Categorical Conundrum:
The Contemporary Consequences of Religious Language Manipulation in Meiji Japan

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Japan is a country well known internationally for the popularity of religious pluralism, yet many Japanese also say that to be Japanese is synonymous with being a Shinto believer. What is more, if pressed, most Japanese report no religious faith at all. Maybe even stranger to an outsider's sensibilities, well over 100% of Japanese surveyed indicate religious participation, in other words a good many of them participate in rituals belonging to more than one religion, but the majority of Japanese also reject any religious identification at all.[1] These apparent contradictions have not gone unnoticed by scholars of religious studies and philosophy. Much ink has been spilled over the Japanese concept of 'religion' and over the characteristically tolerant attitude towards it.

However, there has also been growing concern over the separation of religion and politics as well as individual religious freedoms in Japan after landmark cases in the late 20th century set legal precedent for Shinto practices to be considered cultural heritage practices even when in conflict with other religious beliefs. In light of the Japanese concept of 'religion' being thrust into the spotlight not just of academics but of Japanese society and law as well, many Japan scholars have urged others to consider not the multiplicity and multifaceted nature of Japanese religions but the Japanese *category* of religion. I aim to do so here by providing a brief exploration of the history of the category as well as reiterating a common argument about it, namely that it was invented and shaped with political motivations. Then, I will show that the category is unclear in various discourses and argue that this ambiguity has led to meaningful and direct consequences that call for a unified fixed meaning of religion in Japanese.

Historical Overview

[1] Noriko Iwai, "Measuring Religion in Japan: ISM, NHK and JGSS," Pew Research Center, 2017.

The category of ‘religion’ is not indigenous to Japan. It was introduced to the country first when trade deals were forced upon it by European countries and the United States, and then debated on and researched by Japanese scholars for decades before it was standardized and institutionalized first and foremost as a political tool. While some would argue that comparative works like those by Tominaga Nakamoto can be considered some early form of religious studies, this is projecting back a typology that he, and those from his time, never acknowledged. No, the first time Japanese scholars in the main interacted with the concept of religion as a category as it relates to Japan was in the signing of the Japanese-Dutch Supplementary Treaty (1857) and the Japanese-American Treaty of Amity and Commerce (1858), often referred to as the Harris Treaty, that quickly succeeded it. In both, Japan was pressured to guarantee freedom of religious practice to those who came to the archipelago for trade. The treaties were thought to be nearly identical in content, though the Japanese versions used four different methods to translate ‘religion’ in five instances that all indicated the belief that the term simply meant ‘Christianity’.[2] It’s quite clear that while religion was certainly not a terribly stable category in the West at the time, it was hitherto non-existent in Japan.

It is important here to note that it did not need to exist either. There was an extensive vocabulary to refer to beliefs outside of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Shinto and to different schools of thought and ritual tradition within them. Indeed, before the concept of ‘religion’ was cemented in the Japanese language, Christianity was often referred to as a variation of Buddhism or as simply heresy. It was the introduction of Western scientific ideas as well as anthropological and political scholarship that developed the need for the category, and it was Meiji political actors that institutionalized it.

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[2]Jason Ānanda Josephson-Storm, *The Invention of Religion in Japan*, (Chicago ; London: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 90-91.

Throughout the middle of the 1800's as scholars returned home from studying abroad, Japan was inundated with Western ideas. Crucial among them were the two competing notions. The first, frequently accredited to Aizawa Seishisai (1782–1863), was that in order for the country to compete or even keep up with Western powers its people needed a strong sense of national identity and that a single universal ritual practice was necessary to generate and focus it. The second, on the other hand, was the essential role of freedom of religious belief in social stability.

The former took the form of State Shinto and was enacted via several government projects. The Great Promulgation Campaign (1870) redefined what were beginning to be identified as Shinto practices, since the distinction mostly did not exist before then, as expressions of citizenship or rituals of the state, not religion. In addition, the government sponsored ethics textbooks for children's schools that promoted reverent behavior towards the emperor and the gods in equal measure and warned against superstitious beliefs, *meishin* (迷信).[3] Though the category of religion was new to Japan at the time, *meishin* was not. It carried with it the meaning of losing one's way or of confused faith, and was used within faith communities to describe heretical thought or practices. In the Meiji era, this term would become a way to describe any ideas or practices not considered "modern" or beneficial to the advancement of the nation and national identity. Building on the current popular understanding of this time, American Japanologist Helen Hadacre describes Shinto as an "invented tradition to unite disparate elements into a modern nation."[4]

At the same time, *kokugaku* scholars (lit. "national learning," an academic movement pursuing the essence of Japaneseness) were pushing for a new interpretation of traditional

[3] Ibid., 242.
[4] Helen Hardacre, *Shinto and the State, 1868–1988*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 4.

