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# Beyond Belief: Japanese Approaches to the Meaning of Religion

James Shields  
jms089@bucknell.edu

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# Beyond Belief: Japanese Approaches to the Meaning of Religion

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**James Mark Shields**  
*Bucknell University, USA*

**Abstract:** For several centuries, Japanese scholars have argued that their nation’s culture—including its language, religion and ways of thinking—is somehow unique. The darker side of this rhetoric, sometimes known by the English term “Japanism” (*nihon-jinron*), played no small role in the nationalist fervor of the early late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. While much of the so-called “ideology of Japanese uniqueness” can be dismissed, in terms of the Japanese approach to “religion,” there may be something to it. This paper highlights some distinctive—if not entirely unique—features of the way religion has been categorized and understood in Japanese tradition, contrasting these with Western (i.e., Abrahamic), and to a lesser extent Indian and Chinese understandings. Particular attention is given to the priority of praxis over belief in the Japanese religious context.

**Resumé :** Des siècles durant, des chercheurs japonais ont soutenu que leur culture – soit leur langue, leur religion et leurs façons de penser – était en quelque sorte unique. Or, sous son jour le plus sombre, cette rhétorique, parfois désignée du terme de « japonisme » (*nihon-jinron*), ne fut pas sans jouer un rôle déterminant dans la montée de la ferveur nationaliste à la fin du XIXe siècle, ainsi qu’au début du XXe siècle. Bien que l’on puisse discréditer pour l’essentiel cette soi-disant « idéologie de l’unicité japonaise », la conception nippone de la « religion » constitue, quant à elle, un objet d’analyse des plus utiles et pertinents. Cet article met en évidence quelques caractéristiques, sinon uniques du moins distinctives, de la manière dont la religion a été élaborée et comprise au sein de la tradition japonaise, pour ensuite les confronter avec les conceptions occidentale (abrahamique) et, dans

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**Corresponding author / Adresse de correspondance:**

Department of Religion, Bucknell University, Lewisburg, PA 17837

[email]

une moindre mesure, indienne et chinoise. Une attention toute particulière est ici accordée à la praxis plutôt qu'à la croyance dans le contexte religieux japonais.

### Keywords

Japanese religions, Shinto, belief, ritual, nihonjin-ron, orthopraxis

### Mots clés

It is practice which makes it possible for one to attain one's goals, whether those be defined as liberation, awakening, harmony, prosperity, longevity, purification, or protection.

— Richard K. Payne, "The Ritual Culture of Japan," p. 235

At the beginning of each my undergraduate courses in Asian religion, I employ the classic definition of William James, for whom religion was: "the belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto." I have always believed this a good definition, because it is vague enough (using "order" instead of God or gods, for example) to cover virtually all the major world religions. When we apply James's definition to the case of Japanese religions, however, things quickly become more complicated. This is not because Japanese religions lack "gods" in some fashion (though the precise implications of the fundamental term *kami* is still a matter of some dispute); rather, it is due to the fact that Japanese religions are, arguably more than any other major religions in the world, literally "beyond belief."

Let us begin with a look at the contemporary Japanese word for "religion," which is *shūkyō* 宗教. The two ideograms used here can be roughly translated as "sect" and "teachings"—indicating the distinctly sectarian nuance of the term. As a matter of fact, the term *shūkyō* is a modern re-interpretation of an ancient but obscure term produced by Japanese scholars in the Meiji period, just as Japan was "opening up" to Western culture and ideas. (Shimazono 1998; Kisala 2006: 6–8). It is significant that this term was incorporated in the context of an attempt by Meiji leaders to disassociate Shinto from Buddhism and disestablish the latter. Kisala also notes the role of the 1893 Parliament of Religions held in Chicago in shaping the modern Japanese conception of religion (2006: 4–5). After the Imperial Rescript on Education (1890), religion came to be understood, at least officially, as characterized by "the presence of a individual founder and denominational organization" (Kisala 2006: 8) and, again, from the Meiji state's point of view, as being private and voluntary as opposed to public and obligatory. Interestingly, by effectively cutting off some aspects of Shinto from the category of religion, the Meiji leaders were able to more readily raise the status of Shinto as something *beyond religion*—the very essence of the "national body" (*kokutai* 国体) itself. Although all of this officially ended with the end of World War II and the Allied Occupation, the notion that religion is primarily "an internal affair of individuals" was enshrined in the postwar Japanese government as part of the 1951 Religious Corporations Law (*shūkyō hōjin hō* 宗教法人法) designed initially to protect religious freedom, but of late employed as a weapon against the encroaching power of groups such as Soka Gakkai in the political sphere. (Dorman 1996)

