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Recent Developments in the Japanese Debate on Secularization

UGO DESSÌ

1. Introduction

> Secular Buddhism is a positive movement founded on a sincere wish to practice a contemporary Buddhism that is both encompassing of all lifestyles and true to the early intentions and insights of the Buddha. However, Secular Buddhism does raise questions about the authority granted to scriptures, and lineages, and the applicability or relevance of historic cultural accretions to contemporary practice.[1]

Is "Secular Buddhism" a religion? And is it possible to be secular and Buddhist at the same time? As is also suggested by this short citation, perhaps few concepts in today's popular and academic discourses are more contested, misused, and misunderstood than "secular" and "secularization."

The etymology of these two words derives from the Latin *saeculum*, which initially indicated a long span of time and the present world (as opposed to the next one), while later on, in the Middle Ages, *saecularizatio* came to refer to "a monk's renunciation of the rule of his order."[2] It was only in modern times, through the mediation of the Enlightenment and the work of some influential western scholars (e.g. Max Weber and Émile Durkheim), that secular/secularization took rather different meanings related to the decline of religion in modern society, low church attendance, the privatization of religious beliefs, the weakening of religious institutions, and, for some, the inevitable demise of religion.

Starting in the 1960s, scholars such as Peter Berger,

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1 The Triple Gem Buddhist Foundation, "Questions and Answers about Secular Buddhism," http://www.triplegem.com/secular-buddhism/questions-and-answers-about-secular-buddhism (last accessed December 24, 2016).

2 Philip S. Gorski and Ateş Altinordu, "After Secularization?," *Annual Review of Sociology* 34, no. 1 (2008): 60.

Thomas Luckmann, and Bryan Wilson elaborated different versions of the secularization theory, but since as early as the 1980s their scholarly work and the very idea of secularization came to be criticized by other scholars, especially in the United States.[3] For these critics, the phenomenon of religious resurgence in various parts of the world and the persistence of religious belief in North America do not only contradict the core of secularization theory, but also expose its status as a modern myth ultimately based on European history.[4] As a consequence, secularization theory is nowadays on the defensive not only in North America but also, to some extent, in Europe.

This also applies to other parts of the world, including Japan. Secularization theory (*sezokuka-ron* 世俗化論) was introduced to Japan in the 1970s especially through scholarly exchanges promoted within the International Conference for the Sociology of Religion, the work of Jan Swyngedouw (1935–2012), a Belgian Catholic priest and scholar who spent most of his life in Japan, and, notably, that of Ikado Fujio 井門富二夫 (1924–2016). Ikado, a University of Tokyo graduate who spent five years at the University of Chicago before becoming a professor at Tsukuba University, wrote extensively on this topic and firmly denied that secularization means a general decline of religion. Rather, he understood this phenomenon as a process of functional differentiation of politics, law, economics, and other "social elements" from religion, which can account for the simultaneous booming of new religious movements, and the use of religious elements as customs and ideologies within other secular domains.[5]

Ikado's attempt to fully apply western categories to the study of religious change in Japan was not fated to create a lasting trend. As already noted by Swyngedouw in the late 1970s, the secularization thesis had "not evoked a very enthusiastic response" in Japan, and had "not led to an in-depth debate of the theoretical issues involved."[6] From the beginning, most Japanese scholars were rather more interested in exposing cultural, historical, and religious differences between the European and Japanese contexts. Among these, Yanagawa Kei'ichi 柳川啓一 (1926–1990) and Abe Yoshiya 阿部美哉 (1937–2003) have been widely acknowledged as key players in these early discussions. Their main thesis was that conceptual frameworks developed in western culture and based on the concept of "church" are not useful to explain the peculiar role played by religion in Japan. In their view, the core of Japanese religious life has always been the "household" (*ie* 家), which when one explores modern and contemporary Japanese religions should be taken as the counterpart to the role of the church in western societies.[7]

