

Students' Perception of Religious Phenomena in Japan and the Inadequacy of 'Religion' as Conceptual Tool in a non-Western Context

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Abstract

The main purpose of this study was to evaluate the attitude of Japanese university students towards religious phenomena in Japan, with specific emphasis on the ones labelled new religious movements. This has been achieved through ten semi-structured interviews with female and male university students based in Tokyo, all with varying personal experiences with religion. Drawing on Horii (2018) and Lewis (2015), this thesis further sought to contribute to the debate on how to develop more appropriate conceptual tools for the study of “religion” in Japan. The students' attitudes in this research differed greatly when it came to Shinto and Buddhism, world religions like Christianity, and new religious movements. Shinto and Buddhism were seen as an integral part of Japan's culture rather than religion, and world religions were generally viewed positively. New religious movements on the other hand were regarded with suspicion bordering on fear by some respondents. Lastly, the study found that “religion” is indeed not an appropriate category of analysis and should be replaced to properly capture the reality of Japanese society.

Keywords: Religion in Japan, New religious movements, Perception of religion, Sōka Gakkai, Aum Shinrikyō, Religion and culture, Category of religion

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A Note on Japanese Language

The Revised Hepburn style has been used when romanising Japanese terms in this thesis, including the names of religious organisations (e.g. Sōka Gakkai, Aum Shinrikyō). Japanese terms commonly used in the English language (e.g. Tokyo, Shinto) form an exception.

Japanese names in the text are presented in Japanese order, that is surname followed by given name.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Even in an increasingly secularised world, religion as a topic of discussion is never out of fashion. Highly personal and intimate for those who would refer to themselves as religious, it is still a source of conflict in some parts of the world. Different cultures know so many systems of belief that we cannot find an appropriate definition for the term religion – not in everyday speech and much less in an academic context. Not being able to properly define religion raises the question of its usefulness as an analytical category already in Western-oriented academia (Horii 2018, 23), but using it to examine phenomena present in a culture so fundamentally different in some ways urges researchers to be especially careful.

At first glance, Japan appears to be quite religious with its impressive temple sites, the customary praying at shrines, and Buddhist monasteries doubling as tourist spots – but it is much more complicated than that. When I visited Japan two years prior to my fieldwork and made my way to the train station in Ikebukuro, I was greeted by a voice from a megaphone shouting out phrases such as *sabaki* (punishment) and *erabareshi monotachi* (the chosen ones). Having been brought up in a Western and Christian context, I immediately connected those with religion and wondered why I stumbled across Christian themes in Japan of all places.

Japan's curious situation makes it a popular testing-ground for various theories which have been

developed in a Western-oriented context; its level of industrialisation, urbanisation, and education provides a (superficially) sufficient set of similarities while it still remains its Asian cultural heritage (Lewis 2015, 32). The researchers working in Religious Studies have found an eventful playing field in Japan; although the Japanese are quick to refer to themselves as non-religious (Horii 2018, 45), religious aspects can easily be spotted in daily life. The political party Kōmeitō, which has been in a coalition with the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) since 1999, belongs to the religious organisation Sōka Gakkai. While visiting shrines and temples is generally not regarded as a religious act by most Japanese, shrines and temples as corporate bodies are certified as religious by the law. In the early 1900s, the constitution even defined the emperor as a 'living god' (Horii 2018, 26, 27).

1.1 Context

The Institute of Statistical Mathematics (ISM), Japan's only research institute for statistical science and related mathematical sciences, regularly conducts surveys and publishes the gathered data on its website. The latest data from 2013 indicates that only 28 per cent of all respondents have a personal religious faith (72 per cent do not have a personal faith). Yet 66 per cent of the same respondents believe in the importance of having a religious attitude. Narrowed down to the cohort that comes closest to my target group of students (20 to 29 years), the distribution looks different: only 13 per cent of the respondents in this age group have a personal faith (87 per cent do not), and only 55 per cent believe a religious attitude to be important (ISM 2017).

Hayashi and Nikaido (2009) have been working with the age effect; it means that people are more likely to believe in a religious faith as they grow older. Again, Japan's situation is a bit different from others. Some longitudinal data sets gathered in Japan cover a longer time span than in other countries. Their analysis might suggest the existence of the age effect in Japan, yet an analysis of other, short data sets gathered in other countries suggest a phenomenon called period effect. Hayashi and Nikaido (2009, 168) thus concluded that becoming more faithful with age is one of the qualities of the Japanese character. Albeit an interesting discussion in itself, this thesis will not concern itself with the accuracy of this assessment.

It is not unusual for academia to take a category that was developed in a Western-oriented setting and try to use it in a different cultural context, be it as a point of comparison or in a different way. But the term "religion" does not even have a consistent definition in the West; simply by examining dictionaries from a few decades past it becomes clear how much its official definition has changed (Josephson 2012, 8). As we will see in chapter four, religion has its own shortcomings as an academic category. Its utility depends on the way it is used.

1.2 Contribution and Research Question

Given the variable nature of religiosity and how susceptible to change personal religious belief is, studying anything related to it might appear to amount to nothing but a mere snapshot of the religious landscape of a country or culture. Tracking the development of attitudes towards religion and religious organisations is, however, indispensable to understanding the phenomenon itself. A good portion of the literature in regard to religion in Japan concentrates on new religious movements and how they are perceived by the public. Through interviews with Japanese university students, their attitudes towards various religious phenomena as well as their motivation behind engaging with these phenomena will be evaluated. It additionally aims to examine what the phenomenon of “religion” means in this non-Western context and in how far Western-oriented conceptual tools are inadequate for the study of “religion” in Japan.

We are thus coming to my main research question:

- How do Japanese students today relate to phenomena that by Western standards would be considered religious, and especially to the contentious phenomenon labelled new religious movements?

Furthermore, the collected data will be used to answer the following sub-questions:

- How do they perceive and define the different phenomena in their own way?
- How do their attitudes towards the different phenomena vary?
- What motivates them to engage – or disengage – in the different phenomena?

1.3 Structure

This study consists of six main chapters. Following the introduction, the next chapter will present the literature which has provided the academic foundation of this thesis. This literature review will talk about the major belief systems of Japan, that is Shinto and Buddhism, the origin of “religion” as a term in Japan, as well as a discussion on so-called new religious movements and their role in the country's religious landscape. Chapter three provides an overview of the debate on religion as an academic tool along with my own position in this debate, while chapter four will contain a description of the research methodology used in this study. Chapter five will analyse the findings in light of the theoretical framework. The conclusions and answers to the research question will be found in the final chapter.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

A Brief History of Religion in Japan

The extensive body of literature on religion in Japan, written both in Japanese and English, focuses mainly on Shinto and Buddhism. While this study looks at new religious movements in particular, these studies are essential for understanding the background and context of religion in Japan.

Initially, Buddhism (佛教 *bukkyou*) was regarded as one of the components of China's civilisation. Upon its assimilation into Japanese culture, its practitioners have changed and adapted it in various ways, resulting in Japanese Buddhism becoming a conglomerate of countless schools, sects, divisions, and further subdivisions, some of them even inclining towards magical practices and beliefs (Kitagawa 1987, 205, 265, 267). It accepts Buddha as its founder but does not have a figure that would fit the position of a saviour or messiah found in other world religions (Kitagawa 1987, 178). While Buddhism has been favoured and supported by the Tokugawa regime throughout its existence, the end of the eighteenth century marked a grim time for Buddhism. Upon the collapse of the Tokugawa regime and the restoration of imperial rule, Japanese Buddhism found itself confronted with the rise of Shinto (Kitagawa 1987, 214). This thesis will primarily regard Buddhism as a religion, but Kitagawa (1987, 250) mentions two other levels of meaning related to the term; Buddhism as culture and sociopolitical order related to the concepts of Buddhism.

