

Public Shrine Forests? Shinto, Immanence, and Discursive Secularization

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This article analyzes contemporary Shinto ideology in the light of recent theories on the formation of the category “secular” and on secularization. Drawing on Charles Taylor’s discussion of the original meaning of the categories “religious” and “secular,” as well as the work of Kuroda Toshio and others, it suggests that premodern shrine worship may have been perceived as the “immanent,” “this-worldly” counterpart of a more transcendently oriented monastic Buddhism. In the Meiji period, Shinto developed into a modern Japanese “immanent frame” (or “Shinto secular,” as Josephson has called it)—a public, collective, non-optional frame of reference—while Buddhism, Christianity, and “new religions” were configured as “religious,” that is, private and optional. Contemporary Shinto leaders such as Tanaka Tsunekiyo and Sonoda Minoru draw upon such Meiji-period understandings of Shinto as the immanent, foundational framework by which Japanese culture and society are shaped and conditioned. According to them, Shinto should not be subject to the same legal restrictions as other religions, as it is an essentially public tradition uniting communities (*kyōdōtai*) around their shared sacred center, the shrine grove (*chinju no mori*). As this article demonstrates, these authors actively contribute to Shinto’s *discursive secularization*: they seek to dissociate Shinto from “religion,” instead framing it as Japan’s underlying “traditional culture” (*dentō bunka*). Rather than challenging the postwar legal state apparatus and separation of religion and state, therefore, they seek to renegotiate Shinto’s position within this apparatus, asserting its role as a “secular” worship tradition concerned with the common good of the nation as a whole.

Keywords: *Chinju no mori*, “immanent frame,” public space, sacralization, secularism, Shinto environmentalist paradigm, “Shinto secular,” shrine communities, Sonoda Minoru, Tanaka Tsunekiyo

In recent years, Prime Minister Abe Shinzō’s 安倍晋三 plans to change the Constitution of Japan have received ample media attention. In particular, his efforts to adapt and/or reinterpret Article 9 in a way that allows for more Japanese military involvement in foreign conflicts have been subjected to much scrutiny and protest, in Japan as well as abroad. Yet

Abe's proposed constitutional changes are not limited to Article 9. One significant legal-political change, instigated by the Abe government, concerns the constitutionally stipulated separation of state and religion. Although Japan remains a country with comparatively strict laws when it comes to state support for religious institutions, the boundaries of the category "religion"—which have been subject to negotiation ever since the implementation of the category in the Meiji period—are being actively redrawn, and some practices previously classified as "religious" are currently reframed as "culture," "tradition," or "heritage." Supported by powerful conservative lobby groups, Abe has been actively involved with the reintroduction of Shinto and imperial symbols and rituals into the public realm, leading to their "deprivatization" and, it may be argued, a renewed "sacralization" of the nation and land of Japan.¹

Central to these initiatives are the Ise Shrines, generally regarded as the most sacred site of Shinto, where sun goddess and divine ancestress of the imperial family Amaterasu 天照 is enshrined. Significantly, in 2013, Abe participated in an important shrine ritual in the context of Ise's ritual rebuilding (*shikinen sengū* 式年遷宮), which takes place every twenty years. The myth of Ise as the leading imperial, "non-Buddhist," "eternal" sacred site in the country played a central role in Meiji-period "State Shinto" ideology, and continues to be cherished by Shinto leaders and conservatives. Accordingly, the uninterrupted continuation of ritual practices, including the costly *shikinen sengū*, constitutes one of the Shinto establishment's core priorities.² Not surprisingly, then, shrine leaders actively try to secure imperial and political involvement in (and patronage of) these practices. According to Jinja Honchō 神社本庁 (Association of Shinto Shrines), the powerful umbrella organization with which most shrines in Japan are affiliated, prime-ministerial involvement in the *shikinen sengū* is desirable and in full accordance with tradition.³ In reality, however, Abe was the first postwar prime minister to take part in this ceremony, which is illustrative of significant changes in the public perception of the *shikinen sengū* in the postwar period and, by extension, shifting state-religion boundaries.⁴

Contrary to ministerial visits to Yasukuni, Abe's participation in the ceremony at Ise received little international media coverage and hardly any criticism, despite the fact that he went there in his capacity as the country's leading politician. It is no secret that Abe maintains close links with the shrine establishment and some of its conservative-nationalist lobby groups, yet few of his critics have denounced his patronage of Ise. After all, this shrine has been so successfully depoliticized and turned into a core symbol of both traditional Japanese culture and the natural environment (*fūdo* 風土) by which it is supposedly shaped, that only a handful of interpreters saw his ritual participation as a violation of the constitutional separation of religion and state. Ise transcends religious and political particularities, it appears, and functions as a depoliticized symbol of the sacred nation (*shinkoku* 神国) Japan. It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that Abe has shied away from the heavily contested Yasukuni issue, and embraced Ise as an alternative carrying profound

1 Mullins 2012. For a more elaborate discussion of the lobby groups behind these developments, see the article by Thierry Guthmann in this special issue.

2 Breen 2010b.

3 Tanaka 2011, p. 25.

4 See Teeuwen and Breen 2017. On the different meanings of Ise, see also Rambelli 2014.

symbolic capital, which has the capacity not only to unite Japanese people of different convictions but also to function internationally as a symbol of “ancient Japanese culture.”⁵

Abe is not the only political actor who has discovered and appropriated the symbolic capital of the Ise Shrines. In June 2014, the Inner Shrine at Ise was visited by representatives of various “world religions”—including Buddhism, Islam, Daoism, and several Christian denominations—who attended a major international conference entitled “Tradition for the Future: Culture, Faith and Values for a Sustainable Planet,” where various issues related to religion and the environment were discussed.⁶ The conference was organized by Jinja Honchō, in cooperation with the Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC), a UK-based nonprofit organization which defines itself as “a secular body that helps the major religions of the world to develop their own environmental programmes, based on their own core teachings, beliefs and practices.”⁷ Among the conference speakers were Jinja Honchō’s current president Tanaka Tsunekiyo 田中恆清, a member of the Japanese imperial family, a Shingon Buddhist leader, and the Assistant Secretary-General of the United Nations Development Program. Although the event was not open to the general public, it was reportedly attended by approximately seven hundred Shinto priests from all over the country, as well as by a number of selected journalists and scholars.⁸ One of them, Paul Valley, published a report in *The Independent*, describing the conference as part of the “remarkable resurgence of Japan’s ancient religion of Shintoism,” which “has produced a new Japanese openness to the wider world.” This openness was supposedly illustrated by the event’s interreligious character, as well as the apparent environmental awareness of the actors involved, which, he suggested, “could benefit the whole world.”⁹

At first sight, this image seems to be at odds with the one of a nationalist religion of increasing political significance. How can the image of Shinto as an open, internationally oriented and environmentally-minded religion be reconciled with the image of a conservative tradition with close links to a government that antagonizes neighboring countries and has failed to implement meaningful environmental policies? Yet it is precisely this paradox that defines contemporary Shinto. As I have noted elsewhere, the notion of Shinto as a tradition of nature worship with a strong environmental orientation is actually compatible with conservative and neo-imperial ideology.¹⁰ For one, this “Shinto environmentalist paradigm,” as I call it, strengthens notions of the land of Japan as inherently sacred, and justifies the belief that Shinto is (or should be) essentially a *public* tradition, concerned with the this-worldly well-being of the Japanese nation—and, by extension, the world as a whole.¹¹ Thus, I argue in this article, it is through the discursive association of Shinto with “nature” that its public significance is currently asserted, and its position vis-à-vis both the state and the category “religion” renegotiated. Put differently, the hypothesis explored here is that the association of Shinto with nature and the environment is central to the deprivatization and

5 Hence Abe’s insistence that the 2016 G7 Summit should take place at Ise (see *The Japan Times* 2015). A similar argument was made by Michael Cucek, who convincingly argued that Abe has little interest in visiting Yasukuni precisely because patronage of Ise is less controversial and more politically beneficial (Cucek 2015).

