

The Problems of Religion in Contemporary Japan

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Overall view of the course

This course examines a variety of problems associated with 'religion' (Japanese: *shūkyō*) in Japan conceptually, legally and in practical reality, from debates over the nature of 'religion', to questions about its relationship to society legally and in terms of public safety, to issues related to its apparent decline in very modern times.

In particular it focuses on the period since 1995 when a registered religious organisation, Aum Shinrikyo, used the nerve gas sarin on the Tokyo subway in connection with Aum's millennial visions of a final cosmic war of good and evil, and it examines the problems that this incident has posed for the image, status and support structures of religion in Japan. It also examines a series of problematic issues that can be related in modern conceptual terms to the 'problem of religion', for example in terms of how 'religion' may be thought about in modern Japan, in connection to legal issues related to Shinto, nationalism and the Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo, and to the rise of the so-called 'cult problem' that has arisen after Aum. It also examines whether Japan is becoming increasingly secularised as a result not just of the problems caused by religion and the image of religion as a dangerous entity in need of control- images that have become prevalent after Aum- but also as a result of changing social, economic and demographic flows and because of modernity and its concomitants, which have altered the shape of Japanese society in recent ages.

In this latter context, particular attention will be paid to the question of Buddhism in contemporary Japan- mainly because this is the area that has been most widely discussed in recent academic publications in relation to potential secularisation and the 'decline of religion' in institutional terms- but also to wider questions of declining support levels for 'religion'. In this context, too, there will be some discussion (based on my recent research, much as yet not published) about pilgrimage practices in very recent years and how these might fit in with concepts of religious decline and secularisation. The reason for choosing pilgrimage as a topic to focus on is both because it has been mentioned often as an area of growth in recent times (and hence cited as an example that seemingly shows that religious practices may not be in decline) and because, in my recent research, I have begun to question this image of growth. Recent evidence indicates that many pilgrimages, apart from the most famous pilgrimage in Japan (Shikoku) are in decline, while the popularity of the Shikoku pilgrimage can be linked to an increasing process of transforming it and depicting it as a tourist, cultural and heritage phenomenon- a process heightened by the recent campaign by Shikoku authorities to get the pilgrimage route declared a UNESCO World Heritage cultural asset. As such it may be that, rather than pilgrimage growth we are seeing overall decline along with the success of one single pilgrimage- but a success that has come about as that pilgrimage has, in effect, become increasingly secularised and portrayed as a cultural rather than as a religious entity. Such attempts at reorienting pilgrimage as cultural practice bring us back to the problems of 'religion' and its definitions raised at the start of the seminar.

Course structure

The above topics will be dealt with through four days of seminars, with overlapping themes.

Seminar One (Monday)

- Terms, problems and questions: the terminology and scope of the study of religion.
- The 1946 Constitution and an outline of legal problems that have arisen. Yasukuni, Shinto and nationalism.

Seminar Two (Tuesday)

- The rise of new religions, notions of millennialism and ‘world renewal’ (*yonaoshi*) and critiques of contemporary society. Late 20th century fears about the ‘end of the world’ and fears about new religions.
- The rise of Aum and its turn to violence.
- Reactions and responses to Aum: the notion of ‘cults’ and ‘mind control’; redefinitions of ‘religion’; the notion of religion as ‘dangerous’, calls for state control and scrutiny of religious groups, and potential civil liberties’ abuses.

Seminar Three (Wednesday)

- The aftermath of Aum and its impact on religion, politics and related issues
- Secularisation after Aum? Patterns of modernity, the turn away from organised religion, and claims about ‘spirituality’.

Seminar Four (Thursday)

- The state of ‘religion’ today with reference in particular to Buddhism as an example of institutional decline and the problems of modernity.
- Pilgrimage as an example of potential growth, decline and secularised transformation.
- Concluding comments, including the viability of continuing to use ‘religion’ as a conceptual framework of analysis in Japan.

Readings

Seminar One- primary readings

The concept and construction of ‘religion’ in Japan

Ian Reader and George J. Tanabe 1998 *Practically Religious: Worldly Benefits and the Common Religion of Japan* (University of Hawaii press), pp. 3-7 for a definition of ‘*shūkyō*’ (religion) in Japanese contexts

Junichi Isomae 2005 *Deconstructing “Japanese Religion”: A Historical Survey* *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 32/2: 235-248

On Yasukuni Shrine issues:

Michiaki Okuyama 2009 Disputes over Yasukuni Shrine and Its War Dead in Contemporary Japan. *Religion Compass* Vol 3/1 pp 58-71.

Chris Perkins Inheriting the Legacy of the Souls of the War Dead: Linking Past, Present and Future at the Yūshūkan. *electronic journal of contemporary Japanese studies* 2011 (article freely available online at <http://www.japanesestudies.org.uk/articles/2011/Perkins.html>)

Seminar Two- primary readings

Ian Reader 2000 *Religious Violence in Contemporary Japan* (esp pp 47-52 and pp 224-249. (Curzon Press).

Shimazono Susumu In the Wake of Aum: The Formation Transformation of a Universe of Belief (available online from the *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 1995 <http://nirc.nanzan-u.ac.jp/publications/jjrs/pdf/455.pdf>)

Erica Baffelli and Ian Reader 2012 Editors' Introduction Impact and Ramifications: the Aftermath of the Aum Affair in the Japanese Religious Context. *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* Vol. 39/1 pp 1-28 (available online from April 2012)

Seminar Three – primary readings

Ian Reader 2012 Secularisation R.I.P? Nonsense! The 'rush hour away from the gods' and the decline of religion in contemporary Japan. *The Journal of Religion in Japan*, Vol 1/1, 28 pages in press. (copy of journal being sent to Blai Guarne; pdf will be available also)

John Nelson 2011 *Global and Domestic Challenges Confronting Buddhist Institutions in Japan*. *Journal of Global Buddhism* Vol 12, 2011, pp 1-16. (online at <http://www.globalbuddhism.org/toc.html>)

Seminar Four- primary readings

Ian Reader 'Buddhism in Crisis? Institutional decline in modern Japan' *Buddhist Studies Review* Vol.28, no.2, 2011 pp 233-263 ISSN print 0256-2897; online ISSN 1747-9681

Horie Norichika 2009 2009. "Spirituality and the Spiritual in Japan: Translation and Transformation." *Journal of Alternative Spiritualities and New Age Studies* 5 (2009-2011) (in press. Online at <http://www.asanas.org.uk/journal.htm>).