

Reclaiming the Shinto Secular: The Death of “Religion” in an Enchanted Society

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As recent scholarship has demonstrated, the newly created category “religion” (*shūkyō*) played a central role in modern Japanese state formation during the Meiji period (1868-1912) (Maxey 2014). At the time, “Shinto” was configured as a public, mandatory, and “non-religious” ritual tradition, intimately intertwined with the imperial institution and national-organicist ideology – the “Shinto secular”, as one scholar has called it (Josephson 2012). After the Japanese surrender in 1945, Shinto was depoliticised and legally reclassified as a religion, which it remains today. However, attempts to reclaim Shinto’s position in the centre of public space, both literally and metaphorically, have gained significant strength in recent years. The Association of Shinto Shrines and associated ideologues actively seek to redefine Shinto as “traditional Japanese culture” and re-establish the Shinto secular, in a process which I have referred to as “discursive secularisation” (Rots 2017). The rejection of the category religion on the part of religious actors themselves is not unique to Shinto, but can also be observed in Buddhist and new religious organisations. Unlike these, however, the current Shinto establishment has close ties to the ruling government, and actively contributes to the revitalisation of notions of Japan as a sacred nation surrounding a divine emperor. Importantly, as I will demonstrate in this presentation, the fact that religious actors redefine themselves in alternative terms does not mean that elements commonly associated with religion – e.g. ritual worship practices, a belief in the existence of spirits and deities, and notions of divine ordination – lose their significance or disappear. Indeed, in contemporary Japan, the opposite appears to be the case. The discursive secularisation of Shinto and the rejection of the category “religion” go hand in hand not only with renewed notions of the nation and emperor as sacred, but also with the emergence of various popular new beliefs and practices centred on shrines at sites of “spiritual power”.

References:

- Josephson, Jason Ānanda (2012), *The Invention of Religion in Japan*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Maxey, Trent E. (2014), *The “Greatest Problem”: Religion and State Formation in Meiji Japan*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center.
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