

Secularisation, R.I.P.? Nonsense! The ‘Rush Hour Away from the Gods’ and the Decline of Religion in Contemporary Japan

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Abstract

Sociologists of religion such as Rodney Stark and José Casanova have pronounced secularisation theories to be dead or a ‘myth,’ and in so doing they have often cited Japan as an example of the vigour of religion in the modern world. This article refutes their claims by examining the contemporary Japanese religious situation and showing that, far from being vibrant, religion, whether organised, institutional, or related to popular and folk practices, is in decline. It draws on extensive survey data to show that levels of faith, adherence and practice have decreased significantly, and that they do so especially in conjunction with rising levels of urbanisation and education—two conditions identified in secularisation theory as associated with religious decline. The study examines counter-claims that some areas (notably pilgrimage and ‘spirituality’) are growing in Japan, and shows that the reverse is true. Pilgrimages are losing support while there is evidence that the ‘turn to spirituality’—cited by some scholars as a replacement for organised religion—has petered out in Japan. Thus there is a strong secularising tendency in Japan that refutes the claims of those who wish to bury secularisation theory; as the Japanese case shows, it remains a potent force in the modern world.

Keywords

secularisation, decline, estrangement from religion (*shūkyōbanare*), urbanisation, pilgrimage, spirituality

Introduction

In his clarion call against the continued endurance of secularisation theories, Rodney Stark’s 1999 article “Secularization, R.I.P.” argued that one of the key foundations upon which claims that the world is becoming

increasingly secularised and that religious adherence is in general decline, is not merely inaccurate but a false assumption based on scant empirical evidence. He attacks a foundation stone of such theories, by arguing that the notion of a deeply religious past in which everyone readily prayed and was immersed in religious activities is a fiction with little empirical substance to support it, and that therefore the notion of past piety supplanted by present denial of religion is erroneous. Stark also attacks the notion that modernisation is the causal engine of secularisation and that as industrialisation, urbanisation and rationalisation increase, so religiousness must decrease, both in terms of institutional decline and of individual piety and belief (Stark 1999: 251). In so doing, he emphasises that while people may not necessarily belong any more to established religious bodies or hold any institutional affiliation (a tendency prominently cited as evidence for the incidence of secularisation in Europe) they may still believe or adhere to many basic religious viewpoints—“believing without belonging” according to Grace Davie (1990, 1994).

Stark argues that while secularisation theories have developed based in studies of Western religious contexts (i.e. on what Stark calls “Christendom”) the thesis has been applied globally, as if what happens in the West is a universal model for the rest of the world. He uses the non-Western world to demonstrate the fallacies of secularisation theories, by showing that religion is alive, well and flourishing in a variety of contexts outside of Western Christendom and in which one can see great evidence of ‘believing’ in all manner of popular or folk ideas. One of these flourishing areas, according to Stark, is what he calls “Asian ‘folk’ religions” including those of Japan, where Stark claims that Shintō rituals are highly popular and more prominent in the modern day than in the pre-war era when Shintō was a state religion. He comments further that “Shinto was strengthened by being disestablished” and contends this is “entirely in accord with the market theory of religion” (1999: 268). Such examples, along with his extensive critique of secularisation theories, including rejecting the notion that modernisation is accompanied by a decline in religious belief, lead Stark to conclude with the comment that it is time to consign “secularization doctrine to the graveyard of failed theories” (1999: 270).

Stark is one of many critics who have attacked the concept(s) of secularisation. Others, including Harvey Cox (2000: 4), have described the concept as a ‘myth,’ while José Casanova has asked the question “Who still

believes in the *myth* of secularization?,” and argues that the old ideas that were central to secularisation theories have been replaced by a new paradigm (Casanova 1994: 11-12). According to Casanova, the core of secularisation theory is that of societal modernisation, with the religious becoming separate from the secular and specialising within its own new religious sphere (1994: 19). Thus Casanova argues against normative secularisation theory views that religion would decline in the modern day, by claiming that “most religious traditions in most parts of the world have either experienced growth or maintained their vitality” since World War II; like Stark, he cites Japan as an example underpinning his argument (Casanova 1994: 26-27). Japan, indeed, is crucial to discussions of secularisation theory, given that it is a highly modern non-Western society that has experienced many of the conditions found in Western societies. He does not discuss Japan in any detail, since his focus is on examining secularisation theory alongside what he sees as the vibrancy of religions in the private sphere in Western Christendom. However, in a telling footnote, he uses Japan as a means of critiquing the Enlightenment view of the future (or demise) of religion, stating that while Japan is (like the US) one of the most secular societies on earth (by which I assume he means that it has a strict public/private separation of state and religion along with a public education system grounded in secular notions of science and rationalism), it remains very hospitable to religions of all sorts. Moreover he suggests that Japan has experienced several “rush hours of the gods” since World War II and cites numerous writings (all in English and from the 1980s and before) to emphasise this claim (1994: 242-243).¹

While Stark and Casanova’s arguments have been contested by some,² the anti-secularisation theory tendency that they represent has become very much the mainstream in modern contexts. Citing Japan in their discussions is also important since, as a highly developed non-Western country with increasingly high levels of urbanisation and education, it can serve as a test of whether claims underlying the notion of secularisation are viable. In particular, Japan can provide a valid test case for examining whether

¹ Casanova is drawing here on the title of the book by McFarland (1967) on the rise of new religions in Japan.

² See, for example, Steve Bruce’s (2001) critique of Stark, which presents a long list of conditions that would need to be accepted for Stark’s claims to remain credible.

modernisation, advanced education systems, increasing urbanisation and a shift from a rural/agricultural economy towards urban and technological modes of production may lead to a decline in religious faith, engagement and belonging.

Japan is a worthwhile object of study in this context for another reason. Since 1945 public and private Japanese organisations have conducted repeated surveys of public attitudes and opinions, which have incorporated or focused on religious views, belonging and practices. There have been repeated surveys by government agencies, the annual data gathering exercise by the Ministry of Cultural Affairs, which publishes an annual religious yearbook (*Shūkyō nenkan* 宗教年鑑) outlining Japanese religious affiliations, various Public Values Surveys, and regular surveys by various national media organisations. The Japanese national broadcaster NHK, plus major news organisations such as the Yomiuri and Asahi news groups—publishers of two of Japan's main newspapers—also conduct surveys and publish their details on a regular basis. Japanese academics have supplemented such major national surveys with their own questionnaires and have collated and published the data from all these studies in accessible forms. As such we have a large amount of data that can be used to map general trends in Japan over several decades.

As this article shows, when one examines such data, it becomes clear that claims about the demise of secularisation are not just overly simplistic but erroneous. Rather than providing evidence for the vitality of religion in the modern age, the Japanese data indicate the reverse: a striking decline of religious institutions and of much of the “folk” religion, individual piety and belief lauded by Stark. I will not just look at the statistical data that show clear evidence of secularising tendencies in Japan, but also at areas of popular practice—such as pilgrimage, ‘spirituality’ and non-organised, individualised practice—that are sometimes posited as growth areas that counterbalance the decline in Japan institutional religion. As will be seen, in these cases, too, there is little evidence to sustain claims of vitality and growth.