Some Japanese scholars of religion have also tried to explain the reasons of this unwillingness to apply secularization theories to Japan. According to Hayashi Makoto 林淳 (b. 1953), there are basically three reasons underlying this critical attitude. First, both Buddhism and Shintō have been traditionally subordinated to political power and can be defined as being "originally secular." Second, in Japan there was no such thing as the "sacred canopy" provided by Christianity in medieval Europe. And finally, he observes, it is generally believed that the "rush hour of the gods" in the postwar years and the emergence of new religious movements cannot be explained in terms of secularization.[8]

Another prominent Japanese scholar, Yamanaka Hiroshi 山中弘 (b. 1953), has proposed a more articulated and detailed list of underlying reasons for the lack of support for the attribution of secularization theories, summarized in six points: 1) at the general level there is among Japanese scholars an awareness that secularization theory is not "compatible" with the Japanese context, which does not make this theory very appealing to them; 2) young scholars who studied the Japanese new religious movements in the 1970s came to understand this phenomenon as a proof of the inadequacy of secularization theory; 3) there is among Japanese scholars a general feeling of competition with Western Europe and

3 See David Yamane, "Secularization on Trial: In Defense of a Neosecularization Paradigm," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 36, no. 1 (1997): 109–22.

4 See Gorski and Altinordu, "After Secularization?," 61.

5 Fujio Ikado, "The Search for a Definition of Secularization: Toward a General Theory," in *Cultural Identity and Modernization in Asian Countries: Proceedings of Kokugakuin University Centennial Symposium* (Tokyo: Institute for Japanese Culture and Classics, Kokugakuin University, 1983), 51–2.

6 Jan Swyngedouw, "Reflections on the Secularization Thesis in the Sociology of Religion in Japan," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 6, no. 1–2 (1979): 70.

7 See Kei'ichi Yanagawa and Yoshiya Abe, "Some Observations on the Sociology of Religion in Japan," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 5, no. 1 (1978): 5–27.

8 Hayashi Makoto, "Kindai Nihon no 'shinkyō no jiyū': Sezokuka dewanaku raishizeishon," *Zen kenkyūsho kiyō* 44 (2015): 57–8.

their own attempt to develop an original theory for the Japanese context, which makes them rather indifferent to secularization theory; 4) Japanese sociology of religion is inclined to empirical research and is suspicious of general theories such as those dealing with secularization; 5) unlike the European and American context, secularization theory in Japan has not become a key topic in sociology, but has been discussed by scholars of religion, who somewhat lacked an appropriate theoretical apparatus and were inclined to give emphasis to phenomena of re-sacralization; and 6) Japan lacked a generation of new scholars to replace those who introduced secularization theory in the 1970s.[9]

As Hayashi, Yamanaka, and other scholars suggest,[10] Japanese scholars in the study of religion largely concur on many of the aforementioned points, which is also reflected by the way in which this topic is presented in reference books. The entry on secularization in the *Gendai shūkyō jiten* 現代宗教辞典 (Dictionary of Contemporary Religion), for example, provides a very short introduction to western secularization thinkers and closes by peremptorily stating that any simplistic attempt to apply their theories to Japan based on the idea of church would be misleading.[11] In a similar vein, the author of the entry in the *Shūkyōgaku jiten* 宗教学辞典 (Dictionary of Religious Studies) wraps up his overview of western scholarship by suggesting that secularization theory, as a western paradigm, is now probably on the verge of completing its historical mission.[12]

This does not mean, however, that discussions revolving around secularization in Japan have disappeared from the scholarly scene. In fact, several scholars in Japan use the idea of secularization as a negative point of reference, while others have attempted to apply it more positively to the Japanese context. In other words, something close to a debate on secularization in Japan is still taking place, and it remains worthy of attention and examination. This article aims to partially address this gap. A comprehensive overview and analysis of Japanese literature on this subject would require a much longer article, or perhaps even a monograph. For this reason, I will focus on the contributions given by Japanese scholars in the last decade, in order to illustrate some of the major trends and issues in the current debate.[13]

2. Religion, the State, and New Spirituality

One of the most influential voices in the recent debate on secularization in Japan is Shimazono Susumu 島薗進 (b. 1948), emeritus professor at the University of Tokyo and especially well known outside Japan for his work on Japanese new religious movements.