These facts have led some scholars to conclude, too readily, I think, that prior to its contact with the West Japan did not have a concept of “religion” at all.<sup>1</sup> It is certainly true to say that before contact with the West Japan lacked a sense of religion that was correlative to the way the term is understood in modern Western cultures and languages—but this is merely to state the obvious. Furthermore, the same could be argued about the West itself. After all, is it not the case that, prior to colonial expansion and contact with foreign cultures, or, at any rate, prior to the dramatic and fateful encounter with Islam in the Crusades, most ordinary Europeans also lacked a coherent concept of “religion” other than its equivalence with Christian teaching? While it is true that a few early Christian scholars (e.g., Lactantius, Augustine) sought to define religion as “re-connection (*L. re-ligare*) with the divine,” this was hardly a matter of concern for theologians prior to the Enlightenment. Despite a lack of attention to religion *per se*, there is no doubt that Western Christians shared a general understanding of the basis of *their* or - as they would have it - *the* religion. Belief was obviously fundamental to the Christian faith. Indeed, the many conciliar disputes and proliferation of heresies show the centrality of doctrine to the growing church. Of course, the Reformation showed that the precise balance and relationship between faith and works had never been fully resolved, but even the author of the Epistle of James and his Renaissance humanist heirs would hardly suggest that “works alone” were sufficient for a Christian life. And as much as Islam would come to dispute the central tenets of Christian doctrine, Muslims would never suggest that there was anything wrong with the Christian emphasis on belief. Indeed, the Arabic term *din* refers to the “way” that Muslims should follow—a path firmly rooted in belief in the oneness, power and goodness of Allah. While it is a practice, the practice is formed by and founded on faith, rather than vice versa.<sup>2</sup>

In contrast to both Christianity and Islam (though perhaps closer to Judaism), Japanese religious traditions are characterized by an emphasis on ritual and practice above belief or doctrine, or even ethics as traditionally understood.<sup>3</sup> Though this generalization may apply more directly to the so-called indigenous tradition of Shinto, it also came to shape the development of the various Japanese traditions of Buddhism, including Zen, Nichiren and Pure Land.

## Shinto: The Way of *Kami*

Let us begin with Shinto, which is often—though now controversially—considered the indigenous religion of Japan. How is Shinto understood as a “religion”? What is the Shinto term that best corresponds to the English word “religion”? Any investigation of the meaning of Shinto has to start with the fundamental and inescapable term *kami*.<sup>4</sup> Though this word, like all Japanese nouns, is graphically indicated by an ideogram—神—it is important to recall that, with ancient Japanese terms such as this, the written form is, even in its origins, a translation from the Chinese. Indeed, it is not too much to suggest that the very meaning of *kami* was to some extent shaped by the Chinese nuance brought into the word in the process of assigning it a graphic form (see Havens 2006: 19).<sup>5</sup> A contemporary Japanese character dictionary gives the following senses for the character: god, deity, mind, soul, venerable, hallowed. Most scholars agree that the latter terms on this list more adequately grasp the earlier senses of *kami*: venerable, hallowed, awesome, sublime.

Or, as I generally put it to my students, *kami* might be described as “that which makes you go ‘wow!’” (Jp. *sugoi!*)

Given the extensive applicability and malleability of the term *kami*,<sup>6</sup> it seems that there is hardly a core term in any of the world’s religions that relies *less* upon a conceptual understanding. This is not to say that *kami* is so mysterious or transcendent as to be “beyond language”—as is sometimes claimed for the Chinese *dao*.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, it may well be the opposite: it is so simple that it does not warrant conceptual explanation or a meta-physical gloss. Indeed, it can be fairly said that *kami* is simply a felt presence of awe, and as such can be found or manifest in anything: nature, of course, but also humans, animals, mythical creatures, gods, and even man-made objects such as automobiles or trains.

At some level all this begins to sound suspiciously close to Rudolf Otto’s famous but largely discredited notion of the *mysterium tremendum* that lies at the base of all religious experience, and by extension at the foundation of all religion. The similarity here is a superficial one, since Otto quite clearly frames his understanding of the numinous in terms of “dread” and “majesty,” and insists on this fundamental “non-rational” element being “mysterious”—akin in many respects to the unfathomable godhead of Protestant mystics. While it is true that relations with *kami*—particular the wrathful *aragami* and *goryōshin*<sup>8</sup>—can involve a measure of fear and trembling, Otto’s idea of the unique and *totaliter aliter* aspects of the Holy seem to be worlds away from the very down to earth and humble immanence of basic Shinto. In Shinto, it is precisely the nearness and conditionedness of *kami* that makes it so powerful; it is literally “within you”—if only for that moment of overjoyed response. There is something decidedly concrete and material about this form of religiosity, without it being simply materialistic.<sup>9</sup>

Also significant here is the aspect of feeling (Jp. *kimochi*) that underlies *kami*, which is perhaps best considered as the relation between an external spirit or power and an internal response to such.<sup>10</sup> Or the relation might even be framed in reverse, such that it is the feeling that gives rise to or realizes the external spiritual force. Given the radical immanence of *kami*, and its lack of any sort of conceptual basis, it is easy to conclude that there is little room here for belief or faith as it is normally understood in other world religions. Whether *kami* (conceived as spirits dwelling within nature or objects) really exist is entirely beside the point, for the existence of *kami* rests upon the feeling that one has in encountering anything awesome.

At the same time, again, lest this become too much of a Western romantic notion—the Wordsworthian sublime in the face of Nature—it is always important to note the significance of the community, and of ritual action, in Japanese religion more generally and Shinto in particular.<sup>11</sup> For it is normally within community rituals—*matsuri* or festivals—that Shinto finds its expression. Indeed, in modern Japan it is tempting (though not quite correct) to assume that these festivals *are* Shinto. The practice of festivals helps to build not only relationships between members of a community, but also the connection with the *kami*. Again, this could be understood as a way of cultivating an emotional or responsive vocabulary which opens one up further to the *kami*-experience.<sup>12</sup>

