



Published in final edited form as:

*Soc Sci J.* 2010 December 1; 47(4): 845–852. doi:10.1016/j.soscij.2010.07.010.

## Limitations for measuring religion in a different cultural context - the case of Japan

**Kimiko Tanaka, Ph.D**

Department of Sociology and Anthropology, College of Liberal Arts, Rochester Institute of Technology, 18 Lomb Memorial Drive, Rochester, NY 14623, ktanaka@ssc.wisc.edu, Phone: (585) 475-6701, Fax: (585) 475-6715

### Abstract

The article points out the limitations in surveys measuring religiosity and spirituality using the measures developed in Christian or Western contexts. Japanese people think of religion (*shūkyō*) as revealed religion such as Christianity that has specific doctrinal belief and faith. Through their history of religious regulation, Japanese people came to consider themselves “non-religious” as a way of survival, not to be punished by political authorities and not to be stigmatized in their community. Thus they tend to answer that they consider themselves “non-religious” in surveys, while performing ritual performances for their ancestors in Buddhist temples and Buddhist altars not only to thank ancestors but also to ease the psychological fear people have toward *muenbotoke*, restless ancestors who have no legitimate offspring to take care of them. To extend the study of spirituality or religiousness in the Japanese context, qualitative studies are necessary not to misinterpret religiousness and spirituality in Japanese context.

### Introduction

Previous surveys that aim to compare religiosity faced great limitations since many Japanese people consider themselves “non-religious” and have a rather passive view about religion, reflecting the historical and cultural construction of the word, religion (*shūkyō*). This paper first explains why they came to consider themselves non-religious (*mushūkyō*) while performing ritual performances for their ancestors in Buddhist temples and Buddhist altars. Second, it points out limitations in current social surveys for measuring religiosity and discusses the need for qualitative studies. Finally, social problems caused by Japanese people’s “non-religiousness” in today’s globalization age will be raised to emphasize that understanding religiosity or spirituality in a Japanese context is not only important for social science research but also necessary for educators and policy makers.

#### 1. Birth and Rise of Funeral Buddhism

Buddhism, officially brought to Japan in the sixth century, teaches the realization of suffering, and its practitioners attempt to control the ego through training. Shinran (1173-1262), the founder of Pure Land Buddhism, was anxious about the possibility of falling into hell. In medieval Japan, centuries of continuous wars also made people lament over one’s misfortunes and the deaths of families and friends, which was supported by Buddhist ideas that humans

© 2010 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

**Publisher's Disclaimer:** This is a PDF file of an unedited manuscript that has been accepted for publication. As a service to our customers we are providing this early version of the manuscript. The manuscript will undergo copyediting, typesetting, and review of the resulting proof before it is published in its final citable form. Please note that during the production process errors may be discovered which could affect the content, and all legal disclaimers that apply to the journal pertain.

cannot escape from *uki-yo*, the word of suffering. Finally, Shinran attained liberation after meeting Hōnen (1133-1212) who taught that anyone could attain birth in the Pure Land and become a Buddha just by uttering the Nembutsu, the name of Amida Buddha (Ama, 2005). What Hōnen taught was a revolutionary in Buddhist history because he denied any practices other than uttering the Nembutsu. About the same time, the development of paddy fields assured a stable economy and allowed people to pursue leisure activities. Although the afterlife was still a concern for many people, as it was taught that Amida Buddha would welcome to his Pure Land whoever uttered the Nembutsu, “the world of suffering (*uki-yo*)” was gradually transformed to the “floating world (*uki-yo*)” (Ama, 2008). However, such a transformed worldview did not completely free people from their anxieties concerning their later life. In such context, Buddhism became increasingly recognized as “Funeral Buddhism” during the Tokugawa-period (1603-1868).

The Tokugawa period represents a time of economic growth and freedom from internal wars (Garces-Foley, 2006). Funeral Buddhism is named after the religion’s near-monopoly on the ceremonies of death and memorial services to transform the deceased into ancestors, rather than pursuing the Buddhist teachings (Onishi, 2008). The layers of loyalty and the lord-vassal relationship (*oyabun* and *kobun*) were crucial for Tokugawa leaders to effectively regulate and govern people’s behaviors (Nakane, 1967). Since Christianity places one’s relationship to God before all others, it posed a great threat to the spirit of feudalism (Tanaka & Johnson, 2008). To suppress Christianity, the Tokugawa leaders ordered the populace to register at a Buddhist temple and practice ancestor worship, and asking temples for ritual performances became more structured and standardized. Consequently, people’s interest in the original Buddhist teachings has gradually ceased while Funeral Buddhism became popular.

