

Introduction: Critical Approaches to ‘Religion’ in Japan: Case Studies and Redescriptions

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This Special Issue of the online open access journal *Religions* is entitled “Critical Approaches to ‘Religion’ in Japan: Case Studies and Redescriptions”. It has eight articles that problematise the concept ‘religion’ (JP: *shūkyō*) in Japanese contexts. The theme of this volume echoes Timothy Fitzgerald’s methodological and theoretical proposal, which I have repeatedly quoted in my own works (e.g., Horii 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021). That is: “the category ‘religion’ should be the object, not the tool, of analysis” (Fitzgerald 2000, p. 106). Rather than assuming ‘religion’ is a universal category of human phenomenon, we should examine the process in which a certain human phenomenon comes to be identified as ‘religious’ and the norms and values which govern such classificatory practice. Put simply, the question this Special Issue asks is not “Is a specific human phenomenon religious or not?” but “When and how is it (classified as) religious?” (see Storm 2021 and his contribution in this volume). It is in this spirit that contributors have been asked to disaggregate and redescribe what is often uncritically denoted as ‘religion’ in their analysis of the Japanese context without invoking the *sui generis* idea of religion.

Given this methodological and theoretical thread, this Special Issue focuses on the following two areas. The first is cases of negotiations over contested meanings and definitions of ‘religion’ from the Meiji era to the present in relation to a variety of individual and institutional interests and identity claims. The second area consists of historical investigations that disaggregate what has been assumed to be ‘religion’ in pre-Meiji Japan, where the idea of religion did not exist, and then to reassemble and redescribe its components in more nuanced ways. The subjects of disaggregation in this area include not only the anachronistic projection of the religious-secular distinction, but also that of other related binaries such as religion/politics, sacred/profane, immanent/transcendent, and the like.

In the following paragraphs, I would like to introduce each of the eight contributions to this Special Issue. Timothy Fitzgerald and Philip Garrett have tackled the second area, that is, the problematics of applying the category ‘religion’ to the analysis of historical contexts where the idea of ‘religion’ did not exist. These will be followed by the introductions of the other six papers that examine the first area, that is, the ideological function of ‘religion’ in a variety of contexts in Japan since the mid-nineteenth century up to the present day, where ‘religion’ has been indigenized, institutionalised, and utilised to serve specific norms and values.

1. Timothy Fitzgerald on ‘Religion’ and ‘History’

The theme of this Special Issue is greatly indebted to Fitzgerald’s works published in Fitzgerald (1993, 1997, 2000, 2002). These early attempts to critique the invention of Japanese ‘religion(s)’ and other related categories and to find alternative ways to analyse and represent the data contributed significantly and in the long term to the topic of this Special Issue. Therefore, as guest editor, I have asked Fitzgerald to reflect on his own previous investigations on the category of ‘Japanese religion(s)’. It is a great pleasure to have his contribution, “Japan, Religion, History, Nation”, in this volume.

Fitzgerald summarises some aspects of his more recent published work on the origin of the discourse on generic ‘religion’ in the Anglo-American discourse. Importantly, he has



Citation: Horii, Mitsutoshi. 2022.

Introduction: Critical Approaches to ‘Religion’ in Japan: Case Studies and Redescriptions. *Religions* 13: 763.

<https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13080763>

Received: 13 July 2022

Accepted: 17 August 2022

Published: 21 August 2022

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done so by highlighting its co-emergences and parasitic relationships with other related Anglophone categories. Fitzgerald argues that England, and Europe more widely, did not have ‘a religion’ in the modern sense before the late seventeenth century, and it remained a problematic idea until well into the nineteenth century. Furthermore, as is well known, the Japanese elites found the term highly problematic, as did most other non-European peoples. Then he asks: Why should historians attribute ancient and medieval Japan with ‘religion’ and ‘religious’ institutions and practices?