According to Shimazono, it is possible to distinguish at least three major turning points in Japanese history that concern the relationship between religion and the state and the issue of secularization. The first one, he claims, occurred in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries with the subordination of Buddhism to the state, and the movement away from the Buddhist worldview and its other-worldliness that was promoted by the ruling elite through the adoption of Confucian and Shintō elements. Shimazono locates the second turning point after the Meiji Restoration (1867); on the one hand, this opened the way to the modernization of the country and the rationalization of social life, but on the other hand it meant the creation of State Shintō, which was centered on the divinity of the emperor. Finally, the third turning point took place after World War II, with the new Constitution and the de-sacralization of the State.[14] Shimazono asserts that the first turning point implies a certain trend toward secularization, while the second is more ambivalent, because of the incorporation of Shintō elements in the modern nation state. As for the third turning point, which implied the deletion

9 Yamanaka Hiroshi, "Nihon no shūkyō shakaigaku ni okeru sezokukaron," *Shūkyō kenkyū* 89 (2016): 43–44.

10 See Ōba Aya, "Sezokukaron, gōriteki sentaku riron," in *Kin-gendai Nihon no shūkyō hendō: Jisshōteki shūkyō shakaigaku no shiza kara*, ed. Terada Yoshirō et al. (Tokyo: Hābesutosha, 2016), 147–61.

11 See Miki Hizuru, "Sezokuka," in *Gendai shūkyō jiten*, ed. Inoue Nobutaka (Tokyo: Kōbundō, 2005), 322–23.

12 See Higashibaba Ikuo, "Sezokuka(ron)," in *Shūkyōgaku jiten*, ed. Hoshino Eiki et al. (Tokyo: Maruzen, 2010), 262–65.

13 For the same reason, this article does not take into account contributions to this topic made by non-Japanese scholars. For recent additions to the debate in the English language, see, for example, the special issue "Religion and the Secular in Japan" of the *Journal of Religion in Japan* 1, no. 1 (2012) including articles by Ian Reader, John Nelson, Mark Mullins, and Elisabetta Porcu; chapters 7 and 8 of my *Japanese Religions and Globalization* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013); and Christoph Kleine, "Religion and the Secular in Premodern Japan from the Viewpoint of Systems Theory," *Journal of Religion in Japan* 2, no. 1 (2013): 1–34.

14 Shimazono Susumu, "Nihon no sezokuka to atarashii supirichuariti: Shūkyō shakaigaku to hikaku bunka/hikaku bunmei no shiza," *Shakai shirin* 57, no. 4 (2011): 24–5.

of these religious elements after World War II, he suggests that it can be more explicitly related to the secularization process.[15]

Shimazono, however, is also eager to specify that these historical changes cannot be appropriately analyzed through the lenses of the concept of *laïcité* (*raishite* ライシテ). In fact, this idea is based on the western assumption that with modernity the separation between political institutions and the Christian church was accomplished, which, for Shimazono, is not necessarily found in other cultures. In East Asia, he claims, there was a clear historical tendency to create a political system centered on the sacred figure of the emperor, as envisioned in Japan since as early as the Edo period (1603–1867).[16]

Moreover, Shimazono provides a critique of secularization theory as such, which he identifies with the work of Bryan Wilson and the proponents of similar views. The main problem with these theories, he notes, is that they claim that the functional differentiation of society brings about the privatization of religion, which is thus deprived of many of its social functions. In Shimazono's view, Luckmann provides a more nuanced perspective on secularization by acknowledging that modern religion does not just manifest itself as an institutional phenomenon. However, Luckmann's theory, too, remains anchored to the thesis of the privatization of religion in modern society, which for Shimazono is clearly contradicted by at least three concurrent trends.[17] In many countries worldwide, including not only Iran, India, Turkey but also the United States there is an ongoing revival of traditional religion at least since the 1970s. At the same time, an increasing number of people, especially in industrialized countries, are oriented toward forms of individual spirituality as opposed to organized religion. Concurrently, there is an increase in the number of individuals dissatisfied with secularism who actively try to bring their religious commitment into secular institutions.[18]