In addition, during the Tokugawa period Buddhism came under increasing criticism by the followers of Confucianism. Confucianism, which originally came from China, was interested in how to achieve a harmonious society, thus they did not have much concern for the afterlife nor did they believe in rebirth like the Buddhists (Ama, 2005). Thus Confucians found the Buddhist emphasis on ascetic practice in opposition to their interest in politics and morality. Ideologically, the Tokugawa leaders emphasized the Confucian ideology of filial piety (Tanaka & Johnson, 2008). Being intellectual meant being a Confucian, and people avoided other religions including Buddhism to become good Confucians. Therefore, although Tokugawa leaders opposed to the Buddhist teachings, they did not reject the idea of Funeral Buddhism as it emphasized the importance of filial piety and ancestor worship, sharing the spirit of Confucianism.

Without actual battles during the Tokugawa period, the numbers of samurai increased: as a result the Tokugawa bureaucratized the samurai class to keep them passive. Bureaucratization also gradually transformed the nature of loyalty and the lord-vassal relationship (*oyabun* and *kobun*) to impersonal loyalty to the office. Consequently, lower-class samurai who were dissatisfied with the Tokugawa system overthrew the Tokugawa shogunate, leading to the Meiji Restoration in 1868.

During the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Meiji Restoration centralized the government of Japan under the emperor’s rule in order to ward off encroachment by the Western nations. Religious institutions were defined as *shūkyō*, meaning revealed religions such as Christianity that have a specific doctrinal belief and faith (Ama, 2008). To establish a strong centralized nation-state led by the emperor, the Japanese government regulated religious institutions as they did education and business. Freedom of religion was guaranteed in the Constitution of the Empire of Japan (1890-1947). However, the freedom was guaranteed conditionally as long as people remained “not prejudicial to peace and order”, “not antagonistic to their duties and subjects” including paying taxes, joining the military, and not jeopardizing the Emperor’s system (Ama,

2005, p.31). In such context, for the people being “non-religious” meant not belonging to any *shūkyō* that would jeopardize the emperor, and was a means of survival to avoid being punished by political authorities and stigmatized in their communities.

Although Japan became one of the most industrialized nations in the world after the Second World War, advanced technology and science did not free people from anxieties concerning their later life. Today, a major function of holding funeral rituals is still to ease the psychological fear people have toward *muenbotoke*, restless ancestors who have no legitimate offspring to take care of them (Morioka, 1986; Spiro, 1986). Funeral rituals offered in Buddhist temples prevent calamities to the family offspring which might be brought on by the troubled souls of restive ancestors. When children disrespect their ancestors, Japanese parents often tell them, *bachi ga ataru*, meaning to incur a curse of supernatural forces. Due to postwar fertility decline, increasingly people fear becoming *muenbotoke*, and rely upon temples to permanently care for the *muenbotoke* at a cost of between \$900 and \$45,500 per person (Kawano, 2003). As more Japanese people consider their pets as close family members, some Japanese started to ask Buddhist temples for pet funeral rituals. A pet funeral is often an abridged version of the Japanese funeral for human beings, but it eases the mind of owners concerning the afterlife of their pets reflecting a deeply rooted fear in the Japanese people about the destructive powers of restless spirits (Kenney, 2004). Branched out from the original Buddhism in the history of religious regulation, many Japanese people do not find themselves religious, but they came to consider performing funeral rituals essential.

## 2. Limitations in measuring religion in Japanese society

Since Japanese people tend not to find themselves religious in the sense that they believe in a revealed religion like Christianity, difficulties arise in measuring religiousness or spirituality in a measurement developed in terms of Christian or Western theological frameworks (Traphagan, 2005; Ishii, 2007). Since cultural uniqueness was not considered in the attempt to develop a measure for religion, major surveys on religious affiliation carried out by various official institutions, newspaper companies, and academics in Japan almost invariably show that Japanese people have low levels of religious belief (Reader, 1991).