6 *Kōshitsu* henshūbu 2014. See also Rots 2015.

7 ARC, n.d.

8 Dougill 2014.

9 Valley 2014.

10 Rots 2015.

11 For more elaborate discussions of the “Shinto environmentalist paradigm,” see Rots 2013 and Rots 2015.

discursive secularization by which it is currently characterized. Before elaborating on this issue, however, let us have a closer look at the terminology, and explore some of the ways in which Shinto relates to secularism and notions of “the secular.”

The Public Secular

In recent years, a number of scholars have drawn attention to the fact that “religion” and “the secular” are historically shaped categories, the meanings of which are neither pre-given nor fixed.¹² From this, it follows that sociocultural phenomena are not intrinsically “religious” or “secular.” Rather, their categorization is a function of discourse, and the product of particular power relations, as Talal Asad has demonstrated.¹³ What counts as “secular” or as “religious” is not a natural given: it is the outcome of historical processes of classification and negotiation. The same, I argue, applies to Shinto: whether Shinto is classified as “religious” or “secular” continues to be subject to debate. Accordingly, in this article I will refrain from engaging with the question whether Shinto really *is* religious or secular, as that would imply these categories have some sort of fixed “intrinsic” meaning. Instead, I look at ways in which contemporary shrine practices are *framed* as “secular” and “public” by leading Shinto scholars. By doing so, I draw on the work of Talal Asad and his followers, who re-historicized the categories “religion” and “the secular,” and examined processes by which the two have been constructed in particular historical and cultural contexts.¹⁴ In addition, I will make use of the theories of Charles Taylor, who conceived of the religion-secular dichotomy in terms of a distinction between transcendence and immanence.

It should be pointed out that “the secular” is not the same as “secularism,” “secularity,” and “secularization.” While these terms are obviously related, they carry different meanings. Following José Casanova, we may conceive of “the secular” as “a central modern category— theological-philosophical, legal-political, and cultural-anthropological—to construct, codify, grasp, and experience a realm or reality differentiated from ‘the religious.’... It should be obvious that ‘the religious’ and ‘the secular’ are always and everywhere mutually constituted.”¹⁵ By contrast, “secularism” refers to a range of ideologies or world views that stipulate the separation of religion from purportedly secular spheres (for example, politics and education) and seek to restrict the societal space allocated to religion. This is closely related to the public-private dichotomy, as Bubandt and van Beek rightly point out (in reference to Asad): “This analytic treats ‘secularism’ as a political doctrine or project that rearranges society through a new set of socio-spatial divisions: private and public, the religious and the secular. In assigning each to its ‘proper place’—‘religion’ to the private domain and ‘the secular’ to the public domain—secularism makes possible the establishment of a domain of secular politics that transcends that of religion.”¹⁶ As I shall demonstrate in this article, the distinction between a “public” secular realm and a “private” religious realm is of profound relevance for contemporary Japanese society and ideology.

12 For example Smith 1998. Critical historical studies of the formation of the modern category “religion” in Japan include Isomae 2003; Josephson 2012; Maxey 2014.

13 Asad 2003.

14 Asad 2003. See Bubandt and van Beek 2012 for an insightful discussion of the relevance of Asad’s theory for understanding contemporary Asian societies.

15 Casanova 2011, p. 54.

16 Bubandt and van Beek 2012, pp. 7–8.

While “the secular” refers to a societal realm, and “secularism” to particular world views or ideologies, “secularization” refers to the *processes* by which (aspects of) societies become more secular. As several scholars have pointed out, “secularization” is not a monolithic concept: it has been used to refer to a number of different processes, which may or may not coexist, and which may or may not be irreversible.¹⁷ Casanova has famously distinguished three types of secularization: “the decline of religious beliefs and practices” (which, he adds, “is the most recent but by now the most widespread usage of the term in contemporary academic debates on secularization”); “the privatization of religion”; and “the differentiation of the secular spheres (state, economy, science)” from religion.¹⁸ Casanova’s conceptual triad was developed further by Charles Taylor, who distinguished between secularization as, first, “the retreat of religion in public life” (that is, privatization); second, “the decline in belief and practice”; and third, and central to his theory, “the change in the conditions of belief.”¹⁹ Taylor’s model was applied by Richard Madsen in his analysis of processes of secularization in Asia, referring to them as, respectively, “political secularization,” “social secularization,” and “cultural secularization.”²⁰

Several scholars have pointed out that the categories “religious” and “secular” are co-constitutive: they have emerged in tandem, and the differentiation of the former from other societal spheres could not have taken place without the formation of the latter. As described by Charles Taylor, both emerged within a late-medieval European ecclesiastic context (“Latin Christendom,” in his terminology).²¹ At the time, the term “secular” was used to refer to clergy and church institutions concerned with this-worldly affairs, whereas “religious” referred to world-renouncing monastic communities. As he writes, “the secular had to do with the ‘century’—that is, with profane time—and it was contrasted with what related to eternal, or to sacred time.... Ordinary parish priests are thus ‘secular’ because they operate out there in the ‘century’ as against those in monastic institutions.”²² The defining feature of Western modernity, according to Taylor, was not so much the awareness of a distinction between “profane” (this-worldly) or “sacred” (transcendent) time and space, as the realization that *the former could exist independently from the latter*. As he writes,

what does seem ... to exist universally is some distinction between higher beings (spirits) and realms and the everyday world we see immediately around us. But these are not usually sorted out into two distinct domains, such that the lower one can be taken as a system understandable purely in its own terms. Rather, the levels usually interpenetrate, and the lower cannot be understood without reference to the higher.... The clear separation of an immanent from a transcendent order is one of the inventions (for better or worse) of Latin Christendom.²³

17 See for instance Berger 1999; Dobbelaere 1981; Casanova 1994; Demerath 2007. For an overview of recent academic literature on “secularization” and “securities” in Japan, see the introduction to this special issue.

18 Casanova 2006, p. 7. Cf. Casanova 1994.

19 Taylor 2007, p. 423.

20 Madsen 2011.

21 Taylor 2007; 2011.

22 Taylor 2011, p. 32. Cf. Taylor 2007, pp. 54–61.

23 Taylor 2011, p. 33.

I will not attempt to challenge Taylor's claim that the development of an "immanent frame" freed from transcendent legitimation occurred first in Europe, as this is beyond the scope of the present article.²⁴ Instead, my purpose here is to draw attention to the initial meanings of the (originally European) categories "secular" and "religious," as outlined by Taylor, and reexamine these in a Japanese context. I believe these offer some important clues for understanding present-day attempts to "secularize" Shinto, which coexist with efforts at (re)sacralization, as I shall explain below. Importantly, as Taylor proposes, in medieval Europe the categories "secular" and "religion" were *both* concerned with gods, priests, and rituals. The difference lies in the fact that the former refers to the world here-and-now, and is contingent upon space and time, while the latter denotes other-worldly practices believed to transcend historical and cultural particularities. Thus, the foundational dyad of Western modernity, in Taylor's scheme, is the immanent-transcendent dichotomy—hence the core analytical concept he uses to describe the secular condition, "the immanent frame." Originally, therefore, "secularity" does not signify the absence of deities, offerings, or ritual specialists: quite the contrary, what it signifies is *their immanent character*.

"Secular," in this sense of the term, does not necessarily mean "disenchanted," nor does it imply institutional neutrality, atheism, or the absence of worship practices in public space, even though this is how the term is often understood today. What it implies is that the gods are manifest in our world and, as a consequence, are culturally and historically contingent. "Secularization," according to this line of thought, refers to the development by which the world here-and-now comes to be seen as the sole foundation of social life, no longer in need of "transcendent" legitimation. This is the defining feature of our "secular age," according to Taylor: the social order no longer needs an external frame of reference, as the world in which we live has come to be seen as the foundational principle (the "immanent frame"). Institutions, narratives, and practices concerned with transcendent matters still exist, but they are no longer foundational. Instead, participation and belief has become optional—a matter of choice, not a pre-given.

