist practice displayed by his fellow Kōya clerics. The perceived sense of contemporary degeneration and decay vis-à-vis the time of Kūkai 空海 (774–835), the founder of both the Kōya complex and Shingon Buddhism in Japan, are clear in a number of Keichū's poems from this period, of which the following are representative:

How can people
Who reside here revere it?
Only upon leaving
Does it appear to be lofty,
Mountain of the High Plains (Kōya). (KZ 13: 371)

Snow falls
Atop the leaves of the trees
Of Mt. Kōya—
The way of antiquity,
How far separated have we become! (KZ 13: 380)

Jōgon, too, would write in a letter from this time of his disgust for the venality and corruption of the clerics on Mt. Kōya (*Jōgon Wajō denki shiryōshū*, 56). This disgust seems to have culminated in an altercation wherein Jōgon was wounded by sword, an event which Jōgon's primary biographer, UEDA Reijō (2019, 6), identifies as the immediate cause behind his departure from the mountain. Ueda also speculates that Jōgon was discouraged by the factionalism on Mt. Kōya, as well as the lack of broad support there for the study of Siddham, a Brahmi script used in East Asian esoteric Buddhism for the transcription of Sanskrit ritual texts.

Yet, Keichū and Jōgon also found kindred spirits on Mt. Kōya, who shared their sense that the Shingon school, as well as the Buddhist establishment more generally, had grown excessively worldly and corrupt. In the year he climbed the mountain for the second time, Keichū took the bodhisattva precepts under the supervision of Kaien 快円 (1623–1712), the third abbot of Entsūji Shin Bessho 円通寺真別処, a Shingon Risshū temple founded by Myōnin's disciple Ryōei 良永 (1585–1647). Shin Bessho was one of three major centers of precepts training in the early modern period, alongside Makino'o Saimyōji in Kyoto and Yachūji 野中寺 in Osaka. Kaien himself was associated, via a common teacher, with Jōgon, who, six years later in 1673, would also receive the bodhisattva precepts from him. It is thought, too, that Keichū studied Siddham with Jōgon during this time (HISAMATSU 1963, 51).

After Keichū descended Mt. Kōya for a second time, he returned to Osaka, where he would eventually come to reside at the home of his patron, Fuseya Shigekata 伏屋重賢 (d. 1693). Continuing his study of Siddham but also turning his attentions to ancient Japanese texts, Keichū worked relatively freely outside of the Shingon clerical establishment until his appointment as abbot of Myōhōji 妙法寺 in 1679 at the age of thirty-nine. Jōgon's trajectory after his descent from Mt. Kōya brought him to Kyoto, where he spent three years at Ninnaji 仁和寺, receiving there a transmission into the Nishinoinryū 西院流, one of the Hirosawa 廣澤 lineages that emphasized textual study, especially of the esoteric

ritual manuals known as *giki* 儀軌. In 1677, Jōgon left Kyoto to transform his father's residence in his hometown of Onizumi 鬼住, Kawachi Province, into a base for his precepts reform movement, a temple he named Enmeiji 延命寺. That same year, Keichū traveled to Enmeiji, where he would receive from Jōgon an initiation into his Shin Anshōji 新安祥寺 lineage of Shingon Risshū, copying by hand two-hundred fascicles of *giki* manuals, most of which were originally copied by Jōgon at Ninnaji. Keichū would remain with Jōgon at Enmeiji copying ritual manuals and sutras for the next two years, departing only to take up an appointment as abbot of Myōhōji. According to the *Myōhōjiki*, written by Keichū in 1684, Keichū had attempted to have the abbacy of Myōhōji transferred to Jōgon instead of to himself, though that did not materialize for reasons that remain obscure (KZ 16: 420; Okamura 1969, 245–246). Regardless, Keichū continued his practice of collating and copying sacred texts and *giki* with Jōgon through at least 1684, a year after he was brought onto Mito daimyo Tokugawa Mitsukuni's 徳川光国 (1628–1701) *Man'yōshū* 万葉集 commentarial project.

The study of *giki* was fundamental to Jōgon's precepts reform efforts. Prior to Jōgon, the early modern Japanese precepts reform movement was a trans-sectarian movement that called for the strict observance of the *vinaya* as formulated in the *Dharmaguptaka vinaya* (Nishimura 2008, 5). As Ueda Reijō (1967, 19) has argued, however, Jōgon "esotericized" (*mikkyōka* 密教化) the precepts reform movement. In a 1694 treatise written in response to queries from the bakufu, *Shingon ritsuben* 真言律弁, Jōgon argues that clerics of the Shingon school must observe not only the *vinaya* as laid out in the *Dharmaguptaka vinaya* but also what he, after Kūkai, calls the "esoteric precepts" (*mikkai* 密戒) and the "*samaya* precepts" (*samaya kai* 三摩耶戒) (Fujitani 2016, 28, 32). The esoteric precepts of the Shingon school are not merely add-ons to the precepts observed by lay householders and clerics of other schools, according to Jōgon, but rather their very basis. In his examination of Jōgon's precepts reforms efforts, Okamura Keishin (1969, 234) suggests Jōgon derived this interpretation of the precepts from the *Kōnin yuikai*, a text that Jōgon, in accordance with the Shingon tradition, would have understood to have been authored by Kūkai. According to the *Kōnin yuikai*, the esoteric precepts do not refer to a codified body of law or set of injunctions as do other precepts but are rather simply a way of abiding in one's own enlightened mind, or what the text calls the "unified mind" (*isshin* 一心). In abiding in the unified mind, the practitioner cultivates an attitude of non-discrimination (*mu shabetsu* 無差別) with regard to the relationship between one's own self and other unenlightened beings, on the one hand, and one's own self and the Buddha, on the other (TKZ 7: 392; Okamura 1969, 234).

In the Shingon school, the cleric learns to abide in the unified mind through the practice of esoteric rites (*shuhō* 修法), a kind of ritual practice that takes place at an altar arranged as a mandala and centers on the chanting of mantras in sync

with the binding of mudra, or hand gestures.[6] Because true observance of the precepts, in Jōgon's esoteric understanding, is nothing more than abiding in the unified mind, and because esoteric rites constitute the means by which the cleric abides in this unified state, Jōgon invested considerable energy in the renovation of Shingon ritual as part of his efforts to reform the precepts (Ueda 2019, 8–9). As Ueda (1975, 32–33) has observed, Jōgon's precepts reform efforts were thus predicated on a kind of revivalism, an attempt to revive and restore the ancient practices of the Shingon tradition.

Like Keichū and Norinaga after him, Jōgon endeavored to revive what he understood to be a lost salvific practice. For Jōgon, this practice was the ensemble of actions, including mantra, that formed what Shingon Buddhists called "esoteric ritual"; for Keichū and Norinaga, it was *waka* poetry. Yet, the philological strategy that Jōgon devised for transcending his own temporal location and retrieving this lost practice paved the way for Keichū's reconstruction of *waka* poetry. Rather than relying on medieval lineages of master-disciple transmissions, Jōgon conducted text-critical analysis of Shingon ritual manuals and engaged in systematic study of Sanskrit, the language of Shingon ritual, focusing particularly on its phonology and its phonetic writing system, Siddham. Moreover, he was instrumental in the public dissemination of hitherto esoteric knowledge—another quality often identified with *kokugaku*—publishing three-hundred and twenty-four volumes of *giki* with the Ōbakusan 黄檗山 imprint (Ueda 2019, 8).

Jōgon's Sanskrit Phonology and His Esoteric Buddhist Understanding of Language

In his 1682 treatise on Siddham, *Shittan sanmitsu shō*, Jōgon articulates the esoteric Buddhist understanding of language upon which Keichū would later predicate his study of ancient Japanese. As the title suggests, Jōgon argues that the three elements of Siddham—its phonemes (*shō* 声), graphs (*ji* 字), and referents, or what he calls the real aspect (*jissō* 実相) of reality—constitute the three mysteries—the chanting of mantra, the contemplation of mandala, and the binding of mudra—of Mahāvairocana Buddha, the central buddha of the Shingon tradition. In analyzing language in terms of its phonemes, graphs, and referents, Jōgon drew on the esoteric Buddhist theory of language elaborated by Kūkai in his doctrinal treatise *Shō ji jissō gi*.[7] He grounds his reading of Kūkai's treatise on a *gatha* from the second chapter of the *Mahāvairocana Sūtra* in which it is explained

6. See the entry for "shuhō" 修法 in the online version of *Kokushi daijiten* 国史大辞典 available through JapanKnowledge, https://japanknowledge.com.

7. My analysis of Kūkai's theory of language draws on a rich body of scholarship (Abé 1999, 275–304; Payne 2018, 86–90; Takemura 2021). For an excellent translation of *Shō ji jissō gi,* see Takagi and Dreitlen (2010, 79–126).

that Mahāvairocana Buddha sets forth his teachings through the "empowerment" (*kaji* 加持) of "various regional languages" (*zuihō gogen* 随方語言) (T 848, 18.10a16–17; Geibel 2005, 42; cited by Jōgon in T 2710, 84.716a9–10).

In laying out his analysis of this claim, Jōgon cites a commentary on this passage from the *Commentary on the Mahāvairocana Sūtra*, the authoritative commentary within the Shingon tradition on the *Mahāvairocana Sūtra* by Yixing 一行 (683–727), that further elaborates that the "written graphs of the world" (*seken moji* 世間文字) have "real meaning" (*jitsugi* 実義):

> World-Honored One, the faculties of living beings in the world to come will be dull and, for this reason, they will be deluded with regard to the two truths, not knowing that the ultimate [truth] lies within the worldly [conventional truth]. Therefore, let us adduce an example: "Lord of Mysteries, what is the mantra [literally 'true words'] path of the Tathāgatas? It is the empowering of these written words and letters."[8] Written graphs and speech of the world have real meaning; therefore, Tathāgatas use the real meaning inherent in mantra to empower them. If one supposes that, outside the Dharma-nature, there separately exist mundane words and letters, that is the perverse view of a deluded mind which thinks that, all in all, there is no real substance that can be sought but the Buddha [nevertheless] uses his divine power to empower it. That is a distorted view. It is not the [path of] true words.
>
> (T 1796, 39.650c; cited by Jōgon in T 2710, 84.716a)

The truth, in other words, can be found in the mundane languages of the world, for they do not depart from the Dharma-nature. "Real meaning," moreover, is here synonymous with "real aspect." Hence, Jōgon argues that the phonemes of the Sanskrit language, when represented graphically in writing, manifest the real aspect of reality. In *Shō ji jissō gi*, Kūkai makes precisely the same argument: a phoneme is "not empty," it "manifests the name of the thing," which is the graph itself; the graph—specifically, the kind of phonemic graph used in Siddham—refers to "the essence of the thing," which is its real aspect (TKZ 3: 36). Building on Kūkai's phonocentric understanding of language, Jōgon argues that a particular phoneme (he cites the example of the seed syllable of Mahāvairocana's mantra, the phoneme "A") is not just a sound but an "image-sound" (*gyōon* 形音), and the "image-sound" signifies reliably: it "always encompasses meaning" (*gishū* 義趣). "Sound," "image," and "meaning," Jōgon suggests, are "nondual and non-different." Accordingly, Jōgon concludes that the phoneme is none other than the graph, and the graph—or, more precisely, the phonemic graph—none other than the real aspect of reality: "The voice is itself the graph, the graph itself the real aspect [of reality]" (T 2710, 84.716a22–25).

8. The quoted line is from second chapter of the *Mahāvairocana Sūtra (*T 848, 18.10a).

Despite his interest in the claim made in the *Mahāvairocana Sūtra* that Mahāvairocana "empowers" diverse "regional languages," Jōgon did not extend his esoteric Buddhist understanding of language to Japanese. His consideration of Siddham was rooted in his efforts to reform Shingon ritual and did not extend beyond that. In his work with Shingon ritual manuals, Jōgon encountered many descriptions and citations of mantras and a variety of mantra called *dhāraṇī*. Following Kūkai's emphasis on the importance of their sonic quality, the Japanese esoteric tradition never translated mantra into Japanese but instead cited them either in Siddham or represented their sound using Chinese characters phonetically. Because knowledge of Sanskrit in medieval Japan was limited, how certain mantra should be vocalized came to be a matter of inter-lineal contention within the Shingon school. For this reason, Jōgon's analysis of language focused exclusively on Sanskrit and the problem of how it should be pronounced.

Jōgon developed two philological methods of analysis that Keichū would later adopt in his study of the Japanese language. The first, which would not be picked up by *kokugaku* scholars after Keichū, was the analysis of the manifold meanings of each individual Siddham graph. The second, which would eventually make its way in a modified form into Norinaga's writings via Keichū, was the arrangement of the fifty phonemes of the Sanskrit language into a "fifty-sound chart" (*gojū on zu* 五十音図) that organized the initial vowel or consonant of all phonemes into ten vertical columns and the vowel ending of those phonemes into five rows. Jōgon presents the chart in his *Shittan sanmitsu shō* (T 2710, 84.728b1–30) and uses it as a basis to infer the proper pronunciation of the mantras that he encountered in his study of ritual manuals (T 2710, 84.739b–766b). While Jōgon was not the first to make use of such a chart, he was the first to arrange it in the order that most closely reflects the traditional Indian understanding of Sanskrit phonetics (*śikṣā*), which organizes the phonemes of the Sanskrit language according to an empirical analysis of the point of articulation in the human mouth, moving from back to front: throat, palate, palatal ridge, teeth, and lips.[9] He was also the first to posit a connection between the production of the sounds of the fifty-sound chart and the phoneme *A*, making the claim that because all phonemes derive from *A* all can be used for *dhāraṇī*. He writes:

9. The fifty-sound chart can be traced back to the Heian period (YAMADA 1951, 31). Jōgon was the first to arrange the order of the columns in the order in which it is arranged today: A-Ka-Sa-Ta-Na-Ha-Ma-Ya-Ra-Wa. The modern order approximates a back-to-front movement in the point of articulation of each sound in the mouth: A is open; Ka is velar (throat); Sa-Ta-Na is palatal (palate); Ha (originally, Fa)-Ma is labial (lips). Jōgon places Ya-Ra-Wa at the end of the chart because, in accordance with Sanskrit phonology, he understood these sounds to be semi-vowels, that is, something like y, r, l, and v in Sanskrit. In arranging these semi-vowels, he follows the same back-to-front principle.

> Moreover, the foregoing graphs [for example, phonemes, or sounds, of the fifty-sound chart] all may be interpreted as having the meaning of originally uncreated. That is because all graphs derive from the graph *A* and arise thereby. That they may be used for the purpose of upholding everything (*sōji* 惣持 [that is, *dhāraṇī*]) derives precisely from this graph A. (T 2710, 84.791b12–15)

Here, Jōgon interprets the fifty-sound chart through the lens of the Shingon discourse on the "originally uncreated graph A" (*aji honpushō* 阿字本不生) and, from that vantage point, claims that all sounds of the fifty-sound chart have ritual efficacy.[10] Keichū would subsequently borrow Jōgon's Shingon-derived fifty-sound chart, as well as his understanding of phonology, and apply it whole cloth to the Japanese language, maintaining Jōgon's implications for the ritual efficacy of language.

Keichū's Japanese Philology and His Esoteric Buddhist Understanding of Language

By 1687, when Keichū completed the first draft of the *Man'yō daishōki*, his now-famous commentary on the *Man'yōshū* poetry anthology compiled for Tokugawa Mitsukuni, he was already well versed in Jōgon's esoteric Buddhist understanding of language and the phonological chart he used to analyze Sanskrit phonology. In contrast to his friend and collaborator, however, Keichū was interested in Sanskrit only insofar as it shed light on the specific features of the Japanese language. Therefore, in borrowing from Jōgon's Sanskrit phonology, he adapted its principles and methods to the study of Japanese.

Before Keichū, the forty-seven phonemes of Japanese were analyzed according to a pangram called the *iroha*, a poem that uses every phonemic graph, or *kana*, of the Japanese syllabary once to reveal a Buddhist message about the impermanence of life and the necessity of seeking salvation from it. As a kind of Buddhist anagram of Japanese *kana*, it attracted the attention of numerous Buddhist commentators both within and outside the Shingon school (Abé 1999, 391–393; Komatsu 1979, 36, 144–145). It was not, however, designed to shed light on the phonological structure of the Japanese language. Just as Jōgon, in his study of Siddham, was interested in recovering the original pronunciation of Sanskrit mantra, Keichū sought to reconstruct the sounds of ancient Japanese poems in his study of the *Man'yōshū*. To that end, Keichū turned to Jōgon's chart of fifty sounds as a model. Already in the first edition of the *Man'yō daishōki*, the 1687 *Shokkōbon* 初稿本, Keichū discusses the fifty sounds and includes a chart but leaves it blank (KZ 1: 211). In the second and final edition, the 1690 *Seisenbon* 精選本, he includes a complete chart and offers a detailed discussion of its structure

10. For an authoritative and succinct overview of Shingon discourse on the "originally uncreated graph A," see Misaki (1988, 77–79).