For instance, the General Social Survey (JGSS) is a survey designed to solicit political, sociological, and economic information from men and women aged 20–89 living in Japan with the right to vote (Tanioka et al., 2007). The JGSS conducted in 2005 asked whether a respondent practices any religion. Of 2,023 valid responses, over 60 percent of respondents answered that they do not practice any religion. Among people who practice religion, they asked how much they are devoted, and over 50 percent answered that they are not devoted to any religion. These descriptive statistics suggest that a majority of Japanese people do not belong to any specific revealed religion. Even so, they do not consider themselves devoted to that particular revealed religion. In addition, majority of respondents in the survey answered that they do not trust religious organizations very much, reflecting Japanese people’s cautious feeling toward revealed religions (Fujiwara, 2007; Ishii, 2007).

Comparative surveys also show the limitations in measuring religiosity and spirituality using the measures developed in a Christian or Western context (Ishii, 2007). A major survey carried out under the Japanese public broadcasting system (NHK) in 1981 showed that only 33 percent of Japanese affirmed religious belief compared with 93 percent in a comparable American response (Reader, 1991). A study carried out by Gallup discovered that 14 percent of Japanese respondents considered religion to be very important, much lower than in India and the United States (Reader, 1991). Finally, the International Social Survey Program (ISSP) Survey 1998, asked various questions about religion to men and women between age of 16 and 95 in Japan as well as other nations in the world (ISSP, 2004). In Japan, 68 percent of respondents did not consider themselves religious, compared with 23.5 percent in the U.S., 18.2 percent in

Philippines, and 35.1 percent in Italy. In Japan, 62.5 percent answered that they are not raised in any religion, compared with 5.2 percent in the United States, 1.5 percent in France, and 0.1 percent in Philippines. These comparative statistics suggest that the word, religion, (*shūkyō*), has a great limitation in expressing Japanese people's feelings towards their religiosity and spirituality. Defining religion as revealed religion taken out from Japanese context, these results can be easily mistakenly interpreted that people are by far more religious in other nations than Japan.

Surveys can also provide contradictory results if one measurement takes culture more seriously than the others. The Nihon University Japanese Longitudinal Study of Aging (NUJLSOA)<sup>1</sup> consists of a nationally representative sample of 4,997 Japanese elderly aged 65 and over in the first wave. The survey asked the question if a respondent participates in any religious organization, and only 3.6 percent of elderly respondents participated in any religious organization. The survey also asked elderly respondents a question about whether it is important that taking care of gravesites of family members past and ancestors should be taught to younger or future generations. To this question, most respondents (86.8 percent) agreed with the statement. Another survey, the third wave of the National Survey of the Japanese Elderly in 1996 asked Japanese elderly 60 and over for three questions about their religious practices: (1) At my home, I pray and offer prayers for my ancestors (includes offerings of water, incense, and rice); (2) How often do you read Buddhist scriptures or the Bible in your home?; (3) How often do you watch or listen to religious programs on the TV or radio? Among 2,444 elderly respondents, 80 percent answered that they always or sometimes pray and offer prayers for their ancestors; whereas over 50 percent answered that they never read scriptures nor watch religious programs on TV (Krause et al., 1999).

Greatly influenced by its history of religious segregation from public, many Japanese consider themselves “non-religious” indicating that they do not belong to particular revealed religion such as Christianity. Unfortunately, past and present surveys have a great limitation in capturing such complexities of the Japanese religious mind, and the results can be contradictory or misleading.

## Necessity of surveys cooperating with qualitative methods

A recent article in the Yomiuri Newspaper conducted interviews asking Japanese people about their spirituality. Although the majority of Japanese do not follow a particular revealed religion, 49 percent of respondents answered that they do not think that Japanese people lack of religious feelings. 54 percent responded that they believe in the spiritual and supernatural power in nature that is beyond human control and understanding of human beings. Although further studies are necessary, it appears that Japanese people put certain distance from the particular revealed religions, but they find the importance of respecting and worshipping supernatural or spiritual existence (Yomiuri Newspaper, 2008).

