The impact of COVID-19 on religion in Japan

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On 3 June 2020, the Regional Planning Research Center at Taisho University, an institution of Buddhist higher learning in Tokyo, publicized results of a survey that canvassed temple priests across the country about their experience with Japan’s pandemic shutdown. The results were stark but unsurprising. 88.6 per cent of the 517 respondents reported reduced numbers allowed to attend funeral ceremonies, 87.8 per cent cancelled or delayed services at temples and parishioners’ home altars, and the majority undertook potentially costly special measures at the few services that were scheduled, such as enforcing social distancing, requiring masks, using disinfectant, and curtailing offering incense and other acts involving physical touch.

Overall, Japan’s experience with COVID-19 appeared less dire than many had predicted would be the case in the pandemic’s early phases. The first wave of infections and deaths was subsiding when the Taisho University survey results were made public, and while a second wave emerged from late June 2020, fewer than 20,000 confirmed cases and just fewer than 1,000 deaths were recorded in Japan by the first week of July, or approximate 0.8 deaths per 100,000 persons. With very few exceptions, religious organizations in Japan complied quickly and comprehensively by enforcing the ‘three closes’ (sanmitsu), or more commonly the ‘three C’s’: avoiding enclosed spaces with poor ventilation, close physical proximity, and physical contact. Compliance with governmental mandates resulted in tolls on religious institutions and their communities. It also inspired creative initiatives that promise to outlast the pandemic.

In-person attendance at ceremonies is the social and economic lifeblood of Buddhist temples in Japan, as it is for Shinto shrines, Christian churches, and other religious organizations. Some clergy were able to innovate technologically in order to maintain close connections with parishioners. Religious professionals continued to distinguish themselves through dynamic social welfare outreach programmes even as they struggled against daunting challenges posed by quarantine and social distancing. As institutions strived to perform regular services, many groups reprised their historical roles as providers of special rituals to expunge and mitigate disease; the most prominent of these rituals enjoyed widespread public approval. Approval of certain ritual responses and public opprobrium for others sharpened divides between socially sanctioned Buddhist and Shinto traditions and so-called New Religions (shinshūkyō). While the pandemic clarified this categorical divide, other lines were blurred. The position of religious activists within Japanese electoral politics, for example, was made even more complex by institutional shutdowns to forestall infection. And while a majority of people in Japan...
self-identify as ‘non-religious’ (mushūkyō), individuals, corporations, and even government agencies delved into Japan’s rich mythological bestiary to invoke protective power from the spirit world, bringing to the fore popular appeals to the trans-human in times of anxiety about human frailty.4

Shrine and temple shutdowns: economic fallout and innovative workarounds

Although the major Buddhist denominations and the Association of Shinto Shrines claim to have millions of parishioners, their headquarters do not possess sufficient technological or human resources to help their member institutions move rituals online. The same is true of large New Religions such as Soka Gakkai as well as Christian churches and other groups. Updates from sectarian headquarters during the pandemic shutdown focused on proper in-person conduct and notices about cancelled events, while workarounds to maintain regular ritual practices or efforts to create new ritual and instructional initiatives were left in the hands of individual clergy and lay activists. Accounts proliferated in Japanese newspapers and in sectarian media sources of chanting and meditation sessions offered via Facebook, Zoom, and other online platforms. Priests began uploading dharma talks and sermons to YouTube and other video sites.5 In the early stages of the COVID-19 shutdown, most of these measures were ad hoc, devised to address parishioners’ immediate needs. Wrenching accounts emerged of Buddhist priests streaming their funeral rites from smartphones to bereaved loved ones prevented by social distancing rules from attending to the body of the deceased. As the government’s call for ‘self-restraint’ (jishuku) lengthened from weeks into months, religious aid providers’ offerings grew more sophisticated. Some of the most developed innovations came from veteran aid providers, many of whom had shaped their activities in the wake of the 11 March 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake disasters.6 Examples of these measures include the Care for COVID site, which sets out a range of counselling options, health care advice, and other resources.7 Unlike clinics in other nations, Japanese hospitals and palliative care facilities have not categorized chaplains as essential workers. COVID-19 revealed that religious activists have yet to find a stable position for themselves in officially sanctioned caregiving roles.