## Homology & Holography

The late Japanese scholar Kuroda Toshio became well-known in the 1980s and 1990s for his work on the relation between Buddhism and Shinto in Japanese history, and for his

influential but controversial conclusion that, in fact, to even speak of Shinto as if it were a separate religion from Buddhism before the modern era is a mistake—albeit one that has been made by scholars of all sorts for the past century or more. Kuroda argues that in fact the construction of Shinto is largely an ideological one, developed initially to provide support for the Meiji government’s attempts to re-establish Shinto as the national religion of the emerging Imperial state.<sup>13</sup> At the heart of Kuroda’s thesis is the suggestion that the core of Japanese religion as it has been practiced for at least a millennium is not the phantom Shinto but rather a complex that he calls *kenmitsu hōmon* 顯密法門—roughly exoteric-esoteric Buddhism, a combination of doctrines and practices that emerged out of the Tendai and Shingon sects but which eventually came to undergird all forms of Buddhism, as well as the loose “*kami*-cults” that according to Kuroda are mistakenly called “Shinto.”<sup>14</sup>

Whatever one thinks of the particulars of Kuroda’s thesis—and I, for one, have a number of problems with the way he frames the argument about the pre-modern non-existence of Shinto as well as the way he conceives of *kenmitsu* Buddhism itself<sup>15</sup>—his emphasis on a non-sectarian (largely esoteric) foundation for Japanese religiosity is highly persuasive, and bucks the sectarianism of traditional religious scholarship in Japan, as well as the commonly-held assumption that the so-called *senju* or single-path schools of the Kamakura period overwhelmed the earlier esoteric traditions.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, the particular framework that Kuroda outlines, based on a highly symbolic and, more specifically, *homologic* and *holographic* approach to the world makes a strong connection to recent studies of Japanese ritual and festival.<sup>17</sup>

I am employing these terms here to indicate two related facets of Japanese religiosity. *Homology* refers to the assertion of an identity between two things that goes beyond reference or simple analogy. As Payne puts it: “Mt Fuji does not stand for or represent anything”—it is simply sacred in the sense of “being a place of great power” (2006: 246).<sup>18</sup> *Holography* refers more directly to the proactive element of the same process—a way of relating to the world, whereby each element or particular of a whole is capable of reproducing or realizing the entirety of the whole. Thus mountains may take on a vast cosmic reality by virtue of certain ritual or ascetic practices.<sup>19</sup> The idea of a holographic basis to Japanese religiosity is one developed by Thomas Kasulis in his work on Shinto (Kasulis 2004). Other scholars, however, many following the lead of Kuroda Toshio, have picked up on this matter, which finds parallels in both exoteric and esoteric Buddhist traditions.<sup>20</sup> Bernard Faure has written of the apparent absence of any clear referent to symbols used within certain forms of Japanese Buddhism. In such cases, he suggests, symbols or objects may simply *be* the reality that they “represent.” Another way to speak of this is to say that the whole issue of idolatry that has plagued Western religions for millennia—whether the golden calf, cross, or Ka’aba is a sign of the invisible transcendent force, a window giving access to that force, or, heaven forbid, an idol<sup>21</sup>—is nonexistent in pre-modern and perhaps even in contemporary Japan (see Payne 2006: 246). Or to say, with Payne, that the heavy use of symbols in esoteric Buddhism—and, if we follow Kuroda, in all forms of Japanese religion—is not an indication of a dichotomy or separation between realms, but an expression and assertion of the capability of the distinction between these realms—what might be called the sacred and profane—to collapse.

Important here, again, is the power of ordinary material objects, as well as ritual acts and words, to bring about the holographic transformation of realms.<sup>22</sup> But perhaps even

*transformation* is a misleading term, since what actually occurs is more often understood as a *recognition* of the way things really are—rather than some sort of miraculous change of state brought about by a god or sacred force. As Stone puts it, “Any sphere of phenomenal activity could be ‘mandalized’ as a realm where the wisdom and compassion of the buddhas and bodhisattvas were expressed” (2006: 45). Though the two realms may in fact be conceptually separated, they tend to conflate in practice, given the correct ritual conditions. Moreover, the process can also occur to an individual, who commutes with a spiritual being, provisionally taking on the identity and powers of such via ritual activity, austerities or meditation.<sup>23</sup> Perhaps what we have here is something more akin to what is often called “magic” rather than “religion”—though again we must not let the scholarly biases against the former cloud our judgment, nor assume that the two realms can be so neatly separated.

A final point deserving attention here is the question of *authenticity*. Payne suggests that the power of symbolic objects in Japan may lie precisely with their “capacity for infinite reproduction or duplication.” Rather than search for authenticity, what is sought in a religious artefact is in fact *multiplicity*, understood as the capability of an ordinary object to take on the powers of an original when distributed or, as is often the case in the modern Japanese context, purchased. A visit to any popular religious festival or place of worship in Japan will confirm the multifarious nature of Japanese religion—in that one will be surrounded by booths selling all manner of objects and amulets whose purchase will impart some sort of power via a holographic connection with the shrine or temple (see Payne 2006, 246).