Shinto (神道 *shintou*; way of the gods) is commonly regarded as the indigenous religion of Japan, although it has been historically influenced, as many parts of Japan's culture, by the Chinese civilisation, especially by Confucianism and Buddhism. Among its defining features are polytheism and nature worship (Kitagawa 1987, 139). Without a founder, a fixed system of doctrines or ethics, or even official scriptures, Shinto was not even regarded as a religion in the 1870s, as Josephson (2012, 94) assesses. The state even issued a law which acknowledged Shinto as non-religious and thus gave it a priority status which lasted until the introduction of Japan's new constitution after World War II. This non-religious role taken by Shinto has been posing a problem for many scholars, and while it is an interesting topic in itself, I will only refer to it briefly here. As opposed to the usual course of history, Shinto gained its power through the modernisation of Japan and the exclusion from freedom of religion. The term itself has also been subject to radical changes. For most of its early history, it was understood as something originally imported from China and seen not as an independent religion, but as an extension of Buddhism. What we regard as Shinto these days has been largely invented in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Josephson 2012, 98).

In the introduction of his book "The Invention of Religion in Japan" (2012), Jason Ananda Josephson also raises another interesting issue concerning the use of the term "religion" in the Japanese language.¹ After Japan had started to open up to the rest of the world following Commodore Matthew Perry's arrival in the 1850s, it had become apparent that there was no consensus about how the English term "religion" should best be translated into Japanese. In the end, the Western notions of the term were imposed upon Japan in one of the treaties it entered (Josephson 2012, 1, 4). As an Area Studies student, this is by far not the first and definitely not the last time I have encountered a fundamentally Western or Eurocentric concept being used in an Asian context. I agree with Josephson's argument that, in the end, "religion" simply describes "a perceived similarity to European Christianity" (2012, 9), which poses several difficulties when compared to cultures so vastly different from Western ideas. Even more so when the term "religion" itself has seen so many changes over time, especially after it has been recognised that not all systems grouped together under this umbrella term actually participate in the worship of gods.

There has, however, been a time when Western religions had found their way into Japan. The first Christian missionaries already arrived in 1549, converting no less than 300,000 Japanese to

¹ The Japanese term for “religion” is, to this day, written with the two characters 宗 (*shuu*; sect, denomination, origin) and 教 (*kyou*; teaching, faith, doctrine). Upon asking my participants, they confirmed that this term refers to Shinto and Buddhism just as much as it refers to foreign religions.

their religion and thus becoming a threat to the shogun's power. Then, in 1614, a ban on Catholicism was issued and its followers were prosecuted and tortured, more than 4,000 people being recorded to have died as a consequence of their faith. This incident was one of, if not the main reason why Japan was sealed from the rest of the world in the 1630s (Doughill 2012, xi). During the Meiji period, Buddhist leaders even resorted to alliances with Shinto and Confucian leaders in large demonstrations and campaigns against Christianity (Kitagawa 1987, 216).

After Japan opened up to the world again in the mid-nineteenth century, the first new religious movements started to appear. Again, new religions are a phenomenon primarily examined in a Western-oriented framework, and Ian Reader's (2005) article on that matter catches quite nicely why this view needs to be reassessed. In their Western context, there have been several definitions of new religious movements, all of them with a different focus and not yet completely catching the full meaning of the phenomenon. The study of those movements has been fully embedded in the field of Religious Studies in Japan and its development is of comparable (if not greater) size and advancement as in the West (Reader 2005, 85). Some movements that are classified as “new” by scholars, however, might have already been in existence for over a century or have already established themselves in a significant role of authority and power – two features that oppose Western definitions of new religious movements that either stress a chronological framework or an emphasis on an “outsider” status (Reader 2005, 86). Reader explains further that the Japanese term for new religions used today, *shin shuukyō*, emerged after World War II, well after the first new religious movements were born. Terms that were used in the first half of the twentieth century translated to “quasi-religions” or “false religions” and imply quite clearly what scholars thought about those movements at the time (Reader 2005, 86). He concludes that although some groups manage to acquire a large number of members, a long history, social or political power, they are still seen as alternative or outside the mainstream (Reader 2005, 87).

With that in mind, it makes sense to look at the history of new religious movements in Japan. In his detailed case study on Aum Shinrikyō, Daniel A. Metraux offers a concise but helpful summary of how new religious movements in Japan developed. Following the societal changes of the Meiji Restoration in 1868, Japan has seen three successive waves of new religious movements. The first wave (1868-1912), a direct result of the modernisation process, catered especially to rural and urban areas affected by industrialisation and urbanisation. The end of World War II marked the beginning of the second wave which lasted until the late 1960s and saw the establishment of Sōka Gakkai. Movements from this wave were appealing to Japanese suffering from poverty, disease, or alienation from society and offered them a way out of their hardships. The third wave started in the early 1970s and gave birth to movements like Aum Shinrikyō. Throughout the years, most Japanese had achieved financial stability and no longer sought what the movements from the second wave offered. Instead, many young Japanese and middle-aged women gradually lost a clear sense of purpose in their lives and turned to the new movements created during that time (Metraux 2000, 4-6).

The new religious movements that has received the largest media coverage in the last two decades is, without a doubt, Aum Shinrikyō. In March 1995, members of the movement launched a sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway, killing and seriously injuring several people in the process – a startling development for a group that started out as little more than a yoga club in the mid-1980s. Following the movement's leader's pilgrimages to India and the adaptation of Buddhist concepts, Aum Shinrikyō became increasingly hostile towards society by the end of the 1980s. It should not come as a surprise that news reports on the movement paint a very negative image, often portraying the movement as a

murderous sect and its leader as an insane fanatic (Metraux 2000, 11, 19).

With the latest coverage Aum Shinrikyō received last year when its former leader and some other important figures were executed, it would be easy to assume that it is the most widely-known new religious movement in Japan. While mass media has indeed focused on Aum Shinrikyō in particular, McLaughlin (2012) points out that a different movement has been stigmatised many years before Aum Shinrikyō made the news. Before the terrorist attack in March 1995, Sōka Gakkai has been the most defamed new religion in Japan. The movement expanded exponentially early on and even formed the political party Kōmeitō in 1964 which still performs well today. Due to its size and involvement in various sectors, Sōka Gakkai makes an easy target not only for journalists, but rival politicians and religions alike (McLaughlin 2012, 52). McLaughlin's article is a refreshing reminder that Aum Shinrikyō is not the only new religious movement that has been talked about in Japan. That being said, he also makes the bold claim that “Aum may have marked the end of religious mass movements in contemporary Japan” (2012, 51) right at the beginning of his work. Throughout his article, he explains in detail how Sōka Gakkai's image has suffered from Aum Shinrikyō's attack, even though they clearly defined themselves as different from and not affiliated with Aum Shinrikyō. He finally concludes that Sōka Gakkai could well be regarded as a victim of Aum Shinrikyō (McLaughlin 2012, 70), seeing as they could not overcome the negative impact of press and mass media reports.

Some scholars, like McLaughlin, have speculated that the Aum incident with all its consequences might have marked the end not only of new religious movements, but of any religion in Japan. Other scholars have addressed this issue in more open-ended terms. For instance, Kisala and Mullins have asked the following question in the introduction chapter of their book “Religion and Social Crisis in Japan: Understanding Japanese Society through the Aum Affair”: “Is there a positive role for religion to play in post-Aum Japan?” (2001, 16). Regardless of what side one positions themselves on, students' perceptions are particularly interesting here. Back when Aum Shinrikyō and similar movements were gaining followers, a large part of these members was made up of students (Metraux 2000, 55-56), so looking at today's students will make for a good comparison of attitude.

In their introduction to a special issue of the Japanese Journal of Religious Studies, Baffelli and Reader mention the findings of surveys into the attitude of university students towards religion conducted in 1998 and 1999, only a few years after Aum's attack. In these nationwide surveys, 65 percent of the respondents regarded religion as “dangerous” (Baffelli and Reader 2012, 8). This survey captures the general mood among students after the attack, making it a valuable contribution to the field. In contrast to this, my study will address the perception of religion among students today, for whom the Aum incident is a historical event, only consciously remembered when mentioned in the mass media. Horii, a scholar whose work has been essential for this study, mentioned that, in Japan, the term 'religion' is strongly associated with new religious movements like Aum (2018, 27). At least in my sample it has been different. Upon asking my respondents, they answered that the Japanese 宗教 (*shuukyō*) does not make them think of a specific belief or group, but that it is used to refer to many things.