As such I contend that Japan, rather than providing comfort for the opponents of secularisation theory, shows almost the exact opposite and that secularisation (in terms of the idea of a ‘decline of religion’ and a public withdrawal from engagement with the religious sphere) is a growing force to be reckoned with in Japan today. Moreover, there are clear correlations

between modernisation, urbanisation and higher levels of education (factors often cited as formative forces in the secularisation process), and declining levels of religious belief and practice, whether individually or institutionally. Given that Stark and Casanova, in bolstering their critiques of secularisation theory, have both cited Japan as an example of religious vibrancy, with Casanova referring to Japan's apparently numerous "rush hours of the gods," it is only appropriate to use Japanese evidence to discuss a contrary argument, namely that, from the perspective of Japan, it is their argument rather than secularisation theory, that is the potential graveyard candidate.

Religious Statistics and the Decline of Religion

After World War II, and during the Occupation, the *Jiji Shinbun* conducted a series of surveys on Japanese religious beliefs; these were the forerunner of the regular sociologically sound surveys now done by the *Yomiuri* and *Asahi* newspapers. In the immediate aftermath of war, the 1946 *Jiji Shinbun* survey showed 59.6% of respondents saying they had religious belief; in 1947 it rose to 71% although by the end of the 1940s it had slipped back to 60% (Ishii 2007: 4).

This was a traumatic period of loss and destruction when one might expect people to turn to religion,³ but it was equally a time when the established religions of Shintō and Buddhism were under a cloud because of their complicity in the war. They were also being treated with suspicion by the Occupation authorities which, while intent on developing a constitutional emphasis on religious freedom, wanted to develop new regulations to control religions and ensure the state could not again forge the unhealthy bond with religious groups evident in pre-war Japan. In the turbulent aftermath of war several new religions emerged and flourished but they were also heavily criticised in the media and treated with suspicion by the authorities.⁴ In other words, the relatively high levels of support for religion

³ Sociologists of religion commonly argue that periods of crisis are extremely fertile periods for the growth of religious sentiments and for new religious movements; see, e.g., Beckford (1987).

⁴ See Dorman (in press), who shows that vigorous anti-new religions campaigns by the media damaged the reputations of some movements beyond repair.

after the war occurred when religion as an entity was faced with much public suspicion and criticism. As the Occupation ended, levels of religious belief appeared to be on the rise according to the *Yomiuri Shinbun*'s 1952 survey, in which 64.7% of the respondents replied positively to the question "do you believe in religion?" (*shūkyō o shinjite imasu ka* 宗教を信じていますか) (Inoue 1999: 25).

Those levels of belief have not been reached since; ever since statistics have shown a largely progressive decline. The *Yomiuri* surveys since 1952 have shown a decline on virtually every occasion: by 1965 the number saying they had religious belief was down to 56%, dropping sharply to 36% by the end of that decade, and going downwards thereafter, to 33.6% in 1979, to 29.1% (1984), 28% (1989), 26.1% (1994), and to a low point of 20.3 % in 1995—the year of the Aum subway attack, which impacted dramatically on public perceptions of religion (see below). The figure recovered a little to 22.9% in 2005, but this remains far below the levels of earlier decades (Ishii 2007: 24-25). Other surveys have shown similar patterns; a telling graph produced by Ishii Kenji tracks six such nationwide surveys that have been done repeatedly since the 1950s (in two cases) or 1970s (in the rest); all show progressive patterns of decline. The only real blip is in some mid-1970s surveys, when Japan's rapid economic resurgence after the 1973-74 global oil crisis produced a major resurgence of national pride in Japanese cultural traditions—causing some scholars to talk of a "religious boom" and a brief jump in religious belief levels in the NHK and General Values surveys around 1975. This spike, however, was not evident in the *Yomiuri* and *Asahi* surveys, and the talk of a "religious boom" in the mid-1970s remained unsubstantiated, even as it gave Japanese sociologists of the time the opportunity to criticise the then prevalent theory of secularisation.⁵

The Japanese surveys discussed here usually ask not just about personal religious belief, but about whether the interviewee considers religion to be "important" (*taisetsu* 大切)—enabling those who may not have personal faith to indicate whether they nevertheless consider religion to be a useful social entity. This is relevant given that the legal, constitutional position is that

⁵ For further discussions of this issue see Reader (1990), which shows how scholars interpreted such statistics in line with prevailing theories of the era, and overdid the notion of growth. Inoue (1999: 24) thinks that the NHK survey of 1975 is an anomaly compared with other surveys of the period.

religious organisations are granted favourable tax conditions along with legal safeguards against state interference on the grounds that religion, although a private affair for the individual, is viewed as conducive to the “public good” (*kōeki*) (Mullins 1997). The numbers saying religion is “important” exceed those who had faith but show similar patterns of decline—in the *Yomiuri* surveys from 46.2% in 1979 to 43.8% in 1984, 38.0% in 1989, 34% in 1994, to 25.6% in 1995 and 27% in 1998 (Inoue 1999: 25-26). The Aum Affair clearly had a significant impact here, given the sharp drop between 1994 and 1995, and if the figure has risen a shade once the immediate anger over Aum had subsided, it has not recovered to anywhere near its 1994 levels. The Japanese General Social Survey during the period 2000-2003 indicates similar patterns. It surveyed 10,464 people, of whom only 9.33% claimed individual religious affiliation, with a further 24% saying they had some religious connections, albeit without any form of belief, through their household affiliation. The vast majority, 66.93% (7,004 respondents), stated that they had no religious belief or affiliation (Roemer 2009: 303).

This downward trend is especially striking among young people. The *Yomiuri* surveys also delineate belief levels among different age-sets. These have also declined progressively, with those in the youngest category (ages 20-29) having the lowest levels of belief and with evident decline between 2000 and 2005. Even the age-set with consistently the highest levels of belief (those seventy years old and above) showing a striking fall. In 2005 its levels of belief had fallen to almost half (at 36.8%) of those displayed in the 1989 survey (69.3%) (Ishii 2007: 11).

When one introduces education and domicile into the picture, the evidence of increasingly secular attitudes is even more striking, and one can see a correlation between factors identified as influences on secularisation—such as the notion that higher levels of education would eradicate the need for the ‘irrational’ thought processes of religion, and increased urbanisation—and lower levels of religious engagement and belief. Urbanisation, for example, appears to influence religious attitudes; the statistical decline in religious belief throughout the post-war period has occurred while Japan has become increasingly urbanised and the demographic balance between rural and small-town, and urban/metropolitan, Japan has shifted profoundly towards the latter.⁶ Put simply, those in

⁶ The three main metropolitan areas alone (Tokyo, Osaka and Nagoya) grew by 115% between 1950 and 2000—with urbanisation continuing apace thereafter, while urban areas

villages place more emphasis on religion than those in large cities, and as the population becomes more urbanised, they are more likely to move away from religious belief. The 2005 *Yomiuri* survey, for example, shows that faith levels and feelings that religion was important, were highest among those who lived in villages (42% thinking religion was important and 26.1% having religious faith) and lowest (32.2% and 16.0% respectively) among city dwellers (Ishii 2007: 17).