Japanese texts and religious practices that placed them at the forefront of Western science. It was argued that cutting edge scientific discoveries were predicted and explained in such ancient texts as the *Kojiki* and that those texts then showed that, paradoxically, a scientific understanding of the universe was granted to humankind by the traditional Japanese gods. This put Japan in a privileged position to understand the nature of reality and the traditional gods at the center of a scientific world view.

The latter can be seen quite clearly in Jason Josephson's thorough work on the Meiroku Society, a Meiji era intellectual society at the forefront of neologisms and general import of Western ideas founded by Mori Arinori (1848–1889), Japan's first ambassador to the US, whose members include Nishi Amane (1829–1897), known for coining the term *tetsugaku* (哲学) for philosophy, and Fukuzawa Yukichi, whose writings popularized the term *shūkyō* (宗教) for religion and *jiyuu* (自由) for freedom. From this literati boy's club came a myriad of ideas about the new category, but Josephson has highlighted that nearly all contained a common thread: the distinction between religious beliefs that they argued were essential for a government to promote and superstitious beliefs that were to be proactively stamped out.[5] In 1889, the Constitution of the Empire of Japan would codify these ideas, guaranteeing Japanese citizens the freedom of religious belief.[6]

Nonetheless, this is also where the Meiji government's linguistic meddling becomes obvious. The Meiji Constitution did not grant freedom of religion, which *shūkyō* (宗教) was by that time becoming the standard term for, it granted freedom of religious belief, *shinkyō* (信教). Religious practice was still up for grabs. The ritual processes of emperor reverence were reinforced and new shrines, such as Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo, for those lost in war acted as

[5] Josephson-Storm, 218.
[6] Constitution of the Empire of Japan, art 28.

funerary grounds of the state. On the other hand, freedom of belief also allowed the Meiji government to *limit* religious practice as it saw fit, in order to achieve the "secular" state it aimed for. Something it did in brutal, sweeping fashion. Under the cover of the national policy of "separating the kami from the buddhas," local officials often branded Buddhist and Christian priests pseudo-religious figures, gradually stripped them of rights, and eventually ordered them to stop practicing all-together. Many temples were taken over by the state and converted to government buildings of various types, sometimes despite significant pushback from locals.[7] There was even a, now famous, case of a Christian school teacher, Uchimura Kanzo (1861-1930), being forced to resign for refusing to bow to an image of the emperor.

The linguistic waters get even muddier upon a second glance at the aforementioned ethics textbooks. Among the 'superstitious' beliefs listed are belief in the effectiveness of prayer and the powers of holy water or divination. By situating said beliefs in the realm of superstition, these teachings represent an effort by the government not just to mold religious practice, but religious belief as well.

State Shinto is often described the way it styled itself, as secular Shinto. The 'secular' religion designation alone is enough to cause confusion, but those that style it that way overlook a few key points and fall prey to the very linguistic facade that left *shūkyō* in such an inexact state. *Kokugaku* scholars entrenched the state and science within a set of metaphysical and ontological claims. The state further promoted and shaped beliefs of this type within the youth via the education system and in adults through tactical use of value-laden vocabulary. Finally, it demanded reverent behavior and proscribed ritual worship of other kinds. This would seem to be moving the goal posts so rapidly and readily as to lose productivity of the word 'secular': If it is

[7] James Edward Ketelaar, *Of Heretics and Martyrs in Meiji Japan: Buddhism and Its Persecution*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990).

not a metaphysical difference, then what is it? If it is not an ontological difference, then what is it? If it is not an ethical or ritual difference, then what is it? Meiji political actors' move to place Shinto outside of the category of religion was not motivated out of a desire for exactitude, but out of the need to separate the state religion they wished to promote from the religions they felt must be done away with. This language trick was an intentional move by scholars, well versed in the Confucian principle of right practice makes right mind, who took a functionalist view of religion in the unification of a state.

Nowhere is this functionalist interpretation more evident than in the legal classification of religious organizations as religious corporations in Article 34 of the Japanese Civil Code of 1896. The same code then placed religious corporations under the umbrella term 'public benefit organization' (*kōeki hōjin,* 公益法人) granting them tax-exemption, but also putting them in the same legal basket as 'private school corporations,' 'social welfare corporations,' and 'medical corporations'.[8] Prominent Japan scholar Mitsutoshi Horii has pointed out on several occasions that as a 'public benefit organization' "whatever is defined as *shūkyō* is expected to serve the state, by being 'good' for the public."[9] Crucially, this legal understanding of religion has changed little since the code was first instituted, as highlighted by Japanese legal scholar Yoshio Takeuchi.[10] In fact, it has become a hot button issue since the turn of the millenia, being revised and reformed multiple times in recent years.

