

Finally, secularities within a society respond to and are reconfigured by changing circumstances brought about through public controversies, debates in the media or in educational settings, and legal cases.

To keep the following discussion within manageable limits, I will survey three examples specific to Japan that represent some of the features of secularity just described. The first case is the lingering shadow of empire and the Pacific War. This legacy continues to obscure the separation of state and religion, evidenced in rulings from Japan's high and supreme courts. The second example is a uniquely configured sense of religiosity in Japan that surfaces frequently in scholarly literature via opinion surveys. While individual belief and opinions are important in assessing religion in any society, we will see how overemphasizing these aspects ignore social conditions and cultural trends affecting existing institutions and religious affiliations. My last example will show how a convergence of "unprecedented" global forces are accelerating the diminution of religion in the public sphere and are contributing to the decline and possible demise of numerous Buddhist temples. Taken together, these three situations—the legacy of the Pacific war, diverse religiosity, and newly intrusive social trends—indicate that conventional understandings of secularity and religious practice should be reframed in a "dialectical oscillation in which each is contingent on and responsive to the other" (Demerath 2000: 2488).

Multiple Secularities via State and Empire

The concept of secularism in the West originated as a response to the ways in which powerful and largely autonomous religious organizations (such as the Vatican or Church of England) had become integrated with the political and legal policies of monarchies. According to Ian Ward, "secularism is analyzed most fruitfully as a *discourse of displacement* that fixes citizens' reasonable anxieties...on 'religion,' constructed as an anomalous and unstable object in the 'secular' field of public life" (Ward 2010: 34). In Japan, however, during the nation's rapid modernization from 1868 to 1945, religion as a vital part of secular public life was not considered "unstable." It

quickly realizes that using belief rather than practice as a measure of religiosity is highly problematic.

was the state, and not a dominant religious organization (as in Europe), that appropriated religious legitimacy for itself while at the same time promoting the sovereignty of the Emperor and a dogma of sacred heritage for the nation-state. Japan's first constitution after the feudal period, promulgated in 1889, established a political system centered on concepts Westerners usually think of as contradictory: a sacred monarchy with real coercive power, and a representative democracy that was almost entirely secular (Skya 2009: 131).

State policies to enhance imperial power via religious institutions and rituals—such as State Shintō (*kokka shintō* 国家神道) and Yasukuni Shrine (*Yasukuni jinja* 靖国神社, the controversial shrine at the heart of the State Shintō system), the *niinamesai* 新嘗祭 imperial harvest festival, or pacifying the spirits of the military dead—reached their apex in 1945. With Japan's defeat, the separation of religion and the state came about not through popular demand but via the Allied Occupation. To the common person, their first experience with secularization was less as a policy restricting 'religion' and more as one of a dizzying cluster of changes linked to Japan's defeat and subsequent democratization. Japan's postwar rebuilding is a prime example of rapid modernization and industrialization taking place without a systematic policy of aggressive secularization eliminating the institutions responsible for wartime ideologies. The period can also be characterized as a time of "venture religious activity" where it became privatized and differentiated, one subsystem among many in a society being restructured (Shiobara 1994: 4).

Due in part to constitutional guarantees of freedom of religion, some of the pre-war and wartime political and religious alliances promoting imperial rule and a sacred nation-state have persisted long into the postwar period.⁶ From the 1960s to 2006, a number of groups and individuals have attempted to subvert and reinterpret the postwar constitution's separation clause. There is a wealth of examples where common citizens have sued state agencies and religious organizations over their patronage and favoritism of particular religious expressions linked to nationalism. With cases ranging from taxpayer-funded groundbreaking rituals (*jichinsai* 地鎮祭, see fig. 1) and war memorials, to the state's enshrinement of a soldier killed

⁶ See Mark Mullins' excellent analysis, "How Yasukuni Shrine Survived the Occupation: A Critical Examination of Popular Claims" (Mullins 2010).



Figure 1. Shintō priest before a groundbreaking ceremony (*jichinsai*) altar (photo courtesy of Hachiman Shrine, Yokohama, Japan).

in an accident (over the opposition of his Christian wife), to official visits by the nation's prime minister (and members of his cabinet) to Yasukuni Shrine, each court ruling has been significant in articulating the role of religion in the public sphere.