Thus, I suggest we reconsider the original meaning of "secular"—as immanent, public, and concerned with the common good of the world in which we live, not necessarily devoid of gods or rituals—as a conceptual tool for understanding present-day attempts at repositioning Shinto. One note of caution is needed, however. When using the concept "secular" in this way—that is, as a term that denotes the immanent character of certain practices and world views—we should recognize the fact that in most political and academic discourse it is no longer utilized as such. As explained above, in modern times the term has come to carry quite different meanings indeed, typically denoting societal fields that are differentiated from religion altogether, not those that are dependent on and legitimated by it. Nevertheless, I think it is worth reconsidering the meaning of "secular" prior to the early modern differentiation of "religion" and "politics," as explained by Taylor: rituals, clergy and beliefs concerned with immanent reality, as opposed to monastic orders concerned with transcendent matters. I believe such an approach may shed some light on contemporary Shinto ideology, which is neither "atheistic" (*kami* 神 remain central to

24 For instance, Christoph Kleine (2013) and Ian Reader (2004) both argued that there were functional equivalents to the religious-secular dichotomy in premodern Japan. See also the article by Kiri Paramore in this special issue.

Shinto thought and practice) nor “anti-religious,” but concerned rather with reestablishing Shinto as a this-worldly ritual system placed in the center of public space both literally and metaphorically. Why is it that Shinto actors and institutions have such an ambivalent relation to the category “religion”? Might it be that Shinto is indeed perceived as a “secular” worship tradition—not because there are no gods, but because the gods are place-based and immanent? To what extent is the “discursive secularization” of Shinto that we are currently witnessing—I will return to this term later—grounded in its immanent character? These are the questions I explore in the next sections of this article.

Secular Shinto?

The notion of Shinto as a public non-religion, closely intertwined with the nation state and its divine imperial house, is often associated with conservative ideology. Yet it was one of the most critical historians who suggested that premodern Shinto might be perceived as the “secular” or this-worldly (*sezokuteki* 世俗的) counterpart of the transcendently oriented Buddhist monastic institutions. In his famous article “Shinto in the History of Japanese Religion,” Kuroda Toshio 黒田俊雄 writes:

Here it is important to note the secular character of Shinto in medieval times. Many of the representations of kami familiar to people were secular in form.... The same can also be said of how the word *suijaku* 垂迹 (manifestation) was comprehended.... The term *suijaku* literally meant to descend from heaven to a given spot and to become the local or guardian kami of that spot.²⁵

Kuroda proceeds to argue that the “secular representations in Shinto actually expressed an essence that was strongly Buddhist,” that “shrines were Buddhism’s secular face,” and that Shinto’s “secularity functioned, in the final analysis, within a Buddhist world.”²⁶ Thus, in the medieval *shinbutsu shūgō* 神仏習合 system, shrines, shrine priests, and kami were this-worldly manifestations or representations of Buddhist monastic institutions, monks, and Buddhas and bodhisattvas. As such, Kuroda argues, they were more closely intertwined with public administration and politics than their Buddhist counterparts.²⁷

It has been a while since Kuroda conducted his paradigm-changing research, and some of his conclusions have since been challenged.²⁸ However, there are some interesting similarities between his description of the labor division between Shinto shrines and Buddhist monastic institutions in medieval Japan, and Taylor’s description of the role of “secular” versus “religious” clergy in Latin Christian Europe. The division of labor between “Buddhist” institutions and deities on the one hand, and “Shinto” ones on the other, was arguably more complicated than Kuroda suggested: Buddhist monastic centers were not solely concerned with transcendent matters, and the distinction between kami and Buddhas was not always as clear-cut as it appears in this model. Yet Kuroda’s basic point, that there was a division between a “this-worldly” and a “transcendent” realm in medieval Japan, has

²⁵ Kuroda 1981, p. 14.

²⁶ Kuroda 1981, p. 15.

²⁷ Kuroda 1981, pp. 15–16.

²⁸ For a discussion, see Teeuwen and Scheid 2002.

been substantiated by others, even if they did not equate these realms with “Shinto” and “Buddhism.”²⁹

Assuming that premodern Japan indeed had some sort of distinction between an immanent and a transcendent order, Taylor’s argument that the separation of the former from the latter was one of modernity’s foundational moments may be applicable to Japan as well. The “separation of Shinto and Buddhism” (*shinbutsu bunri* 神仏分離) in the early Meiji period may then have given rise to some sort of Taylorian immanent frame: the gods were made manifest and of immediate public concern, while belief in a transcendent order became a matter of personal choice, one option among others. Thus, Taylor’s own arguments concerning the uniquely Western character of secularization notwithstanding, the Meiji period configuration of “religion” (*shūkyō* 宗教) as private and faith-based, and Shinto as a public nonreligious ritual system (*hishūkyō* 非宗教), was profoundly Taylorian: it has some clear parallels with developments in early modern Europe, where the immanent order gradually replaced the transcendent order as the primary frame of reference.³⁰ In other words, the fact that medieval (proto) Shinto was “secular” (that is, this-worldly) did not make it any less “religious” in the modern sense of the word. However, when it was reshaped and reclassified in the modern period, its immanent character facilitated its formation as a nonreligious entity. Hence, as Kuroda states,

The secularity of Shinto and the political applicability of the concept of “the land of the kami” does not indicate that Shinto was without any religious character but rather shows that the Buddhist system that lay behind it pervaded all aspects of everyday life. The present-day illusion that Shinto is not a religion derives historically from a misunderstanding of this point.³¹

Several scholars have discussed the process whereby Shrine Shinto came to be understood as “nonreligious.”³² Most recently, Jason Josephson has addressed this issue in his study of the formation of the category “religion” in Japan.³³ Josephson writes that “religion” entered Japan as “a nonnative category that emerged in a diplomatic context, such that its contours were established by asymmetries of power and centered on Christianity as its prototype.”³⁴ Shinto, meanwhile, “was the condition for the eventual invention of religion in Japan, because it was the form of the political from which religion could be distinguished.”³⁵ Reflecting Kuroda’s account of Shinto’s this-worldly character, Josephson asserts that Shinto was closely intertwined with education and politics, constituting the basic entity from which the modern category “religion” was differentiated. Thus, he refers to the Meiji-period construction of “Shinto”—the public, de-Buddhistified, mandatory ritual-ideological system conventionally known as “State Shinto”—by the term “Shinto secular.” Josephson defines

29 For example Satō 2003; Kleine 2013; Teeuwen 2013.

30 On the formation of the category “religion” in Meiji-period Japan, see Josephson 2012; Maxey 2014. See also the articles by Hans Martin Krämer and Mark Teeuwen in this special issue.