Education, too, has affected religious attitudes, with the *Yomiuri* surveys showing that university graduates have lower levels of religious faith than those who only graduated from high school, who in turn have lower levels than those who graduated only from middle school. This pattern has been evident since 1969 (when such issues were first included in the *Yomiuri* surveys) and in the two most recent *Yomiuri* surveys—2000 and 2005—for which data are available the fall is striking. Possession of religious faith declined heavily across all three groups (from 43.7% of middle school graduates in 1969 to 29.5% in 2000 and 28.1% in 2005) but the more educated people are, the more their levels of faith decrease. In 2000, 29.5% of those whose final graduation was from middle school stated that they had religious faith. The figure dropped to 24.5% for high school graduates and to 16.4% for those who graduated from university. In 2005 the figures were 28.1% (middle school graduates), 20.6% (high school) and 16.3% (university) (Ishii 2007: 16).

Between 1992 and 2001 Kokugakuin University researchers in conjunction with the Japanese Association for the Study of Religion and Society conducted extensive nationwide surveys of thousands of Japanese university students. These showed that students overall had strikingly lower levels of faith than the general populace. In 1992, 11.2% of those surveyed said they had “faith,” with an additional 35.7% saying that while they did not have faith, they empathised with religion; by 1999 the former number had fallen to a mere 6.2% and the latter to 25.8% (Inoue 1999: 31). Faith in the existence of spiritual beings such as Shintō gods (down from 19.7% to 13.0% between 1999 and 2001), buddhas (from 15.2% to 10.5%) and spirits

in all grew by 83%, resulting in a significant population shift. At the same time, rural depopulation has, along with an aging population, become a major issue and social problem in Japan—one that deeply impacts on the viability of Buddhist temples (Reader 2011a).

(including ancestors, animal and folk spirits, and down from 19.4% to 15.6%) has also declined (Inoue 2003: 41).

The students also exhibited serious distrust of religious figures and leaders; in the 2000 survey only 4.3% said they trusted such figures, 29.5% had some degree of trust, and 65% expressed some or complete distrust. Religious organisations fared poorly as well, with respondents saying in large numbers (76% overall, and 36% very strongly) that religious organisations were especially keen on making money, and high numbers (59% in 1995, rising to 66% by 1999) asserting that public religious proselytising should be legally restricted (Inoue 2003: 31-35).

This distrust of religious organisations and leaders emerged also in the Japanese Values Survey conducted in 1998 by a Nanzan University research team. The Nanzan survey interviewed 300 people in depth on 237 topics and was based on and compared its results to the European Values Studies that have been conducted in Europe since 1981. In most areas the two sets of values (Japanese and European) were similar—for example, attitudes to family and friends scored similarly in both. Religion was a clear exception, scoring 48% approval ratings in Europe, and only 18% in Japan. It was also the least trusted institutionally, scoring significantly lower in terms of trust (13% as opposed to 48% in Europe), and lower than politicians (20%) the press (45%) or any other Japanese organisation or institution (Kisala 1999: 60-65).

The 1995 Aum Shinrikyō affair was a significant factor in this picture of decline and of negativity towards religious institutions, and it has helped spur the turn away from religious engagement and towards the view that religions posed a danger to society. While there has been a degree of suspicion towards religion in previous eras (for example because of the uses of religion made by the State in the war and pre-war eras), the Aum Affair has intensified and heightened such feelings significantly (Baffelli and Reader 2012). The Kokugakuin student surveys mentioned above show this clearly, with the surveys of 1998 and 1999 showing that 65% of students thought that religion was dangerous (*abunai*), while the numbers who felt religions should be restricted by law in their proselytising, as I have noted earlier, rose as well (Inoue 1999: 35, 2003: 28). The negative public image of religion, and associations between it and danger, remain strong in Japan, to the extent that major mobile phone companies in Japan, in an attempt to protect young phone users, have set up a website filtering service that

comes with their services; among the websites deemed as such as dangerous, and from which the youth of Japan are deemed to need protection, are adult fetish sites, sites promoting illegal behaviour such as computer hacking, terrorism and suicide, and sites related to religion, including those of traditional religions (Tsuji-mura 2008: 53).

Institutional Decline: Buddhism and the Prospect of Collapse

A term widely used in religious circles these days is *shūkyōbanare* 宗教離れ, “estrangement from religion,” and in a sense it sums up the general trends and mood of modern Japan, with its falling levels of belief and negative views of religion. This negativity is also evident regarding traditions that have long been at the core of Japanese cultural life. If Japan is becoming estranged from religion, it is also becoming estranged from many of the traditions that have been part of its fabric for so long; observers of Buddhism in Japan—including senior Buddhist figures—have spoken also of *Bukkyōbanare* 仏教離れ, “estrangement from Buddhism,” as a major trend in the contemporary era. Indeed, no area within the religious world in Japan faces greater problems than established temple Buddhism, and its mainstay activities centred around memorialising the dead, performing funerals, and caring for the ancestors. In recent decades Buddhism has faced such rapid decline in these areas that this once-dominant religious tradition is facing a serious crisis. Since I have written about this elsewhere (Reader 2011a) I will here just summarise some of the main evidence of contemporary Buddhist decline.

Buddhist temples, especially in rural Japan, are closing at a rapid rate, due to depopulation and the declining levels of support needed to sustain them. Government statistics indicate that in 1970 there were 96,000 Buddhist temples in Japan; by 2007 there were 75,866 registered temples—a decline of over 20,000 temples in 37 years—and of these around 20,000 did not have a resident priest (Murai 2010: 46). Often, priests oversee several temples as a result, and the declining fortunes of such temples, combined with an increasing reluctance of temple offspring to follow in parental footsteps and become priests, and a lack of recruits from outside temple families, has led to severe succession problems in Japan. In 2005 the Sōtō Zen Buddhist sect—the Buddhist institution with the single largest (around 15,000) number of temples in Japan—reported that 35.4% of its

temples had no successor, with these numbers rising every year, while the Nichiren Buddhist sect also reported an increasing number of temples without priests (Reader 2011a). Such problems are not limited to one or two sects, but are reported widely across the entire Buddhist tradition in Japan.

In numerous conversations in recent years with Buddhist priests in rural Japan and in small towns outside the main population centres, I have been informed about such problems at first-hand. Thus in April 2010 the priest of a temple on the island of Shōdoshima in the Inland Sea, which I have been visiting on a regular basis for the past 25 years, told me that his temple lost on average one or two households per year as a result of depopulation. The island population is declining by around 500 people a year nowadays—in a current population of 30,000—and local businesses are closing as a result, leading to an escalating downward spiral. Other temples on the island were facing even greater decline, and he felt it was highly unlikely that the community could continue to sustain the temples (29 in all) currently extant on the island. Priests in northern Hiroshima prefecture and Fukuoka prefecture whom I visited on the same trip, told me very similar stories.⁷

Decline is also evident in the numbers of funerals and death-related rituals being performed by temples. Statistics from the Sōtō sect indicate that the number of death-related ritual services performed at its temples decreased by 18% between 1985 and 2005.⁸ Again, this is a trend found across all Buddhist sects. Since the income from funerals and death rituals (and related and subsequent rituals associated with the memorialisation of the deceased) forms the single most important element in the economies of temples, and since participation in such rituals is commonly seen as the main area in which Japanese people relate to Buddhism, this decline is itself significant.