For Shimazono, this indicates there is a general shift in global society from secularization to religion, and from religion to spirituality. Religion and spirituality, he affirms, are not the same but have always coexisted.[19] Whereas in religion the relationship with the sacred is understood "in terms of a system," in spirituality is seen from the perspective of "individual experience." However, since the 1970s the general perception of spirituality as independent from religion has gradually gained more strength, thus opening the way to phenomena such as the New Age movement and the renewed emphasis on the spiritual world in Japan, which Shimazono terms collectively "new spirituality" (*atarashii supirichuariti* 新しいスピリチュアリティ).[20] Shimazono notes, too, whereas in the early phase of new spirituality there was an underlying tendency to deny the value of religion, since the 1990s religion and spirituality have come to be considered within this movement as complementary,[21] which is implicitly presented by him as an argument to support his criticism of the secularization thesis.

3. Religion and Laicization

The appropriateness of the concept of *laïcité* for the analysis of Japanese religions has also been discussed by the aforementioned Hayashi Makoto. Hayashi shares with Shimazono and other Japanese scholars the belief that secularization theory cannot be unreservedly applied to the modern Japanese context, characterized as it is by the emergence of new religious movements and lay Buddhist movements.[22] He argues, however, that this does not mean there has been a general revival of religion, and that traditional religions have remain untouched by modernity, as is shown, for example, by the enforcement of the *shinbutsu bunri* 神仏分離 (separation of *kami* and buddhas) policy and the *haibutsu kishaku* 廃仏毀釈 (abolish Buddhism

15 Ibid., 24.

16 Ibid., 26. Needless to say, the interplay of religion and politics can be seen at work also in earlier stages of Japanese history, as is illustrated, for example, by the very adoption of Buddhism by the Yamato court in the sixth century, the establishment of the Ritsuryō system and the network of provincial temples (*kokubunji* 国分寺) for 'protecting' the nation, and the emergence of the *kenmitsu taisei* 顕密体制 (exoteric-esoteric system) in medieval Japan. For a general overview, see Helen Hardacre, "State and Religion in Japan," in *Nanzan Guide to Japanese Religions*, eds. Paul L. Swanson and Clark Chilson (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006), 274–88.

17 Shimazono, "Nihon no sezokuka to atarashii supirichuariti," 31; and Susumu Shimazono, "From Salvation to Spirituality: The Contemporary Transformation of Religions Viewed from East Asia," *Religious Studies in Japan* 1 (2012): 5.

18 Shimazono, "From Salvation to Spirituality," 5–6.

19 Shimazono, "Nihon no sezokuka to atarashii supirichuariti," 32.

20 Shimazono, "From Salvation to Spirituality," 9–10.

21 Ibid., 20.

22 Hayashi, "Kindai Nihon no 'shinkyō no jiyū,'" 58.

and destroy Śākyamuni) movement in the Meiji period (1868–1912).[23] Hayashi suggests that these phenomena, for lack of a better term, can be explained through the concept of laicization (*raishizeishon* ライシゼイション). It is worth mentioning that his characterization of laicization diverges from common understandings of French *laïcité*, implying as it does the strong separation of church and state and the commitment by the state to be "lay, rather than confessional, while still respecting freedom of religion or belief."[24] Rather, for Hayashi laicization has to do with the coercion exercised by the modern nation state upon religion. Based on his analysis of laws enforced by the Meiji government, he argues that they were effective in the creation of a public sphere through the removal of religious elements related to Buddhism, traditional Shintō, and Christianity.[25] In this sense, Hayashi disagrees with Shimazono's characterization of the modern Japanese nation state as intrinsically religious. For Hayashi, the public sphere created by the Meiji reformers was meant to be truly secular (*sezokutekina kōkyō kūkan* 世俗的な公共空間), and the introduction of the emperor system and State Shintō only represented the next step in the process, like "pouring water in an empty vessel."[26]