31 Kuroda 1981, p. 16.

32 Hardacre 1989; Isomae 2003; Nitta 2000.

33 Josephson 2012.

34 Josephson 2012, p. 132.

35 Josephson 2012, p. 132.

“Shinto secular” as “the hybrid Shinto-scientific ideology that undergirded the Meiji state and was ultimately distinguished from the category religion.”³⁶ In contrast to the classical view of “State Shinto” as a state religion in disguise, Josephson argues that Shinto could become a public, imperial worship system exactly by virtue of it being “secularized.” That is, it was coercively “purified” from popular devotional practices, discursively associated with science and modernity, and legally distinguished from “religion,” which had been configured as “private” and, hence, optional. As he writes,

Shinto functioned as the secular in two ways. First, Shinto produced a political reality from which religion could be distinguished. It was a precondition for the formation of religion as a legal category in the 1889 Japanese Constitution. Second, after the production of the category “religion,” the Shinto secular became a politics that could be distinguished from “religion.” Once a Japanese subject granted this Shinto secular ground, religion (Buddhism and Sect Shinto, but also Christianity) was a matter of free choice and therefore optional. This echoed what Charles Taylor described as the core of secularism in the West as the situation in which religion “is understood to be one option among others.”³⁷

For clarity’s sake: the creation of a “secular” Shinto did not entail the removal of divine beings, ritual practices, and sacred symbols from the public sphere. After all, as Josephson describes it, the notion that Japan was “a holy nation beloved by the gods” was taught in public education and was quickly naturalized.³⁸ Moreover, the “unity of ritual and government” (*saisei itchi* 祭政一致) became an important political principle, and shrine worship was effectively integrated into the ideological state apparatus, especially from the late Meiji and Taishō periods onwards. However, if one understands “the secular” as “the immanent frame” from which “religion” is differentiated, as I have suggested, Josephson’s choice of the term “Shinto secular” arguably makes sense. Moreover, he is right to point out that this new ritual-ideological system was closely intertwined with the project of modernization, and associated with the new positivistic episteme, rather than constituting some sort of lingering premodern relic. In any case, the category distinction that emerged at the time—a “public,” deprivatized, and mandatory national Shinto that was perceived and classified as essentially different from “private” religious institutions, membership of which became a matter of individual choice—continues to be relevant today, as it underlies popular contemporary notions of Shinto as “traditional culture” concerned with community life and the common good, centered around the local shrine and its sacred grove. I will discuss these notions in more detail shortly.

In sum, it would appear that, in Taylorian terms, Shinto—the “secular” counterpart of Buddhism in the medieval period—came to constitute the “immanent frame” upon which Japanese modernity was founded. “Religions” such as Buddhism were privatized, losing

³⁶ Josephson 2012, p. 132. For a critical assessment of Josephson’s association of Shinto with “science,” see the article by Mark Teeuwen in this special issue. In the present article, I refrain from discussing Josephson’s interpretation of the category “science.” Instead, I engage with his notion of Shinto as a public, “secular” worship system, which I find very useful.

³⁷ Josephson 2012, p. 138; citing C. Taylor 2007, p. 3.

³⁸ Josephson 2012, p. 156.

their previous self-evident and privileged position, and religious belief and affiliation became a matter of personal choice. Shinto, on the other hand, became the foundation on which modern Japanese secularism was based, notwithstanding the importance of divine beings and rituals. No wonder contemporary Shinto scholars and priests are eager to reintroduce Meiji-period symbolism into the public realm, challenge the postwar privatization of shrines, and assert Shinto's essentially public character. Drawing on Meiji-period notions of Shinto as *shūkyō*'s secular Other, leading Shinto actors today are actively promoting not only the deprivatization but also the discursive secularization of their tradition.

Sacralization and Discursive Secularization in Japan

Some interpreters have perceived the return of Shinto symbols and rituals in the public realm as evidence that Japan is not truly secular, and that Japanese politics and society are going through a period of *de*-secularization, characterized by a “return of religion” in politics.³⁹ Legally and politically speaking, this indeed appears to be the case: as illustrated by Abe's appropriation of Ise, the separation of state and religion (or at least the separation of state and Shinto) is increasingly challenged by leading political actors. Meanwhile, the nation state and emperor are subject to new attempts at sacralization.⁴⁰ However, seen in Taylorian terms, what we are perhaps witnessing is not so much the return of religion per se—indeed, generally speaking, institutionalized religion in Japan is in a state of decline, some exceptions notwithstanding—but, rather, attempts to reestablish Shinto as the foundational and sacred (that is, divinely ordained and non-negotiable) framework upon which twenty-first century Japanese society will be built.⁴¹ Sacralization thus goes hand in hand with what I call the discursive secularization of Shinto: the reconstruction of Shinto as the natural, immanent, and commonly shared world view of Japan, supposedly grounded in and shaped by the country's physical environment. In this Taylorian scheme, Shinto is not so much areligious as some sort of ontological *a priori* that shapes the conditions of religious (or nonreligious) beliefs.

As John Nelson has made clear in a recent article, secularization is culturally specific. It is contingent upon time and place, not a universally valid historical necessity. It is a multi-faceted phenomenon: multiple processes of secularization can be at work simultaneously, which are “globally diffuse” and “locally determined.”⁴² These processes are influenced by global as well as national and local developments in law, mass media, and public discourse.⁴³ Nelson's approach makes clear that secular ideologies and multiple processes of secularization (locally grounded and not necessarily irreversible) are, indeed, influential aspects of contemporary Japanese society and politics. That does not mean, however, that religion in Japan is dying out. As sociologist of religion N. J. Demerath has pointed out, processes of secularization often give way to processes of sacralization. That is, “modernization does often lead to forms of secularization, but these in turn often spark a sacralizing response—one that ironically uses the means of modernity to protest the

39 See for instance Guthmann's article in this special issue.

40 Mullins 2012.

41 On institutional decline, see Reader 2012; cf. Covell 2005.

42 Nelson 2012, p. 37.

43 On the impact of globalization on local secularization practices, see Dessì 2013.

ends of modernity.”⁴⁴ The term “sacralization” refers to “the process by which the secular becomes sacred or other new forms of the sacred emerge, whether in matters of personal faith, institutional practice or political power.”⁴⁵ In other words, it refers to the production and reproduction of “the sacred” in public.⁴⁶ Note that this term does not equal the notion of “de-secularization” as used by sociologist Peter Berger, for sacralization does not negate secularization.⁴⁷ Rather, according to this argument, they are two sides of the same coin, sacralization constituting a profoundly “modern” response to secularization. Indeed, secular elements can be sacralized (for example, national flags and civic commemoration ceremonies), just as religious elements can lose their sacred character.

Mark Mullins’ article on sacralization in contemporary Japan follows Demerath’s theoretical model.⁴⁸ He points out that secularization in Japan is by no means an unambiguous process, as “there are ‘multiple secularities’ competing in Japan today.”⁴⁹ As the title of his article suggests, they paradoxically coexist with processes of deprivatization and “the reappearance of ‘public religion’ in Japanese society.” Mullins argues that recent decades have seen the gradual “*de*-privatization of religion” in Japan, especially Shinto: several players have consistently lobbied for the revitalization of Shinto as a national ritual tradition, to be reassigned important public ceremonial and ideological functions. In particular, Mullins outlines the efforts of the Shintō Seiji Renmei 神道政治連盟—a political lobby organization associated with Jinja Honchō—to reestablish imperial symbolism in the public sphere, nationalize Yasukuni Shrine, revise the constitution, and rewrite national history.⁵⁰

We can refer to this development as the return of sacred symbols and rituals to the public sphere; or, alternatively, as the (re)sacralization of the public sphere. That is, instead of the deprivatization of religious institutions in general, we are witnessing the deprivatization of *some* rituals, symbols, and worship places, which are reframed as public and national rather than private and “religious.” In other words, the declining popularity of the category “*shūkyō*” in Japan does not equal the decline of religious institutions *per se*, only their transformation and reclassification. Secularization coexists with, and may even give rise to, processes of sacralization and the corresponding reappearance of “sacred” symbols in politics and public space. A well-known example of this is the ongoing patronage of Yasukuni Shrine by prominent politicians, which continues to jeopardize Japan’s foreign relations. At least as important is the return of Ise as a core symbol of the nation and its primordial ties to the land of Japan and the imperial family, as discussed in the introduction. Central to this was the impressive (yet uncritical) media coverage of the 2013 *shikinen sengū*, which was

44 Demerath 2007, p. 68.

45 Demerath 2007, p. 66.

46 I use the term “sacred” to refer to objects, places, and practices that are perceived as nonnegotiable; that are set apart from the ordinary, physically as well as discursively; and that are believed to possess certain eternal qualities, that is, that are believed to transcend historical particularities (cf. Rots 2013, pp. 78–87). For a more elaborate discussion of “the sacred” as an analytical category, see Anttonen 2000.