While a key factor in rural Buddhist decline is that people—especially younger generations—are moving to urban areas, this does not mean that urban temples are necessarily benefitting. Rather, there has been a general pattern of indifference and even hostility to Buddhism that is

⁷ I discuss these cases in detail in Reader (2011a).

⁸ These figures are given in two articles in the *Bukkyō Taimusu* 仏教タイムス (Buddhist Times) newspaper, from May 8 and May 15, 2008; the figures (from a survey of a representative set of sect temples) showed a fall from 75,893 rituals in 1985 to 62,003 in 2005.

strongest—and getting stronger—in urban Japan. This has come about in part due to the general hostility to religious organisations and leaders mentioned earlier, but also because the strong links between Buddhism and death in Japan have given it a negative image among young people, and because of widespread perceptions, based on the costs of funerals and related Buddhist rituals, that priests are mercenary and interested primarily in money (Reader 2011a). Declining levels of belief have had an impact, with belief in an afterlife now having fallen below 50% according to surveys (Covell 2005: 174-175). Among the young beliefs in the existence of any form of post-death spiritual existence have fallen sharply, from 29.9% firmly believing in the existence of another realm after death and another 40.2% believing to some degree in it in 1992, to 14.9% and 36.0% respectively in 1999 (Inoue 1999: 75). This is of critical importance for the continuity of Buddhist rituals, given that they are so associated with the memorialisation of the deceased and with the notion that the deceased as ancestors maintain a relationship—articulated via Buddhist rituals at temples and Buddhist household altars—with the living.

Recently the former Buddhist monopoly of death rituals has come under severe challenge not from other religious institutions but from secular businesses that offer funeral services, but with options to exclude any religious elements. These are cheaper and simpler than Buddhist rituals—and they have in a very few years captured a significant share of the market. The trade organisation representing independent funeral service agencies announced that 26% of all funerals in Tokyo in 2006 were non-religious and had no Buddhist elements at all (Murai 2010: 57) and other reports indicate similar levels of non-religious funerals (Reader 2011a). A secular funeral industry that has in recent years aggressively advocated “non-religious funerals” (*mushūkyō sōshiki* 無宗教葬式)⁹ as well as the televised music-based non-religious funeral of the rock star, Imawano Kiyoshirō, who died of throat cancer in May 2009, that gave further prominence to the practice, suggest that this secularising trend is likely to continue. While this is currently an urban phenomenon, commentators have noted that such

⁹ Hibiya Kadan, a Tokyo company that is widely seen as the pioneer in this area, has been especially prominent in such advocacy, as can be seen by its website: http://www.hibiya-lsp.com/religion/religion_01.html.

practices are starting to appear in rural and small-town Japan (Murai 2010; Reader 2011a).

This may be the most striking piece of evidence currently available to indicate the increasingly secular orientations of modern, urban Japan; funerals and the situation of death are one of, if not the most, common arenas or contexts in which people tend to engage with some form of religious ritual. Even those who claimed to have no religious beliefs or engagement with Buddhism, have traditionally had Buddhist funerals for themselves and deceased kin. Now the recently-developed option of secular funerals is changing this pattern and this, along with rural decline, is threatening the very core of institutional Buddhism in Japan—and the signs are that the situation will only get worse.

Institutional decline is not the preserve of Buddhism alone. Space does not permit a discussion of Shintō as well, but although some nationally famous shrines have done well in attracting large numbers of visitors especially at the New Year festival, and have flourished largely as places on cultural and tourist itineraries, the broader picture is not dissimilar to Buddhism: the closure of rural shrines, not enough priests to maintain existing shrines, and structural problems throughout the tradition. There are now approximately five shrines for every Shintō priest—a figure distorted by the major national shrines that may have dozens of priests—and a recent study of Shintō shrines by the journalist Yamamura Akiyoshi showed that some rural priests may need to care for several dozen shrines, and that many priests simply cannot survive on shrine income alone and have to find other jobs to support themselves. Yamamura's conclusion after his survey was that shrine Shintō is in crisis in Japan today (Breen and Teeuwen 2010: 219). Likewise, although the new religions of Japan have often been cited as examples of religious ferment and growth in Japan, the reality is somewhat different. The problems of assessing accurate support levels for such religions are well known, but what evidence there is to hand suggests that they, too, have experienced a difficult period and some stagnancy and decline in the past decades, and especially since the Aum Affair of 1995. Certainly since that time, there has been scant empirically verifiable evidence that any new religion has grown in size or, indeed, that any new religious movement has formed in Japan since then (Sakurai 2008: 36). Officials in various new religious movements I have discussed the matter with have all admitted that they face problems of decline. In discussions

with priests and researchers from Tenrikyō 天理教 in 2006 and 2010, I was informed that apart from a very few people who married followers and joined as a result, the movement was not gaining converts and was, instead, facing problems as older members died and were not being replaced by new converts. Officials and priests in other new religions have made similar comments to me,¹⁰ while there is evidence that Sōka Gakkai 創価学会, the largest new religion, also is facing similar problems.¹¹

In other areas, too, there is evidence of decline, as for example among *kō* 講, the faith-based folk religious confraternities that have been at the bedrock of folk religious practices and that have been important elements, too, in passing on traditions such as pilgrimage practices. Clark Chilson (2010) has discussed this issue in his account of how secretive Pure Land confraternities throughout Japan are disappearing as the next generation is failing to follow in the footsteps of their predecessors and continue village faith traditions. My studies of pilgrimage, and interviews especially with priests in charge of pilgrimage temples in Sasaguri (Kyūshū), in Shōdoshima, in the Tokyo region, and in the Chita Hantō (peninsula) south of Nagoya, all indicate similar patterns of disappearing faith-based confraternities.¹²

¹⁰ A visit to PL Kyōdan's headquarters in April 2011 elicited a similar response, while a chance meeting and conversation with a priest from Agonshū (which was widely cited as a growing movement in the 1980s) in Kyoto in that same month, produced the information that Agonshū was (like other new religions, the priest said) struggling to maintain support structures, and was experiencing a decrease in membership.

¹¹ At a panel on Sōka Gakkai at the 2010 British Association of Japanese Studies conference, Axel Klein, Anne-Mette Fiske Nielsen and Clark Chilson indicated that this was the case, and it was noted that Kōmeitō, the political party closely associated with the Gakkai, and which garners the majority of its votes from members, was one million votes lower in the 2009 election than a decade earlier.

¹² This is currently research in progress, but again the evidence to hand thus far indicates rapid decline in all these areas; in March 2010 in Shōdoshima I met members of a confraternity that regularly in the 1980s made annual pilgrimages to the island, bringing 100 plus pilgrims each time. In 2010 they were only able to assemble 15 members to come on the pilgrimage, and they informed me that the previous year they had not been able to do the pilgrimage at all because they simply could not get enough people to take part. Whereas in previous decades they could bring a cross-section of ages with them, including young children who could continue the tradition, in 2010 the party consisted almost wholly of people in their 60s and above, and they thought the confraternity would die out within a few years. Similar examples were relayed to me by priests in Sasaguri, Chita Hantō and in Tokyo.