While my study is not limited to “the Aum effect” only, and my position and approach are different and my sample size is considerably smaller, it is interesting to keep the results in mind as I look at how another generation feels about religion.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Study Design and Sampling

The necessary data was collected through interviews. Interviewing makes it easier to get in-depth answers and to ask for

clarification, as opposed to questionnaires which only allow for a limited way of asking questions. They lend themselves to lived experience and thus fit well with trying to find out how students perceive religion in an increasingly secularised world (Brinkmann 2015, 48). Seeing as I was talking to people my age, it was easier to do so in a more relaxed, comfortable atmosphere. The questions I asked were rather personal and benefitted from being asked directly rather than through another medium. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews were selected due to the flexibility they provide (Bryman 2012, 472). During the interview process, certain questions and points of interest developed and brought to light aspects that I would not have expected to be part of the conversations I had with the respondents. Themes that were not originally included in the interview design but were mentioned and explored were, among others, conflicts and wars over religion, the frequency of non-religious children attending Christian schools, and fortune-telling. The sampling method that has been employed was purposive sampling, meaning a non-probability sampling and thus not fit for generalisation (Bryman 2012, 418). Since this study focuses on the opinions and impressions of Japanese students, it was necessary to narrow down the sample like this to reach my research goals. Eleven interviews have been conducted in total, seven with female and four with male respondents. One interview of a male student, however, has been found insufficient for data analysis due to difficulties in communication. All respondents were students between 21 and 25 years, ten of them from Waseda University in Tokyo and one from Konan University in Kobe. The students were around my age or a bit younger, meaning that a lot of them had not yet been born when Aum Shinrikyō launched its attack on Tokyo subways in March 1995.

Since the fieldwork course was given at Waseda University in Tokyo, it naturally became the base of my data collection. With the exception of one respondent, all students I talked to were studying at Waseda. The female respondent from Kobe was a friend I made during my semester abroad several years ago. I was interested in whether there would be any difference in how open people would be willing to talk to me about religion based on how long and well they knew me, so I interviewed her as well when she came to Tokyo.

3.2 Interview Process

Before I started my actual fieldwork in Japan, I conducted eight mock interviews with exchange students from Waseda University in Lund, all of which have been helpful in adapting my interview design. Initially inexperienced in interviewing people – especially respondents from different cultural contexts –, this exercise has greatly improved the way in which I conducted the interviews and how I interacted with my respondents. The mock interviews have given me the opportunity to understand what it is like to interview Japanese students and what kind of challenges that poses to me as a researcher. Having conducted the first interviews exclusively in English, I had to figure out how to get my point across without giving the participants the feeling that their language skills were not sufficient. I also noticed that I had naturally expected them to know what I meant when I talked about new religious movements, but of course they were not familiar with the term used in the literature, neither with the Japanese one and most definitely not with the English one.

The changes to my interview design have proven valuable when I went into the actual field. I excluded certain terms that the students in Lund were not familiar with, most of them academic terms used to refer to new religious movements. Some questions were left out completely or their structure was changed because they had interrupted the flow of the conversation during many mock interviews.

The staff from Waseda University's Global Gate has been incredibly helpful in assisting me during my search for respondents, which happened in two steps. First, they brought me into contact with a student who has been to Lund

already and who would be willing to look for fitting respondents among his acquaintances. A few days after I contacted him, he gave me a list of five people who I interviewed in the following days and weeks. Second, I asked the Global Gate staff if there were any clubs at university specifically focusing on their English language skills, and after a few days they sent me a list of another five people taking part in the mentor programme Waseda University has set up for students interested in going abroad. Every student has been informed about the content of the interview before their contact information was given to me. All contact with the respondents before the actual interview happened via email.

While all interviews were conducted mostly in English, the respondents were given the option of answering in Japanese whenever they felt it would be easier to express their opinion in their native language. Only one female student switched to Japanese halfway through the interview, while the others either only added some phrases in Japanese or completely stuck to English. The questions were also translated to Japanese in case the respondents were not familiar with certain terms. Depending on the length of the answers and the language proficiency level of the respondents, the interviews lasted between ten and thirty minutes.

The staff from Waseda's Global Gate offered me to use a seminar room in their building to conduct the interviews in a quiet and undisturbed environment. Nine out of eleven respondents opted to have the interview take place there, probably due to convenience above else. Only one girl specifically offered to have the interview in a café in Ueno, even though she said during the interview that she was afraid the strangers surrounding us could be members of religious movements. The interview with a friend of mine took place over dinner in a small family restaurant.

Given the sensitivity of religion as a topic, about two-thirds of the respondents were a bit hesitant in their answers at first and taking time to think about what words to choose. This might have also been due to the fact that they had to get used to speaking English, though. However, all respondents agreed to having their interviews recorded, which allowed me to fully concentrate on the conversation.

3.3 Transcription and Data Analysis

Since all respondents agreed to their interview being recorded, the transcription process went smoothly. All interviews have been put down in written form. Whenever someone switched from English to Japanese, I wrote down their exact words in Japanese instead of translating into English. Any Japanese quotes used in later chapters will have an English translation added right below them. In some cases the respondents had things to add after the official interview had ended and the recording device had already been switched off. Notes on these parts have been collected in a separate document.

After transcribing the collected data I started with the coding, revising the transcriptions repeatedly and then using NVivo to conceptualise and categorise the data. With the help of nodes it was possible to discover, examine, and compare categories of theoretical significance (Bryman 2012, 568). Through this process emerged several concepts and themes that will be discussed and analysed in chapter five.

3.4 Limitations and Demarcation

As mentioned above, the sample I chose to work with cannot be generalised. It simply represents the opinions and impressions of a small number of students, but it nevertheless holds value. The in-depth analysis of these ten respondents will provide a basis to work with when trying to understand the attitude of well-educated students, the generation shouldering Japan's future, towards religion, new religious movements, and the impact of religion on and its necessity for society. Moreover, as Brinkmann (2015, 33) so pointedly put it, qualitative research “works with words

and not with numbers”. It does not attempt to produce results that could be generalised but instead aims for a detailed understanding of specific phenomena or processes.

Although I had initially believed the topic of religion to be a limitation in itself, I have found that most respondents were curious and some even excited to talk about it. On more than one occasion they thanked me for giving them the opportunity to talk about their views regarding religion and new religious movements in Japan, seeing as it is a topic they would not usually talk about with anyone. Since the students had been informed about the topic beforehand, only those who were interested in giving their opinion volunteered for the interview, meaning I would not have to worry about catching them by surprise with my questions.

Another concern that did not turn out to be a major limitation was language. Almost all the respondents could express themselves well in English, and for those who felt more secure with their native language I offered the option of answering me in Japanese as well. While only one respondent took me up on that offer, I actually would have wished more respondents would have done, seeing as some connotations could have been lost when they translated their thoughts into English.

Scholars have tended to regard religion in Japan as a special case, yet at the same time, religion in Japan is also very much part of global and transnational processes. The literature on globalisation and religion might have been helpful for elucidating some aspects of my study, but as this literature is not sufficiently key to the issues examined here, it has not been included. During the interviews several themes were brought up by the respondents; detraditionalisation in the sense that the current generation of Japanese students does not need religion any more, as well as the (involuntary) export of Japanese religious movements to other parts of the world (Amstutz and Dessi 2014, 85-86). Sōka Gakkai, for example, has branched out not only to Korea but to Germany as well, and Shibuya is home to Japan's largest Mosque with an adjoining Turkish culture centre. Some respondents have made a point to differentiate new religious movements in Japan and their branch offices outside Japan.

3.5 Reflexivity

As qualitative researchers, we need to be aware of our immense influence on the collection, selection and final interpretation of data. It is virtually impossible to completely eradicate our own bias and yet it is our task to minimise it as much as possible (Finlay 2002, 212). Thus, we need to think about how our own experiences influence how we work with the data.

Despite not being religious myself, I have been brought up in a Christian context, making Christianity my point of comparison during data collection and subsequently analysis. I have become especially aware of this when some respondents asked me questions about religion in Europe and Germany after the interview was finished. While showing curiosity for my research topic, some of them still seemed to question where my specific interest derives from.