(KZ 1: 184).[11] Adapting it to the study of Japanese, he was able to accurately identify the pronunciation of sounds that had been lost in the course of phonological change that took place in the nearly one thousand years that separated him from his object of study, the poems of the *Man'yōshū*. Thus Keichū discerned that two characters pronounced similarly in his day, *e* え and *we* ゑ, should be placed in the *a* あ and *wa* わ columns, respectively.

In laying out the theoretical framework for his study of Japanese, Keichū adopted the same phonocentric claims about language and the power of its sounds that we observed in Jōgon's treatise on Siddham. In the "General Introduction" to the *Man'yō daishōki*, Keichū reiterates Jōgon's interpretation of Kūkai's *Shō ji jissō gi*: "Beneath the phonemic graph (*shōji* 声字)," he contends, "always lies the real aspect." On the basis of this understanding of language, derived from Kūkai via Jōgon, Keichū makes the inference that "when we analyze and clarify the phonemic graph, the real aspect manifests" (*arawaru* 顕ハル) (KZ 1: 192). Careful phonological study of written texts, in other words, will yield the reality to which its graphs refer. Extrapolating from this line of reasoning, Keichū lays down the basic principle by which he conducted his study of poetry in the *Man'yōshū*: "Thus in *waka*, before examining the meaning of the text (*bungi* 文義), one must first be able to determine its *kana* orthography" (KZ 1: 192). In thus insisting on the importance of the accurate ascertainment of linguistic sound, Keichū took the same approach to *waka* poetry that Jōgon brought to mantra.

In transposing the methods and principles of Jōgon's Sanskrit phonology to his study of ancient Japanese, Keichū emphasized the inclusivist implications of the Shingon scriptural tradition. As we have observed, the scriptural texts upon which both Jōgon and Kūkai relied make the claim that all sounds made by the tongue—the phonemes of languages in the various regions of the world—are the product of Mahāvairocana's chanting of mantra. Even as they cited these claims and offered careful explanation of them, however, neither Kūkai nor Jōgon extended them to the Japanese language. Keichū was the first to do so.

In the general introduction to the *Man'yō daishōki*, Keichū affirms the universal, enlightened origin and function of the "written languages of the world" (*seken no moji gogen* 世間の文字語言) based on an existential analysis of the manifestation of truth in reality, citing the same passage from the *Commentary on the Mahāvairocana Sūtra* that Jōgon cited in the *Shittan sanmitsu shō*, reproduced above (KZ 1: 191, 214). From the perspective of the ultimate truth, Keichū argues, "phenomena as they appear" and "things as they are" are, respectively, "the way" (*dō* 道) and "the truth" (*shin* 真) (KZ 1: 214). To frame his argument

11. The *Seisenbon* is the official version presented by Keichū to Tokugawa Mitsukuni; it was the *Shokkōbon,* however, that was in circulation during the Tokugawa period.

in esoteric terms, Keichū cites a passage from the *Mahāvairocana Sūtra* (T 848, 18.30a), which argues that all movements made by the body are mudras and all utterances made by the tongue are mantras (KZ 1: 191, 214). Following Jōgon's analysis of the three mysteries of Siddham, Keichū thus invokes the thesis that the written form of a language, its graphs, are in their origins mudra, and the pronunciation of those graphs, mantra. He departs from Jōgon's analysis, however, by placing emphasis on a more inclusive understanding of the manifestation of truth in reality, or, at least, of phenomena as they appear to us. Toward the end of the general introduction, he draws the conclusion that all written languages manifest the truth, that "the written language of a particular region naturally encompasses the real aspect" (KZ 1: 215).

Having thus established this more inclusive interpretation of language, Keichū takes it one step further and applies it to the study of Japanese. In doing so, he turns to the writings of two medieval clerics who explored the relationship between esoteric Buddhism and *waka* poetry: Saigyō 西行 (1118–1190) and Mujū Ichien 無住一円 (1227–1312). Keichū's analysis centers on the striking claim made by Mujū in his *setsuwa* anthology, *Shasekishū* 沙石集, that *waka* is the *dhāraṇī* of Japan. Keichū writes:

> In the *Shasekishū,* Mujū writes that the way of *waka* reveals the deep principle (*fukaki kotowari* 深理) of things, encompassing worldly and other-worldly meaning (*seken shusse no kokoro* 世間出世ノ心), and thus can be said to be the *dhāraṇī* of this country. *Dhāraṇī* contains manifold meanings in a single graph and thus in China is called upholding everything (*sōji* 惣持). (KZ 1: 192, 215)

Thus Keichū cites two reasons given by Mujū in support of the claim that *waka* is a kind of *dhāraṇī*. First, that *waka*, like mantra, reveals the deep principle of reality, encompassing both "worldly and otherworldly meaning"; and second, that *waka* contains manifold meanings in a single graph. This second reason presupposes an understanding of mantra that Jōgon emphasizes in his study of Siddham and serves as a model for Keichū's own analysis of poetry in the *Man'yoshū*; the first reason is the corollary of the second. In order to lend further support for the claim that *waka* is a form of Japanese mantra, Keichū goes on to allude to a (likely apocryphal) tale told by Mujū about how Saigyō explained to the Tendai cleric Jien 慈円 (1155–1255), who would later become an esoteric master in his own right, that to gain command over the practice of mantra, one must first "penetrate the hidden depths of meaning" (*ōhi no gi* 奥秘の義) of *waka* poetry (KZ 1: 215).

Keichū understood mantra as not just a kind of language that manifests the true nature of reality, its real aspect, but, more fundamentally, as a consequence of its power to manifests the truth, an act by which one realizes one's original identity with the ultimate source of enlightenment in the cosmos, Mahāvairo-

cana Buddha. His claim that *waka* is a form of Japanese mantra thus implies that Japan is a land wherein buddhas dwell, albeit via their surrogates, or "flowing traces" (*suijaku* 垂迹), the kami of Japan. After presenting his theory of *waka* as Japanese mantra in the general introduction to the *Man'yō daishōki*, Keichū makes this claim explicit by citing a poem by Saigyō included in the 1187 imperial *waka* anthology, *Senzai wakashū* 千載和歌集. The headnote explains that after living on Mt. Kōya for many years, Saigyō moved to a mountain temple on Futaminoura 二見浦, a sacred mountain near the Ise Shrine dedicated to Amaterasu, the divine progenitor of the imperial line in Japan. This mountain, the headnote further specifies, had come to be known as Mt. Kamiji 神路, or "Kami Path." In the poem, Saigyō portrays it as none other than the abode of Mahāvairocana Buddha:

Entering deeply,
I seek the innermost region
Of the Kami Path—
On the peak above all else,
The wind through the pines. (KZ 1: 192, 215)

In the context of Keichū's discussion, the sound of the wind blowing through pines is a symbol for emptiness. Slightly earlier in the general introduction, Keichū cites a couplet from a Chinese poem by Southern Song poet Yang Wanli 楊 万里 (1127–1206) on the sound of the pine: "The sound comes fundamentally neither from the pine, nor the wind / the one encounters the other and to each other they call out" (KZ 1: 191). In light of the headnote, this symbol for emptiness—the mutual interaction between things—also suggests the chanting of mantra by Mahāvairocana. Thus, Saigyō evokes the Buddha's subtle, nonanthropomorphic presence in the most sacred of places in Japan, the Ise Shrine.

Keichū's Buddhist interpretation of *waka* as the manifestation of Mahāvairocana Buddha in Japan provides the conceptual framework for his philological study of the Japanese language. In framing his study in this way, he makes clear that his investigation of the Japanese language has implications that extend beyond mere linguistic issues to larger religious questions about the divine energies that constitute the Japanese nation and how they offer the promise of salvation for those humans who live in their presence. His Buddhist epistemic framework, in other words, opens his study up to larger speculations about the essence of Japan as a nation. By means of this framework, then, Keichū laid the groundwork for the characteristically nativist Japanese philology practiced by *kokugaku* scholars after him.

Keichū and Norinaga

In his master work of philological study, *Kojikiden*, a forty-four-volume exegesis of the *Kojiki*, Motoori Norinaga credits Keichū for having founded the "way of ancient studies" (*inishie manabi no michi* 古学の道), the field of inquiry in which he situates his own work.[12] In identifying Keichū as the founder of the way of ancient studies, Norinaga drew attention both to Keichū's phonological and orthographic research—which Norinaga collectively calls *kanazukai* 仮字づかひ—and what we would today recognize as his philological rigor: his reliance on the texts, rather than the authority of a particular tradition (MNZ 9: 27). As noted in the beginning of this article, Norinaga makes a similar pronouncement in *Uiyamabumi* crediting Keichū with the formation of an approach to scholarship that was based not on later theories—that is, secret transmissions handed down from master to disciple within esoteric lineages—but rather on the examination of ancient texts themselves (MNZ 1: 15). Keichū himself made this scholarly orientation explicit when he opined that "we should not use the past as an example for later ages. Let us describe it just as it is" (*ari no mama* ありのまゝ) (KZ 9: 101). Of course, Jōgon, as we have observed above, also shared this emphasis on the text as a means for retrieving the past.

Yet, Norinaga's Japanese philology—what he called the way of ancient studies—was more than just an illumination of the facts, or events, of antiquity based on careful study of ancient texts. Contrary to his own presentation of his scholarship, Norinaga's philology cannot be reduced to a value-free science; rather, it was a complex interpretive endeavor (BUSHELLE 2020). In making a careful study of Japan's ancient texts, Norinaga necessarily took for granted a particular understanding of the value and meaning of language—particularly the language of Japan's ancient texts—and formulated a view of the value and purpose of philological study based on that understanding. In both regards, Norinaga borrowed much from Keichū.

As we have observed above, Keichū adopted, via his collaborator Jōgon, an esoteric Buddhist understanding of language that affirmed the power of the phonemic graph to manifest the real aspect of reality. In the preface to his 1693 treatise on Japanese writing, *Waji shōranshō*, Keichū formulates this esoteric Buddhist understanding of language in terms that would have been more familiar to students of medieval *waka* poetics. The structure of the Japanese language, he explains, is characterized by the harmonious correspondence of three elements: speech (*monoii* 言), thing (*koto* 事), and meaning (*kokoro* 心). "Where there is a thing, there is always speech. Where there is speech, there is always a thing.… Speech itself is meaning" (KZ 10: 109). This less explicitly esoteric

12. Norinaga explicitly mentions Keichū as the founder of his school of studies on numerous occasions (MNZ 1: 257, 15; MNZ 9: 27).

Buddhist formulation of the structure of language would later provide the basic interpretive framework for Norinaga's study of the *Kojiki*. In his commentary, Norinaga contends that it is imperative for the reader to understand the "speech" (*monoii* 言語) represented by the "ancient words" of the text. Below is a representative passage:

> Because everything about people's sentiments and circumstances can be surmised via their speech, the myriad things of antiquity, too, can be known by clarifying and awakening to ancient speech….Thus by knowing the speech of the ancients, one comes to know truly the phenomena (*arisama* ありさま) of that age. (MNZ 9: 33)

Speech, in other words, is for Norinaga the expression of the feelings that stir the human heart when it encounters "phenomena" in the world. Therefore, by "clarifying and awakening to" the speech of ancient words, one comes to understand what was in the heart of the ancients, or, more precisely, the movements in the world inscribed in the hearts of the ancients and expressed in their speech, what Norinaga calls "the actions of ancient words" (*kogo no furi* 古語のふり) (MNZ 9: 33). Thus, Norinaga, like Keichū, affirmed the power of the ancient Japanese language to manifest reality, the phenomena that are impressed upon the human heart and then expressed in speech. Based on this understanding of language, Norinaga, like Keichū, adopted a phonocentric approach to the study of ancient texts. For Norinaga, the ancient words of the *Kojiki* were sounds before they were inscriptions. To read the inscriptions without knowing the sounds thus resulted in a failure to grasp the "action of ancient words." He writes:

> Now, as for the words of the imperial edicts of the *Shoku Nihongi* 続日本紀 and other texts and the various *norito* 祝詞 of the eight volumes of the *Engi shiki* 延喜式, their syntax and everything else reflects the speech just as it was at that time. One should first carefully learn the readings of these and come to know thereby the actions of ancient words. (MNZ 9: 33)

One could recover the sounds of the ancient language, and thus also their "actions," through the phonetic transcriptions found in Nara- and Heian-period imperial edicts (*senmyō* 宣命) and prayers to the kami (*norito*).

Keichū's esoteric Buddhist understanding of language not only shaped Norinaga's phonocentric approach to the study of ancient texts, but it also provided the framework for his formulation of its ultimate object. For Norinaga, the study of ancient texts was not just the analysis of ancient words, it was the restoration of the actions of those words. These actions, which can be known from the sounds of ancient words, revealed for Norinaga a way of being that was lost to the Japanese people in the course of their history. Norinaga often terms this way "the way of the kami" (*kami no michi* 神道; *kannagara no michi* 神ながらの道)

or just simply "the ancient way" (*inishie no michi* 古道). In his *Kojikiden*, for example, Norinaga argues: "If we examine closely this record [*Kojiki*] and other accounts of ancient matters, we may come to know well the significance of that [ancient] way" (MNZ 9: 58). Elsewhere, he claims: "Truly, the ears cannot travel back one thousand years to hear the sounds of the past, but fortunately we have *kana* and thus can achieve this with the eyes" (MNZ 8: 389). This retrieval of the "way of the kami," significantly, also implied the clearing away of the "dust of Chinese texts" (*Karabumi no chiri* からぶみのちり) that had "clouded the hearts of [Japanese] people through the ages" (MNZ 7: 485). It provided, in other words, salvation from the "Chinese mind" (*karagokoro* 漢意) that woefully gripped all but a small handful of contemporary Japanese, in Norinaga's estimation, and the restoration of one's "sincere mind" (*magokoro* 真心) (MNZ 1: 48–49).

Throughout his writings, Norinaga makes clear that he conceived the "ancient way" as the "way of the kami" and, moreover, that this way of the kami originated with the age of the kami and was transmitted only in the nation of Japan via the imperial family who descended from the kami (MNZ 9: 49). Based on his esoteric Buddhist understanding of the Japanese language, Keichū arrived at a fundamentally similar conception of the ultimate object of his philological study. In the *Man'yō daishōki*, Keichū writes, "As our realm is a nation of the kami (*shinkoku* 神国), even though the national histories were recorded during the age of humans, what is described therein is none other than the kami. Thus, in reverence, should we believe this" (KZ 1: 250). Later, he reiterates his claim that the national histories describe a "way of the kami" and that this way of the kami is peculiar to Japan: "When we open up and examine the *Nihon shoki* 日本書紀 and other [national histories], we come to understand that the way of the kami differs from both the Dharma of the Buddha and the way of Confucius" (KZ 1: 196). Thus, like Norinaga, Keichū explains that what he aims to apprehend by means of his investigation of ancient Japanese texts is a "way" native to Japan.

For both Keichū and Norinaga, the recovery of this lost way served a religious purpose: transcendence and salvation. Viewing the present realm of ordinary experience as profane, they saw hidden in the ancient speech of the Japanese people a way of being grounded on insight into the ultimate truth of reality. Philology, the reconstruction of the meaning of ancient Japanese speech, was nothing less than a technique for transcending the profane present and merging with a sacred, more true, past. While both Keichū and Norinaga engaged in philology as a religious practice, each traced the truth that it revealed and that, for them, was redemptive of life in the present back to a different source: for Keichū, Mahāvairocana's enlightened mind; for Norinaga, the kami of Japan. Though significant, this difference is not absolute. The notion that human speech need be anchored in a truth-source is itself a Buddhist assumption, one Norinaga inherited from Keichū, and via Keichū, the broader Shingon tradition.

Conclusion

Despite Norinaga's high praise for Keichū, modern scholars have tended to overlook his role as a founding figure in the ideological development of *kokugaku*, focusing instead on two scholars who lived and wrote more than a generation after him, Kada no Azumamaro 荷田春満 (1668–1736) and Kamo no Mabuchi 賀茂真淵 (1697–1769). In his 1904 lecture "Kokugaku to wa nan zo ya" 国学とは何ぞや, for example, Haga assigns only a minor role to Keichū. While he acknowledges Keichū was skilled in "scholarship" and even "laid the groundwork for what Norinaga did" after him, he contends that Keichū devoted most of his attention to classical literature (*koten bungaku* 古典文学)—*waka* poetry and vernacular prose fiction, or *monogatari*, of the Nara and Heian periods—and so never developed a true science of the nation (HYS 1: 149). Building on Norinaga's own understanding of his scholarly tradition, this article has argued, contrary to Haga and many modern scholars after him, that Keichū laid the groundwork for the development of Japanese philology by not only introducing a rigorous method of philological analysis but also formulating the basic understanding of language taken for granted by *kokugaku* scholars in their practice of Japanese philology—an understanding that was based on the religious practices of esoteric Buddhism as they had come to be reinterpreted during a time of intense religious reform.