As well as problematising the projection of ‘religion’ and other modern categories onto Japan’s past, Fitzgerald asks readers to critically reflect upon the very idea of history. Thus, he poses important methodological and theoretical questions about what this Special Issue had assumed to be ‘historical investigation’. I believe that Fitzgerald’s commentary here is extremely valuable to facilitate critical but constructive discussions on the scholarly practices of reassembling and redescribing human phenomena in Japan’s past and present that are conventionally called ‘religion’.

The critique of ‘Japanese religion(s)’ is part of a wider, global discourse on *sui generis* religion and its supposed difference from the ostensibly ‘non-religious’ ‘secular’. There could be no discourse on non-religious secular reason without the invention and exclusion of ‘religion’. In this sense they are a mutually parasitic pair. In this way, the invention of ‘religion’ is the condition for much else that constitutes the ‘modern’—including politics, science, history, the university and its knowledge production, and the dominant world order of ostensibly ‘secular’ nation states.

Fitzgerald here explores the complex interdependency between ‘religion’, ‘history’, and the ‘nation state’.

History, as a secular, professionalised, academic discipline with its own history, has been made possible partly by the invention of ‘religion’. And yet, History has also played a significant role *in* the invention of religion. They therefore have a circular relationship of mutual interdependency. And yet, as Fitzgerald points out in his critique, historians deploy the category ‘religion’ as if it is *ahistorical*.

Something analogous can be said about the relationship between history and modern secular nation states as imagined communities. A nation requires a history to give it substance and legitimacy, including its invented traditions. And yet, the modern professional discipline of history was founded partly on the idea of national histories.

This critical approach has relevance in many sites of colonial contact. This wider context helps to illuminate the Japanese case, while the Japanese case brings a welcome focus and specificity to the global processes of cognitive hegemony and how they actually operate in a particular site.

Though it is probably always true to say that the elites of the colonised site have never been merely passive recipients of the cognitive categories of the coloniser, it is also true that their resistance has understandably and perhaps unavoidably been framed in terms of, or in response to, those categories. The imposition or adoption of ‘religion’, ‘history’, and ‘nation state’ on Japan at the time of Meiji is a significant site for examining these processes of cognitive hegemony.

This has been the wider purpose of the critical approach to ‘religion’ that the Special Issue advocates. From this perspective, Fitzgerald points out the ways in which academic disciplines such as Religious Studies, Sociology, and History, in their attempts at fair-minded, factual representation, inadvertently reproduce and normalise the dominant order.

As guest editor, I have also asked Fitzgerald to critically review some selected studies on Japanese history and the history of Japanese religions. Neither I nor Fitzgerald think that this is an exhaustive procedure: there are always other texts to consider, but it is illuminating.

2. Philip Garrett on ‘Religion’ in Medieval Japan

Philip Garrett’s “Getting Away from ‘Religion’ in Medieval Japan” problematises the anachronistic projection of ‘religion’ onto the context of medieval Japan. His approach

is an extremely significant contrast to the prevalent academic discourse about ‘religion’ in medieval Japan, which includes one of the texts reviewed in Fitzgerald’s contribution, Ruppert’s (2017) “Religion in medieval Japan”. Garrett’s paper is not written to challenge Ruppert’s work. In order to highlight the significance of Garrett’s approach, however, I would like to draw a distinction between Garrett’s paper on one hand and Ruppert’s work that is critically analysed in Fitzgerald’s contribution to this Special Issue on the other hand.

For example, Ruppert (2017, p. 330) acknowledges the argument that “the term ‘religion’ (*shūkyō* in modern Japanese), should not be used in reference to Japan prior to the Meiji restoration (1868)”. Here, he only refers to Josephson’s (2012) *The Invention of Religion in Japan*. Ruppert does not engage with any other studies which problematise ‘religion’ in the Japanese context such as Fitzgerald (1993, 1997, 2000, 2002), Isomae (2014), Maxey (2014), Thomas (2019) and the like. Rather, he quickly puts the problems of ‘religion’ aside and justifies the use of the term ‘religion’ in medieval Japanese context as follows:

Some kind of terminology must, however, be used to convey the broad set of beliefs and practices in premodern Japan, and most scholars studying premodern Japan continue to use the term [‘religion’] since there are few useful alternatives. (Ruppert 2017, p. 330)

In my view, Garrett’s paper in this Special Issue challenges the continuing usage of ‘religion’ in the academic study of medieval Japan, which is represented by the quotation above. Garrett takes seriously the fact that “medieval actors did not perceive their actions as ‘religious’ or non-religious” (p. 2) and attempts to analyse the ways in which they understood their actions and the interactions of institutions.