47 Berger 1999.

48 Mullins 2012.

49 Mullins 2012, p. 79. On the concept of “multiple secularities,” see also Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt 2012.

50 Mullins 2012, pp. 71–80; cf. Breen 2010a. On this topic, see also the article by Thierry Guthmann in this special issue.

generally framed as a great cultural event of nationwide significance rather than a religious happening.

Thus, various attempts are made to challenge the constitutional separation of state and religion, and to reassert the position of Shinto-related symbols and practices in the public sphere. While some sites and practices are subject to heated debate (for example, worship at Yasukuni by the prime minister), others are much less politicized, at least in public discourse (for example, his patronage of the Ise shrines). Significantly, in both these cases, most of the actors involved evade the category of religion altogether, instead framing Shinto practices and places as “traditional culture” and “heritage,” conceiving of them as essentially public. It is to this reframing that I refer with the term “discursive secularization.”

As mentioned previously, Charles Taylor distinguished between three types of secularization: political, social, and cultural.⁵¹ Although Taylor’s analysis is concerned with “the West,” as we have seen, these categories can be applied to Asia as well, as Richard Madsen has demonstrated in an insightful comparative article.⁵² In addition, however, I suggest we distinguish a fourth type: discursive secularization. I use this term to refer to processes by which beliefs, practices, and institutions previously classified as “religion” are redefined and reconfigured (by many of the leading actors involved) as “culture,” “tradition,” “heritage,” “science,” or even “nature”; in sum, as non-religion. This may go hand in hand with processes of deprivatization, sacralization, and/or attempts to reclaim the public sphere, as in the case of contemporary Shinto, but this is not necessarily the case. Importantly, however, discursive secularization does *not* necessarily imply the decline of faith in supernatural beings, ritual activities, or places of worship. What it means is that they acquire new meanings in a changing context, as they are dissociated from the master category “religion,” which in Japan has come to be contaminated to the point that few people or institutions are willing to identify with it.⁵³

The notion of *discursive secularization* is an important contribution to existing theories of secularization, I argue, as it allows for the fact that “emic” conceptualizations do not necessarily reflect wider societal processes. Importantly, the fact that certain religious actors decide to redefine themselves in explicitly “nonreligious” terms does not automatically imply institutional privatization or decline, nor does it mean they are no longer classified as “religious” in law, politics, academia, or media representations. We should distinguish between self-definitions and other types of classification, as these do not always correspond. Furthermore, the notion of discursive secularization is useful for distinguishing between *practices* and *interpretations*: people may engage in practices that are legally and academically classified as religious, yet conceptualize these in different terms, which may be explicitly nonreligious. This does not mean they are inconsistent or self-contradictory: all it shows is that the category “religion” may be employed or discarded for various reasons, that practices are neither intrinsically “religious” nor intrinsically “secular,” and that a practice described as “religious” by some may be perceived in different terms by others. As we have seen, in a “secular age,” religious belief and practice have become optional; what is more, *defining* one’s

51 Taylor 2007, pp. 2–3. For an explanation of Taylor’s categorization, see above.

52 Madsen 2011.

53 See Baffelli and Reader 2012.

belief and practice as “religious” or not has become optional as well, in the sense that the label may be used or rejected, depending on (identity) politics and economic incentives.⁵⁴

Thus, importantly, discursive secularization may be a strategy for survival employed by religious actors. Simply put, reframing shrine or temple worship as “traditional culture” (*dentō bunka* 伝統文化) instead of “religion” can be a means to attract more visitors. Significantly, in the Japanese secularist legal system, it is also a strategy to attract corporate and state sponsors. Not surprisingly, then, many prominent religious institutions (*shūkyō hōjin* 宗教法人) these days have set up nonprofit organizations (*NPO hōjin* NPO 法人) for the promotion of shrine and temple activities, including cultural events, tree-planting, educational activities, and workshops in “traditional arts.” Such activities serve to establish stronger bonds between these institutions and nearby communities, create positive publicity and, perhaps most importantly, raise funds for maintaining buildings, groves, and so on. Creating a puppet nonprofit organization is a means for religious institutions to secure financial support from local authorities and corporate sponsors; in addition, it can be a strategy for engaging in educational activities that would otherwise be unlawful, providing “religious socialization in disguise.”⁵⁵

In sum, my argument here is that leading contemporary Shinto actors actively seek to reframe their tradition as “traditional Japanese culture” rather than religion, even if some of them do not deny Shinto’s religious character when asked directly. Thus, they are contributing to the discursive secularization of their tradition. As such, they are not unique: similar patterns have been observed in Buddhist pilgrimage, for instance, where heritagization reportedly led to a decline in devotional practices, and in some “new religions” reinventing themselves in terms of science, therapy, education, or development.⁵⁶ Contrary to Reader’s rather gloomy prediction of religion in Japan “dying,” however, I do not see this discursive secularization as evidence of religious decline *per se*: on the contrary, it can be a powerful strategy for institutional adaptation.

Nor, for that matter, do I see it necessarily as evidence of a decline in devotional practices. The shrines of Kumano are a case in point. They are UNESCO World Heritage listed, and widely perceived as an important cultural site; they nonetheless receive ample attention in the Japanese media as mythological sacred sites (*seichi* 聖地), characterized by primordial natural beauty and filled with spiritual “powerspots.”⁵⁷ Discursive secularization and heritagization thus do not necessarily mean that places lose their perceived “sacred” or “spiritual” character, but that they are conceived in terms of culture, tradition, and nature, rather than “religion.” “Religion,” after all, means “private”—and if there is one thing the sacred forests and shrines of places such as Kumano and Ise are *not*, according to the Shinto

54 There is some overlap with the notion of “internal secularization,” used by Isaac Gagné (in this issue), drawing on the work of Dobbelaere (1981) and others. The difference is that “discursive secularization” not only refers to internal institutional dynamics, but also to ways in which religious actors (either institutional or individual) present themselves to the outside world; that is, how they frame their own beliefs and practices. Discursive secularization does not necessarily imply a change in those beliefs and practices; rather, it means that they are conceptualized and classified differently.

55 Rots 2013, p. 336.

56 On the decline in devotional practices at Buddhist temples, see Reader 2012. On discursive secularization among new religions, see for instance Watanabe 2015. See also the articles by Erica Baffelli and Isaac Gagné in this special issue.

57 For a discussion of the impact of Kumano being listed as a UNESCO World Heritage site, see McGuire 2013.



Figure 1. A typical broad-leaved *chiju no mori*. Tokiwa Jinja, Mito, Ibaraki Prefecture. Photo by the author.

establishment and its academic spokesmen, it is “private.” That is, in contemporary Shinto ideology, it is often argued that, in order for Japanese society to function well, shrines need to be reassigned their “proper” place not as private religious institutions, but as public community centers, the function of which is social and political as well as spiritual. Central to this ideology is the notion of *chiju no mori* 鎮守の森・鎮守の杜. Literally, this term refers to the “sacred grove” or area of woodland surrounding a shrine, but it has recently come to symbolize the shrine as a whole, and its connection to a local community (*ujiko* 氏子)—as well as, by extension, Shinto’s essentially public character. It is to this notion of *chiju no mori* that I will now turn.

***Chiju no mori*: Public Shrine Forests?**

As I have outlined elsewhere, in recent decades, a new Shinto paradigm has emerged.⁵⁸ I refer to this as the “Shinto environmentalist

paradigm”: the notion that Shinto is a primordial tradition of nature worship (sometimes referred to as “animistic”), which contains ancient ecological knowledge on how to live in harmonious coexistence with nature. Proponents of this paradigm not only draw attention to the intimate connection between shrines, Shinto world views and practices, and (local) natural environments; they also often assert that this ancient ecological knowledge—which, they argue, has been forgotten by most Japanese people as a result of the twin processes of modernization and “Westernization”—contains important clues for living sustainably and solving environmental problems today. Their ideas have gradually spread in recent decades, to the point that they have come to exercise significant impact on mainstream Shinto self-definitions and practices, including, as we shall see, those of the generally conservative umbrella organization Jinja Honchō.