It has been my contention that, contrary to being antithetical to scientific inquiry, as Haga, Muraoka, and others have claimed, religion was integral to the early modern development of Japanese philology. This is not to say that Keichū was not familiar with his contemporary Itō Jinsai's 伊藤仁斎 (1627–1705) Confucian school of *kogigaku* 古義学 (study of ancient meanings), to which *kokugaku*'s philological method is often traced via Ogyū Sorai; indeed, Jinsai was likely one of Keichū's intellectual influences, though the extent of said influence remains unclear.[13] However, Keichū's connections to Jōgon and his Buddhist philology are significantly more robust.

Taking Jōgon's analyses of Sanskrit as a model, Keichū revolutionized the methods and frameworks for the study of the Japanese language. Even as Norinaga rejected Keichū's attempts to anchor ancient Japanese language in avatars of Buddhist enlightenment, he left mostly unaltered the methods and frame-

13. Itō Jinsai's work was not well known outside of his Kogidō 古義堂 academy in Kyoto until 1683, when he wrote the *Gomō jigi* 語孟字義. This was the same year Keichū accepted Tokugawa Mitsukuni's invitation to take over the ailing Shimokōbe Chōryū's 下河辺長流 (1627–1686) commentary on the *Man'yōshū,* which resulted in the *Man'yō daishōki.* As Motoori Norinaga remarked when claiming his school of ancient studies had its origins with Keichū's scholarship, Sorai postdated Keichū and thus is difficult to posit as an influence. Norinaga claims that Jinsai worked around the same time and thus likewise cannot be considered a forerunner of Keichū (MNZ 1: 257). HISAMATSU (1976, 408–409), however, considers Jinsai a tertiary influence.

works that Keichū, via Jōgon, introduced. Two centuries later, when modern scholars attempted to devise a genealogy for their own practice of philology that was independent of their European counterparts, they rightly identified Norinaga as one of their intellectual forebears. But, under the influence of modern European secularist notions that insisted on the opposition between science and religion, they were incapable of countenancing the Buddhist origins of their own practice. Religion, for them, was nothing more than superstition and prejudice. That it could provide the epistemic conditions for the emergence of science in Japan simply did not make sense to them.

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KZ *Keichū zenshū* 契沖全集. 16 vols. Hisamatsu Sen'ichi 久松潜一 et. al., eds. Iwanami Shoten, 1973–1976.

MNZ *Motoori Norinaga zenshū* 本居宣長全集. 23 vols. Ōno Susumu 大野 晋 and Ōkubo Tadashi 大久保正, eds. Chikuma Shobō, 1968–1993.

T *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* 大正新修大蔵経. 85 vols. Takakusu Junjirō 高楠順次郎 and Watanabe Kaigyoku 渡辺海旭, eds. Taishō Issaikyō Kankōkai, 1924–1932.

TKZ *Teihon Kōbō daishi zenshū* 定本弘法大師全集. 10 vols. Ed. Mikkyō Bunka Kenkyūjo Kōbō Daishi Chosaku Kenkyūkai 密教文化研究所弘法大師著作研究会. Koyasan Daigaku Mikkyō Bunka Kenkyūjo, 1991–1997.

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Kokugaku to wa nan zo ya 国学とは何ぞや. Haga Yaichi. HYS 1: 147–164.
"Kokugakushi gairon" 国学史概論. Haga Yaichi 芳賀矢一 (1867–1927). HYS 1: 5–46.
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Mangin shū 漫吟集. Keichū 契沖 (1640–1701). KZ 13: 1–461.
Manyō daishōki 万葉代匠記. Keichū. KZ 1–7.
Myōhōji ki 妙法寺記. Keichū. KZ 16: 419–421.
Nihon bunkengaku 日本文献学. Haga Yaichi. HYS 1: 62–144.

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Japanese Journal of Religious Studies 51/2: 197–220

dx.doi.org/10.18874/jjrs.51.2.2024.197-220

Orion Klautau

The Politics of Essence

Towards a History of the Public Study of Buddhism in 1880s Japan

This article examines the early institutionalization of Buddhist studies in Meiji Japan, focusing on the University of Tokyo's establishment of Buddhism as an academic discipline between the late 1870s and the 1880s. By centering on key figures such as the Sōtō Zen priest Hara Tanzan and the Shin Buddhist cleric Yoshitani Kakuju, it explores how the emerging discipline was shaped by both domestic imperatives, such as reasserting Mahayana Buddhism's legitimacy against Edo-period critiques, and new pressures from Western scholarship, which often dismissed Mahayana as a later development in Buddhist history. Beyond a purely academic pursuit, this public study of Buddhism served broader sociopolitical aims, including efforts to construct a unifying moral foundation for a modernizing nation. The article demonstrates how early Meiji Buddhist intellectuals navigated these multiple agendas, seeking to articulate an "essence" of Buddhism adaptable to evolving notions of religion and philosophy while simultaneously upholding the Mahayana tradition as both historically valid and ethically relevant.

KEYWORDS: Meiji Buddhism—Buddhist Studies—University of Tokyo—Hara Tanzan—Yoshitani Kakuju—Takashashi Gorō

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Today, Japan stands as a major hub for the academic study of Buddhism, hosting numerous sectarian universities. Many of these institutions boast well-resourced departments dedicated solely to the scholarly examination of Buddhist history and doctrine. A notable trend is the influx of Buddhists from other Asian countries to Japan; these individuals, often practitioners from childhood, seek to deepen their understanding of their religion within Japan's academic environment, despite having no specific interest in Japanese culture itself. Additionally, Western scholars specializing in Indian or Chinese Buddhism are motivated to learn Japanese in order to access Japan's legacy of secondary scholarship, illustrating the global interconnectedness of present-day Buddhist studies.

Although one could trace Japan's approach to the study of Buddhism back to the seventh or eighth centuries in a process of extensive historical exploration, the more direct journey to the current state of affairs begins in the 1870s. At that time, the flow of knowledge went a different direction: rather than foreign students coming to Japan to discover the "essence" of the Buddhist tradition, Japanese intellectuals traveled to Europe with the aim of deepening their understanding of the religion's fundamental principles. While the story of Shin priests Nanjō Bun'yū 南条文雄 (1849–1927) and Kasahara Kenju 笠原研寿 (1852–1883) leaving for England in 1876 with the ultimate goal of studying Sanskrit at the University of Oxford under Max Müller (1823–1900) is relatively well known (Stortini 2020), it is equally important to note that significant domestic developments were unfolding during the same period. In this sense, the year 1879 represents a foundational moment in the institutionalization of the academic study of Buddhism in modern Japan; it was at this time that Katō Hiroyuki 加藤弘之 (1836–1916), then president of the newly founded University of Tokyo appointed—in a decision arguably also shaped by global trends—the first-ever lecturer in the discipline. His decision to introduce a course on Buddhist texts, taught by Hara Tanzan 原 坦山 (1819–1892), highlights a deliberate move to incorporate Buddhism within the broader academic curriculum.

However, this early institutionalization of Buddhist studies was not merely an academic exercise; rather, it reflected a nuanced understanding of the religion's role in shaping national identity and was, as such, a response to broader social and political transformations in Meiji Japan. This initial public study of Buddhism was shaped by distinct yet intersecting demands; the first of these essentially represented a continuation of trends from the late Edo period, during

which the Buddhist clergy found themselves compelled to defend their teachings against criticisms that Mahayana was not originally preached by Śākyamuni. Given that this issue touched on the legitimacy of almost the entire East Asian Buddhist tradition, it had been a concern for Japanese priests from the outset. However, a deeper sense of crisis emerged among Buddhists after the late 1870s, when they discovered that prestigious Western scholars were making almost identical claims. The second demand was, as described below, related to how Buddhism could contribute to the improvement of social morality and, as an extension of this more individual enterprise, to the establishment of Japan as a "civilized nation."

This article, therefore, provides a detailed historical account of the early development of Buddhist studies in Japan as it took shape at the country's first modern institution of higher education. While drawing on previous research, it focuses in particular on how Hara Tanzan and his colleague, Yoshitani Kakuju 吉谷覚寿 (1843–1914), the two key figures of this initial period, navigated with varying degrees of success not only contemporary debates on the nature of Buddhism but also its relationship with social morality. Shaped in part by encounters with Christianity and Western scholarship, their efforts highlighted the tension between maintaining doctrinal authenticity and adapting to evolving concepts of nationhood and individual identity, ultimately laying the groundwork for a discipline that would profoundly influence the very understanding of the meaning and end of "religion" in modern Japan.

Buddhism in Modern Academia: Early Institutionalization

Several texts introducing the history of the academic study of Buddhism in modern Japan mention the 1879 appointment of Hara Tanzan at the University of Tokyo as one of the foundational moments of the discipline (Yoshida 1959, 8; Kashiwahara 1990, 81–82). Hara was invited directly by the famous Katō Hiroyuki, then university president, to lecture on "Buddhist texts" (*bussho* 仏書). At the time of this invitation, the University of Tokyo—established in April 1877 through the merger of Kaisei Gakkō 開成学校 and Tōkyō Igakkō 東京医学校, two of Japan's leading institutions of Western learning (*yōgaku* 洋学)—was still relatively new. Originally, the university was comprised of four schools: medicine, sciences, law, and letters. However, whereas the medical school was a continuation of the previous Tōkyō Igakkō, and the schools of science and law were mostly an extension of homonymous departments within the Kaisei Gakkō, the Faculty of Letters (*bungakubu* 文学部) was devised as an entirely new enterprise.

At this early stage, the Faculty of Letters was comprised of only two departments, namely the "first" (*daiichika* 第一科), which included the history, philosophy, and political science courses, and the "second" (*dainika* 第二科), including

disciplines on the study of Japanese and Chinese letters (*wakan bungaku* 和漢文学). Katō Hiroyuki explains the reason for creating this "second department" in a September 1877 document submitted to the Ministry of Education.

> The reason for now adding, to the Faculty of Letters, an entire department of Japanese and Chinese learning is that, under our current situation, such study has become almost like the sparse stars at dawn (*ryōryō shinsei no gotoku* 寥々晨星ノ如ク). If we do not immediately establish it within the university's subjects, it is possible we are unable to enduringly preserve [this knowledge]. Moreover, if those who call themselves the bachelors of Japan (*Nihon gakushi* 日本学士) are familiar only with English learning but are unclear about Japanese letters, they shall be unable to truly achieve the essence of cultural progress (*bun'un no seiei* 文運ノ精英). Since there is, however, concern that those who study only Japanese and Chinese letters might become narrow-minded, we will also have [students in this department] take English, Philosophy, and Western History. By doing so, we hope to cultivate useful human resources.
>
> (Tōkyō Teikoku Daigaku 1932, 472–473, 686–687)

If almost a semester after the establishment of the department Katō still felt, as seen above, the need to continue justifying its existence to the Ministry of Education, we can reasonably surmise that there were at least some voices in opposition. Nevertheless, when the Faculty of Letters underwent restructuring about a two years later, it was not the second but the first department that was most affected. In a September 1879 memorandum, Katō explains that, since there were apparently close to no applicants for history but many interested in economics, the department name was changed from "History, Philosophy, and Political Philosophy" to "Philosophy, Political Philosophy, and Political Economy" (Tetsugaku, Seijigaku, Rizaigaku 哲学・政治学・理財学) (Tōkyō Teikoku Daigaku 1932, 691).[1]

In this same document, Katō asserts that the history course's lack of popularity was essentially due to content. Since the department's main subject was "Western history" (*ōbei shigaku* 欧米史学), students only had the opportunity to learn about the past of distant and unfamiliar places; yet, he argued, they should also be learning about the histories of "Japan, China, and India"—that is, of "all nations of the Orient" (*tōyō kakkoku* 東洋各国). Nevertheless, since there was, according to Katō, no appropriate individual to cover that broad range of topics, the administration had no choice but to close the history course for the time being, privileging economics instead. The university did not, however, abolish all history-related disciplines; they continued to exist, albeit as elective subjects within the first department (Tōkyō Teikoku Daigaku 1932, 691).

1. Katō provides the English translations of departments in Tōkyō Teikoku Daigaku (1932).

Note that, in January 1877, only a few months before the university's establishment, the Meiji government also reorganized its Bureau of Historiography (Shūshikyoku 修史局), which was then responsible for drafting Japan's "official history" (*seishi* 正史) in traditional East Asian terms. Pompously renamed the Office of Historiography (Shūshikan 修史館) and placed directly under the control of the Great Council of State (Mehl 1998, 23–25), this institution employed people such as Shigeno Yasutsugu 重野安繹 (1827–1910), who about a decade later would play a central role in the creation of the University of Tokyo's Department of History (Satō 2022, 28). At this first stage, however, it is curious to see that individuals involved in this type of state-sponsored historical writing were not even considered as capable of teaching domestic history, which might also have been due to the association of the academic discipline of history with specific forms of Western learning.

In any case, Katō seems to have regarded this lack of education about the "Orient" as a serious issue, since he took the opportunity to introduce a new discipline on the topic. On occasion of this reform, the university introduced a class titled "Lectures on Buddhist Texts," which was placed outside both first and second departments and which could be attended by all students independent of which year they were in. As lecturer for this course, Katō invited Hara Tanzan, an individual then quite popular in the early Meiji Buddhist world. Originally educated at the famous bakufu-sponsored Shōheikō 昌平黌, Hara also received training in Chinese medicine and, later in life, became a Sōtō Zen priest. While Kimura Kiyotaka (2002, 15–20) has speculated that his invitation to lecture at the newly founded university had to do with his "scientific" perspective toward Buddhism, Furuta Shōkin (1942, 494) and Satō Atsushi (2017, 4) claim that his hiring was mostly due to him being recommended to Katō Hiroyuki by renowned Nishi Honganji priest Shimaji Mokurai 島地黙雷 (1838–1911).[2]

Besides famously lecturing on the *Dasheng qixinlun* 大乗起信論, Hara also taught the *Yuanjue jing* 円覚経 and, perhaps even more importantly, the *Fujiaobian* 輔教編. Written in the Northern Song period, this latter text proposed equivalence between Buddhist and Confucian values and was probably strategically chosen by Hara due to the educational background of his audience (Licha 2023, 134). Hara's classes proved popular: at this first stage, they were attended both by then already established intellectuals such as Nishimura Shigeki 西村茂樹 (1828–1902) and promising younger students such as Inoue Tetsujirō 井上哲次郎 (1856–1944).

Two years later, in September 1881, the Faculty of Letters underwent yet another reform, which proved quite significant to the teaching of Buddhism

2. Although Furuta does not provide the source for this information, Satō refers to Inoue Enryō's (1915, 2) recollections about Katō Hiroyuki.

(Tōkyō Teikoku Daigaku 1932, 696–697). The philosophy course broke away as a department of its own; political sciences and economics remained together as the second department while Japanese and Chinese letters now became the third. Although the teaching of philosophy was, up to that point, focused solely on Western ideas, this reform now established within the newly-created department had classes on "Indian and Chinese Philosophy," which became compulsory not only for students in the Philosophy Department, but also for those in the Department of Japanese and Chinese Letters (Tōkyō Teikoku Daigaku 1932, 699, 701).

In this context, Hara's class was renamed "Indian Philosophy," ultimately becoming a "regular course" (*seika* 正科) within the faculty. This new status was not, however, the only change brought about by the reform. Around September 1881,[3] the university decided to hire a second lecturer to share duties. In contrast to the more Zen-focused Hara, the university invited Yoshitani Kakuju, a Higashi Honganji priest recommended to Katō Hiroyuki as someone who could teach Tendai studies.[4] And so he did; for the first five years at least, Yoshitani lectured on both Gyōnen's 凝然 (1240–1321) *Hasshū kōyō* 八宗綱要 and Chengwan's 諦觀 (d. 970) *Tiantai sijiao yi* 天台四教儀. Hara, on the other hand, continued focusing on the *Fujiaobian*, while including in his repertoire also the *Vimalakirti Sūtra*.[5]

A year later in September 1882, there was yet more fine tuning. The Chair of Philosophy was divided into "Eastern" and "Western," and the courses taught

3. Although institutional histories of the University of Tokyo record Yoshitani's hiring as occurring in 1882 (Tōkyō Teikoku Daigaku 1932, 717; Tōkyō Daigaku Hyakunenshi Henshū Iinkai 1986, 524, 539), evidence from contemporary media confirms that he was hired in 1881, coinciding with the subject's rebranding and regularization within the university curriculum. See the Zappō 雑報 section of MS 1218 (28 Sept. 1881, 3), which reports on Yoshitani's appointment. The same section in issues 1225 (12 Oct., 4), 1235 (2 Nov., 3), and 1236 (4 Nov., 3), provides information about this and other significant changes of the period concerning the discipline of Indian Philosophy.