It is fortunate that the respondents were close to me in age and experience, as many of them have been abroad as well and were not only familiar with religion in a Western context, but compared it to how religion is regarded in Japan without me needing to prompt them. I was furthermore grateful for all the years of studying Japanese culture and being proficient enough in speaking the language and “reading the air”, as it is so often called here, since that enabled me to pick up cues in the way some respondents formulated their answers in Japanese that I otherwise would not have noticed.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Prior to our embarking on our individual fieldwork trips to Asia, we have been made aware of the ethical guidelines set

by the Swedish Research Council. After studying these guidelines and making myself aware of the responsibility I, as a researcher, have towards my respondents, I set myself the goal of following these principles during my data collection and writing process.

I have given a statement of purpose as well as an explanation of what I am collecting data for both to the Waseda student and the staff who helped me find respondents. When I contacted each respondent to decide on a time and day to conduct the interview, I mentioned again that I am not affiliated with any religious organisation in Japan or abroad and that I will guarantee their anonymity by changing their name and keeping their exact responses confidential to myself and my supervising professor in Sweden. Upon meeting them for the interview I repeated those two points and added that they did not have to answer any question that made them uncomfortable. Further, I gave them the opportunity to ask me questions at the end of the interview, which most of them did. Their questions ranged from my reasons for choosing religion as a topic and my own religious beliefs to recommendations for travels to Europe.

Religion is a sensitive topic in Japan, and especially new religious movements are regarded with caution and suspicion by most people. Making sure that my respondents felt comfortable at any time was of utmost importance to me, so I made sure to stress that none of the responses they gave would be traceable.

4. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

A Debate on Religion as an Analytical Category

When working with religion in academia, it is essential to keep in mind and pay close attention to the still ongoing debate on the usefulness of the concept of religion as an analytical category. This discussion alone is extensive and could fill countless pages and cannot possibly be talked about to the fullest detail here, so I will limit it to what is related to my study. The aim of this part is to illustrate part of the discussion, its importance to my study and to clarify my own position. A recent contribution to this debate has been made by Horii Mitsutoshi in 2018. Before arriving at his own position, he has summarised different writers' examinations and deconstructions of religion as a concept – and criticised their argumentation, in the case of Reader and Tanabe (Horii 2018, 28).

The scholars cited by Horii have approached the use of the term both from a postcolonial and a poststructuralist perspective, famously exemplified by Edward Said and Michel Foucault respectively. Looking at the history of the category of religion, this approach makes sense. What Western modernity calls 'religion' is referred to by different names in large parts of the world – if a term exists at all –, and as I have mentioned already in chapter two, in the specific case of Japan it was the intruding Western powers which introduced the term 'religion' to the country (Josephson 2012, 1). Having been imposed upon various non-Western cultures during colonial times, it is necessary to critically evaluate our use of the term in this day and age (Horii 2018, 23).

Consequently – and similar to other abstractions and categories used in academia –, 'religion' is best understood as “an empty signifier in the sense that it is historically, socially and culturally constructed and negotiated in various situations” (Taira 2013, 26). Despite the harsh wording, any social category is essentially 'empty', but that does not make them any less important. 'Religion' still very much exists and, as a category filled with definitions and meanings depending on the context, affects humans and whole societies. These varying contextual definitions are, however, not only present in academia, but also in daily life. Diverse discourses and definitions breed the impossibility of properly measuring and comparing things as 'religious' or 'non-religious' (Horii 2018, 24). It is probably due to this phenomenon that Japan appears as a special case when it comes to religion, because what the Japanese people define as 'religious' is different from the definition used by scholars (often regardless of their own ethnicity). What we would call 'ancestor

worship' in Japan, to name just one example, is not regarded as a 'religious' act by the Japanese, but would be referred to as such in a different cultural context.

Horii further mentions *sui generis* – termed by McCutcheon in 1997 –, a discourse which “claims that all human cultures have what can be termed 'religion(s)' and that all 'religions' share the same essential characteristics which can be defined and used as an analytical concept” (Horii 2018, 25). While the *sui generis* religious discourse can be found in many constitutions and laws, these do not attempt to define what 'religion' is. Partly responsible for this is, again, the impossibility of a clear definition of 'religion' as a social category. I personally disagree with *sui generis* religion; religions are often, if not always intertwined with the cultures they are practised in, and from these cultural and contextual circumstances arrive too many differences to justify the use of this discourse.

Horii mentions the discrepancy between academic studies on religions in Japan on the one hand acknowledging that Japanese people often regards acts as going to shrines and temples to pray as non-religious, and scholars in Japanese Religions on the other hand often assuming that acts like these are essentially 'religious' even if the Japanese people assume otherwise. I agree with his stance that, rather than imposing an academic category upon people, the focus should be on how the Japanese – and any other people and culture, for that matter – classify their own social practices.

The conclusion Horii arrives at is that 'religion' is simply not a useful category in the analysis of Japanese society; we as scholars should stop using the term 'religion' in the context of Japanese society and instead explore what 'religion' actually means in contemporary Japan. He thus recommends dropping the term and make use of any emic categories that might be used in the given cultural context, since “[r]eligion' as a category of analysis does not seem to capture the reality of Japanese social life meaningfully” (Horii 2018, 47).

Horii also notes that new religious movements should not be labelled as 'religious' without clearly identifying the context of classification. While I do agree with Horii's argument, the term 'new religious movements' will be used in this study simply as a placeholder without attempting to judge how they fit into the category of 'religiosity'.

David C. Lewis arrives at a similar conclusion as Horii, although he takes a more practical approach in directly referring to his own experiences and findings. He is more concerned with measuring 'religiosity' and changes in the religious attitude of people. One problem of such studies, as he points out (Lewis 2015, 33), is that they often use theories of 'secularisation' developed in a Western-oriented context. In such cases the assumption is usually that the circumstances affecting 'secularisation' in Japan and the context it is compared to are sufficiently similar for a comparison to work, but I regard this as just as debatable as Lewis does. 'Secularisation' is a term that carries different meanings and thus needs to be defined just as clearly as 'religion' in such debates. José Casanova, to follow Lewis' example, divides secularisation theory into three separate claims; a) the decline of religious beliefs and practices in modern societies, which – despite being the most recent distinction added – is the term that is most widespread these days; b) the privatisation of religion; and c) the differentiation of the secular spheres, that is the liberation of state, economy, and science from religious institutions and their norms (Casanova 2006, 7). This makes at least three varying connotations of the term.

Another difficulty is found in how to measure 'religiosity'. Studies usually look at effects that can be easily observed, like counting how many people participate in a religious activity, but this method has shortcomings as well. Working with statistics and numbers in general does not seem the best way to approach a concept like religion (Lewis 2015, 38). Especially in Japan – with its major cultural differences from the Western context it is most often compared to – simply comparing what we believe to be 'similar enough' often does not suffice to attain useful data.

He also points out another challenge for secularisation theory in Japan. Although most of his respondents held no strong attachment to any religion, everyone who filled in one of his questionnaires has done something commonly associated with religiosity at one point of their life, be it visiting a shrine, attending a Buddhist ritual in memory of a deceased relative, or carrying an amulet for protection. The difference lies with their motivation; the Japanese people generally do not regard such acts as religious but prefer to frame it as tradition and heritage (Lewis 2015, 59). Lewis' findings in this case are the same as mine; most of the students I interviewed saw those activities as part of their culture, a tradition they follow without any religious mind.

In his studies, Lewis has come to many conclusions concurrent with my own findings. I will refer to this particular aspect in my analysis chapter, but a brief mention of divination in Japan seems appropriate already at this point. Divination (□□ *uranai*) is a well-known practice in Japan not limited to gender or certain age groups, but instead engrained in popular culture. This diversity however makes the term so fickle. As Lewis rightly notes, a variety of practices fall under the term divination; most might think of おみくじ (*omikuji*), oracles available for purchase at nearly every temple or shrine, while especially younger generations might think of astrology and palmistry instead (2015, 41). Even among the small group of people I interviewed, responses were mixed.