Popular Practices, Customs and Household Religion

The surveys I cited earlier also indicate that decline is not restricted just to organised religion and belief. While (to return to Stark's claims) it has often been claimed that the 'real' arena of religious engagement in Japan has been around practices not necessarily tied in to expressed faith or membership of organised religions, even here one cannot see any cogent evidence to support the idea of continuing, enduring vibrancy or growth. Rather, activities from acquiring amulets and talismans, to praying for good luck and worldly benefits, to taking part in cyclical events such as visiting the graves of the deceased at festival times such as *o-bon* お盆 in summer and at the spring and autumn equinoxes, appear to be at a lower ebb in the recent past than in previous decades, while the number saying they took no part in any organised religious activities was on the rise (Ishii 2007: 61, 87-91).

Clear evidence of such decline can be gleaned by focusing on one area that has long been cited as a prime example of Japanese popular or folk religiosity that has previously helped socialise younger generations into the realms of popular religious behaviour and practice: the possession and use of Buddhist household altars (*butsudan* 仏壇) that memorialise the family's ancestors, and the *kamidana* 神棚 (the Shintō altar enshrining protective deities that guard the house and its inhabitants).

Comparing older studies by individual scholars from the 1950s and 1960s, with studies from 1981 onwards conducted by NHK, Asahi, Jinja Honchō 神社本庁 (Association of Shintō Shrines, the national body that coordinates the activities of Shintō shrines) and Kokugakuin University, one can see a continuing decrease in possession and use of both *kamidana* and *butsudan*. According to Ronald Dore's 1951 study of a ward in Tokyo, 53% of houses had a *kamidana* and 80% a *butsudan*, and he notes that of the 78 people in households with Buddhist altars, only nine people said they did not worship at them (Dore 1958: 306-316). Joseph Spae's 1957 study (again in Tokyo) gave figures of 71% and 78% respectively for *butsudan* and *kamidana*, while Morioka Kiyomi's studies from 1964-66 showed that 96% and 92% of households in rural Yamanashi prefecture respectively had *kamidana* and *butsudan*, and that these were possessed by 61% and 69% respectively of working class households and 40% and 60% of white collar households in Tokyo (Ishii 2007: 76).

In 1981 according to the *Asahi Shinbun* survey, 62% of households had *kamidana* and 63% *butsudan*; the 1981 NHK survey has similar figures.

By 1995 according to the *Asahi* survey these numbers were down to 54% for *kamidana* and 59% for *butsudan*. Surveys between 1996 and 2006 by Jinja Honchō show a progressive decline in households with *kamidana*, from 51% overall in 1996, and 35.9% in cities, to 43.8% overall and 26.4% in cities in 2006. The Jinja Honchō surveys unsurprisingly focus only on *kamidana* and do not consider *butsudan*. However other surveys from 1999 show that the possession of *butsudan* also decreased to 57% of households overall and 48.3% in the main cities, while a 2004 Kokugakuin survey showed that 56.1% of households overall and 46.9% in cities, had *butsudan* and that *kamidana* ownership was also down (Ishii 2007: 76). The nuclearisation of families has been a factor in the decline in ownership of such altars, with Nakamaki Hirochika noting that a “significant difference” exists in *kamidana* and *butsudan* possession between extended families and family successors (i.e. those inheriting and taking over households), and newly established households and nuclear families (Nakamaki 2003: 24-25).

It is not merely the possession of such traditional religious objects that is in decline but activities associated with them. Even when a household has a *kamidana* or *butsudan* this does not mean that household members will necessarily worship at them. While Dore’s 1951 research found that close to 90% of those in households with *butsudan* worshipped at them, the surveys carried out by the Kokugakuin University programme between 1999 and 2004 indicate far lower figures. According to the 1999 survey, just under 50% of households surveyed had *kamidana*. Acts of worship took place every day at these altars in 17% of households, “from time to time” in 14.6%, “sometimes” in 11.2%, and “never” in 6.2% of households. These latter figures had barely changed in the 2004 Kokugakuin survey but the number of households without *kamidana* had risen to 56% and the number where daily worship occurred had fallen by almost 5% to 12.1%. A similar pattern held true for *butsudan*: in 1999 30.6% of households had such altars where daily veneration occurred and 14.4% where it occurred from time to time. In 2004 the numbers of households without Buddhist altars had risen from 42.2% to 43.6%, while there was a sharp drop of almost 5% down to 25.9% of households where daily worship occurred at the Buddhist altar. This decrease appears largely to have been balanced by an increase in households where worship happened “from time to time” (up from 14.4% to 19.3%) (Ishii 2007: 78).

The aforementioned decline of Buddhism is clearly linked to this erosion in one of Japan's main areas of folk practice. It will deteriorate further also given that surveys of younger Japanese that I cited earlier indicate a progressively declining belief in the notion of an afterlife. When one no longer believes in any form of afterlife, the need for religious funerals to appease the deceased spirit and to transform it into a benevolent ancestor and Buddhist spirit caring for the living, ceases to hold sway. And when at the same time, families—traditionally the bedrock of religious belonging and practice in Japan, with the majority of those claiming to have any form of faith, stating that their faith is a product of household custom¹³—are no longer engaging in traditional folk practices such as having and engaging in rituals before household altars, the potential for passing on any sense of religious engagement at such levels to the next generation, is likely to disappear.

Counter-Claims 1: The Example of Pilgrimage

Statistical analyses, whether of institutional belonging, religious faith or popular practices, all appear to indicate a one-way pattern towards an increasingly secularised Japan. There has, however, thus far been a reluctance among scholars of Japanese religions to tackle this question head-on. Thus far the general pattern has been to look to areas where it is claimed there are signs of growth or of changing patterns of expression that are producing new alternatives to traditional religious engagement. Two areas that stand out here are the claimed growth and popularity of pilgrimages, and a claimed turn to 'spirituality' and 'new spirituality' movements. Scholars have repeatedly over the past three decades flagged the former up in the media as an example of growth, with Japanese academics and the mass media alike often using the term *junrei būmu* 巡礼ブーム (pilgrimage boom) to underline this claim. The latter has become quite popular among Japanese academics (as it has in Western contexts also) as a form of

¹³ Thus the 1952 *Yomiuri* survey asked those who said they had faith, why they did so; the largest response (30.8%) replied "because it is a household custom"; the next highest reply (29.5%) was "I do not know." The next highest response ("because of illness") stood at 5.9% (Ishii 2007: 25).

counter-blast to the evident signs of religious decline; in effect scholars have claimed there is a rise in 'spirituality,' which is portrayed as an individualised, non-organisational means of engaging in thoughts, practices and activities that are in effect a postmodern form of 'religion' but without the connotations of organisation and affiliation associated with religion. The argument underlying the emphasis on 'spirituality' in effect is that this is replacing 'religion'—and hence that there is no trend towards secularisation, but instead a reshaping of the religious in new ways (see Shimazono 2004, 2007a, 2007b; and Kashio 2010).

Both these issues require intensive investigation and analysis, and space does not allow me to do more than briefly look at each in turn. However it is important to question them because I have yet to see any clear and cogent evidence to substantiate these claims; indeed, by looking at them, and especially at pilgrimage, one can see far more evidence to support my argument of secularisation than to offer any counter-argument to it.