A similar emphasis on the role played by political authority in the secularization process is offered by Nishimura Akira 西村明 (b. 1973), who does not use the term *laïcité* but distinguishes between two types of secularization, that is, "natural secularization" and "artificial secularization." For Nishimura, the former refers to the weakening of denominational affiliation and the general trend of "people away from religion in the process of modernization." This type of secularization, he observes, accounts both for the widespread non-religious attitude in contemporary Japan and for the process through which modern society takes over functions once performed by religion. Although Nishimura's position is in this last respect not fully articulated, it comes close to classic western formulations of the secularization thesis. By "artificial secularization," on the other hand, Nishimura means the deliberate "deprivation from or constraint to people of particular religious faiths and practices by a particular authority." In his view, this second type of secularization is exemplified by reforms such as the institution of the parishioner system in the Edo period and the establishment of State Shintō. As such, Nishimura observes, artificial secularization can lead to extreme adaptations,[27] in a way that is reminiscent of Hayashi's application/adaptation of the idea of laicization to the Japanese context.

4. Public Religion and Post-Secularity

In the specific case of Japan, Shimazono has also attempted to provide some examples of the emergence of public religion as a reaction to secularism. For him, there are clear indications of this trend in the fields of medical care, nursing, education, and, more recently, in the spiritual care offered by religious specialists to those affected by the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake and tsunami.[28]

Shimazono's idea that the spiritual counseling performed by Buddhist priests in the Tōhoku area may be understood as a form of public religion has been questioned by Horie Norichika 堀江宗正 (b. 1969). Based on his research conducted among disaster victims and focusing on their bonds with familiar spirits, Horie has observed that religious specialists offering "active listening" (*keichō* 傾聴) deliberately avoid any preaching, understand their practice as a form of therapy, and perform religious rituals only if they are specifically asked to do so. In other words, they are careful enough not to be seen as "religious" although they present themselves as providers of spiritual care.[29] For Horie, this and other relief activities conducted by Buddhist priests after the tsunami should rather be termed "recovery secularism": "recovery" in the sense that its primary goal is the recovery and revitalization of the affected areas, rather

23 Ibid., 58.
24 Jean Baubérot, "The Place of Religion in Public Life: The Lay Approach," in *Facilitating Freedom of Religion or Belief: A Deskbook*, ed. Tore Lindholm et al. (Dordrecht: Springer Science+Business Media B.V, 2004), 441.
25 Hayashi, "Kindai Nihon no 'shinkyō no jiyū,'" 61.
26 Ibid., 68.
27 Akira Nishimura, "Are Public Commemorations in Contemporary Japan Post-secular?," *Journal of Religion in Japan* 5, no. 2–3 (2016): 149–50.
28 See Shimazono Susumu, "Gendai shūkyō to kōkyō kūkan: Nihon no jōkyō o chūshin ni," *Shakaigaku hyōron* 50, no. 4 (2000): 541–55; and Susumu Shimazono, "Japanese Buddhism and the Public Sphere: From the End of World War II to the Post-Great East Japan Earthquake and Nuclear Power Plant Accident," *Journal of Religion in Japan* 1, no. 3 (2012): 203–25.
29 Norichika Horie, "Continuing Bonds in the Tōhoku Disaster Area," *Journal of Religion in Japan* 5, no. 2–3 (2016): 222.

than the interpretation of the disaster through religious categories; and "secularism" because it implies the separation between the public and private sphere, and assigns religion to the latter.[30]

A more nuanced approach to the same theme can be seen in the work of Takahashi Hara 高橋原 (b. 1969). For Takahashi, there are clear indications that Japanese society is largely secularized. The social welfare activities of Japanese religionists, including grief and spiritual care, cannot be regarded as a sign of religious revitalization in Japan, because they are not accompanied by membership growth among religious groups. He argues, however, that this trend shows that religious resources are being redistributed to other sections of secular society. In this sense, Takahashi claims, it counts as an instance of "post-secularity" in the sense illustrated by the German scholar Jürgen Habermas, that is, as a condition in which modern societies "have to reckon with the continuing existence of religious groups and the continuing relevance of the different religious traditions, even if the societies themselves are largely secularized."[31]