I therefore agree with Lewis that answers about the belief in divination can hardly be compared, even though the phenomenon as such is fascinating. What is more sensible (and more gratifying as well) than trying to compare numbers and statistics, is finding out people's motivations for religious activities and their attitudes towards religion. A topic as heavily debated as religion lends itself to qualitative research which allows for personal contact and the possibility of clarifying issues in detail. Even in the three decades after his initial research in Japan, Lewis found that several of the basic attitudes towards religion indeed remained the same, both among older and younger generations (Lewis 2015, 42).

In addition to contributing to the critical debate on how to develop more appropriate conceptual tools for the study of “religion” in Japan, these attitudes are what I plan to examine more closely and detailed in the following chapters. Lewis shows the discrepancy between engaging in religious activities and at the same time not regarding them as religious, and it is this phenomenon that I want to shine some light on. If the Japanese would not refer to these activities as religious, then what is the actual motivation behind their actions? As for Horii, the aim is to find out what 'religion' actually means to my respondents in Japan, as well as identifying the role of new religious movements in this context.

5. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

This chapter will present the main findings and will analyse them to find an answer to the research question and sub-questions. I will first give a brief summary of important values in Japan's society to provide a basic understanding of the context the new religious movements are operating in. The following two main themes will be discussed in detail: the respondents' attitudes towards religion in general and Shinto and Buddhism in particular, and their opinion of new religious movements.

5.1 Background: Japanese Society and the Image of New Religious Movements

At this point I will discuss some general assumptions about Japanese society that served as part of the foundation of my analysis. There exists extensive literature about the core values of Japan, more than could be adequately dealt with in this part, so I shall quickly review the most important aspects for this study. In contrast to many cultures in the Western

context, Japan is a group-oriented, collectivist society. Great value is placed on maintaining harmony within the group and is, among other things, achieved through not voicing too strongly and sacrificing one's individuality for the sake of the group. Interpersonal relationships also follow a strict hierarchy based on age and experience (Sugimoto 2014, 4). As discussed in the literature review, Japan's society has already been sceptical towards new religious movements before the Aum incident. New religious movements provide a space for those who have difficulties finding their role in mainstream Japanese society (Metraux 2000, 2). However, by separating themselves from the status quo and gathering in these movements, they draw attention to what makes them differ from the norm, resulting in sticking out and appearing strange all the more.

5.2 “Religiosity” in Japan

The majority of my respondents did not regard themselves as part of either Shinto or Buddhism, nor of any other religion. Only two admitted they somehow followed Buddhism but stressed that they are neither attached to nor serious about it. All respondents visited shrines and temples, although mostly on special occasions like New Year's or for festivals. A few participants added (without me prompting) that, for them, activities like these visits belong to the cultural traditions and customs of Japan and do not hold any religious meaning; a statement very much in line with what Horii and Lewis discussed in their work. None of them received any emotional rewards from taking part in these activities but gave completely different reasons for going. Some appreciate the atmosphere or history of shrines and temples, others regarded it as a sightseeing activity (especially when travelling outside of Tokyo) with either their friends or family.

A female respondent said:

“I think many Japanese people basically have a mixture of Shinto and Buddhism, but most of them don't take part in religious activities. Like, the meaning for me is kind of heavy, because of accidents like with Aum Shinrikyō.”

All respondents seemed to have an image of what religion entails or should ideally be about, even if they could not clearly define what exactly religion means. Actively taking part in any religion comes with a commitment that could have an impact on their lives and influence the choices they would make in the future. The certain “heaviness” the respondents connected with religion appears deterring, even scaring for some. Most students stressed that they do not regard Shinto or Buddhism as a religion similar to world religions like Christianity or Islam. The relationship they have to their culture's belief systems differs from the “classic” relationship between a believer and their religion, so they might try to find a different explanation for it.

“I think I don't regard myself as part of [Shinto or Buddhism], because we do have customs and habits, like we go to temples and shrines on New Year's, and then we have some celebrations when we turn a certain age or something like that, but it becomes more like something cultural and I don't regard it as a religion. And I think specific and big religions like Islam and Christianity are different from Shinto.”

Keiko², herself part of a study group at Waseda working with religion, put this view into words most coherently. The respondents stressed a clear distinction between what they themselves regard or not regard as religious and what would be called religious by scholars of (Japanese) Religious Studies. Again, this matches what Horii has discussed in his work (2018, 24). Still, if Shinto and Buddhism are not regarded as religions by the Japanese, then what is it that grants them this peculiar status?

For one of the respondents, Takashi, it was the way Buddhism connected him to his family. He started out rather hesitant at the beginning of the interview, not sounding too sure about belonging to Buddhism, but as we continued to talk he grew more confident. He kept stressing that even if they have an altar dedicated to deceased relatives at home and his family visited temples and shrines regularly, none of them were “serious about religion”. However, at the end he said:

“For me, I need some religion. Speaking about me, I belong to Buddhism, my parents and grandparents are also Buddhist. For me, Buddhism has an important role to connect me to them. Every New Year's I go to a shrine with my parents and grandparents, so that's kind of an activity, and this activity binds me to my parents and grandparents more, stronger. So at that point, for me, I need religion.”

² The names of all respondents have been changed.

While being careful to make a distinction between religion and the tradition followed by his family, Takashi admits to the importance of Buddhism in his life as something shared between himself and the people he cherishes. What academia or other cultures might regard as “religious” falls into a different category with him. Buddhism holds an important place in his life not out of spiritual or pious reasons but is seen by him as a means to connect with his family; a shared experience that binds them together.

Shinto and Buddhism

Takashi was the only respondent who had such a personal relationship with Buddhism. Most respondents agreed that Japan was not a particularly religious country (only one female respondent felt that Japan was indeed rather religious, seeing as Sōka Gakkai's party Kōmeitō is part of the political landscape), but their reasoning differed slightly.

“I think the majority of the Japanese is like me, they do the religious, how do you say, the rituals and stuff, but they don't really feel attached to that, because for funerals and weddings we do the Western-style, Christianity-style. So I don't think they really think about the religion attached to the rituals.”

Takako's words echoed the general feeling among the respondents. It seemed the Japanese acknowledged that some activities they regarded as purely cultural could be judged as religious by others, yet this possible religious side does not hold any meaning for them. One male respondent who had been studying abroad in Canada noted that, other than in the West, Japanese neither believe in gods or religion nor deny it. They “do not care about religious stuff”, so the thought that what they are doing could be seen as a religious act does not even cross their mind. Several respondents alluded to the absence of strong beliefs and that voicing strong opinions is generally seen as unwelcome, and religion seems to be handled similarly.

Ayako on the other hand phrased it like this: religion in Japan is “wide but shallow”. People would participate in “religious” acts but do not think about this aspect while doing it. She said most people usually do not actively think about Buddhism, only when they are reminded of it, for example by a relative passing away since funeral rites are performed in Buddhist fashion.

“日本人だからこういうふうにあります。

We're doing it like this because we're Japanese.”

Buddhist rites are so engrained in Japanese tradition that it has become easy for people to forget about the religious origin and simply view them as part of their culture. The religious connotations that used to be connected to them have faded and disappeared to the point where none of the respondents actively thought about them while performing an activity rooted in Buddhism.

Rin, who agrees that most Japanese do not “have a strong religious mind”, mentioned some geographical differences. She has been travelling through Japan frequently and shared her experiences with me, saying that people living in mega cities like Tokyo are significantly less in touch with religion than people living in the countryside.

“Tokyo is really... a city, not a rural area, and people have very weak feelings, not like rural areas. And personally I like travelling, even in Japan, and I have gone to prefectures outside of Tokyo, and I sometimes go to places really far from Tokyo, and they are really rural, □□ [inaka; countryside] area, and some of the citizens have a really strong spirit of their local religion. And the people who live in the city, of course they are so busy, so they don't have enough time to have that kind of spirit or religion.”

It is almost common knowledge that religious habits vary greatly between rural and urban areas (Chalfant and Heller 1991, 76), but her explanation also fits to other respondents' answers. Many said that while they do not have an altar at home, their grandparents living in the outskirts of Tokyo or in the countryside did. The students' small flats did not offer the space for them to even think about having an altar at home as well.

