

***The Problems of Religion in Contemporary Japan***  
**Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona**  
**Prof. Ian Reader (University of Manchester)**

**Overall view of the course**

This course examines a variety of problems associated with ‘religion’ (Japanese: *shūkyō*) in Japan conceptually, legally and in practical reality, from debates over the nature of ‘religion’, to questions about its relationship to society legally and in terms of public safety, to issues related to its apparent decline in very modern times. In particular it focuses on the period since 1995 when a registered religious organisation, Aum Shinrikyo, used the nerve gas sarin on the Tokyo subway in connection with Aum’s millennial visions of a final cosmic war of good and evil, and it examines the problems that this incident has posed for the image, status and support structures of religion in Japan. It also examines a series of problematic issues that can be related in modern conceptual terms to the ‘problem of religion’, for example in terms of how ‘religion’ may be thought about in modern Japan, in connection to legal issues related to Shinto, nationalism and the Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo, and to the rise of the so-called ‘cult problem’ that has arisen after Aum. It also examines whether Japan is becoming increasingly secularised as a result not just of the problems caused by religion and the image of religion as a dangerous entity in need of control- images that have become prevalent after Aum- but also as a result of changing social, economic and demographic flows and because of modernity and its concomitants, which have altered the shape of Japanese society in recent ages. In this latter context, particular attention will be paid to the question of Buddhism in contemporary Japan- mainly because this is the area that has been most widely discussed in recent academic publications in relation to potential secularisation and the ‘decline of religion’ in institutional terms- but also to wider questions of declining support levels for ‘religion’. In this context, too, there will be some discussion (based on my recent research, much as yet not published) about pilgrimage practices in very recent years and how these might fit in with concepts of religious decline and secularisation. The reason for choosing pilgrimage as a topic to focus on is both because it has been mentioned often as an area of growth in recent times (and hence cited as an example that seemingly shows that religious practices may not be in decline) and because, in my recent research, I have begun to question this image of growth. Recent evidence indicates that many pilgrimages, apart from the most famous pilgrimage in Japan (Shikoku) are in decline, while the popularity of the Shikoku pilgrimage can be linked to an increasing process of transforming it and depicting it as a tourist, cultural and heritage phenomenon- a process heightened by the recent campaign by Shikoku authorities to get the pilgrimage route declared a UNESCO World Heritage cultural asset. As such it may be that, rather than pilgrimage growth we are seeing overall decline along with the success of one single pilgrimage- but a success that has come about as that pilgrimage has, in effect, become increasingly secularised and portrayed as a cultural rather than as a religious entity. Such attempts at reorienting pilgrimage as cultural practice bring us back to the problems of ‘religion’ and its definitions raised at the start of the seminar.

## **Course structure**

The above topics will be dealt with through four days of seminars, with overlapping themes.

### Seminar One (Monday)

- Terms, problems and questions: the terminology and scope of the study of religion.
- The 1946 Constitution and an outline of legal problems that have arisen. Yasukuni, Shinto and nationalism.

### Seminar Two (Tuesday)

- The rise of new religions, notions of millennialism and ‘world renewal’ (*yonaoshi*) and critiques of contemporary society. Late 20<sup>th</sup> century fears about the ‘end of the world’ and fears about new religions.
- The rise of Aum and its turn to violence.
- Reactions and responses to Aum: the notion of ‘cults’ and ‘mind control’; redefinitions of ‘religion’; the notion of religion as ‘dangerous’, calls for state control and scrutiny of religious groups, and potential civil liberties’ abuses.

### Seminar Three (Wednesday)

- The aftermath of Aum and its impact on religion, politics and related issues
- Secularisation after Aum? Patterns of modernity, the turn away from organised religion, and claims about ‘spirituality’.

### Seminar Four (Thursday)

- The state of ‘religion’ today with reference in particular to Buddhism as an example of institutional decline and the problems of modernity.
- Pilgrimage as an example of potential growth, decline and secularised transformation.
- Concluding comments, including the viability of continuing to use ‘religion’ as a conceptual framework of analysis in Japan.