Central to the Shinto environmentalist paradigm is the notion of *chiju no mori*. Composed of the terms *chiju* 鎮守 (or *chijugami* 鎮守神, a protective local deity) and *mori* 森・杜 (forest), the modern compound word *chiju no mori* has come to signify the groves often surrounding Shinto shrines.⁵⁹ In early postwar Japan, many of these centuries-old shrine groves gave way to buildings and roads. In response, around 1980 a conservation movement emerged, led by scientists Ueda Atsushi 上田篤 and Miyawaki Akira 宮脇昭, who conducted research on the composition of shrine forests and pleaded for their preservation. In the 1990s, well-known historians of religion and shrine priests Ueda Masaaki 上田正昭 and Sonoda Minoru 蘭田稔 joined forces with these and other scientists in order to prevent

⁵⁸ Rots 2013; 2015.

⁵⁹ See Rots 2015 for a discussion of this term and its etymology.

the further destruction of *chinju no mori*. In 2002, they established Shasō Gakkai 社叢学会 (Sacred Forest Research Association), a scientific nonprofit organization focused on the dissemination of knowledge on shrine forest history and conservation.⁶⁰

Thanks to these initiatives, shrine forest preservation has become an issue of nationwide concern, and local non-profit organizations bringing together volunteers active in tree-planting, forest maintenance, and various educational activities have been set up throughout the country.⁶¹ Accordingly, the notion of *chinju no mori* has come to be used widely, but it no longer solely refers to the physical forests (or areas of woodland) surrounding shrines. As it is now regularly employed in various Shinto texts (for example, the weekly shrine newspaper *Jinja Shinpō* 神社新報 as well as other Jinja Honchō publications), the term has acquired symbolic significance extending far beyond forest ecology. Representing continuity (spiritual, ecological, and cultural) between the present and the imagined ancestral past, the shrine grove has come to be seen as the number one focal point of a local community: both physical, as a meeting place and sociocultural center, and symbolic, signifying social cohesion and existential belonging to a place. As such, the concept has acquired significant ideological potential. Not surprisingly, therefore, *chinju no mori* now feature prominently in contemporary Shinto texts that try to renegotiate postwar secularism and argue for the ongoing importance of shrines—not as private religious institutions, but as community focal points, located both literally and metaphorically in the center of public space. Two authors who have developed and appropriated the concept are Shinto scholar Sonoda Minoru and incumbent Jinja Honchō president Tanaka Tsunekiyo.

Sonoda Minoru is a scholar of religion and head priest of Chichibu Shrine in Saitama Prefecture. He is also one of the most prominent voices in the *chinju no mori* movement. For many years, Sonoda has been a leading member of Shasō Gakkai, as well as of the International Shinto Foundation (a nonprofit organization devoted to the dissemination of knowledge on Shinto, which has promoted the Shinto environmentalist paradigm both in Japan and abroad). He has described Shinto variously as a “natural religion” that was “formed spontaneously”; as the “ethnic religion” (*minzoku shūkyō* 民族宗教) of the Japanese people, which took shape in tandem with the ancient state; as a “communal religion” (*kyōdōtai shūkyō* 共同体宗教) that emerged in response to the natural landscape and climate (*shizen fūdo* 自然風土) of ancient Japan and constitutes a foundational aspect of Japanese culture; and as an ancient “forest religion” typical of primordial nature worship, unique as “the only ancient religion in the world that has survived until today.”⁶² Thus, in Sonoda’s narrative, shrine worship is fundamentally interconnected with the physical landscape and climate of Japan (its *fūdo*) and its local village communities (*kyōdōtai* 共同体 or *kakyō* 家郷).⁶³ As such, it is similar to other “primal religions” or “folk religions” worldwide, but it is the only such religion which has survived and even flourished in a modern society, while still retaining “strong characteristics of prehistoric religion.”⁶⁴

60 See for instance Ueda 2004. For a more elaborate discussion of the activities of Shasō Gakkai, see Rots 2013, pp. 287–93.

61 For examples, see Rots 2013, pp. 274–365.

62 Respectively Sonoda 1987, p. 3; Sonoda 1998, p. 149; Sonoda 1998, pp. 167–68; Sonoda 1998, p. 41.

63 Cf. Watsuji 1979.

64 Sonoda 1997, p. 45.

As the above list makes clear, Sonoda does not deny Shinto the predicate “religion.” Quite the contrary: as a scholar of comparative religion well familiar with classical European theories in the field, he apparently adheres to a universalistic understanding of religion, seeing religion as a natural category present anywhere in the world since prehistoric times. He does, however, classify different types of religions, following classical theories that predate the “critical turn” in religious studies. According to Sonoda, there is a crucial distinction between “religions of the individual” (*kojin shūkyō* 個人宗教) and “communal religions.” The former are faith-based and individualistic; they have strongly influenced the perception of “religion” in modern times, including, significantly, the way in which religion is defined in the Constitution and other modern laws.⁶⁵ Shinto, by contrast, is an integral part of Japan’s “religious culture” (*shūkyō bunka* 宗教文化), which was formed in a symbiotic relationship with the physical environment, while also shaping local community culture.⁶⁶

Thus, in the religious-cultural system described by Sonoda, local belonging and collective ritual practices take precedence over individual beliefs. The Japanese constitutional separation of state and religion, by contrast, rests on a “Western” understanding of religion, which does not adequately reflect the original Japanese situation in which religious practices were closely intertwined with local societies and their environments. To Sonoda, there is a fundamental distinction between “Western,” “monotheistic” religions such as Christianity on the one hand, and “ethnic” community religions such as Shinto on the other, not only with regard to the extent to which they are individualistic or collectivistic but also in their relationship to nature. His work echoes the rhetoric of contemporary *nihonjinron* 日本人論 scholars such as Yasuda Yoshinori 安田喜憲 and Umehara Takeshi 梅原猛, both of whom have argued that Japan constitutes a “forest civilization,” whose animistic principles should serve as a model for overcoming the global environmental degradation caused by “Western monotheism.”⁶⁷ Thus, Sonoda argues that:

Western people raised in the Christian world view did not consider natural landscapes and forests as sacred. Instead, they cleared the land, built churches, and made artificial gardens, establishing order upon the world, the main point of which was to show God’s glory. By contrast, since ancient times in Japan deep mountain valleys, forests, waterfalls, rocks, and other such natural features, and even forests planted by people, were seen as sacred places guarded by gods and spirits.⁶⁸

The accuracy of this statement may be debated, not only because it gives an arguably one-sided representation of Christian notions of sacred space, but also because it overlooks the long Japanese history of cultivating and controlling nature. It is typical of the Shinto environmentalist paradigm, however, in its assertion that in ancient Shinto natural elements

65 Sonoda 1998, p. 167.

66 Sonoda 1998, p. 168. Cf. Sonoda 2000.

67 For example Umehara 1995; Yasuda 2006. Umehara and Yasuda both appropriated Lynn White’s argument that the Christian world view is to blame for environmental exploitation, which they combined with a nationalist narrative of an “ecological golden age” followed by decline as a result of negative foreign influences. See White 1967.

68 Sonoda 1998, p. 31.

were seen as intrinsically sacred, and that, consequently, Japanese people have preserved nature since ancient times.