If we first look at pilgrimage, it is certainly the case that one pilgrimage, the 88 stage Shikoku pilgrimage, *Shikoku henro* 四国遍路, has flourished in the past 40 or so years. When, in the late 1960s, Maeda Takashi did his sociological research on Shikoku (in conjunction with the then-more famous 33 stage Saikoku pilgrimage *Saikoku junrei* 西国巡礼) Shikoku had perhaps half the number of pilgrims as Saikoku (Maeda 1971). In the ensuing decades, the Shikoku pilgrimage has overtaken Saikoku numerically and probably now has well over twice the number of pilgrims as Saikoku.¹⁴ It has also become highly popular among the mass media, the subject of numerous television broadcasts, documentaries and cultural travelogues, as well as books, photo-magazines and photo essays, while numerous exhibitions on the cultural dimensions of the pilgrimage have been held around the country, all of which have helped enhance its profile, increase its popularity and make it more accessible (Mori 2005; Reader 2007a). These activities have been very successful in increasing the clientele in Shikoku, and making it appear to be Japan's leading pilgrimage. This popularity has also made it appear as if pilgrimage as a practice is growing in Japan, and hence the

¹⁴ It is hard to know the exact numbers but general estimates of 150,000 or so pilgrims a year in Shikoku are the norm, while, as Satō (2004: 141-143) has shown, Saikoku pilgrim numbers have been in the 50,000-60,000 range in the earlier part of this century.

repeated claims of a 'pilgrimage boom'—claims I have also been guilty of, largely based on the Shikoku case (Reader 2007a, 2007b).

Yet there are a number of problems with viewing Shikoku as evidence of overall pilgrimage growth or of seeing it as an example that counters the idea of increasing secularisation in Japan. The first is that it would be very difficult to make a convincing case that modern-day Japan, despite all the advantages of high-speed transport, more people with the ability to travel and support themselves while so doing, and better facilities to make the pilgrimage more accessible to greater segments of the population, really has a greater degree of pilgrimage activity than former ages (for example, in Tokugawa Japan) when it was harder to travel. This is an issue that would require a separate investigation, but one does not see great evidence of the sort of mass pilgrimages in modern Japan that characterised Tokugawa Japan, especially to Ise.¹⁵

Yet it is not the comparative levels of pilgrimage engagement that concern me here, so much as two related points. The first is that the seeming, and media-inspired, growth of pilgrim numbers in Shikoku should not be taken as evidence of pilgrimage growth in Japan overall. Elsewhere there is concrete evidence of real decline and while Shikoku may be flourishing, to a degree this is at the expense of other pilgrimages. Pilgrim numbers on the Saikoku pilgrimage, for example, have been falling steadily over the past two decades. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, when internal travel in Japan was at its peak and prior to a shift in travel patterns that saw more Japanese people going abroad instead of travelling at home, Saikoku attracted around 70-80,000 pilgrims a year, with a peak of 82,033 in 1978. In the early 1990s numbers were not dissimilar, with a high point of 77,415 in 1993. Since then numbers have fallen almost continually, as Satō Hisamitsu's comprehensive study has indicated—by as many as 5,000 per year at times, down to 54,616 in 2001 (Satō 2004: 141-142). Satō's study does not extend beyond the early 2000s, but the pattern he indicates has been confirmed to me by

¹⁵ Around half a million people a year on average visited Ise in the Tokugawa period as pilgrims; in special years known as *okage mairi* the numbers escalated into millions—a significant proportion of the population of that era (Nishigaki 1983). One does not see anything like as much mass pilgrimage activity as that nowadays.

Saikoku priests in subsequent years.¹⁶ In the past three years, in order to hopefully reverse the problem of decline, the Saikoku temples have become involved in a number of publicity campaigns, some in conjunction with the national railway company JR that offer various special offers of fares and souvenirs to participants, as well as opening up normally hidden icons as a way of attracting new pilgrims.¹⁷ Similar patterns are evident elsewhere. The Chichibu pilgrimage (*Chichibu junrei* 秩父巡礼), long a favourite of people from the Tokyo region, in 2008 held a special *kaichō* 開帳 (public display of normally hidden temple icons); while this type of event normally happens every twelve years in Chichibu, the 2008 opening was out of sequence, after only five years since the last one. The reason, as temple officials at the office of the Chichibu Reijōkai (秩父霊場会, Chichibu Pilgrimage Temples' Association) informed me, was because of falling numbers and the need to do more promotional activities to reverse the trend.¹⁸

Other pilgrimages where statistics are available, similarly indicate that pilgrimage is in decline. The 88 stage pilgrimage on the island of Shōdoshima (*Shōdoshima henro* 小豆島遍路), long regarded as one of Japan's prime regional pilgrimages, and perhaps its main regional copy of the more famous Shikoku pilgrimage, used, in the 1970s, to attract 50,000 plus pilgrims a year. By the 1980s this number has fallen into the 30,000s, and it has decreased steadily ever since. By 2008 the number had fallen to 12,500 and was decreasing annually by around 1,500, while many of the confraternities that used to support the pilgrimage were no longer able to recruit enough people to continue making pilgrimages there.¹⁹ Priests on the island I have

¹⁶ I have visited Saikoku pilgrimage temples on a regular basis since 1984, and in each of my last few visits to Japan—in 2009, 2010 and 2011—I visited one or more Saikoku temple, and talked to officials and priests at them; in each case, I heard the same story of continuing decline.

¹⁷ I am currently working on a project about pilgrimage marketing, which will discuss these issues at length, and have interviewed officials from JR and from the Saikoku temples on such matters. For information on the opening of hidden icons see <http://www.saikoku33.gr.jp/open/> and on JR's Saikoku pilgrimage campaigns (which are conducted in conjunction with the Saikoku temples) see <http://www.jr-odekake.net/navi/saikoku/>.

¹⁸ Fieldwork notes, Chichibu April 2008.

¹⁹ On the issue of confraternities, see above footnote 12. I have simplified the pilgrim numbers here, giving rounded numbers, but have full data on these issues stretching back to the mid-1980s. I am grateful to Rev. Fukushima, the priest of the Shōdoshima pilgrimage temple Daishōji and head of the island's pilgrimage temple association who has provided

interviewed state that with this continuing pattern of decline, it is possible that within a decade the pilgrimage could cease to exist.

Space does not permit a discussion of all the factors why this erosion is occurring although one point made to me by priests on all the pilgrimage routes cited above that are facing such problems, is that the recent popularity of the Shikoku pilgrimage is a factor. The prominence of Shikoku in the media and the skilful publicity campaigns the temples there have mounted, have made Shikoku into *the* pilgrimage for the modern day—and this has in effect drawn away those who in an earlier era might have gone to Shōdoshima or Saikoku. However it is not at all evident that the increase in Shikoku's clientele compensates for the overall decreases that other pilgrimages are suffering. For the purposes of this article, the main point to note is simply that, despite claims that pilgrimage is an area of increased vigour and growth in Japan, the reality is far different.