## Rituals of Realization

It has become commonplace in recent Buddhist Studies to lament the excessive attention given to doctrine and philosophy, and by extension to the teachings of a small elite of patriarchs and masters, to the neglect of the way religion is played out on the ground, as it were, in folk beliefs, rituals, and community performances.<sup>24</sup> The past several decades have seen a redressing of this balance, as more studies are inclined towards social scientific, and particularly anthropological, methods of approaching religion. This has entailed an attempt on the part of some scholars to get a proper handle on how ritual can be best conceived and applied in the study of Japanese religion. Yet even when scholars have gotten past the more traditional Protestant or modernist disdain for ritual practice, there still lingers a tendency to protect the sphere of ritual from the distortions of more obviously secular forms such as economics and politics. This is especially problematic when one deals with ancient Japan, where the two spheres were ineluctably interfused. Even prior to the emergence of Buddhism as a protector of the state in the medieval period, the word for government in Japan was *matsurigoto* 政—literally, “ritual or festival matters.” By the Nara period if not earlier, the performance of ritual by the king had become a way—perhaps the way—of establishing his (or her) power. In many respects this mirrors early Chinese kingship patterns, a similarity likely not coincidental. At any rate, the connection between religion and state power—and the use of ritual and ideology—as a discourse of legitimation is apparent throughout Japanese history, from the 17-Article Constitution (*Kenpō jushichijō* 憲法十七條, 605) to the Imperial Rescript on Education (*Kyōiku chokugo* 教育勅語, 1890).

Richard Payne (2006) has addressed this point in a wonderful reflection on what he refers to as a “naturalized” conception of ritual. Payne makes the point that both economics and politics have long been considered as spheres apart from religion in general, and the different aspects of religion in particular (2006: 243). Though Payne aims his critique at Western scholars, it is fair to say the most contemporary Japanese scholars fall prey to the same tendency. Payne is particularly keen to bring economics back into religion (244 n.16) for the simple reason that economics, in the micro if not macro sense of the term, is fundamental to the way Japanese—and perhaps most religions—are actually practiced. The key terms here would be *obligation* and *reciprocity*, which play a fundamental role in Japanese cultural interactions as well as religious ritual. One might also add the term ‘faith’ here—understood not as it normally is in Western traditions as belief in the power of unseen beings, as in the Japanese *shinkō* 信仰; but rather as *shinyō* 信用, which has a rather more ‘secular’ and even economic meaning of “trusting in the integrity of social relationships” and the efficacy of rules of conduct to bring about reciprocity<sup>25</sup> (see Fitzgerald 2003, 33). This ties directly into the element of worldly benefits (*genze riyaku* 現世利益), which some scholars (e.g., Reader and Tanabe 1998) have argued is in fact the most prevalent trope of Japanese religiosity.<sup>26</sup>

## Comparison

Let us look briefly at the way some other major non-Western religions approach or employ a term equivalent to “religion.” Indian traditions, including both Hinduism and Buddhism, have long employed the term *dharma* to signify the core of religion. A notoriously polyvalent term, *dharma* is in one major sense strikingly similar to the Islamic *din*—that is, a path of righteousness that comes from adhering to the teachings of the Vedas, or possibly the Upanishads, as well as to one’s caste duties. Yet *dharma* in Hinduism is more than just a path to follow among many; it is also inscribed in the very fabric of the universe itself. Thus *dharma* is sometimes described simply as Truth. Here, one might plausibly argue, the element of faith is less important than in the Abrahamic traditions, by virtue of the fact that *dharma* is simply the way things are, regardless of one’s particular beliefs. Yet, the way that Hinduism came to be practiced by the vast majority of Indian people—i.e., via *bhakti*, personal devotion to one or several gods; or *darśana*, viewing and being viewed by the divine—adherence to *dharma* in Hinduism normally includes a devotional dimension.

In Indian Buddhism, *dharma* took on a slightly different nuance. While retaining its connection to Truth as the way things really are, the term came to refer more specifically to the Buddha’s teachings (in the Mahayana this was expanded to include the teachings of *all* buddhas and bodhisattvas), and also was reframed in a somewhat more ethical fashion, as reliance on a code of conduct rooted in compassion (*karuna*) rather than adherence to social customs or family loyalties.

## East Asian Connections

Having noted above some of the possibly distinctive features of Japanese religiosity in relation to other major world religions, both Abrahamic and Indian, it is important to address the question of whether, and to what extent, these features reflect influence from



Japan's giant neighbor, China. Is there a more particularly East Asian approach to or understanding of religion that privileges *praxis* over belief? To a certain extent, I believe there is. After all, one does not have to plunge too deeply into early Confucian writings to discover an emphasis on ritual (*li* 禮), understood less as an activity done for the purpose of relating to gods and spirits (whom, according to the *Analects*, one is supposed to respect but keep at a distance), than as a form of practice or self-cultivation that manifests within and helps shape social relations.<sup>27</sup> Daoism, as well—at least in those forms emerging from the *Daodejing* and loosely labelled “philosophical” (*daojia* 道家)—seems to privilege practical “way-making” over doctrine or even ritual and ethics as normally understood.<sup>28</sup>

The influence of both these traditions on Japanese cultural and religious sensibilities is beyond dispute, and thus it would not be surprising to find substantial overlap in matters of religious practice. And yet, without capitulating to the sinophobic arguments of Nativists such as Motoori Norinaga (1730-1801) and Hirata Atsutane (1776-1843), there are also substantial distinctions between Confucianism, which is primarily focused on education and maintaining harmonious social relationships, Daoism, which tends towards a goal of spontaneous and natural living in this world (or, in some forms of “religious Daoism” [*daojiao* 道教] of immortality through the cultivation and manipulation of *qi* 氣 energy) and Japanese religions, which, as we have seen, place stronger emphasis on the emotions as well as the element of homology/holography as noted above.

