Mini-keynote for Session 1

Japanese Religion: A Terminal Patient?

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Thank you—to Nichibunken for choosing the Nordic countries as the venue for this year's conference, to the presenters for sharing your research with us, and to the audience for showing an interest and hopefully posing stimulating questions.

We can look forward to a broad array of topics over the course of this day, ranging from aspects of medieval to modern, hard-core Buddhism to reflections of sacredness or spirituality in cultural forms that appear a lot less specific and defined. As the moderator of this session, I have tried to arrange the papers in groups that, at first sight, seemed in some way related. I hope there will be something of particular interest to each of you; I know for a fact that there will be something in the category of *hatsumimi* for all. It follows from the nature of this conference that we shall be witnessing the variety and scope of research into Japanese religion within the Nordic countries—I trust that the lack of coherence will not prevent you from enjoying the variety of this day's programme.

I have been given fifteen minutes for a so-called "mini-keynote." Key-note is a term from music—apparently it means "the lowest tone or note of a scale," with which everything else in a piece must be "in key." But today's papers are composed in many different keys, leaving me with an impossible task. I will therefore concentrate on keeping my keynote both low and mini.

Just months ago, the study of Japanese Religion has been enriched with a new journal: the *Journal of Religion in Japan*. The title of this Brill-initiated journal signals the ambition to make research on religion in Japan relevant to the field of religious studies as a whole. Japanese religion has, I think, been a rather rich field of study; yet its impact on theories of religion has been quite limited compared not only to the study of Western religions, but, arguably, also of other Asian traditions. This journal could offer a good opportunity to do something about this.

The first, "key-note" article of this new journal is a rallying call in exactly this direction. It is authored by one of the defining figures in the field, and one of few Japan specialists to have spread his wings beyond the Area studies arena: Ian Reader.[1] With his typical flair, he inaugurates the journal by declaring: "Religion may not yet be dead in Japan but it is dying."[2] His explanation for this radical development is just as provocative: Reader argues that the secularization theory should be resurrected in its classical guise, and posits that the radical decline of religion in Japan is due to urbanization and the spread of higher education.

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[1] Ian Reader. "Secularisation, R.I.P.? Nonsense! The 'Rush Hour Away from the Gods' and the Decline of Religion in Contemporary Japan." *Journal of Religion in Japan* 1:1 (2012), pp. 7–36.

[2] Reader 2012, p. 34.

I would be very interested to hear what you all think of this thesis. In studying "religion in Japan," are we studying a terminal patient? Does the incumbent fate of Japanese religion prove that modernity-induced secularization "remains a potent force," as Ian Reader puts it, and even, perhaps, that the same fate awaits religion in other modern societies across the globe?

When put like this, Ian Reader's argument surely sounds overly naïve. The case of Japan does not prove that "religion" is bound to face total extinction any time soon—if only because other modern and modernizing nations provide convincing counter-evidence (such as the U.S., or countries in the Middle East and South Asia). And I won't even start on a discussion of the theoretical and practical problems in pinpointing what "religion" and, even worse, "secularity" may mean in different contexts—other than to say that it is a long way from medieval Christendom, which pioneered this conceptual pair, to early modern and modern Japan.

Still, I think Reader has a point. He argues that critics of secularization theory have often used Japan as an example of a modern society where religion has *not* been threatened by modern secularity, and he sets out to prove that this image of a religiously vibrant Japan has no roots in actual reality by quoting a variety of statistics. He admits that in his earlier writings, he has been among those who have broadcasted an image of Japan as an exciting religious laboratory, and in his usual open-minded manner, he sets out to correct what he now sees as a mistaken perception. He is sceptical of both the so-called "religious boom" of the 1970s and the "spirituality boom" trumpeted by the media in the 2000s. Instead, he sees a steady decline in the fortunes of temples in particular, but also stagnation in the activities of New Religions, and, most significantly, a decline in levels of self-declared "faith" (*shinkō*) and an increasingly negative perception of "religion" in public discourse. I would have framed the argument differently, but I do agree with Reader that "religion" in Japan is negatively affected by increasing scepticism and is struggling to attract the custom on which religious institutions depend for their survival.