The issue of post-secularity has been recently thematized by another Japanese scholar, Sumika Masayoshi 住家正芳 (b. 1973). Sumika agrees that postwar Japanese society, also as a consequence of the 1947 Constitution enforcing the separation of state and religion, is secularized in many respects. He suggests that Japan can thus be included in the list of post-secular societies in which, according to Habermas, "people's religious ties have steadily or rather quite dramatically lapsed in the post-World War II period."[32] Specifically, Sumika has tested the applicability to Japan of the institutional translation proviso postulated by Habermas, according to which "citizens who want to use religious language in the formal public sphere have to accept that the potential truths of religious utterances must be translated into a generally accessible language."[33] Based on the examination of several courtroom cases over the religious nature of public ceremonies and practices since the 1960s (including the Tsu city groundbreaking ceremony case and the Mino'o war memorial case), Sumika has suggested that their use of a secular terminology exemplifies the attempt to mask religious values to legitimize the nation, rather than the applicability of Habermas's proviso.[34]

5. Testing the Secularization Thesis Empirically

Another stream of the debate on secularization in Japan has focused on the analysis of surveys and empirical data; it aims to show whether and to what extent Japanese society has been affected by secularization.

One of the recent publications on this topic attempts to demonstrate the incompatibility of the western concept of secularization with Japan through a survey conducted in 2006 among 1,800 respondents nationwide. The author of this research, Manabe Kazufumi 真鍋一史 (b. 1942), claims that despite the low attachment to religious beliefs (about thirty percent of respondents), secularization is progressing rather slowly in Japan. This is because, he argues, more than half of the respondents still engage in the same religious behaviors and practices, such as worship before the home altar. For Manabe, the data of this survey do not confirm the decline of Japanese people's religiousness but rather "the fact that Japan's unique religious feelings and attitudes continue to live on in people's hearts as they had in the past."[35]

More relevant to the contemporary debate and the present discussion is the work of Ishii Kenji 石井研士 (b. 1954), who has provided a summary and detailed analysis of data from various surveys in his *Dētabukku: Gendai nihonjin no shūkyō* データブック―現代日本人の宗教 (Databook: The Religion of the Contemporary Japanese), the second volume of which was published in 2007.[36]

Ishii has shown that there have been significant

30 Ibid., 221–22.

31 Hara Takahashi, "The Ghosts of Tsunami Dead and *Kokoro no kea* in Japan's Religious Landscape," *Journal of Religion in Japan* 5, no. 2–3 (2016): 194–95; see also Jürgen Habermas, "A Postsecular World Society? An Interview with Jürgen Habermas," http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2010/02/03/a-postsecular-world-society (last accessed December 23, 2016).

32 Masayoshi Sumika, "Behind the Mask of the Secular," *Journal of Religion in Japan* 5, no. 2–3 (2016): 154–55; and Jürgen Habermas, "Secularism's Crisis of Faith: Notes on Post-Secular Society," *New Perspectives Quarterly* 25 (2008): 17.

33 Sumika, "Behind the Mask of the Secular," 157–58.

34 Ibid., 172.

35 Kazufumi Manabe, "The Structure of Japanese Religiosity: Toward a Re-examination of Secularization in Japan," *Kwansei Gakuin University Social Sciences Review* 12 (2007): 10–1.