As it is connected to and contingent upon local communities and their natural surroundings, Sonoda argues, Shrine Shinto transcends individual beliefs and political or ideological positions in its concern with *the common good*, that is, the community as a whole. Thus, he states, it transcends the anthropocentrism (*ningenchūshinshugi* 人間中心主義) characteristic of modernity, acknowledging the interdependence of human and nonhuman actors (gods, trees, animals, climatological phenomena, and so on).⁶⁹ Concerned as it is with this-worldly collective well-being and sustainable human-nature relations—instead of, say, individual salvation in the afterlife—Shinto has an intrinsically public character (that is, “secular” in the sense of “this-worldly” and “immanent”). In Sonoda’s model, this public character is best represented by *chinju no mori*, which constitute the original shape of shrines (that is, people worshipped kami at sacred groves long before they started constructing shrine buildings). They are also seen as the focal points of matsuri (shrine festivals), the most important communitarian activities in traditional Japanese culture, socially as well as culturally. Through matsuri, social bonds between members of a local community are established and strengthened; moreover, by conducting the same rituals as their ancestors, people establish continuity between the present and the past. *Chinju no mori* constitute the centers of these local matsuri—and, hence, of the community as a whole.⁷⁰

Sacred Grove, Public Shrine

As suggested above, the importance of *chinju no mori* conservation far transcends ecological concerns. Arguably, for many of the actors involved, community building and the preservation (or revitalization) of cultural traditions are at least as important. Considering the discursive association between shrine forests, matsuri, and community life—none of which are commonly classified in terms of *shūkyō*, but which all contain devotional aspects nonetheless, possibly more so in the post-3/11 period than before—it comes as no surprise that Shinto actors assert shrines’ public significance (social, cultural, moral, and environmental), and reclaim their position in the public sphere.⁷¹ Thus, Shinto actors’ attempts to negotiate the secular constitution, and redefine the legal status of Shinto shrines, are not limited to controversial issues such as the nationalization of Yasukuni Shrine or the political position of the emperor; they are equally concerned with lesser-known issues such as state support for local shrines and festivals, the role of priests in public education, and the publicly funded preservation of shrine forest land and shrine buildings.

Contrary to what authors such as Sonoda suggest, however, these issues are contested as well. Not all Japanese subscribe to the notion that Shinto constitutes a foundational aspect of their national culture, even if they attend the occasional matsuri or visit a shrine on New Year’s Day (*hatsumōde* 初詣). Nor, for that matter, does everybody agree that shrines should be publicly funded. Constitutional changes that would lead to a revision of the secularist state apparatus, allowing for more direct government patronage of Shinto institutions, are

69 Sonoda 1998, p. 151.

70 Sonoda 1998, pp. 91–138.

71 Elisabetta Porcu has argued that after the disasters of March 2011, people became more aware of the spiritual aspects of matsuri, which thus regained their devotional character to a certain degree (Porcu 2012, pp. 102–103). This does not mean people conceived of these matsuri in terms of “religion,” however.



Figure 2. Associated with the mythical first emperor Jinmu, Kashihara Jingū in Nara Prefecture is closely intertwined with modern imperial Shinto. It is also famous for its forest, however, showing that nationalism and nature conservation are not necessarily at odds. Photo by the author.

highly controversial. And while a majority of the population may be fairly indifferent towards these issues, neither embracing Shinto as an important part of their identity nor rejecting it, some ideological minorities actively oppose such attempts at deprivatizing Shinto. These include leftist groups as well as Christians and members of religious movements such as Sōka Gakkai 創価学会, all of which are against state involvement in religious affairs, fearing the reestablishment of a type of “State Shinto” reminiscent of the period prior to 1945 when communists, Christian leaders,

and members of several new religions were actively persecuted.

For instance, in 2010 there was the case of two shrines in the town of Sunagawa in Hokkaido, which had been given municipal land by the local authorities. This was an act of public support that was challenged by a number of local Protestants, who argued that it constituted a violation of the constitutional separation of religion and state. After all, according to the Constitution, “no religious organization shall receive any privileges from the State” (Article 20), and no public funds may be used “for the use, benefit or maintenance of any religious institution or association” (Article 89). The issue was taken up by the Supreme Court, which ruled that the local authorities had indeed violated the Constitution in the case of one of the two shrines (but not the other). According to the judge, shrine activities are not secular, but religious; the construction of a shrine on municipal (that is, public) land, therefore, is unlawful. This court ruling may have significant impact, as Sunagawa is by no means unique: throughout the country, there are shrines built on state-owned land. Not surprisingly, then, the case received considerable media attention—and provoked the wrath of Shinto leaders and other conservatives.⁷²

One example of a Shinto leader who has disputed the ruling of the Supreme Court is Tanaka Tsunekiyo, head priest of Iwashimizu Hachimangū Shrine in Yawata (Kyoto Prefecture) and current president of Jinja Honchō (since 2010). Tanaka questions the judges’ ruling that building a shrine on public land is unconstitutional, arguing that constitutional guarantees concerning the freedom of belief (*shinkyō no jiyū* 信教の自由) and the separation of state and religion (*seikyō bunri* 政教分離) should not undermine Japanese society. According to him, throughout Japanese history people have come together at shrines; meeting at a shrine (*jinja ni tsudou koto* 神社に集うこと) even constitutes the “foundation of society” (*shakai no konpon* 社会の根本), as it is here that communities took shape in ancient

72 Breen 2010a, pp. 68–71. See also the article by Ernils Larsson in this special issue.

times. Therefore, “this debate completely disregards the historical reality of the actual lives of the people, causing nothing but unnecessary confusion.” Shrines are a “natural” part of Japanese community life, according to Tanaka, and shrine worship is “in the DNA of the Japanese people.”⁷³

If shrines have an intrinsically public character, as Tanaka argues (thus formulating the ideological position of Jinja Honchō), it follows that the use of public land for shrines—or, by extension, the use of public funds for the maintenance of shrine buildings or the organization of shrine festivals—is only “natural.” Restricting the access of Shinto shrines to public land or funding, on the other hand, is at odds with Japanese tradition and “causes unnecessary confusion.” The role of Shinto priests, according to Tanaka, is fundamentally different from priests in other religions; while the latter are seen as preachers who mediate between this world and the divine, Shinto priests merely conduct rituals *for the benefit of the community*. Thus,

When seen from our perspective as shrine priests, shrine ritual worship and governance (*jinja no “matsurigoto”* 神社の「まつりごと」) is always “public.”⁷⁴ Private affairs do not take place at all. Put simply, all we do is pray for the peace and safety of the nation and the community (*kyōdōtai*) where we live. These are, so to speak, public prayers (*paburikku na inori* パブリックな祈り).⁷⁵

Of course, the claim that shrine practices are intrinsically public is problematic, for various reasons. Not only is there a wide diversity of ritual and devotional practices taking place at shrines; shrines also earn most of their money by performing rituals on behalf of private companies and individuals. Although they may frame their activities as public, and although they constitute the focal points of matsuri and other collective events, the reality is that shrines are actors that operate within the postwar Japanese “religious market,” competing with other religious and commercial institutions for the patronage of individual “parishioners” and corporate sponsors.⁷⁶ In fact, if it were not for the financial support from companies, many shrines would have even greater difficulty paying their employees and maintaining their buildings.

Tanaka does not deny this reality. However, he does not see companies as private actors, but describes them as collective entities akin to local communities, both of which constitute the building blocks of Japanese society. Central to his argument is the notion of *kyōdōtai*, which refers to a community, but which literally means “collective body.” As Tanaka argues, most Japanese are part of such a local “collective body,” which can be experienced most directly during a matsuri, when people of all ages “become one body” by carrying a portable shrine (*mikoshi* 神輿) together. Ultimately, these local communities together constitute the “collective body” of the Japanese nation: the “shrine parish” (*ujiko*)

⁷³ Tanaka 2011, p. 15.

⁷⁴ The term *matsurigoto* dates back to the *ritsuryō* 律令 system, the China-influenced system of state administration and ritual ceremonies implemented in the Nara period. Interestingly, it refers to both political administration and rituals. The term was reapplied in the Meiji period, and used to refer to the role of the emperor.

⁷⁵ Tanaka 2011, p. 7.