To demonstrate this, Garrett presents “a single incident which occurred up a mountain in central Japan in 1283” (p. 3). More specifically, that is “a dispute and its resolution, which occurred in the late thirteenth century at the Amano Shrine, in what was then Kii Province (modern Wakayama Prefecture)” (p. 3). He argues that this dispute cannot be properly understood in terms of modern master categories such as ‘politics’, ‘law’, ‘religion’, and the like. Put differently, the thirteenth century Japanese ruling order was organised by its own classificatory schemes. Despite the fact that contemporary historians on medieval Japan tend to conceptualise the distinction between the aristocratic and the monastic in terms of ‘politics’ and ‘religion’, for example, Garrett stresses that such institutional separation “does not automatically imply an understanding of ‘religion’ versus ‘secular’ or ‘political’ organization, but rather the recognition of a distinction between Buddhist institutions and the state: this in itself does not necessarily imply that one of those was a ‘religious’ form and the other ‘political’” (p. 2).

Importantly, what Garrett suggests here is *not* “a practice of using the original Japanese terminology without translation” that “would unduly limit the readership to those students of history who have undertaken advanced study of Japanese language” (Ruppert 2017, p. 330). Instead, Garrett’s paper demonstrates that there are multiple good ways of translating the medieval Japanese order, other than projecting ‘religion’ and other master categories of modernity. In other words, by “getting away from ‘religion’” (as the title of Garrett’s paper states), he tries to unveil and redescribe the power dynamics of medieval Japan, which would have been lost in translation if we employ ‘religion’ and other modern master categories.

Garrett describes medieval Japan as “a society in which the presence of the gods [meaning *kami*] and Buddhas and the correct performance of ritual were fundamental to the functioning of the state and society” (p. 3). Applying the modern categories of religion and politics to this context would be an imposition of the conceptual and institutional distinctions which did not exist in the context of analysis. Garrett even avoids “labelling individuals or actors solely as ‘warriors’ (implicitly ‘political’ or ‘military’) or ‘monks’ or ‘temples’ (implicitly religious)” (p. 3). The paper demonstrates Garrett’s careful attention to the classificatory scheme of the medieval Japanese institutional order. Garrett claims that his methodological strategy enables us “to consider medieval interactions holistically,

which is essential in the understanding of the complex exchanges, tensions, and disputes between individuals and institutions in medieval Japan" (p. 3).

3. Jason A. Josephson Storm on 'Religion' and 'Fine Art'

In addition to Fitzgerald's works mentioned above, the theme of this Special Issue is greatly indebted to Storm's *The Invention of Religion in Japan* (Josephson 2012). This is probably the first English monograph which examines that invention of the category 'religion' in Japan in the context of the wider international power struggles in the late nineteenth century. Storm recalls a decade later that in this book he attempted to "grant that the category is problematic, but actually start from that" (Storm and Gorman 2022). Fitzgerald's contribution to this issue describes that Storm's *The Invention* is "a significant addition to the critical investigation into the category religion". My own academic works have also been inspired by Storm's deconstructionist spirit. My first English book, *The Category of Religion in Contemporary Japan*, for example, was my own modest attempt to follow in the footsteps of Storm's 2012 book by extending the critique of 'religion' to the contemporary Japanese context.