Surprisingly, despite generally agreeing that Japan is not as “religious” as the connection between culture and Shinto and Buddhism would suggest, many respondents told me they still regarded religion as necessary. While two respondents connected religion with conflict and war, the majority felt that religion (in the way they ideally imagined it to be) was something that could be beneficial to the world in general and Japanese society in particular.

“If I regard Shinto and Buddhism as religions, then yes. [...] If there is no religion like Shinto or Buddhism in Japan, I think then we're gonna be more confused. People need something to rely on, so I think it's needed.”

Again, the focus is on how Shinto and Buddhism – as part of the Japanese culture – indispensably belong to society. These belief systems form a moral foundation, a basis for their behaviour and values. For many respondents, the core beliefs laid out by Shinto and Buddhism are something that connects them to their people in a broader sense, something they have in common and that makes them all come together. One respondent believed religion to be necessary because the Japanese depend on each other and lack the ability to make quick and strong decisions, so having a basic philosophy to follow would be beneficial.

Takako phrased it like this:

“Like I mentioned a little bit earlier, if it's the good movements, then it's something to motivate the country, the world to do something good, and then for some people it's a place for them to, like, express their feelings when they can't do so as an individual. So I think in that way religion can be like a big power to move an individual and a group, so I think religion is necessary in some ways.”

Her point is in line with Metraux (2000, 66) who explained that many of Aum Shinrikyō's followers joined the group for this very reason; they were looking for a place where they could express themselves in a way that was otherwise impossible in Japan's collectivist society. Whether this was the actual aim of Aum or not shall not be discussed here. It is however interesting that one of the basic ideas of new religious movements – providing a space for those who do not fit the standards of society – in itself is accepted by some respondents and can exist detached from the crimes committed by Aum.

“My image about new religions in Japan is kind of dangerous, but when I was in high school, many of my high school teachers were Christians, so they were so kind. And every

time they do something or achieve something, they think it's the right thing to do for god, so yeah, they seem so kind. They have hospitality to other people, so religions more or less have such a spirit, so I think religion is needed for people.”

Michiru also separates new religious movements from other religions. While most students at her high school did not believe in any religion, all teachers were devout Christians and shaped her view of what religion should ideally be like. She thinks the general kindness and support you receive from a religious community can be beneficial, yet she views new religious movements as dangerous.

Divination

As already mentioned in chapter four, divination was something that came up several times during the fieldwork process as a contrast to religion in the classic sense. Most students meant *omikuji* when they talked about divination; only one female respondent talked primarily about palmistry. However, no matter their opinion of divination, all respondents have at one point made personal experience with it. Thinking back to the many temple grounds and shrines I came across, many the majority of visitors would buy an *omikuji*. Tasuku, one of the respondents who stressed that Shinto and Buddhism in Japan lean more towards culture than religion, said the Japanese do not actually believe in divination, but they derive entertainment from it, which makes sightseeing spots more interesting and enjoyable to them as well.

The respondents generally did not seriously believe in divination. Some added that while they enjoy doing it from time to time, they only tend to casually believe in it if the results are positive. Divination, to them, does not serve as a replacement for religion but instead offers a similar kind of reassurance that other people might derive from religious groups. It is not related to a specific religion which lessens the feeling of responsibility that the respondents believed to be attached to faith. Some respondents said they felt divination was significantly lighter than religion, seeing as they are not forced to believe anything that they do not agree with. The casualness of divination gives them access to what they saw as beneficial about religious groups yet at the same time comes without any obligations.

„I think they want to be certain about their future or something, I think it's also the part of having something to rely on. Or like, if they know the result then they can decide what to do after they got the answer.“

The wish to rely on something is natural and can be fulfilled through various means. Divination deals exclusively with the future and is thus limited in the kind of support it can give. According to many respondents, the support offered by religious communities is different. Instead of only focusing on the future, members receive emotional support as well. Several respondents knew someone who had decided to join a new religious movement after falling ill or after a loved one passed away. One rather sceptical respondent noted that rather than offering kindness out of altruism, these movements specifically target emotionally vulnerable people to increase their numbers.

Foreign Religions in Daily Life

The respondents' attitude towards Shinto and Buddhism, new religious movements, and world religions practised in the West differed significantly. While religions like Christianity and Islam were generally perceived as something foreign, my respondents hardly held any negative feelings towards them. Only one girl said she felt that Islam was more conflicted in contrast to Christianity, but the latter was always mentioned neutrally. Christmas is even celebrated in Japan, although it is a day celebrated mostly by couples instead of families.

Although their image of Christianity was much more positive than of the new religious movements, their knowledge about it was just as limited. When asked about the differences between world religions and Shinto and Buddhism, their answers came hesitantly, after they had put a lot of thought into their words. This, however, might have also been due to them not wanting to give the “wrong” answer. The respondents mentioned the different gods revered by world religions and the various ways to pray to these gods. One girl pointed out that she liked Christian weddings and their flashiness compared to Buddhist weddings. Tasuku on the other hand mentioned the Bible and doctrines in general; he thought the Bible made it easy to understand what Christians believe in, whereas Buddhism has countless branches and stories that are difficult to keep track of.

“I think it's very unrealistic, to be honest, because most of those religions [like Aum], they don't believe in god or anything that has, like, a major history, and the fact that they believe in somebody that still exists, and they do so much to contribute to him, it's kind of weird to me. I feel like those people are just clinging to something to find happiness in their life.”

This quote by Midori mirrors the feelings of some other respondents as well. World religions and their doctrines provide a history to their belief, a story of how and why their belief was created. It is this long history that resonates with the Japanese and their respect and appreciation for tradition. New religious movements often cannot offer that. Sōka Gakkai's teachings centre around its leader, a human just like them, who is still alive and living among them. It has been the same with Aum Shinrikyō. Several of my respondents told me they do not see the point of revering someone who is still alive.

One of the most surprising findings was the naturalness with which Christian schools are accepted as part of Japan's society. Three of my female respondents had attended a Christian middle and/or high school: Takako, Michiru, and Rin.

Takako had picked the all-girls middle and high school herself because of its advanced English language programme, a purely practical reason which her parents were not opposed to. She had to attend the mass every morning, sang the hymns, and read in the Bible. For her, religion was part of her life, but not in the usual spiritual sense; the school just happened to be Christian and performing the activities just became normal for her. Michiru went to a Protestant high school, also attending mass every morning. The religious background of the school also did not matter to her; she called the school “kind of high-level” and was glad that they had accepted her.

Rin went to an all-girls Catholic middle and high school in Hokkaido with the aim of being far away from her parents. She lived in a dormitory and had to pray every day, even though few of the students actually believed in Christianity. What made her parents agree to her choice – as well as letting her little brother move to an all-boys Catholic school in Hokkaido as well – were the strict rules. Even if the parents did not believe in the school's religion, they trusted that they could leave their child in its care. And they were not the only ones who did. According to Rin, a lot of the students at her school had been sent there because of delinquent behaviour in the hopes of them mending their ways.

Christianity, albeit being a foreign religion, is met with substantially more trust than any new religious movement.

5.3 Impression of New Religious Movements

The respondents' impression of new religious movements varied greatly depending on whether they had personally met members from those movements. Eight out of ten students had a negative impression, ranging from slight distrust to actual disapproval and even fear. Only two respondents were rather neutral about the movements and their members, but told me this was only the case because someone close to them was a member. Four people used the word “dangerous” to describe the movements.

When asked which religions or religious organisations in Japan they knew, every respondent mentioned the new religious movements. Even if they could not remember the specific names, they all had heard of Sōka Gakkai and Aum Shinrikyō before once I mentioned the names. Despite having heard the names, however, only half of the students knew more than rumours about the movements, mostly from friends and family members who were either part of the movements themselves or knew someone who was. The other half said they were not interested in religion and thus did not care about these movements either.

Nine out of ten told me they would never consider joining one of the movements – some quite firmly and with a dismissive attitude, while others told me they would not want to join even if their friends or relatives were members. Only one respondent, a girl named Ayako, did not have any negative feelings about the movements and said she might consider joining if there were no strings attached, and she could leave whenever she wanted – or if her family decided to join.