Moreover, the seeming growth in Shikoku pilgrimage numbers has come in conjunction with a considered downplaying of religious issues, in which the pilgrimage has been portrayed as a manifestation of Japanese tradition and culture, and as an important tourist and heritage site for Japanese people. The promotional materials the pilgrimage temples have produced over the years, along with television programmes produced by broadcasters such as NHK (with the cooperation of the temples) have tended to avoid talking about faith, miracles, healing, salvation and asceticism—all issues critical to the pilgrimage in its formation and earlier development. Instead they focus on such things as the photogenic nature of the island and the temples, and on the foods, local delicacies and local sights that can be seen along the way, and so on. Recently, too, a campaign to have the pilgrimage declared (like the Santiago de Compostela route in Spain) a UNESCO World Heritage site has been under way in Shikoku, and this, too, emphasises issues of tradition, culture, scenery and heritage, while avoiding any mention of religion, practice and faith. The pilgrimages temples are working with regional government agencies and tourist authorities in this campaign. The government agencies concerned cannot, under Japanese laws separating religion and state and prohibiting the use of public money for the support of religion, promote the pilgrimage as a religious activity,

me with the exact figures—tallied at his temple of every pilgrim who has visited it—for pilgrim numbers over the past 25 years.

but they wish to promote the pilgrimage because of the economic value it brings to the island.²⁰ Hence their support in the heritage campaign has required pilgrimage to be portrayed not in religious but cultural and heritage terms, as a secular enterprise. The temples have cooperated in this in part at least because, as sources I have spoken to at the temples have informed me, those running the temples are concerned that the decline evident in other pilgrimages in Japan might happen in Shikoku. Accordingly, they are seeking ways to ensure the longer-term viability of their pilgrimage; aware of how the Santiago de Compostela pilgrimage has flourished as a heritage and tourist centre and route after being declared a UNESCO World Heritage site, priests overseeing the Shikoku pilgrimage are trying to follow suit. As such they are cooperating in presenting the pilgrimage in this light, because they feel it will help them continue to attract visitors at a time when pilgrimage may be on the wane in Japan.²¹

In 2007 the pilgrimage temples issued an edict banning the practice of *takuhatsu* 托鉢, begging for alms, at or around the temples. This practice has long been used by pilgrims in Shikoku both as a means of economic sustenance by poor pilgrims and also because through the practice they can identify with, and temporarily become like, Buddhist monks, for whom alms seeking was a standard practice. Although the practice declined in modern times as pilgrims became better off, it has grown more recently because of Japan's economic problems and a growing number of people doing the pilgrimage after losing their jobs. Feeling that this new presence of pilgrims with begging bowls in hand, in or around the temples, would be off-putting for the types of pilgrim—normally travelling by bus—that they sought to attract, the temples banned the practice from their precincts (Hamaya 2009: 108). Other acts designed to clean up the pilgrimage and dissociate it from seemingly old practices, include the removal of a set of old leg braces and crutches at one of the temples, Iyataniji 弥谷寺; the items had, according to temple stories, been discarded there by disabled pilgrims

²⁰ See also the article by Elisabetta Porcu (in this issue), where she discusses similar themes in the *Gion matsuri* in Kyoto, which has acquired UNESCO World Heritage status.

²¹ I base these comments on fieldwork conducted in Shikoku, including interviews with government officials, priests, business organisations and others involved in the campaign, in spring 2008, and discuss these issues at length in a paper (Reader 2010) to be published in a volume edited by Anton Pazos on transformations of pilgrimages in the modern day. See also Reader (2011b: 93-95).

who were healed when visiting the temple and were parts of the temple's and pilgrimage's lore (Reader 2005: 68). By 2005, they had come to be seen as a sign of superstition and of ways of thinking that did not fit with the contemporary image of the pilgrimage, and were removed (Reader 2010). The temples, in other words, are concerned that mendicant pilgrims and the signs and symbols of miraculous events such as old leg braces and crutches, might harm the image they are seeking to project and impact negatively on their well-off clientele, and as such have been seeking to eliminate such things from the pilgrimage.

In such contexts, one might argue that the current success of Shikoku is built on projecting it in ways that defuse its religious aspects and that portray it more as a comfortable touristic journey into the realms of Japanese heritage—a notion perhaps encapsulated by the website of the Non-Profit Organization (NPO) *Kokorohenro* 心遍路 (literally “spirit of the Shikoku pilgrimage,” <http://www.kokorohenro.org>), one of the organisations involved in the campaign to get UNESCO World Heritage status. This states that the pilgrimage has changed in the modern day and moved away from its earlier orientations; where once faith was its main focus, now health has replaced it as the pilgrimage offers scope for healthy living via sports and exercise, making the Shikoku pilgrimage “the world’s greatest theme park” (Reader 2010b: 96-97). In such ways, the Shikoku pilgrimage is being reformulated in public representations as a ‘brand,’ a theme park and a holiday, hiking and heritage trail. These transformations are indicative of how, to be successful, pilgrimages in Japan are turning away from faith, religion and practice, and towards heritage and tourism. Such issues have been widely understood, too, by those involved with other pilgrimages, and priests I have interviewed elsewhere have repeatedly said to me that they need to follow the line taken by Shikoku if their pilgrimages are to survive and flourish. Pilgrimage thus offers more evidence of increasing secularisation in Japan, with success and growth in effect tied to transforming sites into tourist locations, while older religious themes are eradicated.

Counter-Claim 2: The Rise of Spirituality

As was mentioned earlier, recently some scholars have claimed in effect that a sea change has occurred, with the decline of religion in Japan being accompanied by a rise in ‘spirituality.’ Such claims (which follow similar

claims by some scholars in Western contexts) implicitly or explicitly reject the notion of secularisation and, instead, suggest that what is happening is not a decline or disappearance of ‘religion’ but simply its transformation or regeneration. Yet while books and articles making such claims about ‘spirituality’ have become common in recent times in Japan (e.g. Kashio 2010), they have done so without any clear empirical evidence to show that this is really happening. Indeed, there are those who argue that there is little to show that ‘spirituality’ as a tendency is all that strong. Sakurai Yoshihide, for example, points out that the “spiritual conventions” (known in Japan as *supicon* スピコン) that were established in 2002 as fairs promoting spiritual activities, practices and goods, and which initially were successful and ran in numerous locations over two-day periods, were reduced, due to lack of demand, to one-day only events by 2006 (Sakurai 2009: 142). Ioannis Gaitanidis (2010) demonstrates that the spiritual milieu is in reality a small affair; the most popular magazine in the new spirituality arena, *Trinity*, sells only four thousand copies a time, and the participants who show their wares at the *supicon* events (now renamed *supima*, apparently as a way of trying to revive their popularity) complain about low attendance even in the major cities.