Readers may find commonalities between Fitzgerald's and Storm's contributions when Storm discusses the problematics of 'religion' in relation to other master categories. Storm points out that the key master categories have been deconstructed in a range of academic disciplines since the 1950s. Critique of 'religion' is part of this. What all these auto-critiques tell us is, according to Storm, "how the social world is put together; and the mechanisms through which concepts and social categories are produced and maintained" (p. 11). He argues that the deconstruction of the key categories of academic disciplines help us to see our subject matter as *processes* rather than substances.

Storm seems to echo Fitzgerald's and Garrett's discontent with the scholarly imposition of 'religion' upon the Japanese context before the mid-nineteenth century where the idea of religion had not yet existed. In other words, he argues that "we are able to make more robust generalizations about 'religion' only in the contemporary period once those classifications and legal mechanisms have been brought into place" (p. 17).

The important difference between Fitzgerald's and Garrett's papers, on the one hand, and Storm's paper, on the other hand, is that the latter focuses on the late nineteenth century, when the term 'religion' had already arrived in Japan. Given this specific context, Storm demonstrates a "social process ontology" approach to 'religion' and 'art' as "social kinds". When Storm's concept of 'social' signifies the idea of social construction, he understands that 'art' and 'religion', for example, are 'social kinds' (as opposed to 'natural kinds'). Things grouped together under the rubric of 'art' or 'religion', for example, do not share innate common essences which are totally absent in whatever is classified as non-art or non-religion. Importantly, the distinction between two elements in the periodic table reflects the structure of the natural world. Thus, they are called natural kinds. In contrast, the grouping of 'art' or 'religion' (as opposed to 'non-art' or 'non-religion', respectively) reflects the interests and actions of human beings. When he proposes a social process ontology approach, Storm suggests that scholars should not study social kinds such as 'art' and 'religion' as if they are a substance with a common essence. Rather, what scholars of human sciences could productively study about social kinds is the process in which something is classified as 'art' or 'religion', for instance, and the ways in which such categorisation is negotiated, authorised, and maintained.

Storm's paper starts with the setting at the Hōryūji temple in 1884, when Okakura Kakuzō and Ernest Fenollosa discovered the sacred statue known as the Bodhisattva of the Hall of Dreams, Yumedono Kannon. By telling this story, Storm argues that it is wrong to ask the question "Is this statue religious?", for example. According to him, the questions we should ask is "When and how is this statue religious?" Storm clarifies the significance of this way of questioning by comparing 'religion' with a similarly problematic category of 'fine art'.

The modernisation of lifeways in Japan or elsewhere is generally accompanied with the reorganisation of the lifeworld into different spheres such as places of commerce, homes, factories, schools, museums, places of worship, and the like. Storm notes that this split in modern lifeways is not the result of the differentiation of a previously undifferentiated space. He states: “Pre-Meiji Japan had its own sets of distinctions . . . but the organizational logic was different”. The Japanese encounter with the modern ideas of ‘art’ and ‘religion’ for example resulted in the reorganisation of the institutional structure of Japan’s domain accordingly to such categories in the name of modernisation. The impact of these changes was profound.

As for the introduction of the idea of ‘art’ to Japan, Storm states as follows:

the construction of a notion of fine art in Japan was not merely about translation. It was deeply connected to the diplomatic crucible of the late nineteenth century. . . . The codification of art was connected to new government policy, laws, and institutions. . . . The invention of fine art literally produced new spaces, museums, and galleries, which functioned as locations for the extensive reclassification and reinterpretation of older materials. . . . This has a transformative effect on the works classified and included (or excluded) from the museum. . . . Recast, to conceptualize something as “art” is to remove it from the everyday—to separate it from every other kind of social practice, to render it independent and in some sense transcendent. (p. 8)

Likewise, various entities were assembled together as ‘religion’, and they are separated from ostensibly ‘non-religious’ realms of lifeways. The Meiji government’s deployment of the category ‘religion’ was part of the authorisation process of the new Meiji state’s orthodoxy, which involved internal diplomacy and domestic legislation. The boundaries of ‘religion’ are governed by certain norms and values as well as negotiated by different groups. The Meiji state classified its rival institutions as ‘religion’ and unmarked its norms and values as ‘non-religious’ as if they accord with natural reason and order of things.