On-the-ground religious relief

Though they remain marginalized in clinical settings, religious activists continue to make significant if under-appreciated contributions to social welfare. The pandemic shutdown erected major obstacles to aid provision against which veteran providers persevered to provide supplies and solace to the homeless and other marginalized populations. An example of this is the Single Spoonful Association (Hitosaji no Kai), an outreach initiative begun in 2009 at the Pure Land (Jōdoshū) temple Eishōin in Asakusa, a neighbourhood in Tokyo near Ueno Park and the historical prostitution zone Yoshiwara.8 Reverend Yoshimizu Gakugen mobilizes volunteers, who include parishioners and Buddhist priests from his own sect and others, and other religion-affiliated participants to prepare meals and clothing for the homeless and impoverished. They see to funeral arrangements for people without means, host a food pantry for children (many from single-parent households), and reach out to migrant populations, among other services. From late February 2020, Single Spoonful cautioned its volunteers against lingering too long with each homeless person, to protect them from possible infection, and required those who distributed food and supplies to wear masks and goggles. The temple was flooded by hundreds of masks carefully handcrafted by volunteers, which clergy distributed to the homeless as
components of comprehensive care packages. In his frequently updated blog, Rev. Yoshimizu noted a rise in numbers of the homeless from early 2020 onward. He described how his temple aided displaced labourers from Myanmar and Vietnam who were forced from their accommodation when the restaurants and other businesses where they worked were forced by the pandemic lockdown to close. Religious aid providers afford an alternative history of Japan’s experience with COVID-19, one told from the perspective of the country’s most precarious residents.

**Reprising ritual roles**

On 24 April 2020, a tweet from the priesthood at Tōdaiji in Nara featured a photograph of clergy from Buddhist, Shinto, Shugendō, and Catholic institutions lined up in front of the famous temple’s entrance along with a pledge by these representatives to pray daily for the quick expiation of the pandemic, and for the solace of those who died of the disease. The message was transmitted via new media, but a responsibility to carry out rituals to purge Japan of disease comprised a foundational reason why Tōdaiji and Japan’s other oldest religious institutions received governmental support and persevered into the present. In the 730s, smallpox (or a similar malady) wiped out as much as one-third of the Japanese population, including many powerful courtiers. Inspired to forestall future calamity, monasteries and nunneries were invested by the government to serve as facilities known as kokubunji (‘realm-dividing temples’) to perform rituals to protect the country, with one of each per province making up a comprehensive network. Numerous other famous religious sites and events in Japan originated in rituals to prevent or eliminate disease. For example, the spectacular Gion festival, an event in Kyoto that now attracts tens of thousands of participants every summer, originated in the spring of 869 as a ritual intended to quell the anger of onryō, malevolent spirits of the deceased. An epidemic that swept the imperial capital Heiankyō (now Kyoto) was attributed to dead courtiers. Intervention by ritual specialists was required to assuage them. Perhaps ironically, the Gion festival was cancelled in summer 2020 for fear of spreading COVID-19, as were almost all other large-scale religious gatherings. Clergy at sites across Japan nonetheless continued to conduct rituals to stave off the pandemic. Large and small examples abound, from the aforementioned daily rituals at Tōdaiji, before its famed fifteen-meter-high statue of Vairocana (Jp. Dainichi Nyorai, or the Great Sun Buddha), to the work of Shinto priests at shrines across Japan. Even though they cancelled popular (and lucrative) annual festivals in spring and summer of 2020, clergy performed rituals that comprise the justification for these events, and in many cases added special prayers for the elimination of the novel coronavirus from Japan.

**Sharpened divides between traditional groups and ‘New Religions’**

Though most people in Japan remain leery of the label ‘religion,’ it is notable that ritual responses to combat disease held at Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines appear to have enjoyed widespread social sanction. By contrast, groups marginalized by the labels ‘New Religion’ or ‘cult’ were regarded with heightened suspicion. This divide was exacerbated by the attention-gathering actions of a group called Kōfuku no Kagaku, or Happy Science. Unlike almost every other organization, Happy Science flouted calls to shut down in-person meetings and instead rallied hundreds of adherents and guests to listen to their leader Ōkawa Ryūhō, who promised to deliver a ‘spiritual vaccine’; coverage of Happy Science in *The New York Times* meant that this group most likely stood in as the Japanese religious response to the
pandemic for readers outside Japan. Other New Religions moved quickly to avoid the kind of attention Happy Science sought. Soka Gakkai, the lay Nichiren Buddhist sect that claims the largest number of adherents of any modern group in Japan, shut down in-person meetings in mid-February 2020, close to two months before Prime Minister Abe Shinzō declared a nationwide state of emergency. The group’s leaders announced that Soka Gakkai would not reopen its culture centres and other regional facilities until late summer 2020, and its principal facilities at its Tokyo headquarters delayed events until mid-September, two months after venues in Japan were granted governmental permission to host as many as five thousand attendees.

COVID-19’s religious artefacts: politics and popular culture

Appreciating the pandemic’s full religious range means looking beyond religious institutions to effects in other spheres. One prominent example of religious effects can be found in electoral politics. Japan’s national government comprises a coalition of two parties: the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), supported by Shinto groups and adjacent organizations that promote rightist policies, and Komeito, founded in 1964 by Soka Gakkai on a pacifist platform. Though Soka Gakkai and Komeito officially severed institutional ties in 1970, Gakkai voters continue to treat electioneering on behalf of Komeito and its LDP ally as a component of their religious practice (Ehrhardt et al. 2014). In late June 2020, the LDP indicated it was considering calling a snap election in the fall. In an uncharacteristically frank public announcement, Komeito leaders stated that an election would be undesirable. Unable to muster their Gakkai supporters who were still under quarantine, Komeito had already suffered local-level electoral losses; in an early June election in Okinawa, the party was forced to cut two of four potential candidates, anticipating an inability to gather enough votes while quarantined Gakkai members were unable to electioneer. Going forward, Japan may see a significant reduction in Komeito’s national-level strength. COVID-19 has contributed directly to marginalizing Buddhist voices in the government and increasing opportunities for nationalists who promote a vision of a remilitarized Japan.