State of the Language

After all of this top-down language tampering, in what state is 'religion' left as a concept and as a word? By the end of the Meiji period, the linguistic landscape settled on the term *shūkyō*

[8] Mitsutoshi Horii, *Category Of 'Religion' in Contemporary Japan: Shukyo and Temple Buddhism*, (Cham: Springer International Pu, 2018), 201.
[9] Ibid., 68.
[10] Yoshio Takeuchi, "Shūkyō hōjin no kōkyōsei o meguru kenkyū no genjō," *Gendai Shūkyō* (2017): 239-261.

as the translation for ‘religion’. Many acknowledge a diversity of meanings for *shūkyō* in Japanese from the academic to the legal, but I am interested in the colloquial. The concept or category seems to have a spectrum of meaning with two clear poles. On the one hand, it is considered a set of internal beliefs, disconnected from cultural traditions or rituals. On the other, it seems to refer to a rigorous commitment to certain practices, disconnected from ontological or metaphysical beliefs..

There are plenty of terms with spectrums of meaning, for instance broad abstract terms like ‘democracy’ (liberal or illiberal) or even household terms like ‘bread’ (leavened or unleavened; baked, steamed, or fried), but this spectrum for ‘religion’ has a distinct difference: the two ends are incompatible. Unlike the two examples given, the two ends of the spectrum of meaning for ‘religion’ are not a matter of being simply more or less inclusive or determined by variation enumerated on a consistent set of characteristics. They are fundamentally different types and opposite in characteristics.

Moreover, this spectrum places each pole solidly in the territory of other, already established, terms. The former end, belief alone, is indistinguishable from philosophy and the latter, ritual alone, from tradition. In fact, as the term *tetsugaku* began to settle as ‘general philosophy’, instead of just ‘Western philosophy’, many Japanese Buddhist thinkers began to argue for Buddhism’s classification to be philosophy instead of religion.[11] Perhaps more surprisingly, the reverse, a religion of philosophy, has also been pursued through Inoue Enryō’s Temple of Philosophy.[12] The same reduction can be argued for the latter meaning as well. The ubiquitousness of tradition and the incredibly diverse nature of referents would seem to more

[11] Gerard Clinton Godart, "‘Philosophy’ or ‘Religion’? The Confrontation with Foreign Categories in Late Nineteenth Century Japan," Journal of the History of Ideas 69, no. 1 (2008): 77-78.
[12] Ibid., 91.

than encompass the distributive set of 'religion' by this meaning. Ironically, it would seem that the tension posed by such incongruent possible meanings keeps the word from being dissolved.

That being said, the concepts at either end of the spectrum, when matched with their usual referent, seem incapable of standing on their own without characteristics from the other side. Even by the belief-alone meaning, ontological beliefs typically classified as religious demand action. For example, the characteristically Shinto ontology of purity demands an ethics of purification. Furthermore, ritual action, even if one does not admit the Confucian notion of actions influencing belief, implies belief about the nature or efficacy of and justification for ritual. Finally, and most damningly, neither of the two ends is adequate to describe the totality of the Japanese religious experience.

To make matters worse, language surrounding the category or applying the category is as varied as the institutions that make use of it. To once again lean on Horii's thorough work, "The Agency of Cultural Affairs (ACA) conceptualizes *shūkyō* in terms of 'group' (*dantai*), 'teachers' (*kyōshi*) and 'believers' (*shinja*) (e.g. ACA 1972). This implies the ACA's assumption that *shūkyō* consists of a group of people who organize themselves around a specific doctrine."[13] This kind of belief-centered view of religious organizations stands opposed to government-backed interpretations, such as the public benefit organization view, mentioned above, that is still in law and was backed by the growing Institute of Engaged Buddhism (Rinshō Bukkyō Kenkyūjo) as recently as 2008.[14]

Moving from 'religious organizations' to 'religious services', Japanese funerals have become a subject of much popular discourse recently due to their heavily commercialized nature. Funerals are such an integral part of Japanese Buddhist practice today that many refer to

[13] Horii, 62.
[14] Ibid., 202.

Japanese Buddhism as 'funeral Buddhism'. Yet, much of the actual funeral work is done by funerary companies who act as go-betweens for many families and their local temples, and the near-required donations to the priest for their service could be, and often are, seen as fees.

