Religious Studies in Japan VOLUME 7 (SPECIAL ISSUE): 33–42

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Introduction: Western Esotericism, the Cultic Milieu, and Lived Religion

Problems and Possibilities of "Other-than-Religion" Concepts

This introduction locates the arguments developed by the articles in this special issue within the research interests of Professor Yoshinaga Shin'ichi to whom the original conference panel that this special issue is based upon was dedicated. We note the complications arising out of transposing "other-than-religion" concepts such as "esotericism" or "occultism" in the Japanese context. We then extend the argument to more general issues associated with religious studies categories that have been built in contrast with, or that qualify, the kind of religion in question. We then offer examples of two concepts, "new religions" and "spirituality," which present similar challenges because they have implicitly or explicitly been constructed against normative understandings of "religion." We conclude that the three papers included in this special issue show that by paying attention to the way in which the people involved in the "para/extra/supra-religious" fields explain their engagement with their practices and ideas, we can reveal the limitations and also the possibilities of "other-than religion" concepts.

KEYWORDS: lived religion—critical study of religion—Yoshinaga Shin'ichi—spirituality—minority religions—esotericism

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One of the effects of the constructivist turn in religious studies has been the emergence of new fields of inquiry that are implicitly or explicitly critical of what has been perceived under different frames as limited and normative understandings of "religion." These subfields or associated fields of study are framed in comparison to "religion" (for example, spirituality), emphasize the context-dependency of "religion" (for example, "lived religion"), or concentrate on categories that have been interpreted through specific socio-temporal contexts and in which the category of religion has so far (allegedly) struggled to encompass (for example, Western esotericism, cultic milieu). However, while critical approaches to the concept of "religion" have been a welcome and necessary development since the 1990s, the introduction of new categories does not preclude their analytical effectiveness. By shifting the focus to concepts built in contrast with or that qualify the kind of religion in question, new fields addressing religious, semi-religious, or religious-like phenomena and concepts have not escaped from the conceptual issues that normative understandings of "religion" have produced. Indeed, while trying to grasp the distinctive nature of these concepts, one may risk veering toward essentialism or historical fallacies and also ignore the politics that such concepts have been newly confounded with. In other words, the argument here is not that "religion" should not be replaced with or compared to other terms. Rather, the starting point of this special issue is that while these new fields of inquiry offer significant advantages in unearthing phenomena that the study of religion has so far overlooked or undermined, they are not without their own issues.

To illustrate this, we will use an example from our own experience. Ten years ago, when Gaitanidis presented in Japanese a paper quoting from research that was being conducted in Europe in the field of "Western esotericism" (Gaitanidis 2012), he realised that it was hard to explain what this field was about and how it related to existing research on studies of shamanism, "new religions," or the New Age movement in the Japanese context. In fact, the existence of such overlapping concepts put into doubt the need for yet another academic category. What stood out in the research conducted in Europe at the time, however, was the focus on the Theosophical Society, Freemasonry, and other types of organizations, ideas, and practices that had not yet attracted significant interest in Japan, and these became what the presentation ended up being about. In other words, the employment of the category of "Western esotericism" in that paper was not analytical but associative. The subject of the paper had already been

studied under the category of "Western esotericism" elsewhere, and that is why an introduction to the concept was deemed necessary. This, however, does not mean that the term did not come with its own problems.

Professor Yoshinaga Shin'ichi 吉永進一 (1953–2022), to whom the original conference panel that this special issue is based upon was dedicated, single-handedly managed to forge connections with scholars of esotericism internationally and attracted significant interest both within and outside of Japanese academic circles regarding the influence of the Theosophical Society and other nineteenth- and early twentieth-century occultist organizations, peoples, and practices on the Japanese religious landscape. His connections and engagement with that field were, in large part, also associative and resulted in large research projects[1] and the opening of new directions in the study of Buddhism, the Theosophical Society, and the history of alternative therapies in twentieth-century Japan (see, for example, Harding et al. 2015; Kurita et al. 2019; Dake et al. 2020; Yoshinaga 2021; Yoshinaga et al. 2022). Through international collaboration and comparative endeavours, Yoshinaga found people who were speaking the same "language" and had looked into phenomena that others in Japan had seldom shown interest in. Nevertheless, questions soon arose regarding the analytical and scholarly value of concepts such as "esotericism" or "occultism" in the Japanese context. How do we translate them? Do words like *hikyō* 秘教 (esoteric religion) and *okaruto* オカルト (occult) have the same meaning or value as historical categories? Aren't we recreating, in Japan, the definitional and conceptual issues that the field of Western esotericism had already been struggling with elsewhere?