36 Ishii Kenji, *Dētabukku: Gendai nihonjin no shūkyō* (Tokyo: Shin'yōsha, 2007).

changes in the religiosity of the Japanese in the postwar period. He acknowledges that if one looks at religious practices such as the New Year's visit to a shrine (or temple) (*hatsumōde* 初詣) and visiting the family grave (*haka mairi* 墓参り), there has been a significant increase of about ten percentage points over the last twenty-five years. However, several surveys also show that the percentage of those who "have an interest in religion" (*shūkyō ni tai suru kanshin* 宗教に対する関心) decreased dramatically over about the same period of time, from forty percent in 1978 to twenty-three percent in 2003. Similarly, the number of those who "have religious faith" (*shinkō ari* 信仰あり) has consistently decreased over the last sixty years, and according to several surveys is now below thirty percent.[37] Moreover, Ishii notes that the ties of individuals with institutional religion are weakening, too, illustrated for example by the lower number of families that possess a Buddhist home altar (*butsudan* 仏壇) or a Shintō one (*kamidana* 神棚) and perform the customary religious practices before them.[38] Among other data presented in this databook, it is also significant that in comparative perspective the Japanese are among the people with the lowest trust in religious organizations, which is for Ishii also a consequence of the general distrust in religion created by the Aum incident in 1995.[39] Ishii also observes, however, that in many respects the religiosity of the younger generations is showing signs of vitality, which can be seen in their interest in the spirit world, divination, and the like, a phenomenon that he relates to the impact of the television and other mass media.[40]

6. Conclusion

The overview above illustrates that the discussion of secularization in the Japanese context, far from having vanished altogether, has continued in the last decade among several Japanese scholars. It is of deep interest that these scholars are often aware of each other's work, which justifies the use of the term "debate" to describe their activities. In this sense, the subfield of religious studies on secularization in Japan is thus, to some extent, even more vital than other related subfields such as that focusing on globalization, in which the level of interaction between scholars is very low.[41] It is also worthy of mention that not a few Japanese scholars seem to be concerned with grounding their discussions on secularization in the analysis of empirical data, which certainly contributes to making their work more solid.

One observation that is hardly surprising concerns the persistence of a skeptical attitude toward secularization theory among Japanese scholars. This is well exemplified by Hayashi's claim that the secularization thesis is ultimately based on the western idea of the Christian church as a sacred canopy, an overarching structure originally subsuming all spheres of social life;[42] by Manabe's reformulation of the claim that the western concept of secularization is essentially about levels of religious belief;[43] and, at another level, by Shimazono's idea that secularization theory is substantially flawed because it implies the decline of religion and its privatization, which are contradicted by the rise of spirituality and the vitality of new religious movements.[44]

All in all, these approaches to secularization seem to be underlain by a rather narrow understanding of secularization theory. The idea that secularization is necessarily dependent on the western concept of church reflects to a large extent the work of Yanagawa and Abe, according to whom the church played in western societies an integrating function that is not at work in the case of institutional religion in Japan.[45] As such, it reiterates old views of Christianity as a creedal religion centered on dogmas,[46] and greatly overlooks not only the historical development of Christianity, but also the phenomenon of "belonging without believing" and the relatively weak attachment to orthodox beliefs within vast sectors of modern Christianity.[47]

On the other hand, the assumption that secularization implies the decline of religion and its privatization seems to neglect not only the bare fact that there is no single secularization theory (but many different

37 Ibid., 3–4, 70.
38 Ibid., 76, 85.
39 Ibid., 103, 107–8.
40 Ibid., 141–61.

41 See Ugo Dessì, *The Global Repositioning of Japanese Religions: An Integrated Approach* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017).
42 Hayashi, "Kindai Nihon no 'shinkyō no jiyū,'" 58.
43 Manabe, "The Structure of Japanese Religiosity," 5–6.
44 Shimazono, "Nihon no sezokuka to atarashii supirichuariti," 30–1.
45 Yanagawa and Abe, "Some Observations on the Sociology of Religion in Japan," 12.
46 See Miki, "Sezokuka," 322–23.
47 See, for example, Franco Garelli, *Religion Italian Style: Continuities and Changes in a Catholic Country* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014).

approaches), but also that the central element even in classic secularization theories such as those formulated in the 1960s and 1970s by various scholars (e.g., Luckmann, Wilson, Berger, etc.) was not the idea of the inevitable decline of religion, but that of functional differentiation.[48] Paradoxically, claims such as Shimazono's that "the general trend of human history is directed toward the rise of spirituality"[49] provide the specular image of stereotyped understandings of secularization theory as the prophecy of the future demise of religious beliefs.