4. Andrew Gebert and Anne Mette Fisker-Nielsen on ‘Religion’ and Sōka Gakkai

This volume has two papers on the Sōka Gakkai (SG), which is “the biggest Buddhist organization in postwar Japan” (Fisker-Nielsen this volume, p. 2).

Gebert examines the deployment of ‘religion/*shūkyō*’ by Tunasaburō Makiguchi (1871–1944), the founder of the pre-war predecessor of the SG, the Sōka Kyōiku Gakkai (SKG). Locating Makiguchi’s discourse on ‘religion/*shūkyō*’ in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Japan, Gebert examines the ways in which Makiguchi employed the concept ‘*shūkyō*’ in his endeavour to lead his Buddhist movement in the early twentieth century.

Fisker-Nielsen, in contrast, focuses on the post-1945 development of SG, in particular, SG’s support of the Kōmeitō, the political party established by its third president Daisaku Ikeda in 1964. Whereas the significance of the Kōmeitō in the Japanese ruling order is commonly understood as ‘religious’ influence on secular ‘politics’, Fisker-Nielsen suggests a more nuanced understanding of the SG–Kōmeitō relationship by analysing the semantics and ideological function of the category ‘religion’ in the debate for and against the Kōmeitō.

Gebert’s and Fisker-Nielsen’s approaches to the SG are significantly different from most of the existing scholarly works on SG. Academic studies on SG generally take for granted that the SG is a *religion*, a *religious* organisation, or a *religious* movement. At the time of writing, probably the most recent academic monograph on Sōka Gakkai is Levi McLaughlin’s *Soka Gakkai’s Human Revolution: The Rise of a Mimetic Nation in Modern Japan*. As I opened the book, I was struck by the series editor’s remark in which Sōka Gakkai is regarded as “Japan’s largest lay-centric *religious* organization” (*emphasis added*). The author, McLaughlin also regards Sōka Gakkai as “Japan’s fastest-growing *religion* in the decade after World War II” (McLaughlin 2018, p. 3, *emphasis added*), and as one of “modern Japanese *religious* organizations” (McLaughlin 2018, p. 3, *emphasis added*) with “its *religious* rivals” (McLaughlin 2018, ix, *emphasis added*).

Echoing Storm's process ontology approach, it is wrong to ask the question "Is Sōka Gakkai religious?" The questions we should ask are "When and how is Sōka Gakkai religious?" In this sense, McLaughlin makes some important remarks. He notes, for example: "Soka Gakkai ... began as a *humanistic* organization that came to embrace the teachings of Nichiren, a famously intolerant Buddhist cleric, and it grew into Japan's fastest-growing *religion* in the decades after World War II, ... " ¹ (*emphasis added*). More specifically, McLaughlin observes that its founder Tsunesaburō Makiguchi "hardly deals with religion" in his academic publications, and Makiguchi's works were "concerned primarily with philosophical inquiry, not with religion" (p. 41). When Sōka Kyōiku Gakkai was founded by Makiguchi in 1930, as its Japanese name tells us, it claimed to be an 'educational' organisation. Renamed as Sōka Gakkai after the Second World War, it was not until 1952 that it became a 'religion' under the 1951 Religious Corporation Law.

Andrew Gebert starts his discussion by granting Josephson Storm's argument that the idea of 'religion' had to be 'invented' in Japan during the late nineteenth century. It was the word *shūkyō* that was invented as the definitional Japanese term for 'religion'. While highlighting the semantic instability and multiplicity of 'religion' in pre-war Japan, Gebert unveils the complex and atypical deployment of *shūkyō* by Makiguchi.

Gebert's paper explores Makiguchi's ambiguous relationship with the term *shūkyō*. On the one hand, "Makiguchi regularly used the term 'religion/*shūkyō*' in his writings, including as a descriptor for the Buddhism he embraced and practiced" (p. 2). This seems to be in accordance with the official meaning of *shūkyō* in Japan during the early twentieth century. On the other hand, Makiguchi refused to accept the official definition of Shinto as non-religion. In addition, Makiguchi did not oppose the idea of *shūkyō* against 'education' and 'science'. This went against the norm of intellectual discourse at that time.