Notwithstanding problems arising out of ahistorical definitions that tend to essentialize the "esoteric" as a type of practice, organization, or discourse instead of treating it as a historiographical category (see Asprem 2014 and 2021), using the term "esotericism" in Japan also risked the reification of the field's politics. Adopting the term to talk about "Japanese esotericism" or even "East Asian esotericism" would not only repeat the problematic identity discourse of esotericism as an essentially Western phenomenon, with little reflection on what the "Western" refers to. An uncritical transfer of the term to talk about case studies already conceived of as "Japanese" would also reify the problematic diffusionist conceptualization of esotericism as *spreading out of the West*, absorbing in

1. Professor Yoshinaga was, for example, a key member of a four-year (2013 to 2017) project that received more than fifteen million yen of funding to conduct "A Comparative Literature Study on the Theosophical Movement and its Pan-Asian Cultural Connections" (Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research [B] headed by Professor Ando Reiji). One of the international conferences funded by this project gathered some of the most well-known scholars in the field of esotericism in March 2017 at the National Museum of Ethnology, Osaka. See https://eanase.com/theosophy/.

its global travels everything that resembles it (see Asprem and Strube 2021). Matters of definition and scholarly construction (for example, McCutcheon 1997) or historical contextualization (for example, Josephson 2012) have been amply discussed so far regarding the term "religion," but they are the same for the term "esotericism" and some of the other alternatives that this special issue considers and which have appeared since the rise of a constructionist critique of religion. In other words, even though "esotericism," for example, has been useful in attracting attention first and foremost to the significance of the role played by (allegedly) "eccentric" ideas and practices in framing what we consider today "established" (religious, scientific, and so on) ideas, it does not escape the conceptual and methodological problems of "religion."

The same can be said for other scholarly categories, such as, for example, the category of "new religions," if we consider its postwar emergence as an analytic concept and its problematic construction against the imagined religious identity of the mainstream. As Erica Baffelli has pointed out, while Buddhism and Shinto are portrayed as representative of Japanese identity and culture by tracing back centuries of their history, religious organizations that are not perceived as equally embedded in the structures of the Japanese state and social structures and grouped under the umbrella term "new religions" "are portrayed as somehow different and not part of a supposed Japanese cultural religious identity" (Baffelli 2023, 226).

Yet another example is that of the category of "spirituality," whose scholarly usage worldwide, as well as its "export" to Japan, has demonstrated an equal amount of fallacies. Often framed as a kind of religiousness after the decline of religion, spirituality's construction *against* its allegedly more formative, tradition-anchored, institutionalized sister, namely "religion," has, in effect, worsened the existing methodological problems of naming and quantifying religious identities. Why, for example, would expressing a belief in ghosts be a sign of someone being "spiritual but not religious"? The only context that could assume this is one in which believing in ghosts has already been exhumed from a normative idea of a monotheistic (and, in most cases, Christian) religion. In fact, applied to a Japanese context, the above example would make no sense at all. The common discourse about the non-religiousness of "the Japanese" has never really relied on what type of beings they believe in but on their perceived moral stance, which has been at times considered "lacking" and at other times regarded as "uniquely fit" to support peace, social, economic, and even technological progress (see Fujiwara 2023). In fact, in the aftermath of the March 1995 sarin gas attack perpetrated by members of the religious organization Aum Shinrikyō, several sociologists of religion adorned the newly adopted term of *supirichuariti* with what they had identified as popular religion's positivistic power of renewal and salvation and which they had previously associated with

new religions (see Gaitanidis 2022). Hence, like esotericism or new religions, spirituality is not really constructed against religion but is an extraction out of religion of something that some people may not want to associate with religion anymore. This does not mean that this non-religious term avoids the issues associated with religion in the first place.

Returning to Yoshinaga Shin'ichi's work, its particular strength lay in the ability to show how the vitality of human connections and the impact stemming from people's convictions in the verity of their beliefs and practices should invite the reader to doubt binary worldviews. From the perspective discussed so far, Yoshinaga's studies can be interpreted as having demonstrated that new and old categories that scholars often use to interpret certain phenomena do not necessarily make sense when we look at practices. Interactions and boundaries between what is "established" and what is "alternative" are more fluid and often not a concern for the practitioners themselves. As articles in this special issue also demonstrate, it is important to pay attention to emic perspectives and how different boundaries are negotiated by practitioners depending on circumstance and in relation to other actors, including other religious institutions, media, the general public, and clients.