The pandemic’s religion-related effects are also apparent in the realm of popular culture. Anxiety about infection saw a surge in enthusiasm about a creature from Japan’s mythological bestiary known as the amabie. Resembling a mermaid with long and lustrous hair (its most consistent feature), but with fish scales, fur, a beak, and between three and nine legs, the amabie gained popularity in the Tokugawa era (1603–1868) as a harbinger of disaster and disease. From early 2020, social media posts advised that displaying or carrying amabie pictures served as apotropaic protection against infection. Inventive takes on amabie imagery flooded the internet; temples and shrines featured the amabie on votive tablets; homemakers uploaded photographs of amabie-themed bentō (lunch boxes) and other crafts to Instagram; and the Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare even adapted a Tokugawa-era woodblock amabie image as a mascot for its anti-COVID-19 campaign. The amabie grew so popular that when the advertising firm Dentsu filed to patent the name of the creature in early July 2020, online outrage convinced the company to withdraw its application.

Conclusion: post-COVID religion

Just as the economy, education, government, travel, and just about every dimension of social life across the globe will remain affected by the pandemic for years to come, so too will religion in Japan emerge transformed by its experience with the disease. Time is required to assess COVID-19’s full impact, but some indications are already apparent. Perhaps some of
the best guides to how scholars should study the lingering effects of the pandemic emerge in intimate details within correspondence with religious professionals. Reverend Ōmori, a True Pure Land (Jōdo Shinshū) priest who resides in Tokyo and commutes to his family’s temple in rural Yamaguchi prefecture, provided some insight into how post-COVID religion may take shape:

In all likelihood, numerous things will be weeded out. For example, as we carry out memorial services and rituals, we will probably ask ourselves ‘we have done this in the traditional manner up to now, but was it necessary?’ It’s likely that only those activities that truly matter will be retained. However, new and necessary functions will also manifest at the same time. Conducting online consultations for those experiencing trouble or in need of Buddhist rituals, for instance.

Reverend Ōmori’s missive indicates that a divide may be taking shape in the midst of the quarantine. Those with the means and motivation to connect with parishioners online, and those who are willing to make bold decisions about casting aside tradition and formulating new solutions, may be the religious providers who shape institutions in the aftermath of the pandemic. Less flexible practitioners, particularly those of older generations, may find themselves left behind.

Notes

1 A summary of the survey, which was conducted between 7 and 24 May 2020, is available at https://chikouken.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/9cbedbdaacbf235ad666da66146d147c.pdf.


3 See McLaughlin 2020 for detailed discussions and numerous additional references related to the topics in this chapter.

4 The most recent survey results on religious affiliation appear in a volume edited by the NHK Broadcasting Culture Research Institute, ed., (2020). For analysis of how ‘religion’ was imported as an umbrella category as Japan transformed into an imperial nation-state, see Josephson 2012.

5 For examples, see McLaughlin 2020.

6 See Takahashi, this volume.

7 https://careforcovidfighte.wixsite.com/caremedical. See also coverage in the newspaper Asahi shinbun (14 May 2020).

8 The Single Spoonful Association blog is at www.facebook.com/hitosajinokai. Information on the association is at www.hitosaji.jp/?fclid=1wAR37QUkwCQATmkbBbXPPNNKoR-TQjaB17VN7V8OR55zk0CibebagLvl1A.

9 See https://twitter.com/kojomrt/status/1253686100683452417. See also Lowe 2020 for discussion of Tōdaiji’s ritual response in historical perspective.

10 See the New York Times article from 16 April 2020. See also Wagenaar 2016 for discussions of Orientalizing tropes in media coverage of Japan.

11 See Seikyō shinbun (12 June 2020). Initial plans to reopen large venues across Japan were announced on 10 July 2020 (Kyodo News).

12 See The Asahi Shinbun (1 July 2020). Komeito nonetheless prepared to field candidates in the event of a snap election (Asahi shinbun, 2 July 2020).

13 See Mainichi shinbun (30 April 2020) for an analysis of Komeito’s campaign in Okinawa.

14 For a broader analysis of popular invocation of mythical beasts in times of calamity, see Miura 2019.

15 Examples abound, but an image search on Google or Instagram for amabie yields ample evidence.

16 Imagery use examples appear on the Ministry webpage (www.mhlw.go.jp/stf/seisakunitsuite/bunya/0000164708_00001.html).
The patent was filed on 30 June 2020 and withdrawn one week later. See https://biz-journal.jp/2020/07/post_166479.html.

Written correspondence with the author on 27 June 2020. ‘Reverend Ōmori’ is a pseudonym.

Bibliography