Fisker-Nielsen investigates the discourse on religion in the debate for and against SG's support of the political party Kōmeitō. The party "was established in 1964 by the then SG president, Daisaku Ikeda (1928-); by 1967, it had become the third-largest political party in Japan" (p. 10). Since its establishment, Kōmeitō's relationship with SG has often been criticised as an unconstitutional invasion of secular politics by religion.

Criticisms against the Kōmeitō-SG relationship assume that Kōmeitō and SG represent a transgression of the constitutional separation between religion and politics. In contrast, SG claims the institutional separation between SG ('religion') and the Kōmeitō ('politics'), as well as claiming SG members' constitutional right to support a political party. At the same time, Fisker-Nielsen argues, SG's interpretation and practice of Nichiren Buddhism resists the ideological force to define whatever is classified as 'religion' as a matter of personal faith in contrast to public rationality. When SG calls its belief and practice 'religion', the term "is understood to be a 'social' and 'cultural' practice that begins with drawing on a 'life-force' (*seimei ryoku*) in ways that impact an individual person's actions, and as part of aiming to create a broader sense of community" (p. 1).

In other words, SG "has refused to have its collective actions dismissed by labelling them 'religious'" (p. 2). On the one hand, SG's postwar mission to spread its version of Nichiren Buddhism "sought legal protection in the postwar constitution by registering as a Religious Corporation under the 1951 *shūkyō hōjinhō* (Religious Cooperation Law)" and "used the term 'religion' to juxtapose itself as the 'true religion'" (p. 9). On the other hand, SG has de-exoticised "Buddhism into a philosophical practice, to be realized in behavior and 'worldly affairs'" (p. 15). "'Buddhism' as fundamentally a 'cultural' and 'social' engagement" (p. 14) has been a recurrent theme in the interviews and conversations with SG members. SG calls its faith and practice as Buddhist Humanism.

5. Ilaria Vecchi, Ernils Larsson, and Alec R. LeMay on 'Religion' and Minority Groups in Contemporary Japan

The remaining three papers explore the category 'religion' in the context of minority groups in contemporary Japan: the *Itako* mediums in northern Japan, the Chinese heritage in Okinawa, and the Filipino communities in Tokyo.

First, Ilaria Vecchi is an ethnographic filmmaker. Her contribution to this Special Issue discusses the methodological and theoretical foundation of her 2020 documentary film *Tohoku Monogatari—A Story from the Northeast of Japan*. The film is available online at: <https://vimeo.com/435013437> (PSW: 8618) (accessed on 16 August 2022).

This film is the product of her ethnographic fieldwork in Japan. She studied the *Itako*, the mediums who are “a now small group of practitioners living in the Tohoku region” (p. 2). They “were traditionally blind women who supplied a number of services, one of which was the summoning of the spirits of the dead (*kuchiyose*)” (p. 6).

Vecchi’s *Tohoku Monogatari* challenges scholarly and popular assumptions about the *Itako* as a ‘shaman’ and more importantly as a ‘religious’ figure. She argues that the category of religion had created cognitive and representational structures in which the *Itako* become “subjects for exoticism and nostalgia for a diverse and global audience” (p. 6). Vecchi claims that the exoticism in the imagery of the *Itako* has been strengthened by their association with the concepts such as ‘religion’ and ‘shaman’.

