

# Reconsidering the Concept of “Religion” from the Perspective of Religious and Non-Religious Interactions

Yoshiyuki INOUE (Ryukoku University)

## Abstract

I will examine how the concept of “religion” is perceived in Japan, taking into account the history and current state of Japanese religion. Generally, “religion” is understood as having specific doctrines, rituals, and orders. According to this definition, it must be said that in contemporary Japan, religion is in decline, people are becoming less religious, and that the significance of religion is becoming weaker. However, when we look at the original function of religion expressing unique values for individual religious needs and ordinary sufferings, we understand that this function has not been weakened. This function is manifesting itself in the listening activities of “supra-religions and supra-sects” after the Great East Japan Earthquake. In such activities, not only believers in a particular religion but also non-religious people encounter “religious discourse” that is not reduced to the values of a particular religious sect or religion, nor is it exclusively secular. Moreover, such an awareness of the “religious” does not occur intentionally, but is recognized in a religious context by both the non-religious people and the religious people. This observation indicates that the essential function of religion manifests itself in the margins of each religion. While the substantive definition of religion clarifies the outlines of each religion, we observe that its original function itself is manifested precisely in the interactions between the religious and the non-religious.

## 和文要旨

本発表では、日本の宗教の歴史と現状を踏まえ、「宗教」概念が日本でどのように受け取られているかを検討する。一般に「宗教」は特定の教義・儀礼・秩序を持つものと理解され、この定義によれば、現代日本では宗教は衰退し、人々の宗教性が薄れ、その意義も弱まっていると言える。しかし宗教の本来の機能——個別の宗教的必要や日常的な苦悩に固有の価値を与える——に目を向けると、この機能は弱まっていない。実際、この機能は東日本大震災後の「超宗派・超宗教」的傾聴活動において顕著に現れている。こうした活動では、特定宗教の信者だけでなく非宗教者も、特定宗派や宗教の価値に還元されず、かつ純粹に世俗的でもない「宗教的言説」に触れる。このような「宗教性」の自覚は意図的に生じるのではなく、宗教者・非宗教者双方によって宗教的文脈の中で認識される。この

事実は、宗教の本質的機能が各宗教の周縁においてこそ現れることを示している。実体的定義は各宗教の輪郭を明らかにするが、その本来の機能は宗教と非宗教の相互作用においてこそ発揮されるのである。

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I will talk about “Reconsidering the Concept of “Religion” from the Perspective of interactions between religious and non-religious people. Specifically, I want to explore how we understand and define "religion" in different contexts from the following three perspectives. To achieve this, I will focus on the history and current state of religion in Japan and examine how Japanese society perceives it, particularly in relation to traditional forms of Buddhism such as Jodo Shinshu. Jodo Shinshu is the largest Buddhist sect in Japan, with over 15 million followers and a key example for understanding Japanese religious identity.

Jodo Shinshu gained prominence during the 15th century under the leadership of Rennyo. Rennyo's strategy for spreading the teachings involved "*yoriai*," or community gatherings, which facilitated discussions on various community issues, including faith. *Yorai* meetings were held regularly in village communities, led by influential people such as elders and priests. Rennyo's efforts included issuing documents to promote the teachings and establishing dojos for rituals and learning.

During the early Edo period, the number of Buddhist temples increased significantly. In response, the government introduced a temple ordinance to regulate this growth, and temples began to manage family records through a registration system. Japan now has around 70,000 temples — more than there are convenience stores.

Now the topic shifts to the present. In the mid-1950s, Japan experienced rapid economic growth, leading to urban population concentration. The industrial structure shifted from primary industries to secondary and tertiary industries. This shift caused younger generations, particularly second and third sons from rural areas, to migrate to cities for work, resulting in the formation of nuclear families distanced from local communities. Younger generations moving to urban areas and lacking ties to their ancestral temples wanted new religious affiliations.

Religious groups such as Soka Gakkai, Rissho Kosei-kai and Reiyukai adopted their teaching methods to meet the needs of urban dwellers. The original form of these methods could be called "*yoriai*" as used by Rennyo. These methods emphasize sharing personal experiences and problems, providing guidance and support, and encouraging community. With large population movements, new places of faith emerge that are different from the previous ties between community and faith.

Today, the share of tertiary industry exceeds 70%, allowing individuals to change their living situations relatively freely. This mobility has made it difficult to pass on religious beliefs from one generation to the next, as many people leave their ancestral lands without hesitation.

While traditional views see religion as doctrines, community, and rituals, their importance may be changing. However, religions still provide valuable perspectives on individual suffering and values. This function is not necessarily weak today.

There are various non-traditional activities that play similar roles to religions in addressing personal issues. As an example, I would like to introduce *Guchikore*. "*Guchikore*" is an abbreviation for "*Guchi* Collection," an activity that began in December 2012 to listen to people's complaints on the street for free, collect them, and publish them on a website. In Japanese Buddhist terminology, "*guchi*" means to complain and is considered one of the most common forms of attachment. In this sense, the word "*guchi*" has an inherently negative meaning. However, this activity was started with the hope of creating a society where modern people, who often face many problems, can freely express their frustrations. The idea is that by openly sharing their feelings, people can confront their true emotions in a positive way. Although this activity was originally started by volunteer Jodo Shinshu priests, it is not intended to promote the teachings and beliefs of Jodo Shinshu, nor is it initiated by any religious order. The priests participate in casual clothing, and the main participants are ordinary citizens—many of whom are non-religious—who come to complain and seek a listening ear. Since priests explain the activity's purpose beforehand, those who complain know they will be speaking with a religious person. While they don't offer solutions, many find relief and perspective simply by talking to someone they see as a spiritual listener.

Another example is "Café des Monk," created by Soto Zen monk Taio Kaneda to support victims of the Great East Japan Earthquake. It is distinct from traditional sectarian activities. Café des Monk is also a listening activity, and its name comes from the English word "monk" and the Japanese word "*monku*" meaning "complaint" or "agony." It focuses on listening to the complaints and suffering of earthquake victims, fostering a sense of shared agony. This activity is also not a traditional missionary activity, but rather an activity of being close to the victims of the disaster. These activities are not confined to sectarian boundaries. Similar efforts, like "Study de Monk," involve students in disaster areas.

These efforts and activities are marginal to the traditional view of religion, which sees doctrine, sect, and ritual as the core of religion. Therefore, some people criticize that listening to people's complaints is not a religious activity. But throughout history, religions have inherently possessed these functions. For example, Christianity provides pastoral care. These functions extend beyond the inner workings of a sect as a community of believers to the margins of each religion. There, not only followers of a particular religion, but also non-religious people may encounter discourses or "religiosity" that cannot be described as the values of a particular sect or religion, but which are not entirely secular. Moreover, the awareness of such "religiosity" does not occur intentionally, but is instantly recognized in a religious context, not only by the non-religious people involved, but also by the religious people themselves.

These activities are often referred to as "super-sects" or "super-religious". This may indicate that the original function of religion is manifested on the margins of each specific religion.

In conclusion, while the substantive definition of religion clarifies its structure, its core functions—such as compassion and listening—are often expressed through interactions between religious and non-religious people. These interactions reveal the original, universal aspects of religion that transcend specific doctrines or sects.