4. Yoshitani was recommended to Katō Hiroyuki by a Higashi Honganji priest named Kondō Shūrin 近藤秀琳 (d.u.) from Nensokuji 念速寺 (Licha 2023, 141; Satō 2017, 4); note that this same Kondō was also responsible for recommending that Inoue Enryō 井上円了 (1858–1919) take the entrance examination for the University of Tokyo (Miura 2016, 713–714).

5. In several postwar retrospectives of the early days of Buddhist scholarship at the University of Tokyo, Hara Tanzan and Yoshitani Kakuju are described as having, from this point onwards, taught in alternate years (*kakunen de tantō* 隔年で担当) (Fujii 1982, 8; Sueki 2004, 87; Klautau 2012, 61). This assertion is, however, mistaken; it first appeared in a historical overview of the Faculty of Letters published during the early Showa period (Tōkyō Teikoku Daigaku 1942, 340) and was later reiterated in the authoritative volume commemorating the university's hundredth anniversary (Tōkyō Daigaku Hyakunenshi Henshū Iinkai 1986, 525). In fact, Yoshitani and Hara taught concurrently; this error likely stemmed from a misinterpretation of the fact that Hara, at least, taught the same texts every other year (Hara 1886a; TZ, 362–363). The more recent Satō (2023) was also fundamental in clarifying this long-standing misunderstanding.

by Hara and Yoshitani were naturally allocated to the former. In fact, after the 1881 reform, "Indian Philosophy" became predominant as the larger rubric to speak about the teaching of Buddhism; it was not until 1994 that the term *Bukkyō* was used again in an official manner in the department's title. HAYASHI Makoto (2002, 252–253) explains that the reason behind the choice of "Indian Philosophy" was twofold: first, it had to do with concerns about having a subject dedicated to a single "religion" in a state-sponsored institution; second, this was also connected with the reformulation of Buddhism and Confucianism as part of an "Eastern Philosophy" (*tōyō tetsugaku* 東洋哲学) on an equal basis with its "Western" counterpart.

From this year onward, Hara and Yoshitani both taught "Indian Philosophy," alternating texts every year. From 1883, the former abandoned the *Essays on Assisting the Teaching*—which students complained was too "easy" (HARA 1886a, 3; TZ, 362)—in favor of the *Awakening of Faith in Mahayana* (SATŌ 2023, 179), while Yoshitani continued with the *Essentials* and the *Outline* until finally changing in 1887 to a textbook he himself had prepared (SATŌ 2017, 5). Together, they educated an entire generation of Meiji scholars, including Judo founder Kanō Jigorō 嘉納治五郎 (1860–1938), legal scholar Ariga Nagao 有賀長雄 (1860–1921), and Buddhist intellectuals Inoue Enryō and Kiyozawa Manshi 清沢満之 (1863–1903).

Early Issues in Public Scholarship: Hara Tanzan and "Experience"

The type of Buddhism that both Hara and Yoshitani conveyed to their students was not unrelated to contemporary matters. Their very choice of texts can be regarded as evidence of that: Hara focused on the *Awakening* due to his emphasis on the importance of Buddhism as a form of psychological science fit for modern society; Yoshitani's choice of the *Essentials* was in turn part of a larger task of presenting Buddhism in a holistic manner vis-à-vis the purported systematic teachings of Christianity. That is, both Hara and Yoshitani, Buddhists from very different sectarian backgrounds, seemed preoccupied mostly with creating more comprehensive representations of their beliefs.

Although Hara and Yoshitani's efforts to justify Buddhism in light of contemporary priorities began before their tenure as public scholars, their interest in redefining Buddhism in relation to modern concepts such as "philosophy" and "religion" was arguably stimulated by their new positions. In this context, the issue of representing Buddhism in terms of "essence" was their common preoccupation, albeit manifested in very different ways. Hara, for instance, depicted Buddhism as a mind-centered intellectual system akin to what he perceived as modern science. While his perspective stood as somewhat unique in the context of his time, the challenges he encountered in grasping the essence of Buddhism

mirrored those of his contemporary fellow priests. For example, in his efforts to portray Śākyamuni's teachings as a somewhat physiological approach to conquering ignorance, Hara also grappled with the question of whether Buddhism, similar to Christianity, qualified as a "religion." As described in detail by recent scholarship, the very idea of "religion" was appropriated by the Japanese after the 1870s in the process of translating both legal and scholarly texts (Josephson 2012, 71–93; Hoshino 2012). While there existed early modern proto-terms to denote Christianity and Buddhism (Hayashi 2003; Josephson 2012, 22–70; Krämer 2015, 21–41), the introduction of new concepts compelled Japanese intellectuals to adopt a term that, due to the circumstances of its coinage, became closely linked with Protestant Christianity.

In this sense, Hara was categorical in emphasizing that Buddhism was superior to Christianity due to its being, ultimately, a system of scholarship (*gakumon* 学問) rather than a religion (*kyōhō* 教法). In an 1885 lecture, he asserted that while the goal of scholarship was gaining knowledge (*chi* 智) through evidence (*shō* 証), religion was, instead, limited to simply believing (*shin* 信). Although

figure 1. Hara Tanzan c. 1886. Reprinted from tz. https://dl.ndl.go.jp/pid/823362/1/3

he did admit that scholarship too required some level of faith, this was only as a first step to reach the final stage of absolute wisdom, which was itself beyond all belief in other-worldly deities (Hara 1885; TZ, 52). In insisting that learning and understanding supersede belief, and therefore painting his Buddhism as a doctrine focused on the attainment of wisdom, Hara found himself in agreement with contemporary Western depictions of the religion.[6] It is no surprise, then, that Hara became one of the earliest scholars to adopt, at least in part, the understanding of Buddhism proposed by the Theosophical Society. In a February 1887 lecture at one of the most prestigious academic spots at the time, he said as follows:

> With the separation of fields (*gakka bunritsu* 学科分立) that took place in later times, generally everyone came to present Buddhism as a religion rather than taking the experiential (*jikken* 実験) as its basis. However, Buddhism does not take as its aim blind belief in ghostly realms (*yūmyō kōbō* 幽冥荒茫) like the other religions. [Henry S.] Olcott states, "The word 'religion' is [most] inappropriate to apply to Buddhism…. *Buddhism… is a moral philosophy.*" I would quickly note that it is *appropriate to call [Buddhism] a* "*philosophy of the nature of the mind*" (*shinshō tetsugaku* 心性哲学)…. In any case, [Buddhism] is not something outside of the mind and body.
>
> Hara 1887, 105; TZ, 54–55; translated in Toda 2021, 157–158)

The above is, in effect, one of the first occasions on which we can find Hara using the term *shūkyō*, which he employs specifically to claim that Buddhism is *not* a religion. Part of the ideas presented here by Hara can be traced to Henry Steel Olcott (1832–1907), a native of New Jersey and first president of the Theosophical Society, who played an important role in the revival of Buddhism in Sri Lanka.[7] In his best-selling *Buddhist Catechism*, first published in 1881, Olcott claims that Buddhism is a "scientific" and "ethical" set of teachings, and therefore it should be classified as "philosophy" rather than "religion." Commissioned by Nishi Honganji's Akamatsu Renjō 赤松連城 (1841–1919) and translated by Imadate Tosui 今立吐酔 (1855–1931), the Japanese version of *Buddhist Catechism* was very well received by local intellectuals; as we can observe in Hara's text, this reception was not, however, uncritical. That is, although Hara concurred with Olcott that Buddhism fundamentally differed from Christianity, unlike the American's view, he saw it not as an ethical system, but rather as a form of therapy capable of harmonizing matter and spirit.

6. For a historical overview of this type of discourse, see Lopez (2008).

7. On Olcott, see Murphet (1972) and Prothero (1996). On his influence in Japan, see Yoshinaga (2021, 131–211).

For Hara, however, this original "experience" of Buddhism as put forward by Śākyamuni had been lost,[8] and the founder's ideas degenerated into a set of "preposterous and irrational teachings" (*kōtō mukei no mōhō* 荒唐無稽の妄法) (Hara 1886b, 72; TZ, 44). Hara's goal as a Buddhist scholar was, therefore, to recreate this perspective, which he considered crucial for the survival of Buddhism in a new era. For Hara, however, the key for reconstructing this original Buddhism did not lie in recovering lost ancient texts or summarizing their essence for contemporary lay audiences. Rather, it was centered on reclaiming the lost *experience* of Śākyamuni himself. In fact, regarding textual matters, Hara believed the exact opposite: he thought that the emphasis on the written word over the original practice was precisely what had led Buddhism into the contemporary dilemma it faced. Hara emphasized that it had been "due to unnecessary embellishment of these teachings [of Śākyamuni] by biographers and translators" that arose so "many different expressions" (*shuju no myōgi* 種々ノ名義), which caused Buddhism to "abruptly stray into nonsensical and fictitious theories" (*kōtan kakū no setsu* 謊誕架空の説). This was also why, he continued, "criticism such as that from the *Shutsujō gogo* 出定後語 is so difficult to avoid" (Hara 1886b, 72; TZ, 44).

Often translated into English as *Emerging from Meditation*, the text referred to here by Hara first appeared in 1745, authored by Tominaga Nakamoto 富永仲基 (1715–1746). From the late Edo period, Buddhists perceived it as one of the most severe critiques of their religion ever to surface in Japan, provoking clerical responses well into the Meiji years. In this text, Tominaga famously asserts that Mahayana, essentially the only form of Buddhism found in Japan, had not been expounded directly by Śākyamuni Buddha (*Daijō hibussetsu* 大乗非仏説), but was rather a much later development. Tominaga's work was particularly feared by late-Edo clergy precisely because it was grounded on what was then regarded as an impressive knowledge of Buddhist scripture (Klautau 2021, 182). During the early Meiji era, this perceived attack against Mahayana gained additional support from a new source of authority, one that Japanese Buddhists were reluctant to dismiss: European scholarship.

Early Western Buddhology is renowned for its critical view of Mahayana Buddhism. Notable scholars like Oxford professor Friedrich Max Müller (1823–1900) initially adopted a Śākyamuni-centric perspective on Buddhism, often regarding later developments—mostly associated with Mahayana—as corruptions or degenerations (Masuzawa 2005, 126; Krämer 2023, 167). Although Müller's views on Mahayana Buddhism evolved over time through increased interaction with East Asian scholars, his earlier perspectives continued to signifi-

8. For in-depth analyses of Hara's idea of "experience," see Yoshinaga (2006) and Licha (2021a).

cantly influence Japanese scholars during the early to mid-Meiji era (Krämer 2023, 165–187). This shift in viewpoint, however, was not mirrored by his colleague Monier Monier-Williams (1819–1899), who even after gaining a deeper understanding of Mahayana texts and practices, persisted in depicting these later manifestations of Buddhism as "a history not of development but of deterioration" (Masuzawa 2005, 128). In short, negative views such as these were somewhat common in European academia, and, as we shall explore later, Japanese Buddhists had become well acquainted with them by the early 1880s. From the mid-1880s onward, their influence significantly increased. A major contributor to this shift was the hin priest Nanjō Bun'yū, briefly mentioned in the introduction to this article, who after studying in England with scholars including Müller, returned to Japan to teach Sanskrit at the Imperial University in Tokyo. This move helped bridge Western academic perspectives and Japanese Buddhist scholarship, amplifying the dialogue between the two.

While Hara Tanzan agreed with the majority of his contemporary clergymen that Buddhism was in a state of decline and urgently needed revival, he appeared to show little interest in the debate over the validity of Mahayana teachings. Despite being significantly influenced by Western concepts, Hara believed that the revival of Buddhism was not about textual legitimization. Instead, he focused on reclaiming Śākyamuni's original "experience." However, it is important to note that, in this regard, he was somewhat of an outlier. Not only did his colleague, Yoshitani Kakuju, hold divergent views, but so did his successor, Murakami Senshō 村上専精 (1851–1929), whose perspectives could be considered more aligned with the mainstream of the time.

Yoshitani Kakuju and Nirvana

Many recent studies that delve into Japan's engagement with the Euro-American concept of "religion" strive to demonstrate the reconfiguration of Buddhism in response to this emerging discursive framework. For instance, in his monograph on the concept of *shūkyō*, Hoshino Seiji (2012, 45–70) considers the work of Takahashi Gorō 高橋吾良 (1856–1935), a Christian scholar who, influenced by Western scholarship, wrote works on comparative religion. On Buddhism, specifically, he published in 1880 *Butsudō shinron* 仏道新論, a text that would prove quite influential, receiving responses from several important Buddhist priests, including Yoshitani Kakuju, introduced above as one of the early lecturers in Buddhist studies at the University of Tokyo. According to Hoshino (2012, 57), Takahashi Gorō associated the "principle" (*ri* 理) of contemporary science with the notion of a creator god, leading him to the conclusion that scholarship and religion should, ultimately, be in accordance with each other. Although this harmony could be achieved by Christianity, that was not the case with Buddhism,

which was perceived by Takahashi as a "religion" with many unscientific characteristics.

In his analysis of the portrayal of the historical Buddha in modern Japan, Micah Auerback (2016, 171–180) provides a detailed examination of the impact of Takahashi's *Butsudō shinron* at the time. Certain elements of this 1880 publication exemplify precisely the kind of critique the nascent academic field of Buddhist studies aimed to address. For instance, as a recent convert to Protestantism, Takahashi agreed with many of his fellow Christians that a nation's idea of morality was informed by its "religion." Yet, when it came to Buddhism, Takahashi contended that its problematic "essence" rendered it unfit for such a purpose. Nonetheless, the question persisted of what exactly this "essence" was. After all, was it not the case that Mahayana, the sole variant of Buddhism existing in Meiji Japan, constituted a deviation from the historical Buddha's original teachings?

However, unlike many of his predecessors, Takahashi did not take the usual Christian route of asserting Mahayana as an illegitimate form of Buddhism. Quite the opposite: for the sake of argument he asserted, for instance, that although the Mahayana scriptures had indeed not been preached by Śākyamuni, neither had been those of the other "vehicles," adding that they all equally sprung from the Buddha's "mind" or "intent" (*kokoro* 意) (Auerback 2016, 172–173; Takahashi 1880, 12–13). That is, despite the centuries-long debate on the historicity of Mahayana going back, in the Japanese case, at least to Tominaga Nakamoto, it was useful for Takahashi, in the context of his critique, to depict Buddhism as one tradition with an ultimate single goal: the attainment of nirvana (Takahashi 1880, 46). However, how could a "religion" whose ideal was the complete extinction of the self-play the important social role of nation-building? Takahashi's argument was precisely that it was not.

At first sight, one could assume that Takahashi's relativization of the idea that Mahayana had not been preached by the historical Buddha would have at least partly pleased the Meiji Buddhist clergy.[9] Meiji Buddhists were, however, unwilling to accept either the idea, common in European circles at the time, of nirvana as the final goal of Buddhism, or Takahashi's somewhat audacious depiction of all vehicles as equal. In any case, the impact of Takahashi's work was astounding to say the least. After a privately printed the first edition in May 1880, *Butsudō shinron* soon sold out, leading to a second edition published in November of the same year—this time by Jūjiya 十字屋, a prominent Christian publishing

9. It is also interesting to note that his depiction of Mahayana not as the "Buddha's words" but as a manifestation of his "intent" predates by at least two decades the more famous theories of Murakami Senshō. For an English-language introduction to Murakami's arguments, see Ward (2021).