Of course, any paper on *shūkyō* would be remiss if it failed to highlight the term's recent decline in popularity. At the start of this work, I offered some seemingly odd survey results that were likely influenced by this phenomenon. The contemporary common interpretation of *shūkyō* refers to the so-called 'new religions', which have been subject to severe stigma since the sarin gas attacks of 1995. In this context, religion indicates weird fanaticism or harmful superstition, a stigma so powerful that several important Buddhist priests have made a point of defining themselves as non-religious and refer to their recruitment practices (*fukyō)* as 'cultural events'[15]. Consequently, other terms that encroach on the same linguistic space have risen in popularity to keep up with demand. Now we see shows broadcast on the NHK that interview priests of various sects and discuss positive existential views describing its contents as regarding the *kokoro* (心)[16], and best-selling books that advise readers on how to interface with the supernatural or to recognize the true nature of reality go by titles that use the term ***supirichuaru***.[17]

The Consequences of Ambiguity

It is important at this stage to ask why we should care about agreeing on what we call religion. We can acknowledge plenty of terms that have even seemingly contradictory meanings, such as the ever vexing 'literally', without a call for the necessity of precision. In this section I will show that we should want, in this case, precision for more than just precision's sake.

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[15] Ibid., 206.
[16] This specific example is Kokoro no Jidai: Shūkyō no Jinsei (心の時代～宗教・人生～) from the NHK. Others using similar meanings of *Kokoro* include Kokoro no Tomoshibi (心のともしび) from the KBS and Mitsuo Aida: Kokoro no Oashisu (相田みつを・こころのオアシス) from BS11, to name a few.
[17] Examples are plenty and range from well-known author Akira Tachibana's *Supirichuaruzu Watashi no Nazo* (スピリチュアルズ 「わたし」の謎) to social media influencer and self-styled Miko's *Neosupi!!!* (ネオスピ!!!).

The widespread attitude of religious pluralism in Japan might rightly be recognized as one of the few things to have emerged from the Meiji government's intentional language manipulation as a blessing. In general, the Japanese are overwhelmingly tolerant and accepting of others' religious beliefs.[18] However, when the category of 'religion' is as vague, it can be difficult to pin down what that actually means in practice.

One place where this can be seen most readily is in Japanese Supreme Court cases, where interpretation of 'religion' becomes an issue of law. As noted by scholar of Japanese religion Ernils Larsson among others, in key decisions like the 1997 Ehime Tamagushiryō case and the 1988 SDF Enshrinement case the courts have shown a view reminiscent of the contradiction riddled State Shinto.[19] The first ruled that burial at shrines of war dead is a natural part of Japanese culture. The second ruled that all are free to carry out whichever religious rites they wish, thereby denying the Christian deceased's wife's opposition to his enshrinement at a Nation Protecting Shrine and was well known for causing waves of distress among Japanese who believed this set legal precedent for the state to deny their religious rights.[20]

Many are quick to call Shinto the exception to a standard meaning of religion or a unique case, but ambiguity of the category can just as readily be found in what might commonly be called other religions. The rise of Kōmeitō stands out as a Buddhist example. The Japanese constitution has strict articles that maintain a separation of state and religion. Yet, Kōmeitō was founded by members of Sōka Gakkai, a modern Buddhist movement, and it remains ostensibly its arm of political power, a fact that has been openly contested by many as a violation of this

[18] Iwai, "Measuring Religion in Japan."
[19] Ernils Larsson, "Covenantal Pluralism in "Homogenous" Japan: Finding a Space for Religious Pluralism"; "Rituals of a Secular Nation: Shinto Normativity and the Separation of Religion and State in Postwar Japan"; "Jinja Honchō and the Politics of Constitutional Reform in Japan".
[20] Judgment on the Enshrinement of a Dead SDF Officer to Gokoku Shrine, Supreme Court of Japan (1988).

separation. Today, Kōmeitō is a minor partner in the LDP's (Liberal Democratic Party) coalition that enjoys the majority in the lower house of the National Diet of Japan.[21]

Religious language ambiguity threatens not just those standing on the outside looking in, but religious professionals as well. The recent near constant revision of the Public Benefit Corporation Law turns a critical eye to the tax-exempt status of religious institutions and to the religious nature of the funeral business as a whole. Increased commercialization has led many to question how any organization whose primary business is funerals can be called a public benefit organization. On the other hand, Horii has argued that the religious nature of funerary work might be better supported by exclusivity. Temple cemeteries open to all regardless of religious affiliation, or lack thereof, certainly bolsters the temples' image as public benefit organizations, but in doing so the identity of temples as religious entities, distinct from other public benefit organizations such as those listed above, fades.[22] Furthermore, religious professionals' face a daily struggle contending with the stigma surrounding *shūkyō*. They seek to maintain their religious identity while feeling the need to avoid appearing religious at the risk of losing all appeal to newcomers at best and inciting fear or anger at worst.