## The Mahāyāna: Faith through Form

Though the cultural transmission of Buddhism through East Asia is a long, complex, and only partly understood story, we can flesh out some key points in this transformation. While the growth and development of the Mahāyāna and later Vajrayāna forms of Buddhism seem to have deepened the element of faith and devotion within North and East Asian Buddhism, deep contact with Sinitic culture and thought also infused some schools of East Asian Buddhism—the Chan/Zen schools most particularly—with a decidedly pragmatic flavor, one that fused with the growing devotional elements.<sup>29</sup> The extrapolation of the concept of emptiness (*śūnyāta*) within the Mahāyāna schools also opened up the possibility of a challenge to the traditional understanding of *dharma* as being solid and eternal. After all, according to most understandings of emptiness, *nothing* is solid and eternal—this is the only truth that one needs to realize.

And yet, rather than take one out of the mundane, this affirmation of emptiness flips one back to the world of phenomenal reality, where the world is encountered in a direct, concrete way, but always mediated by symbols and ritual practice. One finds the best expression of this in the work of Japanese Sōtō Zen founder Dōgen 道元, who, though often considered Japan's greatest pre-modern philosopher, preached the ineluctable intertwining of Buddhist thought and practice. Indeed, practice for Dōgen remains the key to enlightenment—one might even go so far as to say that enlightenment is nothing other than correct practice.<sup>30</sup> One does not *achieve* enlightenment—one *does* it.

The Pure Land schools, which together have been for some centuries now the largest Buddhist sect in Japan, are often considered to be something of an anomaly within the Mahāyāna or more particularly Japanese forms of Buddhism. The reason is that they

appear to privilege devotion and absolute faith over the more pragmatic and ritually oriented esoteric and Zen schools. In other words, they look suspiciously like religions in the Western (or Hindu) sense. Yet even here looks can be deceiving. As James Dobbins (1999: 166) has argued, the Pure Land sects offer a path to the deepest Mahāyāna truths “through form, specifically mythic form.” Though Pure Land mythic form may not be so immediately phenomenal as the *mudrās*, *mantras*, and *mandalas* of Shingon or the ritualized everyday behaviors of Zen, the saving grace of Amida and the bodhisattvas is normally made real through Pure Land art, sculpture and temple architecture—all of which may act as transformation tableaux—and rituals, which become themselves “acts of Amida” (281).

Most contemporary scholars would agree that, however significant certain ideas may have been to the odd Buddhist master or Shinto scholar, it is *orthopraxis* and not *orthodoxy* that drives and sustains Japanese religion. This is not to say that doctrine or philosophy plays no role in shaping practice,<sup>31</sup> but that it is normally the reactive rather than the active partner in what Reader (2006: 71) refers to as a “creative dynamism”—often mediated by liminal figures such as the wandering *hijiri*.<sup>32</sup> Even in the unusual case of traditional Buddhist sects or contemporary New Religions that claim exclusive commitment, that exclusivity is predicated on ritual and behavior more so than on doctrinal adherence. In the case of the two largest Buddhist sects in Japan—the Shin and Zen sects—which have traditionally admonished worshippers to avoid practicing superfluous rituals beyond meditation (for Zen) and the *nembutsu* prayer (for Shin), scholars have found a significant gap between the often strict rules proffered by the institution and the way the traditions are practiced on the ground by the vast majority of followers.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, sectarian conflict in Japanese Buddhism tends to revolve around questions of the efficacy of various ritual objects and techniques rather than disputes over doctrine.<sup>34</sup> Given what has been said above, however, regarding the radical phenomenality of Japanese religiosity, this should come as no surprise.

## Whither the Secular?

Let me conclude with a few comments on a general issue that I think the study of Japanese religions can help bring to light—namely, the vexed line between what is *religious* and what is non-religious or *secular*.<sup>35</sup> When religion is understood primarily in terms of faith, doctrine, or institutional affiliation, the lines between religious and secular spheres, while sometimes blurry, can be meaningfully sketched. When religion is understood in terms of ritual practice, homology and holography, however, these sketched lines may well collapse. It is well-known that Japanese people today routinely disavow being “religious,” only to make yearly visits to a shrine on New Year’s, actively participate in Obon festivals for the dead, and so on. The disparity has less to do with cognitive dissonance than it does with the way most Japanese people understand religion—i.e., the way most Westerners do, as well as most scholars. If *that’s* religion, then I’m not religious.<sup>36</sup> Most of the practices that are commonly performed by modern Japanese are rather considered to be “cultural” or “just being Japanese”—legacies, perhaps of the Meiji ideologies discussed above.

Of course, one danger of reframing religion in a performative, ritual sense, and including within it the categories of economics and politics, is that it leads to such an open-door policy that it becomes increasingly hard to say what is *not* religious in ordinary Japanese behavior.<sup>37</sup> After all, it is clear that reliance on gods, while a part of Japanese Buddhist and Shinto doctrine, is not a fundamental feature of Japanese religiosity. The *activity* is what makes the connection, fulfils obligation, or brings benefit or ‘salvation’<sup>38</sup>. Yet this could apply to numerous situations normally considered ‘secular’; e.g., giving a small gift after receiving a favor from someone (a ritual that even includes a formulaic phrase insisting on the insignificance of said gift).