In the groundbreaking ceremony case, the Nagoya High Court ruled in 1972 that an event in the city of Tsu 津—conducted by ordained Shintō priests in front of an altar dedicated to a specific deity of the land upon which was to be constructed a municipal gymnasium—was really not religious but was a “traditional folkway” and thus a secular (*sezokuteki* 世俗的) activity. When the case was appealed to the Supreme Court, it ruled in 1977

that the ritual was not a “folkway” but was still a secular activity, noting that because of Japan’s unique religious history, it was impossible to separate what was religious from what was considered secular. The ruling acknowledged that Shintō priests were involved, but since they did not preach or proselytize, they were considered to have not engaged in a religious activity (see O’Brien 1996; Hardacre 1989).

Following the court’s logic, Japan’s Shintō shrines nationwide could thus be considered as secular rather than religious institutions in which people participate voluntarily.⁷ A possible result of this ruling (and one long desired by neo-nationalists) would be a government sponsored centralization of and patronage for shrine Shintō, including Yasukuni Shrine and other regional “nation-protecting” shrines. However, disagreement over the nature of shrines as ‘religious’ or ‘secular’ between the nation’s Shintō priests and their central policy board (*Jinja Honchō* 神社本庁, Association of Shintō Shrines) in Tokyo effectively hamstrung any initiative that might have advanced shrines as secular institutions.

Although the nation’s Shintō priests disagreed over the possible outcomes of this ruling, conservative and nationalistic politicians within the Liberal Democratic Party saw an opportunity and acted upon it. The Supreme Court ruling was a critical juncture where circumstances and highly motivated actors coincided to produce a series of political moves, all designed to either enhance or restore the political and sacred power of the emperor. (This is probably *not* what Max Weber had in mind when discussing the ‘reenchantment’ of the world). A bill had already been introduced in 1969 to reestablish Yasukuni Shrine as nonreligious foundation. Grand ceremonies celebrating emperor Hirohito’s fifty years on the throne were held in 1976, paid for with federal funds over the objections of opposition forces both within and outside the government. In 1977, the prewar anthem, *Kimigayo* 君が代 (which extols imperial rule lasting forever and says nothing about the actual nation of Japan), was reinstated for official occasions (although not passed into law until 1999). In 1979, the government was complicit in the enshrinement of fourteen convicted class-A war criminals at Yasukuni Shrine, while the following year the nation reverted officially to

⁷ Elisabetta Porcu’s work on neighborhood organizations in Kyoto (this issue) indicates that a legally-sanctioned organization, the *chōnaikai* 町内会, exerts coercive pressure on residents to contribute financially to Shintō festivals.

counting years according to the reign of an emperor. In 1984, a government committee of lawmakers and legal experts concluded that official visits to Yasukuni Shrine could be considered constitutional based in part on the 1977 Supreme Court ruling in the groundbreaking ceremony case. The very next year, then prime minister Nakasone Yasuhiro 中曾根康弘 made an official visit to Yasukuni, setting off a firestorm of controversy from Asian nations once occupied by Japanese imperial forces. The 1984 committee report may have also provided Koizumi Jun'ichirō 小泉純一郎, Japan's prime minister from 2001-2006, a legal framework for justifying the five official and highly controversial visits he made to Yasukuni.

Multiple Secularities and Japanese Religiosity

Since the religiosity of the Japanese people has been a key factor in both the High and Supreme Court's rulings, it is worth investigating further how this legacy plays into debates about secularity. The courts' logic of how an average Japanese person would regard a groundbreaking ceremony cited both a widespread "religious indifference" as well a "pluralistic religious consciousness" contributing to this unique sense of the secular (O'Brien 1996: 92). Scholars of secularization in the West might assume these descriptions apply to the postwar period of religious freedom and rapid modernization. They refer, however, to a centuries-old general tendency in Japan for individuals to seek spiritual and religious benefits (*riyaku* 利益) from a variety of traditions, depending on the setting, circumstances, and timing of a person's need. Awareness of and loyalty to the doctrine of a particular religious tradition has been the exception rather than the norm in Japan, except during that period of late nineteenth and early twentieth century imperial rule when the State actively promoted and enforced ideologies about the sacred quality of the emperor.⁸

For many scholars, the idea of 'religion' as a discrete category of belief and individual practice outside Europe predates the modern period and is tied to global effects of colonialization (Miyajima 2010). Since arriving in Japan from Europe in the nineteenth century, the concept of "religion"

⁸ Both Weber and Foucault have noted that the all-encompassing nature of Christianity meant it did not need to be enforced in any highly-regulated manner or even practiced in a daily way before the Reformation (Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2000: 15).