Call for Reflection

Firstly, I feel that it is important to note here that the first half of the work, the history and argument of political manipulation of the category, is not terribly innovative or ground breaking. As I have shown, others have made the same argument before me, and in fact, it may very well be the popular interpretation today. So while I hope my work has provided a concise survey of the literature, the real aim of the project is to serve as a step in the direction of everyday Japanese

[21] Other examples of blurring the line between religion and state include the Liberal Democratic Party's well-known involvement with Jinja Honchō, the Association of Shinto Shrines, and over half of the National Diet members membership in Nippon Kaigi, a prominent political organization that openly expresses a desire for minimizing the separation of religion and state, whose council primarily consists of Shinto priests .
[22] Horii, 214.

speakers critically examining their own use of religious language. Though, as an academic work, not to mention one written in English, this is of course an early step.

Some scholars may be quick to pin the blame of the current state of the Japanese category *shūkyō* on translation issues from the historically protestant value-laden English term ‘religion’, in what might be some Quinean sense of indeterminacy of translation. Indeed, this may very well have played a role in the persistent foreignness of the category as it was introduced, but the issues the category is facing today are not those of ‘religion’ — they are of *shūkyō.* It is firmly a Japanese category, navigated in the daily life of modern Japanese people. Those who warn of the conceptual projection of the category, in this case, may be guilty of the very same projection themselves.

A few prominent scholars of Japanese religion have similar analyses of the adoption and manipulation of the category of religion but come to varying conclusions. At this point I think it is important to acknowledge those on which this work leans the heaviest, Jason Josephson and Mitsutoshi Horii, and to take a moment to address how the solution I argue for differs from theirs.

Josephson argues in his 2012 work that the category exists in a different space from when it was first conceived. Today. it is a part of a global conversation of power framing. In this conversation, he argues, it forms a trinary with the modern scientific "real" and superstition/delusion, wherein each negates the next. For example, in international politics and national lawmaking.[23] However, in this work, I argue the focus should be on local everyday language use in Japan. I have highlighted that many of the consequences of categorical ambiguity are social, local, or even personal, and it is there that we must meet the problem. Lest we commit the same error as many Meiji political figures.

[23] Josephson-Storm, 251-262.

Horii argues in a 2015 work for an "empirical and systematic analysis of meaning for the term ‘religion’ which is located in the particular context of its usage, at different levels of discourses, including the lay understanding of the term. The diversity in conceptual boundaries, meanings and utilizations needs to be mapped across society."[24] I hope it is clear by this point that this first argument resonates throughout my own. However, in his later 2018 work mentioned frequently above he argues for the dissolution of the category entirely in analytical discourse due to its unproductivity.

Here again I must stress, I am not concerned with the terms scholars use to analyze Japanese society. Regardless of whether scholars continue to make use of the category, it is already in use in everyday language, and so must be addressed as it is there that faces the consequences of its lack of clarity. We can not just agree not to use it in scholarly efforts anymore and be done with it. Moreover, to separate the way we use words between analytical or scholarly discourse and everyday discourse is to fall victim to the same pitfalls about which the ordinary language philosophical movement warned us. Unlike the aforementioned scholars, I do not intend with this work to encourage other scholars to be more critical. Nor do I wish to condemn or promote any particular meaning of *shūkyō* or to make normative statements about those who hold them. I want to encourage *everyday Japanese* to be more critical of the language they use.

The light language clarity provides may not be very motivating, or even necessary, in many instances, but contemporary religious discourse in Japan is stumbling in its absence. The seemingly contradictory survey responses outlined at the forefront of the work are best understood with respect for the state of the language in which they are being discussed.

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[24] Mitsutoshi Horii, “Critical Reflections on the Category of Religion in Contemporary Sociological Discourse,” Nordic Journal of Religion and Society 28, no. 1 (2015): 21–36.

Prominent political actors during the introduction of the category warped and abused the language surrounding it for political ends, until it was left nearly unusable. Without a critical public dialogue to undo the obfuscation by the Meiji government, we can only expect to see more public discontinuity, more court rulings limiting religious freedoms, and further re-encroachment of religion into politics.

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