## Conclusion

In short, at the heart of Japanese religiosity is ritual practice; practice framed as *realization* or *commutation* rather than devotion as it is normally understood. Though such practice on the ground is rarely connected to any specific doctrine, it is true that some general doctrinal understanding, such as that of “original” or “inherent enlightenment,” may provide an important frame of reference for practice. Indeed, instead of obviating practice, the notion that everything is always already in a higher or transformed state—the effective collapsing of sacred and profane, secular and religious—allows practice to be understood as an *expression* of connectedness rather than a *means* to connectedness.<sup>39</sup> Or perhaps it is both at once, another distinction here biting the dust. Richard Payne has argued for a new approach to the study of ritual culture in Japan, one that frees itself from the bonds of Western religious studies—in particular the assumption that “ritual derives from doctrine”—an assumption that he claims is not appropriate to the study of religion in Japan (2006: 251).<sup>40</sup> While this may be true, I would go further to ask whether the ready assumption of the priority of doctrine to ritual—and, by extension, the understanding of devotion as *belief* in a spirit or deity or *adherence* to certain propositions—is appropriate to the study of religion in *any* culture. It may be time to go beyond belief, and reconsider the significance of orthopraxis—especially in relation to the promise of worldly benefits—in the world religions at large.<sup>41</sup>

## Notes

1. As Hayashi (2006: 215) notes, prior to the Meiji resurrection of *shūkyō*, the words *shūshi* 宗旨 and *shūmon* 宗門 were frequently employed to mean something like “religion.” However, while these earlier terms may not have been so obviously dependent on Western conceptions of religion, they too, like *shūkyō*, suffer from an intellectualist or institutionalist bias, implying something closer to sectarian teachings. Also see Isomae 2003, Shimazono and Tsuruoka 2004, and Seki et al. 2003.
2. The related Arabic term *iman*, often literally translated “to learn,” in fact implies something more like “to fully observe one’s faith”—indeed, the distinction between learning and faith virtually collapses in the Quranic context. Russell McCutcheon has argued in several places (e.g., 2005: 38-40) that we should be wary about translating *din* with “religion,” pointing out that the term is rooted less in something like “faith” than in social rules, debts and obligations—terms that strike a chord with Japanese religiosity as discussed in this paper.

3. Recognition of this disparity may go some ways towards explaining the relative lack of success of Western religions in Japan. Even during the period from 1550-1650—Japan’s so-called “Christian century”—when Japanese Christians numbered some 400 000, European missionaries had grave doubts about the extent to which these Japanese were “truly Christian”—which, in their eyes, meant adhering strictly to Roman Catholic teachings. See Endo Shusaku’s *Silence* for the best literary investigation of the tensions and paradoxes of Japanese Christianity. (Endo 1969; esp. 146-52)
4. Other terms such as *mono*, *chi*, *mi* and *tama* were also employed to refer to the natural powers of the world (see Ito 1998). Since *kami* is the most well-known, it is the one I will focus on here, but it should be kept in mind that these terms were likely used interchangeably.
5. Kuroda (1981) goes much further to suggest (albeit, without much evidence), that the very term *kami* itself meant simply gods of any sort—initially Chinese Daoist deities—who were incorporated into Japanese religion at an early period. Thus Kuroda’s rather surprising conclusion that Shinto in fact may have referred to Chinese (religious) Daoism.
6. See McFarland (1967: 24) for a list of seven different meanings of *kami*.
7. The Chinese Dao 道 is often conceived to be ‘beyond words’, as indicated by the cryptic opening lines of the *Daodejing*: 道可道也非恒道也; 名可名也非恒名也无。 In terms of Shinto, language has an extremely important role to play due to an ancient belief in *kotodama* 言靈—the power of words to enact transformation.
8. See, e.g., Sasaki Shōten’s argument for understanding Japanese folk religiosity in terms of what he calls an “animistic-shamanistic complex” categorized by a tension between *kami* that should be approached with reverence and thanks (*okagesama*), and those that should be feared due to their power to curse (*tatari*) (Sasaki 1988: 475).
9. See Reader and Tanabe (1998: 23) on the impossibility of separating the material from the spiritual in speaking of Japanese religions. Again, an oft-unquestioned category collapses rather readily, to the extent that we should question our adherence to it at all.
10. Winston Davis includes *kimochi* along with *shugyō* 修行—which he translates as “religious praxis” but which might be better translated as simply “austerities” or “cultivation”—as “the core of Japanese religion” (Davis 1992: 236 [in Fitzgerald 2003]). Also see Hardacre (1986: 188) for a discussion of self-cultivation as the core feature of Japanese New Religious Movements.
11. See Shimazono (1996: 227-28) for insightful comments on the resurgence of “animism” (or at least the perception of Shinto as such) since the 1970s, a trend that the author connects with a dual influence of Western New Age thinking and an anti-Western (or anti-materialist) construction of cultural identity. I believe that such factors have also greatly impacted the perception of Zen for Westerners and Japanese alike.
12. Interestingly, the Latin root *religio* implied a sense of duty or reverence, and only derivatively came to include the object that inspires such feelings. According to John Bossy, even in early Christianity *religio* still referred primarily to a “worshipful attitude”—still a far cry from the modern sense of a “system of doctrines and beliefs” (Bossy 1982: 4-5).
13. In Havens’s delightful expression of Kuroda’s thesis, Shinto is like an onion (rather than a pearl), since “once relieved of its historical ‘accretions’, little remains of an immutable entity worthy of the name ‘Shinto,’ at least until the creation of State Shinto in the modern period” (Havens 2006: 18).
14. Kuroda 1981. See Bodiford (2006: 167) for a brief analysis of the main themes of *kenmitsu* Buddhism.