FIGURE 2: Yoshitani Kakuju, date of photograph unknown. Reprinted from YOSHITANI 1914. https://dl.ndl.go.jp/pid/907028/1/5

house of the time. Third, fourth, and fifth editions followed in 1882, 1883, and 1885 respectively, and the work also provoked responses, both direct and indirect, from the Buddhist clergy (AUERBACK 2016, 172–173). One of these indirect responses was by Yoshitani Kakuju, who in his early career as a public scholar seems to have dedicated himself precisely to countering this view of Buddhism as a religion of emptiness.[10]

From 1884, Yoshitani began publishing in installments one of his first works aimed at responding to the emerging challenge of developing a form of non-sectarian Buddhist scholarship suitable for teaching in public institutions to students from a wide array of backgrounds. *Bukkyō taishi* 仏教大旨—for which Yoshitani himself provided the English title *A Brief Account of Japanese Present*

10. While Yoshitani does not explicitly mention Takahashi in his writings, the character of his rebuttal strongly suggests he was responding to the latter's viewpoints. Indeed, this is a work we can say almost no Buddhist at the time was unfamiliar with: besides being republished almost annually between 1880 and 1885, it also received coverage in *Meikyō shinshi* (MS), arguably one of the era's most notable Buddhist periodicals, under the editorship of Ōuchi Seiran 大内青巒 (1845–1918). In 1880 alone, Takahashi's work was either announced or featured in MS 992 (8 June, p. 5), 1004 (4 July, p. 6–8), 1005 (6 July, p. 7–8), 1006 (8 July, p. 7–8), and 1007 (10 July, p. 7–8).

Buddhism—was first serialized in the pages of the journal *Ryōchikai* 令知会, edited by the eponymous association led by Shimaji Mokurai, before being published as a single volume in 1886.[11] In a clear response to contemporary debates on what, in the end, constituted the essence of Buddhism, Yoshitani begins his work as follows:

> The original doctrine of Śākyamuni (*shakushon ichidai no kyōhō* 釈尊一代の教法) is as infinite and boundless as the number of atoms. Nevertheless, if we were to categorize its varieties, we would then have such distinctions as Mahayana and Hinayana, exoteric and esoteric, expedient and true, partial and complete, noble and pure, sudden and gradual, and so on. However, in recent times the social climate has changed greatly; religious ideas have progressed and revealed lively energy, in the sense that we now have those who attempt to distinguish religions between right and wrong, true and false.… [In this context] there are those who criticize Buddhism outwardly, without knowing the truth of its teachings or even discussing the original meaning of its particular doctrines, and those who spill such deluded arguments are not few. Among these [types of criticism], the damage of the *daijō hibussetsu* itself is not recent, but now there are even those who will say that Buddhism's remarks are splendid and its truth deep, and although one does not find [in Buddhism] the teachings of creation (*zōkakyō* 造化教), it upholds the nirvana, that is, absolute emptiness, as its ultimate doctrine. I cannot, however, accept that, and I am not alone in being unable to do so: this is something unpleasing for society in general (*shakai ippan no tame ni yorokobu beki koto ni arazu* 社会一般ノ為ニ忻フヘキコトニ非ス). (Yoshitani 1886, 1–2)

Furthermore, Yoshitani also accuses not only "Westerners" but also people from "India and Ceylon" of not understanding the "deep principles" (*shinri* 深理) of Mahayana. Throughout this 1886 work, and in those that would follow, he asserted that it was not nirvana but "thusness" (*shinnyo* 真如) that was the most essential principle amidst the myriad Buddhist teachings. That is, Yoshitani explicitly recriminates certain groups for claiming Hinayana alone represented the Buddha's "true words" (*shinsetsu* 真説),[12] but also for blindly accepting Hinayana's "one-sided view of the emptiness principle" (*henshin no kūri* 偏真ノ空理) (Yoshitani 1886, 13, 36).

11. In terms of Buddhist media history, it is worth noting that the volume was published by Bussho Shuppankai 仏書出版会, a publishing house that, in the same year, also issued the aforementioned Japanese translation of H. S. Olcott's *Buddhist Catechism*, as well as an annotated edition of the famous Edo-period monk Jiun's 慈雲 (1718–1805) *Hito to naru michi* 人となる道 (Katsuragi 1886).

12. See Licha (2021b) for an analysis of the development of the category of "small vehicle" (*shojō* 小乗) in post-Restoration Japan.

Although nirvana had been a topic for debate in European academia, during the nineteenth century a majority view among scholars of Buddhism and much of their non-specialist audience was that it "*essentially*, entailed the annihilation of the individual" (Almond 1988, 102).[13] This perception of Buddhism's ultimate goal was initially brought to Japan indirectly via the efforts of Christian converts like Takahashi, and subsequently in a more direct fashion through the translation of contemporary European texts. For example, in 1886—the same year Yoshitani released his *Bukkyō taishi*—a work by Max Müller was translated into Japanese for the first time, focusing, perhaps unsurprisingly, precisely on the topic of the nature of the Buddhist *summum bonum*.

The *Nehangi* 涅槃義 was a translation by Nishi Honganji priest Katō Shōkaku 加藤正廓 (1852–1903) of Müller's "The Meaning of Nirvāṇa." The background story of this text is itself significant: it emerged from a debate triggered by one of Müller's earliest writings on Buddhism. As Hans Martin Krämer (2023, 165) points out, Müller, originally a scholar of Sanskrit studies whose work concentrated mainly on literature, published in 1857 his first text on the "philosophy" of Śākyamuni, a somewhat lengthy review essay of Stanislas Julien's *Voyages des pèlerins bouddhistes*. In this article, Müller proposes a more nuanced perspective on nirvana: while for the "Buddhist metaphysician" it would indeed mean something akin to the absolute nothing, for "the millions who embraced the doctrines of the Buddha," it took on "the bright colours of a Paradise," meaning, in much simpler terms "a relative deliverance from the miseries of human life" (Müller 1867, 250).

This review essay by Müller received, a few days later, a response from Francis Foster Barham (1808–1871), an English writer then known for developing Alism, a "divine system" which aimed at reconciling "all great truths" (Barham 1847). In "Buddha and His Critics," Barham disagrees with what he still saw as a nihilistic perspective, claiming that nirvana was in fact "deification, apotheosis, absorption of the soul into God, but not its annihilation" (Barham 1857, 8). This deserved yet another response by Müller where, while reaffirming the essential annihilationist philosophical view, he again asserts that, later in history when Buddhism became a more popular creed, followers deified the originally atheist founder, turning "the very Nothing into a paradise" (Müller 1867, 284).

This response, which originally appeared in an April 1857 issue of *The Times*, was subsequently expanded and included in the first volume of Müller's *Chips from a German Workshop*, under the title "The Meaning of Nirvāṇa" (1872, 279–290). It was this enlarged version that served as the base for the Japanese translation, which should be considered as a direct response to the debate stimulated by

13. In addition to the summary provided in Almond 1998 (102–110), for more comprehensive evaluations of the debates on nirvana during this era, see Welbon (1968) and Droit (2003).

the likes of Takahashi Gorō. That is, while Müller's response does reproduce the contemporary European idea that Buddhism, as a philosophy, upheld nirvana as a type of annihilation of the self, he did also mention that historically, as a religion, Buddhism came to hold a far more optimistic—and for Müller, one could argue, less sophisticated—idea thereof.

The introduction of this work to Japan revealed to local audiences that, even in Europe, the debate was ongoing and far more nuanced than Japanese Christians would have local audiences believe. Perhaps this was, in a way, a dispute to which the Japanese clergy could contribute. And Yoshitani did.

Yoshitani and His Disciples: Mahayana as a Social Religion

For Meiji Buddhists, the above debates on the essence of Buddhism went far beyond the limits of sectarian studies.[14] Note that in 1881, the same year Yoshitani was invited to teach at the University of Tokyo, the Japanese government issued the imperial edict for inaugurating a national assembly (*kokkai kaisetsu no mikotonori* 国会開設の詔). The process of constitutional drafting began around the same time, which also led several private associations to pen their own proposals (George 1984; Toriumi 1988, 164–184).

The constitution was ultimately promulgated in 1889, prepared by a group centered on Itō Hirobumi 伊藤博文 (1841–1909) and Inoue Kowashi 井上 毅 (1844–1895) and under influence of the Prussian system. As scholars such as Yamaguchi Teruomi (1999, 29–55) and Trent Maxey (2014, 163–185) demonstrate, debates on the role of religion in state formation were prevalent throughout the 1880s. In this context, Christians like Takahashi argued that their religion was best suited for a nation aspiring to join the "civilized world." Conversely, Buddhists like Yoshitani asserted the opposite: that Buddhism, not Christianity, was the most appropriate for that. As exemplified by Nishimura Shigeki's influential 1887 publication *Nihon dōtokuron* 日本道徳論, the concept of national development through cultivating a shared moral consciousness that extended from individual to society gained significant traction throughout the 1880s.[15] Thus, in an era focused on redefining Buddhism within a national context, one can imagine the challenges figures like Yoshitani faced with portrayals of their faith emphasizing ideals such as "annihilation of the self" and "pure emptiness."

Mid-Meiji Buddhists responded to this moral question in comparable ways. For instance Inoue Enryō, founder of the Tetsugakkan 哲学館 and perhaps one of the most successful Buddhist students of both Hara and Yoshitani at the University of Tokyo, claimed that Buddhism as it existed in late nineteenth-century

14. For more on Mahayana's social role, see Klautau (2014, 73–78).

15. Note that, in his understanding of religion, Nishimura was influenced by none other than Hara Tanzan. On this topic, see Ge (2013).

Japan was not only a philosophical religion, but also one with a potentially strong moral aspect. In a text published only a couple of months before Nishimura's *Nihon dōtokuron* in February 1887, Enryō asserts that Buddhism was indeed "a type of pure philosophy" (*isshu no junsei tetsugaku* 一種の純正哲学) that at the same time could teach plenty in terms of the "practical utility of moral religion" (*dōtoku shūkyō no jitsuyō* 道徳宗教の実用) (INOUE 1887, 40). Although while making such an argument, Enryō also attempts to push his agenda that contemporary Buddhism was far from its ideal form and therefore in need of urgent reformation (*kairyō* 改良). His responses to contemporary debates arose in most part from within the larger discursive context of the early public study of Buddhism (HASEGAWA 2017).

Yoshitani, too, presented comparable views. As indicated in parts of his work highlighted in the previous section, we observe an initial inclination to contrast what he perceived as the more individualistic approach of Hinayana Buddhism with the social dimension inherent in his own Mahayana tradition. Or, alternatively, we could argue that his aim was not so much to emphasize the social dimension but rather to refute the antisocial implications associated with the annihilationist interpretation of Buddhist nirvana. His engagement with this topic ought to be understood within the broader social context outlined previously, and in works published in the mid to late 1880s, he would extend his argument even further. Yet, before delving deeper into these arguments, the examples of both Hara and Yoshitani should serve to reinforce the somewhat obvious argument put forth at the beginning of this article: namely, how the specific context of early Meiji Japan shaped not only the inclusion but also the early development of Buddhism as an academic discipline in the country's nascent universities. However, as the historical narrative above illustrates, this context was not solely defined by Japan's new position in the world or the influx of Christianity and "Western" ideas. Rather, it was also, to a significant extent, a continuation of concerns that had existed at least since the mid to late Edo period. While these preoccupations were indeed longstanding, their urgency was heightened not only by the influence of European scholarship but also by specific national imperatives that compelled Buddhists to articulate—more proactively than ever before—not only the social role but also the very essence of their religion. In other words, Meiji Buddhists such as Yoshitani skillfully navigated and synthesized these diverse influences, integrating them into their evolving formulations of the meaning and purpose of their beliefs.

This kind of comprehensive response to criticism is exemplified in an essay by YOSHITANI (1884).[16] This piece appears to have achieved a degree of popularity,

16. The original 1884 text was later reprinted in an 1886 issue of the journal *Kyōgaku ronshū* 教学論集, again in 1888 in the same *Ryōchikai zasshi*, and finally included in YOSHITANI (1890).

as it continued to be reprinted in various outlets over the next four years. Its contents were eventually incorporated into *Bukkyō sōron* 仏教総論, Yoshitani's far more elaborated doctrinal overview published in August 1890, around the same time he departed from his position at what was then the Imperial University. Additionally, it appears the original article was also presented as a public lecture, given its inclusion in contemporary anthologies featuring talks by notable Buddhist personalities (Sasada 1887, 99–106). In this text, Yoshitani acknowledges that the claim the Mahayana sutras were not spoken by Śākyamuni was not unfounded, nor, he notes, was it a novel assertion. However, he argues that the presence of Hinayana as the sole form of Buddhism in Southeast Asia should not be taken as evidence that it was the form closest to the "original" teachings of the historical Buddha (Yoshitani 1890, 78–80).

Be that as it may, Yoshitani opted for a different line of argumentation, steering away from the philological concerns of textual legitimacy. Drawing on the translated works of American educator Charles Northend (1814–1895), Yoshitani argued that if humans were, as many contemporary theories suggested, inherently social beings, then Hinayana's emphasis on "self-interest" (*jiri* 自利) was inadequate as a foundation for a healthy society. In contrast, the Mahayana teachings, which are grounded in "altruism" (*rita* 利他), could offer the essential principles for fostering "true societal benefit" (*shakai no jitsueki* 社会ノ実益). Yoshitani maintained that while the Buddha might not have directly articulated the Mahayana sutras, their teachings not only stemmed from Śākyamuni's original truth but also evolved in accordance with *human nature* itself. That is, he argued that Mahayana, by offering a foundation for the much-needed social order and contributing to the happiness of both individuals and the nation, effectively embodied the "true words of the Buddha" (*shinsei no bussetsu* 真正ノ仏説)—far more so than Hinayana (Yoshitani 1890, 80–82).

Yoshitani's rhetoric of a "social Mahayana" versus an "individualistic Hinayana" not only works as a response to contemporary nihilistic depictions of Buddhism—such as those put forward by Takahashi Gorō—but it also addresses the issue that, in terms of essence, Buddhism as it existed in Japan at the time was able to contribute to the nation's progress into "civilization." This line of reasoning seems to have influenced the following generation: Murakami Senshō, who was to become, from September 1890, Yoshitani's successor as lecturer of Indian Philosophy at the University of Tokyo, proposed similar arguments in his 1888 *Bukkyō dōtoku shinron*. In this text, Murakami provides a lengthy discussion of Buddhist ethics vis-à-vis Western philosophy. Although he used Hinayana and Mahayana as examples of what Western thinkers called, respectively, "selfish" (*jiaiteki* 自愛的) and "altruistic" (*taaiteki* 他愛的) moral principles, Murakami (1888, 66) claimed he preferred defining the two vehicles in terms of "inferior" (*katō* 下等) and "superior" (*kōtō* 高等) morals. Note that this was not, however,

the only occasion when his achievements appear to emulate those of Yoshitani. In January 1890, a few months before he was invited to lecture at the Imperial University, Murakami published what became his first best-seller, *Bukkyō ikkanron* 仏教一貫論, which represented an effort similar to that of Yoshitani in his 1886 *Bukkyō taishi*.

While Yoshitani's arguments for the legitimacy of Mahayana—viewed not as the Buddha's direct teachings but as a crucial historical development thereof—lacked the complexity found in the later works of his successor, they do precede Murakami's 1901 *Daijō bussetsuron hihan* 大乗仏説論批判 by well over a decade. In light of this, one could argue that the same concerns prevalent in the early days of Buddhist public scholarship continued to influence at least one subsequent generation, even though some of the newer responses significantly diverged from those offered by Hara or Yoshitani. Murakami, for instance, discovered over the course of the 1890s that simply uncovering Buddhism's inner "consistency" would not suffice; far beyond that, Buddhism needed to be actively unified not only in terms of doctrine, but also as practice. The way these issues were addressed during Murakami's era warrants a separate discussion. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that the question of how Buddhism as it evolved in the Japanese archipelago aligns with the religion "as a whole" has not only influenced Murakami's generation but, to some extent, continues to engage a significant portion of Japanese Buddhist scholars even today.

Conclusion

What was, for these early scholars, the "essence" of Buddhism? While Hara Tanzan focused on redefining Buddhism through individual experience, Yoshitani engaged more directly with contemporary debates on society and morals. Yet, in both cases, their portrayals of Buddhism's ultimate goal were shaped by contemporary political concerns. In other words, the institutionalization of Buddhist studies at the University of Tokyo was, as one would expect, not merely an academic endeavor but also a reflection of broader intellectual movements toward modernization and the construction of a national identity that reconciled Japan's heritage with the expectations of the "civilized world."

The Meiji years were, therefore, an era defined by the complex interplay between traditional and modern perspectives on "Buddhism," as scholars like Hara and Yoshitani navigated both international and domestic criticisms (Isshiki 2019, 10–12), striving to articulate a version of their religion that was not only doctrinally sound but also socially relevant. In either case, as we briefly reflect on the contributions of these pioneering figures, we are reminded that, although we may not perceive it as such today, our own perspectives on what constitutes "Buddhism" are also shaped by ideologies that future generations will

inevitably scrutinize. Examining the early public study of Buddhism in Japan not only deepens our understanding of a specific moment in East Asian religious history but also prompts us to recognize ourselves as historical beings whose study of Buddhism influences how our ideals manifest in society.