Due to all respondents having individual experiences with new religious movements and their members, it is difficult to paint a general image about their attitude. Some were surprisingly open-minded and considered learning more about the

movements (or already did so because good friends of them were members), while others refused to interact with members at all. One respondent who had a more negative impression of the new religious movements said:

“If a person close to me belonged to such a group, maybe I might try to make them quit the group. This is only my opinion, but I think many people are so serious about it that they might cause problems in the future, and I don't want people close to me to join such activities, so I think I would try to remove them from the movement.”

The respondents also had different opinions on why people decided to join movements like Sōka Gakkai. Many of the female respondents admitted that they liked the idea of self-improvement or kindness towards fellow human beings that was part of the movements. Some girls told me stories about people they knew who joined when they themselves or their loved ones fell ill and then found hope and support through the movement. One girl put it like this:

“I think the people want something to rely on and the religion can be the solution for it, but for me I can't understand, like, I can't know how they felt and then decided to join, so... I think the religion can be friendly for them.”

Others were less diplomatic with their answers. They called the movements “unrealistic”, “scary”, and “strange”, believing that the only reason people joined was because they had been brainwashed by existing members. What some respondents regarded as a general kindness of the movements, others believed members would target people's weaknesses, like their personal struggles or lack of self-confidence, and would then persuade them to join.

The actual reasons for people's joining might vary from individual to individual, but Metraux (2000, 1) has found that it was less due to what some respondents referred to as brainwashing, but rather because the movements offered them an “independent path in life.” Japan's society is not kind to those who do not adhere to its customs and values, so religious movements – themselves taking the role of an outsider – offered a place for these people to feel at home and understood.

The respondents' opinion was split on whether new religious movements are harmful to society or could actually have benefits. Two leaned more towards the movements being slightly harmful to society, saying the members' opinions are too strong and would not fit into Japan's society. However, most agreed that it heavily depends on the specific movement. Takashi said the following:

“I think those activities have both aspects, but of course causing some problems, for instance, is very harmful for society. But I also think such religious activities can give people hope or motivation to live, to the point that I think such activities are good for society.”

He pointed out that motivated and happy citizens would work harder for society, and if their

motivation came from being members of religious movements, then that would make those movements a beneficial thing. Ayako, while essentially agreeing with him, explains it like this:

“大きくなったら手が届かない。その上の人たちの手が届かなくなったところで危険な組織に変わっちゃうのかなって。

If it gets bigger, it can't be controlled. If the people at the top can't control it any more, it might turn into a dangerous organisation.”

Her words sum up what many respondents mentioned throughout the interviews. They did not necessarily fear the movements' members as individuals, but the sheer size of Sōka Gakkai, for example, as well as the fact that it is also meddling in politics, made them feel uneasy.

Opinion Formation

It came as a surprise how many respondents had personal experience with new religious movements. Several had neighbours, friends, or even relatives who were members of (in most cases) Sōka Gakkai, which was what influenced them the most when they formed their opinion. Those whose friends were members of one of the movements were generally more accepting and open-minded, and more careful in the way they chose their words. Ichika, for example, became friends with a Korean exchange student during her time at Lund University who was a member of Sōka Gakkai's Korean branch. She told me that her friend changed her opinion about the organisation to a more positive one; she said that if someone as kind as her friend was a member, the movement could not be that bad.

About half of my female respondents have also been in relationships with members of Sōka Gakkai during their high school days. Their parents, especially their mothers, strongly opposed the relationship in all cases and advised them to break up. When I asked them whether they would consider joining a movement, many added that their parents would not like them becoming a member, indicating that the way their parents – who have witnessed Aum's attack – perceive the movements has influenced them. Especially in Keiko's case:

“My father was supposed to take the exact train [that was attacked by Aum], but then he missed that and he was getting on the next train, so that's why he's alive and I'm here.”

Despite that, she was one of the most open-minded respondents, herself part of a research group at

Waseda University that was concerned with religion in Japanese society. She also mentioned that there are special TV shows on Aum Shinrikyō every year, so even though my participants were not even born yet when the incident happened, they still grew up constantly learning about and being reminded of it, often sensationally.

Michiru, another respondent, also learned about Aum Shinrikyō through the media:

“My high school had religion as a subject, so my religion teacher told us that, if you enter university, and some people talk to me too kindly, you should be careful. And in my childhood I watched TV shows about how Aum Shinrikyō was dangerous, so that's my image. Like, new religious movements seem so dangerous to me.”

She was not the only respondent who was told to be wary of people approaching her too kindly. Waseda is infamous among its students and professors for the frequency with which religious organisations are trying to recruit students close to the premises. One respondent asked me if I have never met any of those groups, which I unfortunately have not.

The Great Unknown

Rin was one of the most interesting students I talked with. She was the only respondent who wanted to have the interview in a public space – but also the only one afraid that strangers around her could be members of new religious movements. She feared that even her friends or teachers could belong to the movements without her knowing, so she tried to be careful of her words whenever the topic came up in conversations. Most respondents who had a negative opinion of these movements formed it through personal experiences with members, but Rin only heard stories from her mother and friends. Despite her fear, she still thought there could be positive sides to the movements. Similar to other respondents, Rin acknowledged the kindness and support offered to members of religious groups. At the same time she believed it unnecessary for her generation to “have a specific religion”. The strong opinions and beliefs of new religious movements could become too overwhelming and cause trouble in harm instead.

We have already established that new religious movements are generally perceived as dangerous and as something that you would do best to stay away from. The reason for that is not the religious aspect of the movements, in fact it is because organisations like Sōka Gakkai and Aum Shinrikyō are more than just “religious” groups.

Although many new religious movements have taken part of their teachings from Buddhism, the level of commitment is completely different. Sōka Gakkai, for example, has evolved into such a large organisation that it owns countless schools and universities for their members' children to attend. While members are not obliged to send their children to Sōka Gakkai's own facilities, it is common practice nevertheless. It is the same with marriage; as far as I have been informed, there are no written rules that say members are only allowed to marry other members, but it is strongly encouraged and marriages with non-members are frowned upon. Similarly, if a member of Sōka Gakkai has a child, this child automatically becomes a member as well and is raised accordingly.

These customs are what attracted the negative attention of my respondents. More than half of the students I talked to

had personal experiences with Sōka Gakkai members, be it through friends or family members or because they have been approached and asked to join, This recruitment process might just be one of the biggest issues. Several respondents complained that they have been asked to join Sōka Gakkai, at times quite adamantly. Even foreigners, regardless whether they are tourists or residents, are approached by members looking for new recruits. This persistence in trying to persuade people to join is what has been alienating all students I talked to. One female respondent in particular noted that, in her opinion, religion should be something personal and intimate, but by attaching this much value to the recruitment process, this intimacy seems to get lost. It does not help that members of Sōka Gakkai gain more credit within the organisation the more new members (and thus money) they bring in.

“なんか、ちょっと変わった人たち。

They're a little strange, those people.”

Japan's collectivist society is not kind to those who do not adhere to the status quo. Members of new religious movements are often regarded as those who do not fit into society, who do not agree with the country's competitive mindset, and are therefore seen as outcasts. The strict and at times odd rules that Sōka Gakkai's members are expected to follow are not working to their advantage either. When asked if they could imagine why people decided to join new religious movement, several respondents deemed brainwashing possible.

“But with Sōka Gakkai, everything is just, the religion is so dark, it's like a religion that is not set by example, unlike Christianity.”

Just as much as the respondents did not view Shinto and Buddhism as actual religions, they generally doubt the altruistic and benevolent nature that new religious movements should have in their opinion. The movements do not fit the stereotypes they have about religion, so they are wary of them and their members.

New religious movements also lack the history and tradition that makes Shinto and Buddhism part of Japanese culture. Several respondents noted that world religions like Christianity seem more logical to them because of their scriptures and history. This is quite possibly rooted in Japanese culture itself which puts great importance and worth on long tradition; it is the same with the preparation of certain dishes and performing arts, among many other things.