Horie Norichika has critiqued the term ‘spirituality’ in Japan, arguing that it is basically a popular or folk concept, not an analytical one (and hence not one that ought to be used by scholars) and that it really began to be used after the Aum Affair, by those who sought to get around the problems that the term ‘religion’ caused as a result of Aum. In other words, rather than a real alternative, ‘spirituality’ was in essence a rebranding or renaming of ‘religion’²²—a point that has caught the attention of critics of religion and of Japan’s burgeoning anti-cult movement, who have gone on the attack against various proponents of ‘spirituality’ and who have complained about the mercantile nature of the ‘spiritual sales’ business that has

²² For instance the term *pāwā supotto* (パワースポット, “power spot”), one of the terms that has surfaced in the ‘spirituality’ milieu, appears to be little more than an attempt to rebrand once-popular shrines and temples from the ‘old’ religious milieu. This is just an observation at present, and one that needs to be tested further, but if my observations—from visits to shrines such as those in Takachiho, Kyūshū that now call themselves ‘power spots’ and from reading through recent guidebooks of shrines and temples—are anything to go by, this is evidence of a rebranding process rather than anything else. I have yet to see any evidence that it is succeeding.

accompanied this apparent interest in spirituality (Horie 2009, 2010). As a result, there has been much scepticism surrounding the subject, leading media companies that initially were keen to put on television shows that focused on the idea of spirituality, to now take such programmes off the air. Thus, Hiroe argues, the media's interest (often a barometer of the viability and popularity of topics in Japan) has waned substantially, to the extent that in 2009 the TV programme *Aura no izumi* アウラの泉, which featured well-known advocates of 'spirituality' and the phenomena they claimed to present, was taken off the air after numerous complaints. After this, Hiroe states, many critics of the 'spiritual business' and many in the media announced that the 'spiritual boom' was over (Horie 2009; see also Ishii 2008: 3-4). There appears thus far little convincing evidence, in other words, that spirituality as a concept and as a viable set of practices has supplanted 'religion.' It is probably more accurate to say that it is really just a way of providing an alternative label for it and attempting a rebranding of the subject in order to overcome the decline of religion and stem the tide of secularisation. As yet there is no clear evidence to indicate that this is succeeding; indeed, the arguments cited here by Sakurai, Horie and Gaitanidis would suggest it is not.

Conclusions

In the early 1970s, when secularisation as a theory was at its zenith in the sociology of religion, Japanese sociologists questioned whether it could be fruitfully applied to Japan and in so doing they provided some useful counter-arguments to it. They were especially concerned about whether such a Western-centric theory could be applied to Japan and as such they tended to reject the idea, in part because if the theory could be applied, Japan would be seen as very much 'like' the West—a view that ran against the dominant Japanese tendency of that era, of emphasising Japan's difference and 'uniqueness.' They argued that religion and religiosity did not operate only within institutionalised structures, and by drawing attention to folk religious practices and suggesting that engagement in all manner of activities with religious orientations—from acquiring amulets to taking part in Buddhist funeral rites and visiting the graves of the deceased—should be seen as elements of religious vibrancy and as repudiations of Western-centric secularisation theory (Reader 1990). As such, Japan was used as a counter-argument to secularisation theory at a time when that

theory was perhaps at its strongest. With the theory now being proclaimed as dead or headed for its grave, it is beneficial to look again at Japan, a country crucial, as Casanova has reminded us, to discussions of secularisation theory because it is a non-Western country that has experienced the conditions of modernity that have appeared in Western societies, and hence is a vital test case by which to judge whether a Western-centric theory could be applicable beyond such borders. My answer in this article is that not only can Japan be considered a vital test case of secularisation theory, but that it shows that secularisation theory is by no means dead and that it remains a viable means of analysing modern trends in religion and a useful analytical tool for helping us interpret what is going on in religious terms in Japan today. Japan in the past two decades has to all extents and purposes turned much of the secularisation debate on its head by providing us with a very clear example of a society in which 'religion' in terms of faith and adherence, appears to be not just on the wane but highly unpopular. This tendency has gone hand-in-hand with Japanese modernity, and increases the more the population becomes urbanised and educated.

One final point is worth making. It is often argued that times of crisis and unease are especially fertile times for a turn to religion, and many studies of the Japanese new religions have linked their growth to periods of unease and social change. Yet all the above phenomena I have outlined—the decline of religious engagement, the troubles of religious movements, the transformation of practices such as pilgrimage into cultural tours, and so on—are all occurring in a society very much facing a crisis or, rather, a series of crises. The economic recession that has dogged Japan since the early 1990s, increasing public debt, unemployment and insecurity, political instability, with generations of politicians being seen as out of touch and incompetent, the declining birth rate that has made people worry about the future well-being of the elderly, and an aging society that has caused unease among younger generations fearful of growing up with unbearable tax and social burdens, are all interlocked parts of this crisis or sense of crises. If one also takes into account the drastic loss of public confidence in public safety after Aum, the huge loss of confidence in the government and related agencies because of the poor response to the 1995 Hanshin earthquake, and the general feeling that the political classes in Japan are not really able to cope, it would be fair to say that Japan is in a state of unease and social crisis. This is just the sort of context in which one might expect

religions to flourish and for new movements to emerge to deal with and provide solace in the face of such unease. And yet none of this has happened. (One might note that it is too early to see if the tragic Tōhoku earthquake, tsunami and the nuclear problems that have followed thereafter will have changed things). In an era through the 1990s and at least until 2011 which have seen many conditions that ought to facilitate religious growth and the emergence of new movements in Japan, what we see instead is religious decline and the lack of any new movements.

This I contend is not simply because Aum has made the idea of religion and the notion of new religions appear dangerous; it is because religion as a concept and entity has become anathema to so many modern Japanese and because of changing social conditions, including increasing urbanisation and higher levels of education. The Japanese avoid religious organisations and declare repeatedly in surveys that they do not have faith and that religion is not important; they are turning in increasing numbers to ways of dealing with death that repudiate their Buddhist traditions and that are overtly secular and non-religious. They no longer get Shintō and Buddhist altars for their houses—and people in the households that have them appear to be becoming increasingly lax about performing acts of worship before them. They eschew the faith-based and socially organised local confraternities that were for long a bedrock upon which grassroots faith was built and which ensured the vitality of numerous pilgrimages and related practices. Where we see evidence or claims of flourishing or of activity that is not in decline (e.g. the Shikoku pilgrimage) one can legitimately question whether these are related to an interest in religion or whether they are growing because—as is the case in Shikoku—pilgrimage is increasingly presented as a secular entity associated with travel, sightseeing and cultural heritage with elements of faith downplayed or removed from sight. In other words, where growth might occur in areas commonly associated with religion, it may be because they are being increasingly disassociated in practical terms from any mention of such things.

One could go on with additional evidence to substantiate the point, but enough has been said to indicate that Stark's claims that the long-term assessment of data shows no long-term decline in attendance and participation in religious activities and belonging, that the world remains as religious as it ever was, and that accordingly those who believed in secularisation theory were wrong, are themselves, if the Japanese case is taken

into consideration, wide of the mark. Given that Stark uses Japan as an example to back up his arguments, it is only reasonable to use it to test them—and here, it is clear, they simply do not stand up to even the most basic scrutiny.

Although Casanova claimed that Japan has had plentiful “rush hours” of the gods the evidence presented here indicates something rather different, especially since 1995: a rush hour *away from* the gods. Religion may not yet be dead in Japan but it is dying—and with it the claims of anti-secularisation theorists such as Stark and all those who cling to the notion that religion is somehow universally alive and well in post-modern society. The Japanese case informs us that secularisation is a force to be reckoned with in the modern world rather than an idea to be consigned to the grave. At the very least we should recognise that a more nuanced analysis of secularisation theory is needed, one that recognises that there will be examples—perhaps when societies become highly technologically advanced, highly urbanised and very highly educated to the degree that Japan has—when theories of religious decline will be more feasible than spurious assumptions of religious vibrancy. “Secularisation, R.I.P.?” I think not. From the perspective of Japan, the reverse is true, and the supposed corpse is actually alive, well and devouring religion at such a rate that in two decades we are far more likely to be saying ‘Religion R.I.P.’

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