In other words, Vecchi attempts to construct a narrative that is an alternative to the *religionizing* and *shamanizing* discourse on the *Itako*. She does not use the categories of religion and shaman to analyse her ethnographic data on the *Itako*. In her fieldwork, Vecchi attempted “to collaborate with them, ask questions, observe and hear from these mediums their view on their profession and life” (p. 9). One of the important findings about the *Itako* was this:

people never considered what they were doing of any particular “religious” nature. In fact, no one ever used the word religion to define what they were doing. The most used terms were activity (*katsudō*) and tradition (*dentō*). (p. 5)

The aim of Vecchi’s ethnographic film was to create a more holistic representation of the *Itako*, rather than confining them to the categories of ‘religion’ and ‘shaman’. Vecchi tries to “understand *Itako*’s cultural dimension and her profession in the context of Tohoku” (p. 9). More specifically, her film aims to “capture the daily life of the *Itako*, a professional of communication—and a digital online presence—with a social life” (p. 9).

Second, Erniles Larsson’s paper examines the Japanese Supreme Court ruling in 2021, where a Confucius structure at the Kume district in the city of Naha, Okinawa, was defined as ‘religious’.

It was 1879 when the Japanese state occupied Ryūkyū Kingdom and turned the domain into the Okinawa prefecture of Japan. There had been an extensive influence of Chinese Confucianism on Ryūkyū since the fourteenth century. Such influence has been represented by the Confucius Temple, more precisely, *kōshibyō*, located at Kume in Naha, Okinawa. The temple has been owned by *Kume sōsei-kai* (KSK) since 1915, when the ownership was transferred from Naha City. The temple was destroyed during the Second World War. In the mid-1970s, KSK was reorganised as a general corporate juridical person (*ippan shadan hōjin*), whose main purpose is to rebuild the Confucius temple and to commemorate the Chinese influence on the Ryūkyū islands since the fourteenth century.

In March 2011, the mayor of Naha City gave KSK permission to construct the new Confucius Temple on a plot of land in the Naha Municipal Park, and the mayor decided to waive the rent for the land used by the institution. In the mayor’s opinion, the institution promoted by KSK was an ‘educational facility’, and importantly, KSK was registered as a ‘public organisation’ (not as a ‘religious corporation’). In 2014 and 2015, however, a lawsuit was filed against the Naha mayor by a private citizen in Naha. The plaintiff claimed that KSK and their facilities were ‘religious’. If that is the case, the mayor had promoted one specific religion, and this is something clearly prohibited under the constitution.

In this case, whether Confucianism is a religion or not become a contentious issue. It seems that the court had accepted the plaintiff’s claim that the specific Confucianism that KSK and its temple represent is “not the academic Confucianism accepted in the Edo Period, but a religious Confucianism” (p. 12).

Importantly, Larsson examines this court case in relation to the post-war Japanese statecraft, the colonial status of Okinawa, and the history and memory of the Chinese

immigrant community in Naha since the fourteenth century, which are represented by the Confucius temple. Importantly, the Supreme Court in Tokyo granted the idea of ‘religious’ Confucianism of Okinawa as opposed to supposedly secular academic Confucianism. The latter was part of the Meiji statecraft that colonised the Ryūkyū Kingdom. In contrast, the Confucius heritage of Okinawa was regarded as ‘religion’ partly because of its direct historical connection to China. Here, the idea of ‘secular’ Japan is normalised by imagining somehow ‘religious’ China. Ultimately, the Okinawan classification of the Confucius temple as nonreligious was denied by the Tokyo-based judiciary and it was replaced with an implicitly anti-China classification scheme.

Third, Alec LeMay challenges the taken-for-granted idea of Catholicism as a religion. In his contribution, he turns the identification of Catholicism as religion into an object of analysis in the contemporary Japanese context. Rather than assuming Catholicism as a religion, he examines the consequence of such assumption in the Filipino Catholic community in Japan, particularly, in the acculturation process within Filipino–Japanese families. More precisely, LeMay locates “the discourse of ‘religion’ within the acculturation process of Filipino–Japanese children” and assesses the ways in which the term ‘religion’ has “led to an increased degree of dissonant acculturation for Filipino–Japanese children who want little to do with their mother’s Catholicism” (pp. 1–2).