The distinction between "mainstream" and "alternative/rejects" is not clear-cut, and these categories shift over time. In some cases, the "alternative" can become part of the "mainstream," while in other cases, some practices stop being "in tune with the period" and could even be perceived as a "minority" or even as potentially dangerous. Thus, the labels of minority and official and unofficial practices that minoritize certain groups or individuals are "never merely descriptive of a social reality but serve the interests of one social group 'minoritizing' another or a social group minoritizing itself" (see Stausberg, van der Haven, and Baffelli 2023). Therefore it is important to look not only at the mechanism of survival and adaptation of practices and organizations, but also at instances of decline and demise (see Stausberg, Cusack, and Wright 2020).

In this special issue, we consider how concepts explicitly or implicitly constructed against "religion" can be problematized when we pay attention to how people involved in "para/extra/supra-religious" fields explain their engagement with such practices and ideas. To do this, the three papers reexamine categories of noninstitutional religion by grounding them in case studies focusing on the motivations of practitioners and their clients.

The papers address two general questions:

(1) How do individuals' intentions and their practices put into question conceptual labels about what religion "usually looks like"?

(2) How do these individuals borrow, negotiate, and reappropriate concepts employed to distinguish them and their practices from normative religion?

More specifically, in the first paper of this special issue, *Rethinking Lived Religion in Contemporary Japanese Shamanism*, Murakami Aki observes how the concept of "lived religion" has dramatically helped scholars to rethink the limitations of studies excessively focused on institutional religion, but, as a result, it has tended to ignore how organizational and doctrinal aspects of religion remain entangled in daily religious practices. Murakami notes that this entanglement had been instrumental in framing Japanese folk religion in the 1970s and 1980s through, for example, the concept of "lived Buddhism" (*seikatsu Bukkyō* 生活仏教) coined by the anthropologist Sasaki Kōkan 佐々木宏幹 (b. 1930). Sasaki's concept of lived Buddhism relies on the existence of a category of individuals that he calls the mediators, an "ambiguous and elastic realm" (see Murakami's paper in this issue, page 23) between doctrinal Buddhism and laypeople, populated by shamans, ascetics, and Buddhist priests. Murakami proceeds then to explore the case of one such mediator, Ms. Kasai, a shamanistic practitioner called *kamisama* living in the city of Hirosaki, in Aomori Prefecture. Although Ms. Kasai's status as an "effective" *kamisama* is determined by her reputation among her clients, for reasons of common practice that are related to the historical persecution of shamanism she also holds a Shingon priest license. However, Ms. Kasai is not just a *kamisama* and a Buddhist priest. When the circumstances demand it, such as at local festivals or events targeting tourist groups, she also adorns the "hat" of an *itako*, a blind shaman that used to own exclusive rights to the performance of *kuchiyose*, a ritual to summon the dead spirits and listen to their voices, popularized in the media since the 1970s. Considering the dearth of *itako* in contemporary Japan, Ms Kasai "becomes" one when necessary. Seamlessly navigating established Buddhism, popular religion, and its mediatized imagination, the case analyzed by Murakami not only helps us reconsider what "lived religion" is about but also erodes the prescriptive boundaries between "religion" and "non-religion."

In the second article of this special issue, *Alien Astronauts, Underwater Civilizations and Radioactive Volcanos: A Global Esoteric Business Imagines Japan*, Stephen Christopher considers another contemporary case that blurs the religion/other-than-religion divisions. The Modern Mystery School (MMS) is a global business with headquarters in Toronto, London, Florianópolis (Brazil), and Tokyo. It combines multilevel marketing techniques developed in the U.S. in the twentieth century with the teachings of its Icelandic founder Gudni Gudanson, inspired by a variety of esoteric ideas such as Rosicrucianism, Theosophy, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, and Universal Kabbalah. Studies on "Western esotericism," which have usually dealt with such ideas, have highlighted the influence of (supposedly) Asian traditions on esoteric teachings. In fact, as recent research has illustrated, it is difficult to study esotericism without considering colonialism and the ways people uneasy at materialist

developments in Western contexts sought "wisdom from the East." And, of course, vice versa: to understand the Theosophical Society, for example, it is important to understand how the fascination with the "wisdom from the East" started. Christopher's analysis of Gudni's infatuation with (his constructed image) of Japan is a clear demonstration of this phenomenon. Indeed, based on extensive fieldwork within the organization, Christopher's ethnographic study shows the complex dynamics of "collective formation" in the process of the adaptation of Western esotericism in Japan.