Some respondents further described it as deterring that, instead of believing in and praying to a supernatural entity like a god, new religious movements are often times personality cults that revere humans who are still alive and living among them.

“Because even if Aum Shinrikyō – you know, that was crazy, they even murdered people –, so like, when you believe in someone that still exists and who does that crazy stuff, it makes you think, 'Okay this is really dangerous', and it kind of gives it a category, 'Stay away', so yeah, that's the kind of impression I always have when I see them on TV or in the newspapers.”

Having only one person at the top of the movement is understandably unsettling, especially the larger the movement grows. The size of many new religious movements makes it close to impossible to monitor the actions of every member and complicates the information flow from top to bottom. Unless in a high position themselves, members will probably not have an opportunity to talk to the movement's leader personally. In the case of Aum Shinrikyō, the majority of members did not know about the crimes planned and committed by the leader and his close group of confidants (Metraux 2000, 16). In contrast, Shinto and Buddhism – as religions – operate differently and leave more responsibility with those who believe. Its long history and the fact that it is not a personality cult are making it easier to trust Shinto and Buddhism as opposed to new religious movements.

Another point that came up frequently was Sōka Gakkai's involvement in politics. Several respondents mentioned the organisation's party Kōmeitō without me prompting them to and explained that it made them uncomfortable when politics and religion are fused like this.

“I don't think I want to vote for them, and I think religion and politics should be apart, but that's totally going in the opposite way, and it's scary.”

Politics is just as sensitive a topic in Japan as religion, and having both of them combined like this creates a feeling of unease among the students I talked to. There are two reasons why the respondents have been approached by members of Sōka Gakkai before. One was because the members wanted to recruit them, and the other was because they have been asked to vote for Kōmeitō. A few respondents – whose families were friends with members of Sōka Gakkai – said their negative image of the group partly came from the persistent and constant phone calls through which the members tried to convince them to vote for Kōmeitō in the upcoming elections.

For Sōka Gakkai – and for other new religious movements as well, since they are inevitably coloured with the same brush by most Japanese – it is the huge size of the movement paired with its involvement in Japan's political landscape that deters the respondents. While the members themselves are mostly just seen as odd in the best and emotionally weak in the worst case, it is the unknown dimension to Sōka Gakkai which strikes fear into Japan's citizens.

Religion has “so much power to move something forward” that feeling like this power is not used correctly or not utilised for the greater good of society but instead for someone's personal gain does not leave a positive impression on people. Some respondents feared that by growing too big and powerful, movements like Sōka Gakkai could go down the wrong road and commit atrocities similar to Aum Shinrikyō.

“I think the ones, the not famous ones, the not established ones, are more self-central, kind of? The others, like Christianity, Buddhism, they... a lot of the stuff that I know is more about how you can make society better, but then Aum Shinrikyō, they're moving at the thought of one leader, and it feels like it's a thought that doesn't make society better.”

More than two decades have passed since the Aum incident and the current generation of students had not even been born yet when it happened. However, they are constantly being reminded of the incident, either by TV shows marking the anniversaries of the attack or by people who have been witnesses of that event. No matter how my respondents

formed their opinion on Aum and other new religious movements, they cannot help but compare them. I agree with McLaughlin (2012, 72), who noted that although “alarmist reactions to the term 'new religion' may diminish in intensity as memories of Aum Shinrikyō lose their immediacy, the 'new religion' stigma is likely to persist.” The respondents did not completely condemn new religious movements, but they were wary and careful in their interactions with them, always assuming that another organisation could follow in Aum Shinrikyō's footsteps.

“This is not how religion works, it's not for the money, it's not about how many people you recruit, if you want to believe in god you don't have to go through that, it's so unnecessary.”

One respondent compared new religious movements to companies since they did not fit the idealist picture he had of religions. It appears that new religious movements are an embodiment of all negative connotations the respondents had with religion in general. Instead of treating religion as something intimate and personal, members of Sōka Gakkai and other movements try to recruit people in a way that leaves a negative impression. Many respondents thought the movements focused too much on earning money and increasing their influence, and disliked how they were trying to push their faith onto them.

In contrast to that, Shinto and Buddhism – while not actively regarded as religions by many Japanese – are valued for what they contribute to Japan's tradition and culture. Shinto and Buddhist rites are an integral part of everyday life and come so natural to the Japanese that neither are triggering the heavy feeling usually connected with religion.

6. CONCLUSION

This study has examined the attitude of Japanese students towards religion in Japan, with specific emphasis on new religious movements. After looking at the respondents' attitudes towards different religious phenomena and their perception and opinion of new religious movements in particular, it is now time to recapitulate the findings and see how they tie in with Horii and Lewis' research.

With Sōka Gakkai and Aum Shinrikyō being the most well-known groups among the respondents, the majority of people I interviewed had a negative impression of new religious movements and even regarded them as dangerous and something one should not get involved with. In many cases, their parents had been the ones to stoke their distrust, often because of their own experiences with members from those movements. Having a personal connection to members of new religious movements positively influenced the respondents' opinion in many cases. There was no clear consensus among the respondents on whether movements like Sōka Gakkai and Aum Shinrikyō are generally more beneficial or harmful to society. While the support and kindness received from a religious community was something universally seen as conducive, the size of Sōka Gakkai in particular and the tenacity (verging on harassment) with which its members are trying to recruit people to join was criticised by all respondents.

World religions like Christianity and Islam seemed to have a separate status among the respondents. They might be seen as something foreign, yet the students' opinions on them are either neutral or positive. Especially Christianity was associated with kindness, hospitality, and benevolence. Christian schools in Japan are not uncommon and viewed by some as a good way to teach children respect and manners. What seemed to legitimise world religions for the respondents, as opposed to new religious movements, were their long tradition and history. Christianity was met with considerably more trust than any new religious movement.

Similar to Lewis' conclusion, every single of my respondents has engaged in an activity that could be regarded as religious, be it visiting a shrine, participating in a temple rite, or honouring their deceased ancestors with an altar. My own findings coincide with his; the Japanese students who participated in my project stressed that they receive no spiritual gratification from any of these activities or thought of any religion while participating in them. Instead, the students emphasised that neither Shinto nor Buddhism could be called religious in the Japanese context. Both belief systems are so deeply entangled with the traditions of Japan that Shinto and Buddhism seem to have transitioned to being part of the culture more so than of the religious landscape. Rites and rituals connected to either were regarded as something fundamentally Japanese by the respondents, as some of them said following Shinto or Buddhism felt right because it was something they did “because [they] are Japanese.”

New religious movements, however, were seen as religions still less than Shinto and Buddhism. Although many movements have their roots in Buddhism, the students have likened them more to companies and corporate organisations. Especially Sōka Gakkai with its own political party has been met with disapproval and distrust by them. Sōka Gakkai's size, its assets in the form of educational facilities, hospitals, and more, as well as its connection to politics – none of this is in line with what the students would regard as religion. The strict rules and requirements are discouraging my respondents from interacting with members of Sōka Gakkai and other new religious movements, and the fact that some movements have grown too large to be properly controlled is what fuels their fear of them. After all, there is still a possibility for one of the movements to follow in Aum Shinrikyō's footsteps, as some of them pointed out.

Horii has been putting emphasis on the importance of finding out what 'religion' means to the Japanese. Most of my respondents perceived religion as something heavy, a commitment that comes with responsibilities and rules to follow in exchange for a supportive community. Neither Shinto and Buddhism nor the new religious movements qualified as religion in their opinion, yet none of the students had a distinct idea of how to define religion in the first place. The respondents of this study all defined religion differently, filling this “empty signifier” with a personal meaning that can hardly be generalised.

In this study I have come across most of the issues pointed out by Horii in his recent work. Not only did the respondents each relate to religious phenomena differently; their classification also varied from those used by scholars of Religious Studies. Some students explicitly stressed that all the acts and rituals regarded as “religious” by scholars were rather part of the cultural sphere. Upon being asked, most were willing to explain how they perceived, classified, and defined religious phenomena in Japan. Given this readiness to help develop a more fitting category for what is labelled “religion” in a Western-context, Horii's recommendation to drop the term in the Japanese context and instead use emic categories sounds more than plausible and achievable.

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