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ABBREVIATIONS

MS *Meikyō shinshi* 明教新誌. Meikyōsha, 1875–1901.

TZ *Tanzan Oshō zenshū* 坦山和尚全集. Ed. Akiyama Goan 秋山悟庵. Kōyūkan, 1909.

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Japanese Journal of Religious Studies 51/2: 221–251

dx.doi.org/10.18874/jjrs.51.2.2024.221-251

Jolyon Baraka Thomas

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?

KEYWORDS: religious culture education—religious sensitivity education—democratization—morality—economic growth—security

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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 wartime 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, Woodard 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 Woodard 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 Woodard 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, Woodard 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* 宗教に関することがら) into the social studies courses that had been introduced recently as a replacement for the old wartime 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 *McCollum 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* 宗教的知識教育), 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 (JTU; 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 JTU 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" Karasawa (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* 宗教的情操を養う) 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* 宗教的情操) to outline educational ideals (Chūō 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 subfield. 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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NDKR *Bunken shiryō shūsei Nihon dōtoku kyōiku ronsōshi* 13*: "Kitai sareru ningenzō" ronsō* 文献資料集成日本道徳教育論争史13：「期待される人間像」論争, ed. Kaizuka Shigeki 貝塚茂樹. Nihon Tosho Sentā, 2015.

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19. This research was assisted by a grant from the Abe Fellowship Program administered by the Social Science Research Council and in cooperation with and with funds provided by the Japan Foundation Center for Global Partnership.

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Aike P. Rots

Crossing Boundaries

Rethinking "Japanese Religion" in the Anthropocene

This article uses the fiftieth anniversary of the *JJRS* as an occasion to re-examine the field, consider challenges and opportunities, and offer suggestions for how to bring Japanese religious studies more in tune with developments in adjacent academic fields and wider societal concerns. I argue that scholars of Japanese religion must engage more with the most pressing issues of our time and that they can do so by applying insights from the environmental humanities to their studies. This project should involve reflection upon the adjective "Japanese" and a critical awareness of processes of Japan-making in academia, with greater attention to diversity within the Japanese isles, focusing on migrants, Indigenous communities, and other minoritized groups, and with a transnational comparative approach that moves beyond nation-states as analytical units and acknowledges cross-border flows and commonalities. These conceptual and methodological interventions directly align with the core concerns and objectives of the environmental humanities.

KEYWORDS: environmental humanities—Indigeneity—Japan-making—methodological nationalism—more-than-human relations—ritual

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Over the last fifty years, the *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* (*JJRS*) has contributed significantly to the establishment, consolidation, professionalization, and growth of "Japanese religion" as a scholarly subdiscipline. This subdiscipline is located at the intersection of two larger fields: Japanese studies and religious studies. In addition to specialist journals, the study of Japanese religion has its own research centers, units or sections at major conferences, and university positions.[1] As a result, the last decades have seen a stable supply of historical and ethnographic case studies providing in-depth analyses of selected places of worship, philosophical and mythological texts, ritual traditions, and individual founders and ideologues. This is an impressive collective achievement. The subdiscipline appears robust, at least for the time being.

But will it stay that way? The consolidation of the subdiscipline has led to increasing specialization and knowledge production, but also to fragmentation, insularity, and methodological conservatism. One of the main debates in our field, which came to the fore at the *JJRS* anniversary symposium held in 2023, is whether scholars of Japanese religion should continue "business as usual," publishing in specialized journals and developing fine-grained historical case studies of specific texts or temples, or whether they should try to reach out to and engage more actively with other fields and disciplines—and even beyond academia. This article argues for the latter, not because specialized knowledge is not valuable, but because scholars of Japanese religion possess knowledge and skills that deserve to reach a wider audience, and because they can contribute to larger academic and societal debates. Put differently: much of what we study can be applied productively in more comparative projects, to understand or contextualize similar cases and processes elsewhere, and to develop new theoretical or methodological interventions (McLaughlin, Rots, Thomas, and Watanabe 2020).

This article is grounded in the conviction that academic practices—research, teaching, and public outreach—are inevitably shaped by, and must respond to, wider social, political, and ecological contexts. Today, we live in a time of multi-

1. In addition to the *JJRS*, there are two other English-language peer-reviewed academic journals devoted to the same themes: *Japanese Religions* and the *Journal of Religion in Japan*. Overseas research centers include the Centre for the Study of Japanese Religions at SOAS, University of London, and the Shinso Ito Center for Japanese Religions and Culture at the University of Southern California. There is a "Japanese Religions" unit at the annual AAR meeting and a section on religion at the triannual EAJS conference.

ple crises. These crises are interconnected. The global environmental crises that we are all facing—climate change, biodiversity loss, toxic pollution, and mass extinction—exacerbate fear and inequality, feeding into other crises such as wars, human rights violations, and the erosion of democracies worldwide. And these crises of democracy, in turn, affect academia. It is no exaggeration to state that academia in general and the humanities in particular are under immense pressure globally as governments worldwide, including in the supposedly free West, cut research funding and seek to limit academic freedom.[2] In the short term, this trend may affect public universities more than privately funded institutions. But in the long run, there is no guarantee that private donors will continue investing in humanities research either. The subdiscipline of "Japanese studies" depends at least partly on the endowments and other types of funding provided by religious and corporate sponsors, which makes it vulnerable to economic downturns and ideological whims.

Thus, like other relatively small fields within the humanities, it is uncertain whether the study of "Japanese religion" will be able to survive in its current shape and uphold the same level of activity. This is *not* an argument for trying to justify the relevance of our field in economic-utilitarian or political-strategic terms. But it *is* an argument for overcoming insularity and building bridges with other academic disciplines, adjacent as well as more distant ones. In this article, I focus specifically on the environmental humanities, arguing that it constitutes a promising emerging field and that engagement with some of the concepts and methods developed within this field can enrich the study of Japanese religion. Ideally, this should be a two-way process: insights from our subdiscipline can also inform other areas of study within the environmental humanities. One of the strengths of this new field, I suggest, is that it is *not* a discipline in the classical sense, but that it provides a conceptual, social, and sometimes physical space for conversations *across* disciplines, as well as between academics and non-academics such as artists and policymakers. These conversations may take different shapes, but they are typically centered around a shared concern for social and environmental justice. And while they do not always lead to the desired outcomes, they are helpful for questioning and potentially overcoming established epistemic and political boundaries.

2. In 2025, the Trump administration launched an unprecedented attack on research and higher education. But the United States is not the only democratic state where academic freedom is under threat. Other clear examples of this trend are the Hungarian president Viktor Orbán, who forced Central European University out of Hungary in 2019 because he disapproved of its liberal progressive politics, and the current far-right Dutch government that has announced massive cuts in higher education, prompting the universities of Leiden and Utrecht to discontinue or merge several language and area studies programs. Japanese universities, too, are facing significant budget cuts (Mainichi shinbun 2024). For more examples, see Rots (2023, 30 n. 4).

This article is not a case study. It is a programmatic statement. The fiftieth anniversary of the *JJRS* is a perfect occasion to apply a bird's-eye view to the field, consider challenges and opportunities, and make some suggestions for how to bring it more in tune with developments in adjacent academic fields. In this article, I focus especially on themes and interventions from the environmental humanities, but these relate directly to some of the other concerns of our time: globalization on an unprecedented scale; the rapid transformation of digital technologies and media; widespread resource extraction and economic inequality; the global resurgence of nationalism and authoritarianism; the growth of disaster capitalism; and increasing militarization worldwide. These issues all affect academic practices in one way or another.

The remainder of this article is divided into five sections. First, I provide a brief overview of the environmental humanities, discussing some of its main foci and interventions and introducing one of its core concepts, the "Anthropocene." This section also discusses some previous attempts to bring the environmental humanities into productive dialogue with Asian studies. In the second part, I move on to discuss notions of "Japanese religion" as a unified tradition, arguing that methodological nationalism is a lingering problem in the field. By contrast, I suggest we adopt a different perspective that demystifies the notion of "Japanese" and instead focuses on processes by which certain practices come to be classified as Japanese, while others are excluded from this category. In the following section, then, I argue that there is a need to acknowledge the plurality of practices and perspectives within the Japanese archipelago, proposing that we "recenter the periphery" by placing migrant and Indigenous perspectives at the center of our analysis, which includes an awareness of problems such as environmental degradation and social inequalities. Likewise, I suggest in the fourth part that it is important to consider commonalities and connections across national borders, not as a means to reconfirm nation-states as analytical units but as a tactic for overcoming them, which aligns with some of the main concerns of the environmental humanities. Finally, I provide more concrete examples of ways in which a conceptual framework in dialogue with the environmental humanities can inform the study of Japanese religion, and vice versa. I focus here on notions of more-than-human agency and relationality, arguing for a renewed awareness of the role played by natural phenomena, nonhuman animals and other organisms, and climate events in shaping historical processes and ritual practices. This is but one of several potentially fruitful research directions. I conclude by suggesting that there can be a future for the subdiscipline—but that we must build bridges, not reify boundaries.

Environmental Humanities, the Anthropocene, and Asian Studies

The humanities are undergoing a paradigm shift. The modern epistemic nature-culture dichotomy is crumbling apart, and corresponding notions of human exceptionalism and the autonomy of the individual subject are under increasing intellectual scrutiny. Against this background, the environmental humanities have emerged as a new, global, transdisciplinary field of study concerned with the various interactions between humans, nonhuman companion species, and physical environments (Emmett and Nye 2017; Hubbell and Ryan 2022). The environmental humanities draw upon much earlier scholarship, and the topics they address are not necessarily new. What is new is the institutional support and its consolidation internationally as a field, with its own research institutes, university programs, book series, scholarship programs, and flagship journal (*Environmental Humanities*, published by Duke University Press since 2012).

To be clear: the environmental humanities do not represent a single methodology or conceptual framework. Their value lies in the fact that they provide a space for different epistemological cultures to interact, allowing for encounters between different sets of methods and concepts, centered around a shared concern for environmental justice and a growing awareness that no discipline can tackle the formidable challenges of our time on its own. These encounters are not always successful; translating specialized scientific knowledge into a common language can be difficult, and cross-disciplinary collaboration faces numerous challenges. In many ways, then, environmental humanities spaces such as seminars, conference panels, workshops, journal debates, and edited volumes are spaces of *friction* in the Tsingian sense (Tsing 2005)—confusing and frustrating at times, but also fertile ground for the emergence of new ideas and creative interventions.

One of the main contributions of the environmental humanities is that they have provided a space to reconsider the question of what it means to study humans in relation to nonhuman others. The establishment and acceptance of the environmental humanities as an academic field has provided legitimacy to the study of more-than-human relations in history and today.[3] It has encouraged humanities scholars to overcome their anthropocentric disciplinary training and consider nonhuman animals, plants, landscapes, microbes, fungi, and toxins as historical, social, and literary actors. As a result, scholarship on such topics has become less scattered, more widespread, and more robust than several decades ago. This development is significant not only because it has given rise to new insights within disciplines such as history and literature studies, but also because

3. For an insightful discussion of the concepts "more-than-human," "multispecies," and related terminology, see Price and Chao (2023).

it provides a new space for dialogue and collaborations between humanities scholars on the one hand and social scientists, natural scientists, artists, and policymakers on the other. And although some environmental humanities scholarship has been rightly criticized for its conceptual fuzziness and lack of practical and political applicability (Hornborg 2017), there have been numerous attempts by researchers in the field to ask how their work can contribute to solving real-life problems and to propose concrete methodological interventions (for example, Bubandt, Andersen, and Cypher 2023).

An important moment for the recognition of the environmental humanities as a relevant field for Asian studies was the roundtable discussion "Asian Studies and Human Engagement with the Environment," which took place at the 2014 annual meeting of the Association for Asian Studies (aas). Several papers presented at this roundtable were published in a thematic section of *The Journal of Asian Studies* later that year (Elverskog 2014; Hudson 2014; Philip 2014; Thornber 2014). They raise relevant questions about methodological triangulation, geographical demarcation, and multiple temporalities. The authors discuss the tendency of area studies to fence off its field of study and shy away from larger transnational issues, but they also suggest that Asian studies has the potential to make relevant contributions to the environmental humanities as a whole. Ten years later, the body of scholarship on environmental change in Asia has indeed become much larger—not least within Japanese studies, which has seen a growing interest in environmental history (Miller 2013; Miller, Thomas, and Walker 2013; Arch 2018; Avenell 2017; Holm 2023) anthropology (Kimura 2016; Watanabe 2019; Claus 2020), and philosophy (Miyamoto 2021; Honda 2023)—but many of the suggestions and arguments made by the contributors to the aas roundtable still stand.

Here, I focus specifically on Mark Hudson's article, as it raises some important questions that have implications for my overall argument. As Hudson (2014, 942) states, "placing Asia in the Anthropocene requires us to consider at least three topics: the role of Asia in histories of the Anthropocene, the social-ecological vulnerabilities generated by and experienced in Anthropocene Asia today, and the question of how the Asian experience might be used to build responses to the Anthropocene." The first point is related to the question of the role of Asian societies in global environmental history and pertains to debates about periodization and nomenclature. Ten years later, these issues remain unresolved. Although the term "Anthropocene" has by now become commonplace not only in academia but also in wider society, scientists still strongly disagree about the question of when it started, as illustrated by the recent controversy surrounding a proposal to date its beginning as late as the mid-twentieth century (Sullivan 2024). Others have objected to the term itself, pointing out that the Anthropocene is not the fault of *anthropos* in general, but rather of a relatively small

group of humans who have grown rich by exploiting the planet and their fellow humans (Moore 2016). These are important considerations, and I agree with Moore that the globally dominant ideology of extractivist capitalism is one of the main drivers behind our current composite crisis. I am also convinced by Max Liboiron's (2021) argument that this ideology and the practices into which it translates are grounded in a persistent colonial logic. But the fact remains that "Anthropocene" has become the paradigmatic term to refer to the present age and our collective ecological predicament, acknowledging the fact that "without planning or intention, humans have made a mess of our planet" (Tsing 2015, 19).

The value of the concept then arguably lies not in its historical precision, but in its ability to provide scholars and scientists across disciplines with a common language. The term "Anthropocene" has come to indicate a time in which no single part of the atmosphere or oceans is unaffected by fossil fuel emissions, no human or animal body is free of microplastics and other anthropogenic toxins, the globe is covered with vulnerable for-profit monoculture plantations, species are going extinct at an alarmingly fast rate, and more such crises. That is, it functions as a shorthand both within academia and beyond. As such, its value lies primarily in the fact that it travels well across disciplines, even if it may not be helpful for purposes of historical or geological periodization.

This brings us to Hudson's (2014, 948) second objective: situating Asia "in the history and geography of the proposed new epoch." How has the Anthropocene affected Asian societies, and how have Asian societies shaped the Anthropocene? It is a well-known fact that affluent nations in the Global North have a significantly higher ecological footprint than so-called "developing" countries in the Global South, while the latter, ironically, are hit hardest by climate change and often lack the financial resources for major infrastructural adaptations (Levy and Patz 2015). Such north-south inequalities are also at work in Asia. Wealthy countries like Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and China have used their economic power to export polluting industries to and extract natural and human resources from lower-income countries in South and Southeast Asia (Dauvergne 1997; Avenell 2017). Seen in this light, voters and consumers in Japan are as complicit in the current crisis as upper- and middle-class people in North America, Europe, and Australia. That does not mean, however, that people in Japan and neighboring countries are not also at risk, as "uncanny and improbable events" (Ghosh 2021) are becoming increasingly possible. While the tsunami of 2011 can hardly be contributed to the Anthropocene—earthquakes and tidal waves have always been a fact of life in the Japanese archipelago—the destruction of coastal communities and nuclear disaster that followed it were largely the consequence of human infrastructural decisions and, as such, illustrative of our current predicament. As we are approaching the tipping point, the impact of climate change and biodiversity loss will only get worse, leading

to unprecedented weather events and "natural" disasters for which we can only partially prepare. Humans respond to such uncertainty not only through costly infrastructural projects and training in "disaster preparedness" (Watanabe and Hanson 2023), but also through ritual practices, visual art, and storytelling. I will return to this topic in the last section of this article.