As Christopher observes, MMS actively harnesses an East/West dichotomy to ground its teachings in a discourse of Japanese spiritual exceptionalism that is both meant to attract new recruits in Japan and to advance to the rest of MMS initiates a business narrative of global expansion. The esoteric ideas that are employed to appeal to this Japanese exceptionalism consist, however, of very common symbolisms in the Japanese religious landscape. The examples of Mount Kurama, Mount Aso, and Yonaguni that Christopher discusses are frequent members of sacred geographies referred to by local religious groups, para-scientific theories about ancient civilizations and extraterrestrial beings, and popular media products. As such, they acquire value in MMS theology, not because of their secrecy, but because of their contribution to locating MMS and its initiates within a global network of practices centered on and oftentimes emanating from (an imagined and orientalised) Japan. In other words, in the process of familiarizing themselves with esoteric ideas, Japanese members of MMS also tend to espouse ideas that reaffirm Japanese exceptionalism, therefore questioning the category of "Western esotericism" altogether.

In the third and final article of this special issue, *Historicising the (Oc)cultic Milieu: Mikkyō in 1970s Japan*, Han Sangyun examines the concept of the "cultic milieu," which Colin Campbell coined in 1972 to refer to a sort of cultural underground pool of systems and practices considered deviant and unorthodox, and which were thought to be directly feeding the continual process of formation and collapse of individual "cultic" groups. Han proceeds to critique this concept by noting how, like in the case of "lived religion," the overemphasis on one dimension of religion, in the case of the "cultic milieu," "unorthodox" or "deviant" religion, leads to at least two interrelated issues: the context-dependent meaning of that dimension, that is, "deviancy," and the mutual construction of the religion and other-than-religion pair, "unorthodox" religion and "mainstream" religion. To explore these ideas, Han employs the cases of three authors who, in the 1970s, seemed to share a common interest in associating Mikkyō 密教 (commonly translated as "Esoteric Buddhism") with the acquisition of psychic powers (*chōnōryoku*). The three authors, however, do not have anything else in common. Nakaoka Toshiya 中岡俊哉 (1926–2001) was a popular writer who earned his living from books on parapsychology. Kiriyama Seiyū

桐山靖雄 (1921–2016) was a licensed Shingon Buddhist priest who later (in 1978) became the head of the new religious group Agonshū 阿含宗 and had reinterpreted Mikkyō as techniques of healing and salvation suited to the apocalyptic era he considered himself to be living in. And Yamasaki Taikō 山崎泰廣 (b. 1929) is a traditional Shingon priest who served as head of Buddhist temples and held a professorship at Shuchiin University, an institution partly dedicated to the teaching of Mikkyō. Despite the distinct *milieux* that these three authors were active in, and even if some of their ideas were not in line with "orthodox" Buddhism, they all contributed to a reimagining of esoteric Buddhism as offering practical tools for self development, which "traditional" Shingon was starting to accept as one way of popularizing their teachings. Han shows, therefore, that not only are the lines between parapsychology and new and established religious ideas porous, but also that these distinctions feed from each other to such an extent that it becomes very complicated to identify an "underground pool of deviant ideas" as Campbell had originally suggested.

If other-than-religion concepts are useful in pointing us toward what our discussion of religion had so far missed or undermined, they are also eventually effective in qualifying the value judgments that lie at the basis of the artificial distinctions that we make within "religion" and between "religion" and "non-religion." We hope that this special issue will foster further discussions on "other-than-religion" concepts and would like to thank the contributors, the reviewers for their constructive comments, Professor Hoshino Seiji, the editor of *Religious Studies in Japan*, and also Professor Fujiwara Satoko and the rest of the steering committee of the 81st Annual Conference of the Japanese Association for Religious Studies, where earlier versions of these papers were presented.

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2022 *Shinchigaku to Ajia: Seiyō kara kita "Tōyō"* 神智学とアジア—西からきた〈東洋〉. Kyoto: Hōzōkan.