As long as I can remember, Japan has been portrayed both as strikingly secular on the one hand, and, at the same time, as overflowing with temples, shrines and churches of all kinds. Already in the 1970s, Jan Swyngedouw of Nanzan University described the question whether "Japan should be called a secular or religious society" as "classic."[3] The same decade saw a lively discussion on the effects of secularization on religious institutions in Japan; few were optimistic on their behalf.

Yet, looking back on my own experience of developments in northern Europe, I would say that religious institutions in Japan have proved remarkably robust in the face of change. In my city of birth, Eindhoven in the Catholic south of the Netherlands, there were fifty-seven churches when I was young; now there are only two left. In Japan, the number of temples has decreased by some 20 or 25 percent since 1970; shrines and churches may even have increased in number. Rural shrines are threatened by depopulation rather than secularization; most

[3] Jan Swyngedouw. "Secularization in a Japanese Context." *JJRS* 3/4 (December 1976), p. 283.

urban shrines appear to be doing quite well, and my impression is that shrine priests have more confidence in the future than do temple priests. From a northern European perspective, we should perhaps ask not why "religion is dying," but rather why so many Japanese religious institutions have managed to survive in what appears to be an environment that is increasingly hostile to "religion," and why some institutions fare worse than others.

Central to the conundrum of religion in Japan has been the question of religious identity. Astounding numbers of Japanese temples and shrines have subsisted for a remarkable length of time by offering services to people who do not identify themselves with the sect or even religion that those temples and shrines represent. This simple and much-discussed fact has profound implications for a discussion about secularity in Japan, or in the many Asian countries where religious institutions function in similar ways.

Charles Taylor has written a fascinating work on the emergence of secularity in his classic *A Secular Age*.[4] One central moment in this long saga was the movement, from the sixteenth century onwards, to "reform" the City of Man by applying the standards of the City of God to all aspects of society. This involved imposing the norms of religious life on lay people. Their interaction with the church was no longer limited to their depending on the mediation of professional priests at crucial moments in their lives; now, they had to take care to live Christian lives on a daily basis. Others have called the infusion of religious values and practices into all spheres of social life "fundamentalism," and argued that this originally European process spread across the world in the nineteenth century.[5] Ironically, "reform" of this kind produced both political forms of religious fundamentalism and secular thought—which retains the idea that the world can be improved towards perfection but does away with the primacy of God.

Many writers on Japanese religion have argued that in order to survive, Japanese religion has to follow a similar path, from lay-people's dependence on the services of religious professionals to the creation of religious identities based on the notion of what Taylor calls "Reform." Swyngedouw, for example, wrote that Japanese religions needed to "evolve in a direction based on the ethic of the universally human" and inspire "personal faith" in their followers on that basis.[6] In the immediate post-war, Orikuchi Shinobu argued the same for Shinto; so did numerous Buddhist leaders for their sects. The shrine organization Jinja Honchō has consistently resisted this path; many Buddhist sects did embrace it, but have had limited success in winning over their *danka*. In the end, most users of religious services in Japan show little interest in, or actively resist adopting a religious identity, or embarking on a programme of personal reform.

In some way or other, this must have profound repercussions for the way Japanese religious institutions are affected by secularization. Losing interest in using ritual services is a very

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[4] Charles Taylor. *A Secular Age*. Harvard University Press, 2007.

[5] Torkel Brekke. *Fundamentalism: Prophesy and Protest in an Age of Globalization*. Cambridge University Press, 2011.

[6] Swyngedouw 1976, p. 303.

different thing from abandoning a religious identity. Choosing between a temple grave and a grave in a public cemetery may well involve questions of faith, but not necessarily. It makes sense to say that Norwegian parents choosing to baptise their child in a church are making a religious choice, and those who choose not to do so may perhaps be described as secular; but do the same terms apply in any meaningful way to *hatsu miyamairi* or *shichi-go-san*?

One of the main conclusions to arise from the debate on secularization is that, contrary to what Reader appears to be arguing, secularity comes in many shapes and forms. To my mind, the way Japan's temples and shrines function does not fit in very well with most of them. Perhaps their future depends not on a contest between religion and secularity, but rather on changes in the public demand for ritual performances, and priests' abilities to offer these in an attractive and effective manner. This may well explain why shrines, which are less associated with the problematic label of *shūkyō*, appear to be doing better than temples or the churches of New Religions. It may also explain why temples and shrines seem relatively unaffected by falling rates of self-declared faith, and why temples that offer only rites that suit traditional families are in most trouble of all.