Third, Hudson addresses the same question as many others before and after him have: do Asian societies possess cultural, ethical, or practical knowledge that can help tackle and perhaps even solve environmental problems today? Hudson appears cautiously optimistic about this, but he rightly acknowledges the fact that previous attempts to answer this question have often given rise to cultural essentialist, nationalist, and green Orientalist narratives that contain lofty promises but few practical suggestions. This debate remains highly relevant today. It is beyond the scope of this article to address it at length; I have done so before, in this journal and elsewhere (Rots 2015; 2017; Rots and Lu Rots 2023). Suffice to say here that I am skeptical of grand narratives about the purported environmental orientation of Asian "ontologies" or "civilizations," but I do not reject the possibility of place-based ecological knowledge. Indeed, in many places, Indigenous and other local communities have developed and transmitted skills and practical knowledge that can be highly relevant today (for example, see Kimmerer 2013). Rather, my skepticism concerns attempts to appropriate and frame such knowledge in terms of national cultures (like "Japanese culture") or other reified traditions (such as Shinto, Daoism, or "animism"). The problem of such totalizing narratives is that they often ignore, if not silence, the actual historical actors who are the bearers of knowledge. They also conceal the fact that both nation-states and powerful religious elites have been complicit in the erasure of local ecological knowledge, not its preservation. This applies to modern Japan as much as to other imperial powers, as illustrated by the way in which officials working for the colonial state transformed the landscape of occupied Ainu Mosir and attempted to eradicate the knowledge and livelihood practices of its Indigenous population in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Lewallen 2016b; Grunow et al. 2019)—a topic to which I will return below.

In summary, the value of the environmental humanities lies in the fact that it provides a space for cross-disciplinary encounters and collaboration, which are arguably needed to confront the major challenges of our time. The field raises important questions about historical periodization and responsibility, the impact of East Asian societies on environmental crises (and vice versa), the possible significance of alternative knowledge traditions, and more. Although "Anthropocene" is one of the field's core concepts, these questions are not only limited to the modern period or to contemporary phenomena, but also apply to historical studies. That is, while the paradigm shift that we are witnessing in the humanities may be informed by current global environmental crises, its rel-

evance is not limited to the present moment. It also shapes the questions we ask about the past, for instance by helping us consider the role of nonhuman animals, microbes, or climate change in historical processes. And it may help us question some of our field's classification models and internal boundary-making practices.

Beyond Methodological Nationalism: From "Japanese Religion" to Studying Japan-Making

Engagement with the environmental humanities will lead to new research questions and methodological approaches with potentially far-reaching implications. Japanese studies arguably still suffers from lingering methodological nationalism, which I defined elsewhere as "academic practices that take the nation-state for granted as their main unit of analysis, tacitly assume the self-evidence of naturalized national adjectives such as 'Japanese,' and overlook the historical and contemporary significance of transnational or regional connections" (Rots 2023, 11). A similar argument was made recently by Akihiro Ogawa and Philip Seaton (2020) in their introduction to an edited volume that challenges the category boundaries of "Japanese studies."

One example of such methodological nationalism is the widespread and non-reflexive use of the compound term "Japanese religion" in English- and Japanese-language academic discourse. This term is a scholarly abstraction, created and reified by scholars who have used it to refer to a singular, bounded cultural system in the Geertzian sense (Geertz 1993). Academic and popular texts typically present this national system as a body of beliefs, symbols, rituals, and institutional formations that are characterized by unity in diversity, which have certain common features that distinguish them from other religious traditions—especially their main discursive Others, "Western" or "Abrahamic" religions. This national "Japanese religion" does not equal Shinto, Buddhism, or any other specific tradition; it encompasses and exceeds them. The notion of "Japanese religion" as a singular tradition that transcends denominational distinctions and other historical particularities and is characterized by harmony and complementarity goes back to the early twentieth-century work of Anesaki Masaharu 姉崎正治 (1873–1949), the founding father of religious studies (*shūkyōgaku* 宗教学) as an academic discipline in Japan (see Isomae 2002; 2005). It is also exemplified by the works of influential postwar theorists such as Umehara Takeshi 梅原 猛 (1925–2019) and Yamaori Tetsuo 山折哲雄, who have postulated that the essence of "Japanese religion" lies in a pre-rational, communitarian, spiritual appreciation of divine nature, traces of which can still be found in various Shinto and Buddhist rituals and beliefs (Umehara 1995; Yamaori 1996). The national-system

approach was also characteristic of much late-twentieth-century Anglophone scholarship (Earhart 1969; Kitagawa 1987; Reader and Tanabe 1998).

Such notions continue to be prevalent in introductory and popular texts today. In scholarly literature, by contrast, it has become less common to make blanket statements about "Japanese religion" as a whole. Most monographs in the field now zoom in on the histories of individual temples, shrines, or devotional movements, avoiding generalization. Nevertheless, within these works, too, the categories "Japan" and "Japanese" continue to be used widely, often escaping critical examination.

Interestingly, in the past fifteen years, the academic study of "Japanese religion" has contributed significantly to a growing awareness of the historical formation, adaptation, and diversity of the term "religion." In particular, scholars have made significant progress in re-historicizing the category of religion (*shūkyō* 宗教) and investigating its genealogy in relation to nineteenth-century state formation (Hoshino 2012; Josephson 2012; Maxey 2014; Krämer 2015). This body of research was spearheaded by a polemical review article written by Timothy Fitzgerald (2003), who accused scholars of "Japanese religion" of non-reflexively projecting the Western category "religion" onto Japanese practices and beliefs. What is puzzling about Fitzgerald's critique is not so much his argument that "religion" is a historical construct that ought to be treated with caution—this is now widely accepted—but his failure to see that the adjective "Japanese" is likewise the outcome of scholarly abstraction and equally problematic. In his later work, Fitzgerald even suggests avoiding the category "religion" altogether, yet he does present "Japan" as a single, bounded entity, characterized by a unitary system of ritual and discursive practices. His "critical anthropology" of Japanese religion thus criticizes "religion" while being oblivious to the problems inherent in the adjective "Japanese" (Fitzgerald 2012). This latter monograph has received comparatively little attention, and most scholars of religion now consider Fitzgerald's arguments outdated. My point is not that his work is representative of the field, but rather that Fitzgerald's blind spot is illustrative of a larger problem. While the noun in "Japanese religion" has been subject to considerable scrutiny in recent years, few scholars have questioned the adjective. Yet the questions of why and how certain practices come to be seen as "Japanese" and others do not are at least as interesting and important as the question of what is or is not classified as "religious."

My aforementioned article critiquing methodological nationalism identified three promising directions for Japanese studies (Rots 2023), each of which can fruitfully be applied to the study of Japanese religion as well. First, I suggest that we shift our focus from the studying of "things Japanese" to studying how some things come to be classified as Japanese, while others are excluded from that category. Why and how, for instance, did whale meat become a core part

of the Japanese "traditional cuisine," while insects did not, despite the fact that consuming insects was much more common than consuming whale prior to the modern period (Mitsuhashi 1997; Arch 2018)? This is an important question that touches upon topics such as modern resource imperialism, economic livelihoods, nationalist ideology, and foreign relations. Similarly, my suggestion is that scholars of "Japanese religion" study not only the historical formation and competing definitions of "religion," but also ask how certain practices and worldviews have come to be classified as *Japanese* religion, while others have been excluded.

Only in the last few years have scholars of religion started asking critical questions about the ways in which the academic study of religion has been complicit not only in *religion*-making, but also in *Japan*-making processes—not only in the category's foundational period, the late nineteenth century, but also in postwar society and today (Thomas 2019; Larsson 2024; McMullen and Thomas 2025). This is a promising development. It is also necessary, now that classic *Nihonjinron* tropes are reemployed and consumed eagerly by global audiences. For instance, Shinto has today become what Zen was in the mid- and late twentieth century: the quintessential Japanese nature spirituality, embraced by a new generation of mostly Anglophone spiritual seekers (Ugoretz 2022). While the media of dissemination are new—social media and neo-nationalist websites like nippon.com, predominantly—the popular narrative of Shinto as an "ancient, indigenous animistic tradition" supposedly opposed to "the West" and its "monotheistic" religion is well established (Rots 2017). They draw upon and reproduce foundational nationalist myths about "the Japanese love of nature" and corresponding notions of uniqueness and untranslatability, which obscure modern Shinto's ideological significance and transnational history. This, incidentally, is a good example of a topic that must be discussed not only within disciplinary confines, but also where scholars of religion in Japan can make an intervention in environmental humanities debates. One example would be pointing out the ideological implications of popular narratives about "Shinto animism" or "techno-animism" that have been embraced uncritically by some STS and environmental humanities scholars (see Frumer, Rots, and Thomas forthcoming). Again, I argue that for the study of Japanese religion to remain relevant, we must critically scrutinize the adjective—not only the noun—while engaging in dialogue with scholars from other disciplines.

Diversity, Indigeneity, and Environmental Justice

A second promising direction within Japanese studies is an increasing focus on diversity within the Japanese archipelago, including migrant and Indigenous perspectives, which can help us overcome assumptions about "Japanese" culture

or religion as a single system within a demarcated territory. A good example of this approach is Suma Ikeuchi's (2019) *Jesus Loves Japan*, which is an important work not only because it focuses on a minority group that has received little academic attention but also because it challenges widespread assumptions about Japanese religiosity, the connections between ethnicity, national belonging, and religious practice, and the supposed incompatibility of Christianity and Japanese culture. As the number of migrants in Japan continues to increase and the number of Japanese citizens with hyphenated identities grows accordingly, the myth of a unified Japanese culture and religion appears increasingly untenable. New forms of ritual practice and belief—whether classified as Buddhist, Christian, Muslim, or "folk religious"—are inevitably affecting the mosaic of "Japanese religion," even if this causes friction and requires negotiation on the ground (Kojima 2023). In this respect, it is worth pointing out that scholars of migration are increasingly focusing on environmental degradation, climate change, resource overexploitation, or forced displacement as important factors behind migration patterns, not only today but also in the past (Hunter, Luna, and Norton 2015; Armiero and Tucker 2017). Although I have not yet come across any large-scale research on these communities and their backgrounds, my impression thus far is that many of the Vietnamese and Indonesian migrant workers who live in precarious conditions in Japan are from coastal provinces where people have lost livelihoods due to pollution or overfishing (Lu Rots 2018; Tran 2020)—this, at least, is a hypothesis in need of further investigation. In any case, research on the interplay between environmental change, migration patterns, and religious practices is likely to increase in importance in years to come.

The subdiscipline of "Japanese religion" has long struggled to make sense of traditions that do not fit easily within the paradigm of a single national religious culture characterized by unity in diversity. This applies not only to so-called migrant religions but is also clearly visible in the academic treatment of the ritual practices of the Indigenous minority cultures of modern Japan, that is, Ainu and Ryukuan traditions, both of which were forcibly incorporated into the Japanese empire in the nineteenth century. Religious traditions of the Ryukyu Islands and especially the Ainu have long been a blind spot within the study of "Japanese religion," receiving considerably less attention than mainland traditions, as exemplified by their exclusion from most introductory texts, handbooks, and anthologies (Rots 2024). There may be several reasons for this. It may be due to lingering Kansai- and Kanto-centrism in the field, which is illustrated by the fact that many scholars focus on myths and institutions linked to historic centers of power rather than "peripheral" popular traditions. It may also be related to the predominance of text-based historical research, combined with methodological challenges in studying traditions that lack written sources. More importantly, some scholars may deliberately exclude Ainu and Ryukyuan prac-

tices from handbooks or textbooks because they are aware of the problematic legacies of imperialism and social evolutionism and therefore do not want to classify those practices as "Japanese"—unlike the classical *minzokugaku* 民俗学 scholarship of Yanagita Kunio 柳田國男 (1875–1962) and Orikuchi Shinobu 折口信夫 (1887–1953), which framed those practices as remnants of a primitive, original "Japanese" culture and religion (Morris-Suzuki 1998, 30–32). This is understandable, but the fact remains that, in modern times, these cultures *are* part of the country of Japan. Excluding them from the picture inadvertently confirms notions of "Japanese culture" as a singular, unified system.[4]

In fact, recentering the periphery by foregrounding analysis of Ainu and Ryukyuan cases may help us gain new, important insights into the different ways in which ritual, mythology, and the modern category of "religion" have functioned in the Japanese archipelago and wider East Asian region. For instance, in a recent analysis of the Naha Confucius temple court case, Ernils Larsson (2024) has demonstrated how larger political and ideological conflicts surrounding public support for ritual practices and the role of "religion" in the Japanese constitution impacted a minoritized group and its place of worship. This case shows that religion-making is not always something that happens in centers of power; in fact, some of the most impactful negotiations take place in the periphery and affect minoritized groups. Likewise, attempts to create, consolidate, and demarcate the nation are often the most pronounced and contested in frontier zones with minority populations (Taylor 2004). It is no coincidence, therefore, that Tessa Morris-Suzuki (1998, 9–34) began her groundbreaking study of historical processes of Japan-making with a discussion of ways in which Ainu and Okinawans have been discursively assimilated within the framework of the nation-state; as Others within, their very existence constituted—and perhaps still constitutes—a threat to modern nationalist fantasies of ethnic, cultural, and linguistic oneness.

So where do the environmental humanities come into the picture? Research on minoritized communities and Indigenous cultures need not focus on environmental issues. However, as numerous geographers and political ecologists have demonstrated, these groups are often the most vulnerable and the most

4. There are some exceptions. Historians like Akamine Mamoru (2017), Gregory Smits (2018), and Tze Loo (2023), who have written about the establishment, development, and demise of the Ryukyu Kingdom, have all discussed cosmology and ritual transformations. In the 1990s and early 2000s, there was a wave of ethnographic research on the role of women in Okinawan Indigenous religion (Kawahashi 1992; Røkkum 1998; Sered 1999; Wacker 2003). Anthropologists doing research with Ainu communities recently have referred to cosmology and ritual transformations in passing, but without taking it as their main topic of inquiry (Watson 2014; lewallen 2016b; Swanson 2022). However, none of this scholarship has affected thematic foci and dominant ideas within the "Japanese religion" subdiscipline.

severely affected by climate change, waste problems, and biodiversity decline (Dove 2006; Li 2010). Japan is no exception. In Ainu Mosir/Hokkaido, colonial exploitation and genocidal violence by the early modern Matsumae clan and imperial Japanese state went hand in hand with the remaking of landscapes, overexploitation of resources, and (near) extinction of species that carry cultural and spiritual significance for the Indigenous population (Walker 2001; Strong 2009; Grunow et al. 2019). Such colonial violence still takes place today, as the state denies Indigenous Ainu populations' tenure rights (Morris-Suzuki 2018), constructs dams that destroy local ecologies and livelihoods (Maruyama 2013), and erases Ainu knowledge and history from nature conservation projects (lewallen 2016a). Interestingly, however, it is precisely within the societal space of Indigenous religion—or, more precisely, in ritual ceremonies known as *kamuy-nomi*—that Ainu actors can reclaim some of their lost culture and reestablish relationships with nonhuman Others such as salmon (Iwasaki-Goodman and Nomoto 2001; Kosaka 2018) or with the willow trees that are used for making ritual *inaw* sticks (fieldwork observations, 2022). More research on the interplay between environmental change, Indigenous rights, ritual innovation, and other types of cultural performance is urgently needed.

Like Hokkaido, Okinawa and the western Ryukyu archipelago were incorporated into the modern Japanese empire in the 1860s and 1870s. Unlike Hokkaido, these islands constituted a semi-independent kingdom, governed from the capital Shuri on Okinawa Island. These islands were integrated into the East Asian cultural sphere culturally, politically, and religiously, but they did have their own distinctive local practices, including a ritual system centered on priestesses conducting community rituals at sacred groves. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Okinawans have suffered from wartime atrocities, land-grabbing, militarization, economic and political marginalization, and systemic gendered violence (Allen 2002; Hein and Selden 2003; McCormack and Norimatsu 2018). Here, too, such "slow violence" (Nixon 2011) often translates into environmental degradation, toxic pollution, the deliberate destruction of ecosystems by the US military and Japanese state, and the loss of companion species and landscapes (Mitchell 2020; Palz 2023). And here, too, religion offers a space for creative resistance, as some Buddhist and Christian priests and Indigenous ritual practitioners (*kaminchu*) are active in anti-base protest movements (fieldwork observations, 2017–2018). In Okinawa, as elsewhere in Asia, minority and Indigenous ritual practices and religious identities are often shaped by issues of social and environmental justice, and they may mobilize people to negotiate or resist oppressive structures. More in-depth research on this and related topics, by scholars of religion as well as others, is needed.

Transnational Perspectives

Third, I argue that Japanese studies, including the study of "Japanese religion," needs to adopt a more explicitly transnational comparative approach (Rots 2023).[5] Unfortunately, the word "transnational" has become a bit of a buzzword in recent years, to the point that some scholars who conduct excellent transnational research no longer want to use it, while much of what passes as "transnational" research today does not in fact transcend the nation. Such research merely juxtaposes "things Japanese" with data from other countries and ends up reconfirming modern nation-states as units of comparison.[6] Just like "internationalization" (*kokusaika* 国際化) discourse in the 1990s and early 2000s served to naturalize nations (Robertson 1997), recent area studies scholarship still struggles to think beyond the nation-state as its main analytical and organizational unit. By contrast, I advocate a multisited, cross-border comparative approach that considers formations of the nation-state on the ground but does not take them for granted; in other words, research that *transcends* nation-states, not reconfirms them. This approach is informed by recent arguments put forward by two anthropologists of Asia, Laurel Kendall (2021) and Peter van der Veer (2016), both of whom moved from being single-country experts (South Korea and India, respectively) to conducting comparative research in different parts of the continent, which generated new questions and insights.