15. For one, Kuroda's use of the secular-religious distinction in his critique is confusing at best, problematic at worst. He also betrays an intellectualist bias in looking for a more accurate conception of the way terms such as Shinto and *kami* were conceptualized in the ancient period.
16. Stone (1999) has done much to deconstruct this assumption, but it remains prevalent in both Japanese and Western scholarship. Stone and others such as Dobbins (1998) and Adolphson (2000) have shown that the so-called "New Buddhisms" of the Kamakura period were not only quite marginal movements initially, but they did not reject the "this worldly" approaches to ritual of the prevailing Heian Buddhist consensus.
17. No doubt aware of the explanatory strength of his *kenmitsu* thesis, Kuroda concludes his most famous essay on the matter with the suggestion that it gets to the subconscious essence of the Japanese. This, to my mind, is to give the game away to the very scholars Kuroda opposes—those who suggest an "essence" to Japanese religion to be found in (subconscious) Shinto. But this may be simply a poor choice of terms.
18. See Ambros (2006: 293) for a discussion of homology in terms of *shugendō* or mountain asceticism. Also see Blacker 1965, Grapard 1982, Ten Grotenhuis 1999 and Keenan 1999 on the process of "mandalization"—wherein mountains in particular serve as loci for a "realization" of various realms of existence, from lowest to highest.
19. Perhaps the best term to describe this process is *commutation*. To commute within a spatial area is at once to transform, to transfer, and to travel to that area. Yet it is important to remember that there is little sense here of a change of *essence*—as in, say the Catholic transubstantiation of the eucharist. Rather it is a change of form, but one capable of flipping back, due to the fact that form is ultimately emptiness, and vice versa.
20. One thinks most obviously of the famous parable of Indra's net from the *Kegon* (Skt. *Avatamsaka* / Ch. *Huayan*) *Sutra*—a text whose influence extended well beyond the Kegon school, despite its abstruseness. One might make the case that the eventual success of esoteric Buddhism in Japan, and the *kenmitsu* complex, is due to the correlation between this holographic approach and what already existed, albeit in a more rudimentary form, in what Kasulis (2004) calls "existential Shinto."
21. One might argue that a similar tension exists in Indian religions as well, particularly within Buddhism, which has—perhaps especially in its southern or Theravāda forms—sometimes struggled with the distinction between veneration of a Buddha image and devotion to such. Again, however, it appears that the struggle was one felt much more by scholars and elites than by the vast majority of practitioners. At any rate, any such tension virtually disappeared in the Mahāyāna, with its much looser approach to devotion.
22. Cf. Jan van Bremen on understanding ritual as the process by which "trivial elements of the social world can be elevated and transformed into symbols, categories, mechanisms, which, in certain contexts, allow the generation of a special or extraordinary event" (Van Bremen and Martinez 1995: 3) .
23. Pilgrimage is perhaps the most evident example of this process of commutation in Japanese religion, both the popular Shikoku 88- temple *henro* 遍路 and the more ascetic *kaihōgyō* 回峰行 of the Tendai monks of Mt. Hiei. Where pilgrims in the former may take on aspects of Kōbō Daishi (Kūkai), those of the latter will become Fudō Myō-ō, the fierce guardian king. A similar commutation may take place during *misogi* 禊 water austerities (see Payne 2006: 249). It is also important to include meditation here, especially given the fact that in Western scholarship it is often if not always disassociated with 'ritual'—and usually, at least in

- 'Protestant' cultures, held above ritual as a less superstitious activity. See Payne (2006: 236 n.2) on the irrelevance of this distinction (and value judgment) in the case of Japan.
24. See Schopen 1997 on material culture in Buddhism; Staal 1989 on ritual in Asian religions; Payne 2006, Reader and Tanabe 1998, Averbuch 1995 and Law 1997 on the significance of ritual culture and performance in Japan.
  25. Obviously, herein lies the potential also for abuse of trust, particularly when it comes to aggressive techniques sometimes employed to sell amulets promising miracle cures—called *reikan shoho* 靈感喬法. Though the Religious Corporations Law attempts to regulate such abuses, it is difficult, in a culture where commercial aspects of religion are not by any means considered taboo or unusual, to draw clear distinctions between what is and is not legally or morally acceptable. For instance, Reader (2006) gives ample evidence of the commercial sale of pilgrimage scrolls—whose prices can be exorbitant—and other items connected with the Shikoku 88-temple *henro*, items which always promise some sort of reward for oneself or one's family in this life of the next. The stamping of scrolls on the Shikoku pilgrimage is also evidence of the emergence of new rituals, whose origins can sometimes be surprisingly profane and/or mundane.
  26. We might borrow Terry Eagleton's critique of objective knowledge, applying the same critique to ritual activity: "All of our [ritual actions] move within an often invisible network of value-categories.... It is not just as though we have something called [ritual] which may then be distorted by particular interests and judgments... Interests [both ours and others] are *constitutive* of our [ritual activity], not merely prejudices which imperil it." In short, the objectivist appeal to a form of ritual that is value free "is itself a value judgement" (Eagleton 1983, 194-95).
  27. See, e.g., *Analects* 12:1—"The Master said: 'Through mastering oneself and returning to ritual (*li*) one becomes humane. If for a single day one can master oneself and return to ritual, the whole world will return to humaneness (*ren*). Does the practice of humaneness come from oneself or from others?' Yan Yuan said, 'May I ask about the specifics of this?' The Master said, 'Look at nothing contrary to ritual; do nothing contrary to ritual.' Yan Yuan said, 'Though unintelligent, Hui requests leave to put these words into practice.'" With regard to "spiritual beings," see *Analects* 6:20.
  28. In their recent "philosophical translation" of the *Daodejing*, Roger Ames and David Hall argue that the text and subsequent tradition are focused on extending ordinary awareness through techniques of "habit-formation," with the goal of "enchanted the everyday" and ultimately "making life significant" (Ames and Hall 2003: 49-50). Ames and Hall go on to argue, persuasively, I believe, that the classical Confucian worldview—based on *li* as "ritualized awareness"—can be read in a very similar fashion, albeit with more direct emphasis on the family and social world.
  29. Ama (1996) argues that the spread of Confucianism in Japan contributed to a this-worldly emphasis and a decrease in concern with (Buddhist) conceptions of the afterlife. However, it might alternatively be argued that "this worldliness"—or at least a concern with ritual efficacy (see Matsumura 2006: 134)—is characteristic of "folk religion(s)" in general, and it was thus the continuing influence of folk customs that played this role, which was then met on the other end of the spectrum by Confucian doctrine filtering down from the scholars and elites. Also we cannot rule out elements of "this worldliness" in Buddhism itself, especially in its Sino-Japanese Mahāyāna forms.
  30. See Maraldo 1981; Bielefeldt 1999: 220-22. Tanabe (1999: 18) notes that Dōgen's rather uncompromising sectarian views of correct Sōtō practice were quickly abandoned by his