Kaneko (2003) told his college students from Osaka Ichiritsu University to freely write about the word religion. A minority of students had strong positive or negative opinions about religion, and a majority of students had a rather passive view that it is something not to be deeply involved with, but something supernatural that is naturally appreciated and worshipped through rituals and not to be taunted by being disrespectful (Kaneko, 2003). One student wrote that she follows rituals of Funeral Buddhism and she makes offerings to her ancestors. Although she does not feel that she belongs to a particular religion, she finds it is important to respect her ancestors and she feels that she will incur a curse if she disrespects them (Kaneko, 2003).

---

<sup>1</sup>This study used data from the Nihon University Japanese Longitudinal Study of Aging (NUJLSOA) conducted by the Nihon University Center for Information Networking

Another student described that she does not consciously think about religion. However, she also wrote that she often turns to native deities for inspiration (Kaneko 2003). Kaneko (2003) described that such passive views towards the word religion was consistent across age groups. These examples are limited in the number of responses compared with national surveys and further studies are necessary. However, they suggest that current surveys face great limitations in capturing Japanese people's interest and appreciation in the spiritual world and nature.

Various U.S. studies have discussed that religiosity and spirituality have a positive influence on physical and mental health. Religious involvement is discussed to reduce "belief-based" behaviors including alcoholism, drug use, cigarette smoking, risky sexual activity, failure to wear seat belts, and drinking while driving (Koenig, 2002). Replicating the study in Japan using the same measure would be problematic since these studies would simply reveal that Japanese people are not religious in any sense parallel to that of people in the West (Traphagan, 2005). In Japan, regardless of attending religious services in public, respecting ancestors through ritual performances and the feeling of being connected through generations may greatly contribute to reducing social isolation in later life. Having future generations to take care of ancestor worship may provide great comfort to the elderly, but those who do not have any children may carry greater anxiety in later life. To extend the study of how spirituality and religiousness influences well-being in the unique Japanese context, qualitative studies are essential. Specifically, Ishii (2007) suggests going beyond comparative studies to investigate why Japan is different from other Christian, Muslim, or Jewish countries, rather than simply concluding that Japanese people are not religious based on descriptive statistics. Focus groups and informal interviews are effective ways of learning how young, middle-aged, and old people express religion and religiosity, which would lead to better questions being asked in surveys to capture how religion is placed in the lives of Japanese people.

### **Discussion: Japanese "Non-Religiousness" in the Future**

The word, religion, is historically and culturally constructed. Japanese peoples' feeling of "non-religiousness" reflects reluctance to deviate the norm by publicly revealing that they are religious. As Japan goes through globalization, not only in terms of improving the quality of surveys, but also for educators and policy makers, understanding Japanese "non-religiousness" is necessary.

Fujiwara (2007) warns that Japanese non-religiousness or prejudice against revealed religion may have led some Japanese to prejudicially view religious people. Japanese scholars of religion have advocated the problem of stigmatizing religious people as "cults" and the importance of people being tolerant of people with different beliefs (Fujiwara, 2007). The history of Japanese leaders suppressing revealed religions prevented Japanese people from understanding the culture of those with revealed religions. The exclusion of religion from education derives from the post Second World War policy of removing the influence of religion from education, and teaching about religion came to be considered unnecessary or even tabooed in publicly established schools (Fujiwara, 2007). Thus, although it is important for Japanese education to include non-confessional and multi-faith religious education for tolerance and respect for other cultures in the globalization age, its history of seclusion of religion from education will make such a change controversial and difficult (Fujiwara 2007). As Japanese society welcomes more foreigners through marriage and labor, their children from various religious backgrounds attend school and Japanese education system will be required to adjust their programs in order to respect religious differences and to give fair options to students with different religious backgrounds.

In the future, with the continuous decline in fertility and the further decline in its population, losing connection with previous generations, Japanese might truly come to consider themselves “non-religious” (Matsubara, 2002). Future studies should not only consider culture into measuring religiosity and spirituality, but also they should take on-going demographic transition into consideration. To understand spirituality and religiosity in a non-Christian or non-Western context, development of time and context sensitive measurements through qualitative studies is necessary.