Still another idea that enjoys a certain popularity in Japanese religious studies is that the postwar proliferation of new religious movements and the emergence of new spirituality movements essentially contradict the secularization thesis. This does not, however, take into account sufficiently the distinction between different levels of secularization proposed by authors such as Karel Dobbelaere and José Casanova. The latter, in particular, has shown that the presence of secularization as functional differentiation does not prevent the revival of religion and its reappearance in the public sphere.[50] In other words, it is perfectly possible to have a secularized society characterized by the presence of new religious movements and informal spirituality.

More in general, a lack of clarity in the use of the term secularization is noticeable in the Japanese debate. Hayashi criticizes western secularization theory but at the same time affirms that Meiji policies resulted in the creation of a "secular public space," without specifying what he means by secular in this case.[51] Moreover, he discards secularization but adopts the concept of *laïcité*, which is possibly even more tightly bound to western (French) intellectual history than secularization itself.

A similar tendency may be seen in the work of scholars who apparently show a more positive approach to secularization theory. For example, Takahashi indirectly defines secularization as the decline in religious membership, which represents however only one of the many facets of secularization.[52] And Sumika, though acknowledging that postwar Japanese society is secularized, relies on Habermas' implicit characterization of a secular society as one in which "people's religious ties have steadily or rather quite dramatically lapsed," without providing an exhaustive explanation of the concept.[53]

Some of the limitations of the current debate on secularization have been observed by Japanese scholars such as Morooka Ryōsuke 諸岡了介 (b. 1976), who has criticized (within his discussion on the definition of religion) the wide currency that stereotyped views of secularization hold in Japan.[54] There are indications, nonetheless, that the current Japanese debate remains to an extent trapped between two relatively antagonistic angles.

On the one hand, one finds a certain inclination among Japanese scholars engaged in this debate to downplay the importance of analytical approaches to secularization, and the clarification of key concepts and ideas. This tendency might be related to one of Yamanaka's points listed above, in which he refers to the relative lack of a theoretical apparatus within Japanese religious studies that might prevent a deeper insight in the topic of secularization.[55] From another perspective, however, this may also be the effect of a certain eagerness of Japanese scholars to catch up with discussions on post-secularity taking place at the international level, which unfortunately ends up bypassing the preemptive clarification of the meaning of secularity.

On the other hand, there is the idea that the interplay between religion and other spheres of social life is in Japan somehow unique and cannot be explained through 'western secularization theory' (whatever this may mean). This tendency was already noticed by Swyngedouw in the early phase of the debate,[56] and is implicitly acknowledged by Yamanaka, when he includes "a general feeling of competition with Western Europe and the attempt to develop an original theory" in his list of the causes underlying the guarded attitude of Japanese scholars toward secularization theory.[57]

48 See Olivier Tschannen, "The Secularization Paradigm: A Systematization," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 30, no. 4 (1991): 395–415.
49 Shimazono, "From Salvation to Spirituality," 6.
50 José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994).
51 See Hayashi, "Kindai Nihon no 'shinkyō no jiyū,'" 68.
52 See Takahashi, "The Ghosts of Tsunami Dead and *Kokoro no kea* in Japan's Religious Landscape," 194.
53 See Sumika, "Behind the Mask of the Secular," 155.
54 Morooka Ryōsuke, "Sezokukaron ni okeru shūkyō gainen hihan no keiki," *Shūkyō kenkyū* 85, no. 3 (2011): 623–43.
55 Yamanaka, "Nihon no shūkyō shakaigaku ni okeru sezokukaron," 43–4.
56 Swyngedouw, "Reflections on the Secularization Thesis in the Sociology of Religion in Japan," 65–88.
57 Yamanaka, "Nihon no shūkyō shakaigaku ni okeru sezokukaron," 43–4.

Needless to say, it is perfectly legitimate and desirable for Japanese scholars to create original approaches to the study of religious change in contemporary society. However, the more this is pursued by relying on the oversimplification of theories developed in the 'West' or other parts of the world, the higher the chance that they come perilously close to forms of reverse orientalism.

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