⁷⁶ See for example Reader and Tanabe 1998.

to which “all Japanese belong.” This collective body is symbolically united by the imperial family, which constitutes its head.⁷⁷ Although the political consequences are not necessarily the same, the similarity of these ideas to prewar *kokutai* 国体 (“national body”) ideology is significant; they point to an organicist understanding of nationhood that denies internal diversity and downplays historical contingencies. Moreover, they naturalize the imperial institution, by suggesting that the emperor is the head of the “body” that constitutes the Japanese nation.

Clearly, such views are of an inherently ideological nature and have potential political significance. For instance, they may be employed to justify various types of state patronage of Shinto shrines that are not available to Buddhist or Christian institutions. However, while hinting at such possible implications, Tanaka generally refrains from making explicitly political statements. The image of Shinto presented in his work—as in the work of Sonoda Minoru, as well as other contemporary Shinto scholars—is that of an ancient tradition of nature worship, intimately (even existentially) connected to the Japanese nation and its supposed physical territories; not of a modern, politically engaged religion. Significantly, these Shinto thinkers present Shinto not only as a “nature religion” (that is, a religion concerned with the worship of deities residing in natural elements), but also as a “natural religion” (that is, a religion that took shape “naturally” and “spontaneously” without the mediation of a historical founder).⁷⁸ By describing Shinto in these terms, they dehistoricize and depoliticize it; as an essential, *natural*, and foundational aspect of Japanese culture and society, Shinto both predates and transcends modern categories such as “religion” and “politics.” This naturalization, I argue, is part and parcel of Shinto’s discursive secularization: by redefining Shinto as the “natural ground” underlying other cultural and religious practices, it is presented as Japan’s “immanent frame” that shapes the conditions of belief. Thus, Shinto is not beyond belief—it precedes it.

The implication of Tanaka’s argument is that discussions about shrine patronage in relation to the constitutional separation of state and religion rest on a serious category mistake: Shinto does not correspond to the modern category of “religion,” since this category was imposed by foreign occupation authorities rather than being grounded in “the” Japanese historical experience. There is perhaps some truth to this argument: after all, in contemporary Japan, there is a clear discrepancy between legal constructions of “religion” and daily-life uses of the term (or avoidance thereof). As we know, *shūkyō* is a modern construct that does not cover the range of devotional and ritual practices taking place in the country. However, those criticizing the secularist state apparatus for being a modern construct typically fail to acknowledge that Shinto as it exists today is largely a modern invention as well, shaped in tandem with the modern state and its categories.⁷⁹ Instead, they assert the transhistorical character of Shinto, arguing that it goes back to prehistoric times, when it took shape “spontaneously” in reaction to the natural environment. This Shinto is said to constitute both a natural and a foundational aspect of Japanese culture and society.

77 Tanaka 2011, p. 19.

78 Depending on the context, the adverb *shizen ni* 自然に can mean both “naturally” and “spontaneously.”

79 Kuroda 1981; Josephson 2012.

Conclusion

Notions of Shinto as a tradition of nature worship—and, correspondingly, pleas for the protection of shrine forest land and shrine-based nature conservation practices—are not at odds with an understanding of Shinto as the ancient spiritual tradition of the Japanese nation, which constitutes a single collective body. Quite the contrary: the Shinto environmentalist paradigm has turned out to be perfectly compatible with notions of a more outspokenly conservative and nationalist nature. One reason for this is that a professed concern for “nature,” “ecology,” and “environmental sustainability” can serve to provide legitimacy for various activities, in Japan as well as abroad, without necessarily leading to significant changes on a practical level. The increasing association of Shinto with these issues in recent years has led to much positive PR, and arguably contributed to the dissociation of Shrine Shinto from issues of a more explicitly ideological nature, including the lingering nostalgia for prewar imperialism and the historical revisionism displayed by the Yasukuni management and its powerful supporters.

The paradigmatic status of this notion of Shinto as a nature religion is well exemplified by the fact that even the president of Jinja Honchō now writes that “the origin of Shinto is nature worship,” and that “the sacred grove constitutes the center of the local community.”⁸⁰ After all, *nature is public*; moreover, it transcends historical particularities and human contingencies. To what extent Jinja Honchō and its leaders have become “truly” concerned with environmental problems is subject to ongoing debate, and I will not attempt to solve this issue now. In any case, they do appear to have embraced the notion of *chinju no mori* as sacred sites where meaningful and sustainable relationships are established between local communities, natural environments, and deities. According to Tanaka and like-minded Shintoists, it is through a renewed awareness of one’s local identity and belonging to a place—social as well as physical—that Japanese people can once again learn about “their” ancient traditions, which are characterized by a symbiotic relationship with the natural environment, as well as gratitude to the ancestors and the gods. Ultimately, the argument goes, this will lead to a moral renaissance, and to the rebirth of the nation.⁸¹

Thus, in this narrative, the significance of *chinju no mori* far transcends the two-dimensional state-religion dichotomy characteristic of postwar legal secularism. Contemporary Shinto ideologues such as Tanaka Tsunekiyo and Sonoda Minoru challenge this secular apparatus; as such, it appears justified to describe their position as “anti-secular.” However, it should be emphasized that ultimately, these Shinto leaders do not challenge the separation of religion and state *per se*. All they state is that modern notions of religion as primarily faith-based and individualistic do not accurately reflect the historical reality of Shinto: a community religion shaped by the natural environment of the archipelago where it emerged. According to them, the legal category *shūkyō*, as it is defined by the Constitution, does not cover Shinto. While the Constitution defines religion as essentially a private affair, Shinto is fundamentally public and collective, they argue. Rather than challenging the separation of state and religion, therefore, contemporary Shinto leaders seek to *reposition* their tradition in the public realm. Thus, they do not wish to abolish the secular system—quite the contrary. Instead, they want to move Shinto from

⁸⁰ Tanaka 2011, pp. 10, 12.

⁸¹ Tanaka 2011, p. 19. See also Breen 2010b.

the “private” realm of *shūkyō* (back) to the “public” or “secular” realm, which encompasses culture, heritage, and nature. Their claim is that Shinto’s place is *in this world*, even though it deals with gods: yet the gods matter here and now, to the entire collective body and the natural environment by which the collective is shaped. Thus, in Josephson’s terminology, these scholars seek to reestablish the “Shinto secular.” When perceived as such, the attempts to make Shinto public and dissociate it from “religion” can indeed be conceptualized as the discursive secularization of Shinto (but not, obviously, its decline).

Eventually, of course, this all boils down to the question of definition, which brings us back to the topic of this special issue, and the debates outlined previously. The concepts “secularism” and “secularization” are used differently by different interpreters, and have come to carry a range of meanings, which are not always made explicit by authors employing these terms. As I have pointed out, contemporary Shinto ideology may be seen as antithetic to secularism by some. Indeed, the attempts to challenge the constitutional restrictions on religious institutions and re-sacralize the public sphere may appear anti-secular at first sight. However, I have argued that these same attempts to reassert Shinto’s role in the public sphere may also be interpreted as a strategy to reestablish Shinto as a secular (that is, nonreligious) collective tradition. In this paper, I have referred to this strategy by the term “discursive secularization.”

When using the terms “secular” and “religious” to refer to Japanese ideology and practices, we need clear working definitions, and consistent application. Should we choose to define “secularity” as the absence of any reference to divine beings in public, Shinto most certainly is not secular. However, should we choose to define it as the this-worldly counterpart of a more transcendently oriented “religion,” which in modern times has come to constitute the “immanent frame” by which the conditions of belief and disbelief are shaped, then Shinto *is* secular, at least in the perception of some of its leading ideologists, who actively argue for corresponding legal changes. Whichever approach we adopt, it is of crucial importance to realize that, although they may have been shaped in a “Western” historical context, “religion” and “the secular” have become very real societal categories in many societies worldwide (including Japan), and therefore cannot be discarded. Their meanings continue to be subject to negotiation and change, however. What counts as “secular” and “religious” is never fixed: these are normative concepts, not neutral analytical categories. One man’s secularism is another man’s religion.

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