Readings (note: these are indicative readings that can help provide various perspectives on complex topics)

## **The concept and construction of ‘religion’ in Japan**

Junichi Isomae 2005 Deconstructing “Japanese Religion” : A Historical Survey *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 32/2: 235-248

Jason Ananda Josephson 2006 When Buddhism Became a" Religion": Religion and Superstition in the Writings of Inoue Enryō *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 33/1 pp 143-168

Junichi Isomae 2002 The discursive position of religious studies in Japan: Masaharu Anesaki and the origins of religious studies *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* Vol 14/1 2002 pp 21-46.

The following four discussion papers are linked and should be read in conjunction with each other as they constitute a debate about the topic (and are polemic in tone!)

Timothy Fitzgerald 2003 'Religion' and 'the Secular' in Japan: Problems in history, social anthropology, and the study of religion. *electronic journal of contemporary japanese studies* available at

<http://www.japanesestudies.org.uk/discussionpapers/Fitzgerald.html>

Ian Reader 2004 Ideology, Academic Inventions and Mystical Anthropology: Responding to Fitzgerald's Errors and Misguided Polemics *electronic journal of contemporary japanese studies* available at

<http://www.japanesestudies.org.uk/discussionpapers/Reader.html>

Timothy Fitzgerald 2004 The Religion-Secular Dichotomy: A Response to Responses *electronic journal of contemporary japanese studies* Available at

<http://www.japanesestudies.org.uk/discussionpapers/Fitzgerald2.html>

Ian Reader 2004 Dichotomies, Contested Terms and Contemporary Issues in the Study of Religion *electronic journal of contemporary japanese studies* available at

<http://www.japanesestudies.org.uk/discussionpapers/Reader2.html>

Similarly these two should be read in conjunction as they argue about the boundaries of 'culture' and 'religion': Richard Anderson 1991 What Constitutes Religious Activity? (I) *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 1991 18/4 pp 369-372 available online at <http://nirc.nanzan-u.ac.jp/publications/jjrs/pdf/349.pdf>

Ian Reader 1991 What Constitutes Religious Activity? (II) *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 1991 18/4 pp 373-376 available online at <http://nirc.nanzan-u.ac.jp/publications/jjrs/pdf/350.pdf>

See also Ian Reader and George J. Tanabe 1998 *Practically Religious: Worldly Benefits and the Common Religion of Japan* (University of Hawaii press), pp. 3-7 for a definition of 'shūkyō'

### **Yasukuni and legal issues:**

General background:

John Breen and Mark Teeuwen 2010 *A New History of Shinto* (Wiley-Blackwell) esp. pp. 199-220

Helen Hardacre 1988 *Shinto and the State* (Princeton University Press)

On the Yasukuni problem:

Mark R. Mullins 2010 How Yasukuni Shrine Survived the Occupation: A Critical Examination of Popular Claims *Monumenta Nipponica* 65/1: 89-136.

K. Peter Takayama, "The Revitalization of Japanese Civil Religion" in Mark R. Mullins, Shimazono Susumu, and Paul L. Swanson, eds., *Religion and Society in*

*Modern Japan* (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1993), pp. 105-120

Michiaki Okuyama 2009 Disputes over Yasukuni Shrine and Its War Dead in Contemporary Japan. *Religion Compass* Vol 3/1 pp 58-71.

Michiaki Okuyama 2005 Historicizing Modern Shinto: A New Tradition of Yasukuni Shrine. In Stephen Engler and Gregory P. Grieve (eds) *Historicizing "tradition" in the Study of Religion*. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter) pp. 93-108.

Breen, J. ed., 2007a. *Yasukuni, the War Dead and the Struggle for Japan's Past*. London: Hurst Publishers Ltd, especially the chapter by Breen Yasukuni and the Loss of Historical Memory. London: Hurst Publishers Ltd, pp. 143 – 162.