Here, too, the environmental humanities offer some useful suggestions for how to proceed. More engagement with environmental issues can be helpful for overcoming methodological nationalism for the simple reason that climatological phenomena, nonhuman animals, and pollution do not respect borders. Bodies, landscapes, ecosystems, and cultures are porous and interconnected. They are all shaped and transformed by human and nonhuman actions and by anthropogenic matter created in different times and places. One of the strengths of the environmental humanities is precisely that they force scholars to look beyond

5. Interestingly, in the 1970s, the *JJRS* did have such a comparative orientation, as illustrated by the 1976 special issues on the secularization debate, which included theoretical interventions by sociologists Bryan Wilson (1976) and Thomas Luckmann (1976). In later decades, however, it focused primarily on Japanese cases, only rarely publishing articles that apply a cross-border perspective. Perhaps *JJRS* can once again take up such larger debates and invite scholars working in other parts of the world to contribute to special issues, engaging in dialogue with scholars who focus on Japanese cases.

6. A good example of this approach is the keynote lecture of the last conference of the European Association of Japanese Studies in 2023, held by University of Tokyo professor Sonoda Shigeto (2023). Titled "Asianization of Asian Studies and Its Impact on Japanese Studies," one might expect a lecture with a strongly transnational orientation. Instead, the speaker ended up reproducing common tropes about Japan, China, and Korea, taking them for granted as natural categories. Such *kokusaika*-type implicit nationalism remains widespread within Japanese higher education, as well as Japanese studies departments and funding schemes abroad.

national and disciplinary boundaries. Climate change, plastic pollution, zoonotic diseases, and mass extinction are complex and multifaceted problems that cut across national borders and scientific paradigms, which can only be tackled by international and multidisciplinary collaboration. It is no coincidence that some of the most interesting works in environmental anthropology in recent years that focus on Japanese cases have a transnational or comparative orientation (Avenell 2017; Watanabe 2019; Claus 2020). The authors of these studies are aware that environmental change cannot be studied in national isolation.

This also applies to phenomena that we refer to as "religious." Applying a cross-border comparative approach to the study of religion on the islands that today make up the country of Japan is about more than recognizing the basic fact that the deities, myths, rituals, and institutional formations on these islands have all been shaped by continental influences. This latter fact is widely accepted in the field today, fortunately (except for some staunch neo-*Nihonjinron* Shinto scholars, perhaps), but acknowledging foreign influences alone is not sufficient for overcoming the nation-state paradigm. Similarly, recent years have seen attempts by Japanese scholars to universalize the Japanese term *shinbutsu yūgō* 神仏融合 and project it onto other parts of Asia, but so long as such scholarship reproduces notions of "Japan" as the model for practices in other Asian countries, it does not transcend the nation-state as the main unit of comparison (Yoshida 2021). As Tessa Morris-Suzuki (2000) and Peter van der Veer (2016) have both argued, the point of transnational comparison is *not* to universalize and deny cultural differences; rather, the goal is to zoom in on *particulars* that are not framed in terms of national adjectives (or other large-scale totalizing categories, such as "world religions") and to compare particulars in different places and times in order to achieve a better understanding of larger patterns, similarities, and interactions.

Such an approach implies an acknowledgment of the constant interplay and tensions between local place-making and story-telling practices, nationalist imagination, state involvement on different levels, and cross-border comparison by the actors involved. As Heather Swanson (2022, 11–21) has rightly pointed out, academics are not the only ones who think comparatively; so do the people we study. Comparison is a world-making practice. Thus, as Fabio Rambelli (2014) has demonstrated, perceptions of "India" and "China" were central to the medieval Japanese Buddhist imagery and served to justify particular ritual innovations or power structures. Similarly, in postwar Japan, notions of "Christianity" and "monotheism" have been central to efforts to redefine Shinto (Rots 2017; Thomas 2019). For twentieth-century self- and world-cultivation movements belonging to the Ōmoto lineage (for example, Church of World Messianity, oisca, and Aikidō) and *Lotus Sūtra*-centric lay Buddhist movements focusing on world peace (for example, Soka Gakkai and sgi), cross-border com-

parison and outreach are not merely a pastime; they are at the core of members' self-definitions and aspirations (McLaughlin 2019; Watanabe 2019). People define themselves in comparison with multiple others, real or imaginary, at home or in faraway locales.

Thinking transnationally also means that we should question the ways in which conferences, edited volumes, study programs, and journals such as the *JJRS* compartmentalize the generic category of "Asian religion" into different country-shaped units (Japan, Korea, China, Tibet, India, Vietnam, and so on). This compartmentalization has led scholars and students to place too much weight on the nation as the defining variable for religious action and too little on cross-regional flows and commonalities. It has taken me a while to realize this. When I was a graduate student, I mostly focused on cases from Japan, but since then, I have had the opportunity to conduct research not only in Okinawa but also further south, in coastal areas of central and southern Vietnam. My experiences in Vietnam and elsewhere in East and Southeast Asia have made me see that many phenomena commonly framed as "Japanese" in academic and popular literature—*kuyō* 供養-type pacification rituals, sacred trees and rocks, bodhisattvas manifesting themselves as local deities (or the other way around), a focus on this-worldly benefits (*genze riyaku* 現世利益) in ritual practices, *kami* 神 residing in nature, and more—are not uniquely Japanese at all, but common across the region. There is a shared ritual logic. There is also considerable diversity when it comes to the exact shape of rituals and identity of deities, of course, but this diversity also exists *within* nation-states. Classifying everyday ritual practices into reified and nationalized categories such as "Japanese Shinto," "Chinese popular religion," "Korean shamanism," and "Vietnamese spirit worship" obscures cross-border regional commonalities *and* local particularities.

Studying Religion in Japan from an Environmental Humanities Perspective

In the previous sections, I have given several examples of ways in which the environmental humanities can inform, challenge, and redirect the study of religion in Japan—as well as, potentially, vice versa. In this final section, I give three further suggestions. This list is meant to give an indication of the field's rich potential, but it is by no means exclusive, and I trust that others will explore additional themes and methodological approaches. For now, my suggestion is that the environmental humanities can enrich the study of religion in Japan in the following three ways:

1) Rethink rituals as techniques for mediation between humans and nonhuman others and consider ritual responses to environmental change;
2. Overcome anthropocentric biases in the study of religion and consider the agency of nonhuman animals, plants, microbes, and other natural phenomena;

3. Establish and cultivate more in-depth dialogues and collaboration between fields like environmental history, sociology, literature studies, and ethics on the one hand, and religious studies on the other.

First, on a fundamental level, thinking of environmental change, more-than-human relationality, and ritual practices in conjunction can be fruitful as it may help us to remember *what rituals actually do*. As Donovan Schaefer (2015, 4–10) has pointed out, one of the unfortunate consequences of the linguistic turn in the humanities in the last few decades is that scholars of religion and ritual have predominantly focused on questions of ideology, symbolism, and power relations between humans, while overlooking the importance of ritual for cultivating and maintaining affective relationships between human and nonhuman actors such as plants, animals, weather events, and bodies of water. But rituals are not merely reflections of human power structures and social relations; they are also techniques for mediating human-nature relationships. Through rituals, people summon the gods to bring rain, pacify the waves, or bring an end to pandemics; they try to navigate a dangerous world full of forces that are difficult to control. Indeed, it is precisely here, in the shared ritual logic, understandings of more-than-human relationality, and notions of enchanted physical environments, that we witness the fundamental similarities between practices taking place in Japan and elsewhere in the Asia-Pacific region, regardless of the practitioners' "ism" or citizenship (Andaya 2017; Rots 2024).

Rituals are practices of care. Through rituals, people establish, cultivate, maintain, transform, and sometimes end affective relationships with other persons, human and non-human. Many of these actors are immanent (Sahlins 2022). They live in our houses, in the rivers, seas, and trees around us, or on the side of the road. Some are powerful; they can make beaches erode, storms change direction, fish or game appear or disappear, and viruses lose strength. But they are not omnipotent, and some of them are suffering, too—for instance, when humans take their dwelling place away from them. What happens to deities and spirits of the seas and rivers when the waters in which they live become polluted and their fish is no longer safe to eat? What happens to forest gods and tree spirits when the trees are all felled, as happened in Cambodia, one of the most deforested countries on this planet (Swift and Cock 2015)? Do they simply disappear, do they undergo transformations, or do they start wandering and cause trouble to people? Similarly, what happens to the rituals that focus on mediating relationships between humans and species central to their livelihoods and environments, when these animals gradually disappear or even go extinct?[7]

7. See Johnson (2020) on the loss of species and ritual transformations on the Mekong River; Sakakibara (2020) on Iñupiat responses to the decline of the bowhead whale population; and Darmanto and Persoon (2026) on crocodiles spirits causing havoc in western Indonesia.

A related and equally timely question is how rituals help people give meaning to, mourn, and prepare for natural disasters. If catastrophe and religion are often co-constitutive and formed in tandem, as Levi McLaughlin (2025, 13) argues, what does this bode for the coming decades, in which climate change-induced disasters will occur with increasing frequency? Can we expect new waves of ritual innovation and revival? These questions are becoming increasingly urgent for many people worldwide, and Japan is no exception. Bringing environmental perspectives into the study of religion will help us stop considering Japanese cases in isolation.

Second, learning from the environmental humanities can help us overcome lingering anthropocentric biases in the field. The question of nonhuman agency remains a thorny one in most of the humanities, including the study of religion.[8] Non-confessional religious studies tend to focus primarily on human actors, while bypassing questions of divine agency—an epistemological position generally referred to as methodological agnosticism. Perhaps as a consequence, few scholars of religion have addressed questions about animal or other nonhuman agencies in their research, although this may gradually be changing. Animals do feature in the study of religion, but mostly as human-made symbols, objects of worship, totems, and taboos or as passive victims or recipients of human moral actions. Only recently have some scholars of religion started taking animals seriously as historical actors, who have co-shaped the world together with humans.[9]

Likewise, there is some excellent scholarship on the role of trees, statues, and natural landscapes in Japanese religion (Moerman 2005; Rambelli 2007), but these works mostly focus on the meanings attributed by human actors, not on the ways in which these trees, objects, and landscapes themselves have *made* history. My own earlier research on sacred groves at Shinto shrines, too, focused mostly on human meanings and practices, without seriously considering trees, insects, or deities as actors (Rots 2015; 2017). A multispecies approach can potentially help us look beyond discourse and consider the ways in which trees, animals, or microbes have shaped ritual practices and institutional histories. This is not a radical idea: environmental historians have long known that changes in ecosystems affect the human societies that depend on companion species and plants for their livelihoods (Totman 1989; Walker 2001; Arch 2018). We can shelve philosophical and biological questions about nonhuman volition and cognition while still asking how nonhuman beings have shaped historical developments through their actions.

8. For insightful discussions of nonhuman agency, see Nash (2005) and Aronsson, Holm, and Kaul (2020).

9. For a more detailed discussion of this topic, including examples and an overview of the academic literature on the topic, see Rots, Durney, and Åman (2026).

This brings me to the third and final point of this section: the potential for cross-disciplinary collaboration. As should be clear by now, the trend towards increasing specialization in the humanities and area studies has been a double-edged sword; while it has led to more knowledge in certain fields, it has also given rise to blind spots, disciplinary siloing, and mistaken assumptions of uniqueness. By contrast, the environmental humanities have emerged as a space for intellectual exchange in which people with different backgrounds and methodological toolkits can join forces. This provides some interesting opportunities for scholars of religion in Japan and beyond. Environmental history and anthropology are obvious examples: until recently, most studies in this field had a decidedly "secular" character, focusing on resource use, multispecies interactions, and ecological change but largely bypassing questions of religious engagement with the natural environment (Fernando 2022). This applies to Japanese environmental history as well. But there are some promising attempts to bridge the fields; for instance, two recent studies of Japanese whaling history have included religious perspectives into their analyses (Arch 2018; Holm 2023). Likewise, scholars of religion could focus more on environmental change when delving into the histories of their chosen temples and shrines, as the availability of natural resources, unforeseen climate events, erosion, droughts, extinctions, and industrial pollution may have all given rise to ritual and institutional transformations at different times in premodern and modern history.

In a similar vein, other fields that have engaged with environmental issues in recent years, such as anthropology, ethics, literature and popular culture studies, sociology, and STS would do well to engage with critical religious studies. For example, Heather Swanson's (2022) recent study of salmon hatcheries in Hokkaido and Chile is an excellent transnational multispecies ethnography, but it overlooks the importance of religious ideology in colonial-extractivist projects and does not pay sufficient attention to the significance of ritual in Indigenous environmental activism. Yuki Miyamoto's (2021) study of philosophical and ritual responses to the Minamata crisis likewise touches upon religion yet shies away from fully exploring the multiple meanings and societal significance of the mnemonic sites and ritual performances developed by survivors. More problematically, several recent works by sociologists and literature scholars reproduce ahistorical and essentialist stereotypes about an imaginary, intrinsically Japanese "Shinto animism," overlooking most of the recent scholarship on Shinto (Jensen and Blok 2013; Yoneyama 2019).[10] It is an illusion to think that we can prevent

10. I share a thematic interest and environmental agenda with these scholars, but I disagree with them on conceptual and ideological grounds. This type of academic "animism talk" reproduces methodological nationalism, mistakenly frames elements of a reified national culture as solutions to environmental crises, and obscures the economic and political structures that prevent necessary systemic change (Frumer, Thomas, and Rots forthcoming).

such ideas from circulating and gaining academic currency altogether, but I do believe that scholars of religion in Japan can do more to reach across disciplinary divides and seek to establish a constructive dialogue with colleagues in other fields. Environmental humanities networks, conferences, journals, book series, and study programs may just be the right spaces for this.

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued against insularity. I suggested that scholars of Japanese religion need to engage more with other fields of study and that journals such as this one must seek to include more perspectives from other academic disciplines and geographical regions. Such engagement matters not only intellectually, but also politically. Humanities and area studies are under pressure worldwide, and funding sources or academic freedom cannot be taken for granted. Like other humanities researchers, scholars of religion in Japan need to engage with some of the most pressing environmental and political issues of our time, regardless of the historical period(s) on which they focus in their research.

Recent years have seen the establishment and consolidation of the environmental humanities, not as a new discipline but as a space for cross-disciplinary dialogue and collaboration. More in-depth engagement with some of the theories and questions put forward by scholars within this space can help scholars of Japanese religion overcome some of their field's blind spots and limitations. This is a two-way process: scholars of Japanese religion can contribute to more nuanced and informed academic debates about, say, the relationship between ritual and environmental change or the purported influence of Japanese religion on present-day technology and popular culture.

This article has argued that scholars of Japanese religion should reflect more upon the adjective "Japanese" and study processes of Japan-making, rather than taking Japan for granted as a core variable. It has also argued for more awareness of diversity within the Japanese isles and for recentering the periphery by focusing on migrants, Indigenous communities, and other minoritized groups. And it has called for a more explicitly transnational comparative approach that moves beyond nation-states as analytical units and acknowledges cross-border, regional flows and commonalities. A more extensive engagement with the environmental humanities can be helpful for achieving these three objectives.

Throughout, I have applied a meta-perspective and outlined a programmatic statement, rather than analyzing one or several case studies. I am convinced that ritual practices and religious storytelling matter in the Anthropocene, as they help humans cultivate and mediate relationships with nonhuman others such as companion species, deities, landscapes, and climate events. I am also convinced that a mono-national approach to such practices and stories leads to serious

oversights, distortions, and potentially even to epistemic violence. We must study borders, not build them. There is no such thing as self-contained, demarcated "Japanese religion," other than as a discursive construct.[11]

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11. Research for this article was conducted in the context of the erc-funded project "Whales of Power: Aquatic Mammals, Devotional Practices, and Environmental Change in Maritime East Asia." This project is funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program under grant agreement no. 803211 (erc Starting Grant 2018).

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Japanese Journal of Religious Studies

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Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture
18 Yamazato-chō, Shōwa-ku, Nagoya 466-8673 Japan
TEL (81) 52-832-3111 / FAX (81) 52-833-6157
E-MAIL: jjrs.submissions@gmail.com

ISBN 9798294207632
ISSN 0304-1042