In the Japanese colloquial discourse, “The difference between ‘religion’ and ‘non-religion’ is one of social acceptance” (p. 8). That is, in Japan, the ‘socially accepted’ kinds of being and doing are generally considered as ‘non-religious’ or *mushūkyō*. In contrast, religion or *shūkyō* is often a label that is attached to socially unacceptable or non-Japanese kinds of behaviours. Given such a function of ‘religion’, LeMay clarifies the ways in which Christians can be marginalised in Japan by being identified as ‘religious’:

Being called ‘religious’ has become synonymous with piousness, extremism, danger, and terrorism. Moreover, being associated with ‘religion’ (for which Christianity is ‘religion’ par excellence) has led to children’s ridicule, marginalization, or worse. (p. 3)

When a variety of customs and rituals of the Japanese are seen as nonreligious, those of the non-Japanese or foreigners are more likely to be labelled as ‘religious’. The latter includes the Filipino/Catholic custom of churchgoing on Sunday. When the practice of Sunday churchgoing prevents one from participation in Japanese customs and rituals, it is likely to be considered as ‘religious’. In addition, Filipino mothers and Filipino–Japanese children may justify their Sunday churchgoing as ‘religious’ in order to claim their right to prioritise it over other commitments in their lifeways in Japan. In both cases, however, the identification of churchgoing as ‘religious’ increasingly marginalises Filipino ways of living. LeMay summarises his finding as follows: “The more the Filipino mother demands her children attend church despite having commitments otherwise, the more her church activities become ‘religious’ and something unappealing” (p. 14). It is the association of Catholicism with the idea of religion that take Filipino–Japanese children away from the Filipino Catholic traditions of their mothers.

6. Concluding Remark

It would not be an exaggeration to say that the religious–secular distinction has been a rhetorical device to normalise the myth of modernity, such as nation states and capitalism, as if they are a ‘secular’ factual reality as opposed to ostensibly fictional religions. In this light, while the projection of ‘religion’ upon the non-modern or premodern context functions to create an illusion that ‘religion’ is universal and an ahistorical human phenomenon, it also authorises ostensibly ‘nonreligious’ or ‘secular’ modern ways of being and knowing as the bedrock of reality.

In this Special Issue, Fitzgerald and Garrett have challenged the scholarly practice of projecting ‘religion’ onto Japan’s premodern past by historicising the idea of religion. Understanding ‘religion’ as a modern category helps us to realise that nonmodern or premodern ways of life are operating with their own system of categories which do not

have the religious–secular distinction. This way of thinking enables us to question the apparent universality of our modern classification scheme of human phenomena and to see the processes in which modernity’s fictions and master categories are normalising each other.

I believe it is in this spirit that Storm’s paper in this Special Issue argues for the process ontology of modern master categories such as ‘art’ and ‘religion’. Likewise, Gebert and Fisker-Nielsen analyse the processes in which the Sōka Gakkai, the largest Buddhist organisation in postwar Japan, and its prewar predecessor, Sōka Kyōiku Gakkai, have negotiated with the idea of ‘religion/shūkyō’. In addition, Vecchi, Larsson, and LeMay examine the uneasy relationship between specific minority groups and the category ‘religion/shūkyō’ in contemporary Japan.

All these papers highlight the processes in which a specific range of theorized beliefs and practices has been exiled from the domain of power as ‘religion’ while simultaneously other ostensibly ‘nonreligious’ or ‘secular’ beliefs and practices have been assumed as in accordance with natural reason. Thus, the deconstruction of the religious–secular distinction enables us to see the mythological nature of what we assumed as “the inherent nature of things, the real world of facts and rational decision-making” (Fitzgerald 2011, p. 10). By applying this approach to Japan, I hope that this Special Issue provides readers with a deeper insight into the processes in which the dominant ideology is authorised, maintained, and often contested in Japan.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Note

- ¹ In the light of the theme of this Special Issue, it is worth noting that when McLaughlin describes Nichiren as “a famously intolerant Buddhist cleric”, it appears that he is importing the modern concept of ‘religious toleration’ into a context where it had no analogue or relevance. I would like to thank Andrew Gebert for pointing this out to me.

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