Chris Perkins Inheriting the Legacy of the Souls of the War Dead: Linking Past, Present and Future at the Yūshūkan. *Electronic journal of contemporary Japanese studies* 2011 (article freely available online at <http://www.japanesestudies.org.uk/articles/2011/Perkins.html>)

### **Aum Shinrikyo and Responses to Aum**

For a detailed study of the Aum Affair:

Ian Reader 2000 *Religious Violence in Contemporary Japan* (esp last chapter pp 224-249. (Curzon Press).

And also

Robert Kisala and Mark Mullins (eds) 2001 *Religion and Social Crisis in Japan* (all chapters relevant, especially Shimazono Susumu In the Wake of Aum: The Formation Transformation of a Universe of Belief (also available online from the *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 1995 <http://nirc.nanzan-u.ac.jp/publications/jjrs/pdf/455.pdf>)

And also

Watanabe Manabu *Reactions to the Aum affair: The rise of the anti-cult movement in Japan* on the rise of the 'anti-cult' movement: also available in the *Bulletin of the Nanzan Institute for Religion & Culture* 1997 No. 21, pp. 32-48

For the aftermath of Aum:

*Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* No 39/1, spring 2012 special issue *Aftermath: Impact and ramifications of the Aum Affair in Japan and Beyond* (guest editors Erica Baffelli and Ian Reader; all eight articles of relevance, will be available online free at <http://nirc.nanzan-u.ac.jp/publications/jjrs> from April 2012. In particular see the articles by Mullins on neo-nationalism, McLaughlin on the impact on other religions, and Baffelli and Reader—overview of the affair and its broader impact.

### **Secularisation and religious decline (plus claims of growth in spirituality)**

Ian Reader 2012 Secularisation R.I.P? Nonsense! The ‘rush hour away from the gods’ and the decline of religion in contemporary Japan. *The Journal of Religion in Japan*, Vol 1/1, 28 pages in press.

On Buddhist problems and decline:

Ian Reader ‘Buddhism in Crisis? Institutional decline in modern Japan’ *Buddhist Studies Review* Vol.28, no.2, 2011 pp 233-263 ISSN print 0256-2897; online ISSN 1747-9681

Mark Rowe *Bonds of the Dead: Temples, Burials and the Transformation of Contemporary Japanese Buddhism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2011.  
Stephen Covell 2005 *Japanese Temple Buddhism: Worldliness in a Religion of Renunciation*. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press).

John Nelson 2011 *Global and Domestic Challenges Confronting Buddhist Institutions in Japan*. *Journal of Global Buddhism* Vol 12, 2011, pp 1-16. (online at <http://www.globalbuddhism.org/toc.html>)

George J. Tanabe 2004 Popular Buddhist Orthodoxy in Contemporary Japan *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 31 / 2: 289–310 (online at <http://nirc.nanzan-u.ac.jp/publications/jjrs/pdf/696.pdf>)

On alternative claims of growth and discussions thereof (Pilgrimage and ‘spirituality’):

Ian Reader 2007 Positively Promoting Pilgrimages: Media representations of pilgrimage in Japan *Nova Religio* 10/3, pp.13-31

Ian Reader 2010 *Hiking, Heritage and Holidays: Sanitising and Transforming Pilgrimages in the Modern Day*. Book chapter in press about pilgrimage transformation in the modern world, which refers in part to Japan (Pdf will be supplied)

Horie Norichika 2009 2009. “Spirituality and the Spiritual in Japan: Translation and Transformation.” *Journal of Alternative Spiritualities and New Age Studies* 5 (2009-2011) (in press. Online at <http://www.asanas.org.uk/journal.htm>)

\*Please note that aspects of the final topic area (secularization and on transformations in pilgrimage) are areas that have been little studied in recent times in Japan and are the focus of my current research. Hence aspects of the final seminar in particular will draw directly on my most recent research and fieldwork.