successors, including Keizan (瑩山 1264–1325), who, “displaying a pragmatism for what works rather than what is doctrinally prescribed, easily adopted ritual practices that Dōgen would not have considered”—a move that was crucial to the long term success of Sōtō Zen as an institution. Also see Bodiford 1999 for a discussion of orthopraxis in Zen precept procedures.

31. “Doctrine defines rituals and right conduct, but practice can also determine theory. And then there are times when neither is the cause of the other, when one side, usually theory, is simply ignored” (Tanabe 1999: 20).
32. A dynamism that, however creative, was not always harmonious (see Reader 2006). See Shinno (1993: 197) for the role of the *hijiri* in mediating between universalizing and local traditions. Also see Gardiner (1999: 154) on the flourishing of the Shingon 真言 sect due to elite support and propagation of material culture.
33. See the writings of Sasaki Shōten for discussion of this problem via-à-vis Shin Buddhism, in the context of his attempts to construct a “postmodern Shin theology” that fills the gap between doctrine and practice (see Sasaki 1988). It would appear that Zen leaders have come to terms with this, and essentially “given in” to the facts of Zen practice; i. e., that most Zen Buddhists are simply not interested in meditation or philosophies of emptiness—or doctrine at all for that matter—and are more concerned with ritual propriety, including, perhaps most importantly, rituals and festivals surrounding the dead (see Reader 2006; Bodiford 2006: 171).
34. In much the same way that the sixth century disputes between the Soga 蘇我 and Mononobe 物部氏 clans regarding the acceptance of the foreign religion of Buddhism were largely if not entirely about ritual efficacy.
35. Here are some meanings of *secular* gleaned from the OED: 1. of or belonging to the world, as opposed to the Church (used chiefly in a negative sense); 2. of or belonging to the common people; 3. of or belonging to the present or visible world as opposed to the eternal or spiritual world; 4. in scientific use, an enormously long period of change. Given the tropes of Japanese religiosity, these distinctions melt away, effectively hollowing out the term along with its opposite. The Japanese term for “secular”—*sezoku* 世俗—implies only the second of the above four English senses, thus closer to the English “common” or “vulgar” than to “non-religious.” See Fitzgerald (2003: 6) for an extended (and not unproblematic) critique of the use of terms religious and secular within the study of religion; also see Van Bremen and Martinez 1995: 2-3).
36. See Kisala 2006: 3: “In contrast to the situation in many of the European countries and some other areas of the West, where we see relatively high levels of at least nominal religious affiliation and low levels of participation in religious rites, religion in Japan is marked by almost universal participation in certain rites and customs but low levels of self-acknowledged affiliation to a religious group.”
37. Of course, not all scholars would lament the collapse of these categories. Fitzgerald argues for just such an open-door policy on the study of Japanese ritual, suggesting that distinctions such as “belief in superhuman agents” are only “weakly conceptualized” in Japan. “Indeed,” he concludes, “it may be that the Japanese capacity to take the shrine and temple performance of rituals seriously *in the absence* of clearly articulated ideas or doctrines...can only in principle be understood *in the context of* the whole spectrum of ritual performances that are conducted in every institution and at every level of society” (Fitzgerald 2003: 9-10; italics in original).
38. “Salvation” is another ambiguous term in the Japanese context. The best translation, *kyūsai* 救済, includes not only spiritual salvation by deities but also, and perhaps more significantly, any

form of worldly help one may receive in time of need (cf. The more common *tasukeru* 助ける). Whereas there is some truth in Dykstra's (1999: 117) comment to the effect that Buddhism in Japan has been used as a means of "acquiring mundane benefits as well as spiritual salvation," the distinction itself may be inappropriate.

39. See Tanabe 1999: 10-11; Reader 2006: 105.

40. Also see Bachnik 1995: 109-110; Fitzgerald 2003: 9.

41. See Ikegami 2004 for a preliminary attempt to extend the analysis of "worldly benefits" beyond Japanese or Asian religions.

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