## Acknowledgments

The author wishes to acknowledge the Center for Demography of Health and Aging (P30 AG17266) and the Center for Demography and Ecology (R24 HD047873) at the University of Wisconsin–Madison for offering the NIA postdoctoral fellowship (T32 AG00129) to conduct this research. The author also would like to thank Jamison T. Arimoto, Esq., for useful insights.

## Bibliography

- Ama, T. *Why Are the Japanese Non-Religious?*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America; 2005.
- Ama, T. *Why are the Japanese Non-Religious?* (in Japanese). Tokyo: Chikuma Shinsho; 2008.
- Fujiwara S. Problems of teaching about religion in Japan: another textbook controversy against peace? *British Journal of Religious Education* 2007;29(1):45–61.
- Garces-Foley, K. *Death and Religion in a Changing World*. Armonk NY: M.E. Sharpe; 2006.
- International Social Survey Program. *INTERNATIONAL SOCIAL SURVEY PROGRAM: FAMILY AND CHANGING GENDER ROLES III, 2002* [Computer file]. ICPSR version. Cologne, Germany: Zentralarchiv fur Empirische Sozialforschung [producer], 2004. Cologne, Germany: Zentralarchiv fur Empirische Sozialforschung/Ann Arbor, MI: Interuniversity Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributors], 2004. 2004. doi:10.3886/ICPSR04106
- Ishii, K. *Data Book: Gendai Nihon-jin no Shūkyo (Religion in Contemporary Japanese Society)* (in Japanese). Tokyo: Shin-yo-sha; 2007.
- Kaneko S. Changes of Japanese Modern Values and Religious Consciousness. *Studies of Urban Cultures* 2003;2:23–35.
- Kawano, S. *Finding Common Ground: Family, Gender, and Burial in Contemporary Japan*. In: Traphagan, JW.; Knight, J., editors. *Demographic Change and the Family in Japan's Aging Society*. New York: State University of New York Press; 2003. p. 125-144.
- Kenney E. Pet funerals and animal graves in Japan. *Mortality* 2004;1(9):42–60.
- Koenig, HG. The Connection between Psychoneuroimmunology and Religion. In: Koenig, HG.; Harold, G.; Cohen, Harvey J., editors. *The Link between Religion and Health Psychoneuroimmunology and the Faith Factor*. New York: Oxford University Press; 2002. p. 11-30.
- Krause N, Ingersoll-Dayton B, Liang J, Sugisawa H. Religion, Social Support, and Health among the Japanese Elderly. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 1999;40(4):405–421. [PubMed: 10643163]
- Matsubara, Hiroshi. Western eyes blind to spirituality in Japan. *The Japan Times*. 1992 Jan 1. 2002.
- Morioka, K. Ancestor worship in contemporary Japan: Continuity and change. In: Devos, GA.; Sofue, T., editors. *Religion and the family in East Asia*. Berkeley: University of California Press; 1986. p. 201-213.
- Nakane, C. *Kinship and Economic Organization in Rural Japan*. London: The Athlone Press; 1967.
- Onishi N. Buddhism sees its role fading in Japan. *International Herald Tribune Asia-Pacific*. 2008 July 14; 2008.
- Reader, I. *Religion in Contemporary Japan*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press; 1991.
- Spiro ME. Some reflections on family and religion in East Asia. *Senri ethnological studies* 1984;11:35–54.
- Tanaka K, Johnson N. The Shifting Roles of Women in Intergenerational Mutual Caregiving in Japan: The Importance of Peace, Population Growth, and Economic Expansion. *Journal of Family History* 2008;33(1):96–120.

- Tanioka, I.; Nitta, M.; Iwai, N.; Yasuda, T. JAPANESE GENERAL SOCIAL SURVEY (JGSS), 2005 [Computer file]. ICPSR04703-v1. Osaka, Japan: Osaka University of Commerce, Institute of Regional Studies [producer], 2007. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributor], 2007-08-13. 2007. doi:10.3886/ICPSR04703
- Traphagan J. Multidimensional Measurement of Religiousness/Spirituality for Use in Health Research in Cross-Cultural Perspective. *Research on Aging* 2005;27:387–419.
- Yomiuri Newspaper. Yomiuri Chosa (Survey conducted by Yomiuri Newspaper). 2008. available online at <http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/national/news/20080529-OYT1T00923.htm>