

Japanese Religious Responses to COVID-19: A Preliminary Report

Levi McLaughlin

Abstract: As the novel coronavirus swept Japan, religious practitioners of all types responded. This article provides an overview of early-stage reactions by individuals and organizations affiliated with Buddhism, Shinto, New Religions, and other religious traditions in Japan. It features interviews with Japanese clergy and lay followers who contended with social distancing and more dire consequences of COVID-19, and it contextualizes their responses within media coverage, sectarian sources, and historical research. As it highlights trends in religious reactions to the coronavirus, such as a divide between policies enacted by “new” and “traditional” groups, the article discusses reasons for contrasting responses and points to dilemmas that will face Japan’s religious organizations after the pandemic subsides.¹

Keywords: COVID-19; coronavirus; religion; Japanese religion; online religion; ritual; disaster; Buddhism; Shinto; New Religions; Shugendō; Soka Gakkai; Happy Science

Listen to the podcast by the author [here](#) on *Japan on the Record*.



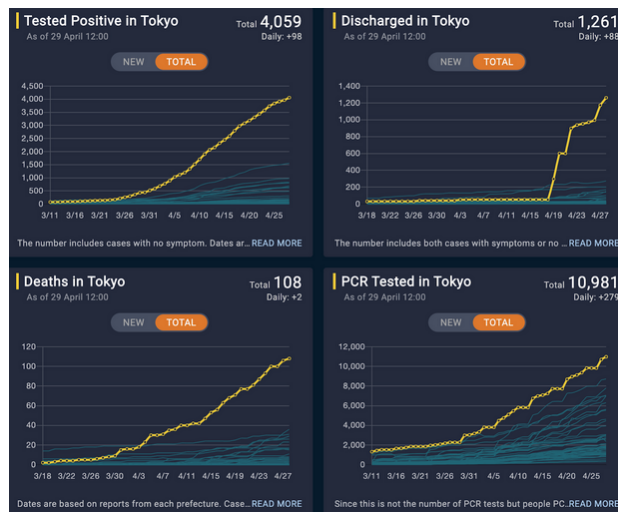
Reverend Koike Yōnin, assistant priest at the Shingon sect temple Sumadera in Kobe, describes the benefits of *shakyō* (sutra transcription) at home in a dharma talk broadcast through YouTube. Source: *Mainichi Shinbun* 27 April 2020

Introduction: Putting COVID-19 into Perspective

Widespread concern about the devastating effects of a novel coronavirus epidemic in Wuhan province began spreading along with the disease beyond China’s borders in January 2020. From February 4, 3,700 passengers aboard the cruise ship Diamond Princess were quarantined in Yokohama harbor. Thirteen passengers died, and 712 were confirmed in Japan as infected with the disease, which the World Health Organization (WHO) named COVID-19 on February 11.² The Japanese government enacted basic policies on February 25 to forestall infection, which included calls

for residents to exercise “self-restraint” (*jishuku*). Schools across Japan were requested to close from March 2, and many businesses shortened their hours or shut their doors. On March 7, the Japanese government temporarily halted visas for 2.7 million Chinese and 17,000 South Koreans. On March 24, the International Olympic Committee announced that the Tokyo 2020 summer games would be delayed until July 2021.³ Japan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a Level 2 travel warning on March 25, advising against non-essential travel outside Japan. Expanded emergency measures were announced on March 28, and passage to and from Japan all but completely halted. The workforce turned to the daunting task of telecommuting, even though at-home high-speed internet access rates in Japan remain low.⁴

undertook self-restraint and worked remotely, a significant percentage of businesses remained open, commuters continued to crowd onto trains, and school closings were uneven.⁵ On April 7, 2020, Prime Minister Abe Shinzō declared a state of emergency for seven of Japan’s most populated prefectures. On April 16, the emergency order was expanded to the whole country in response to an alarming rise in COVID-19 patients who were straining hospital capacity, a measure taken more than a month after many other nations. At the end of April, testing indicated that Japanese case numbers crested to 13,000 and were still rising (albeit at a reduced rate), and close to 400 people had died of the disease. Concern surrounds the fact that only a small percentage of the Japanese population was screened and that recorded infection rates depended on whether or not testing facilities were open.⁶



COVID-19 rates continue to rise in late April

Overall, Japan lagged behind the global trend to flatten the curve of a logarithmic rise in infection rates. In contrast to countries that enforced strict quarantine measures, and in some cases threatened transgressors with legal penalties, the Japanese government only issued recommendations. While many residents

In mid-April, I began reaching out to religious practitioners in Japan via email, Facebook, Line, and other virtual means. I wanted to know how they were dealing with the onset of COVID-19 in Japan; how adjusting to the call for self-restraint affected believers’ activities and institutional policies; what kinds of ritual responses individuals and institutions were devising; how religious professionals handled memorials, funerals, and other services for socially distanced parishioners; and how clergy coped with a sudden loss of income as in-person services were canceled. One of the first to respond was Reverend Asahikawa, a female priest at a Shingon temple in a community in Wakayama prefecture, an hour from Osaka by train and a short distance from her denomination’s headquarters on Mount Kōya.⁷ She began her thoughtful and wide-ranging response by contextualizing the pandemic within living Japanese memory of other calamities:

Right now, most Japanese are carrying on

with their activities even though they are afraid. We look for something that signifies that we can overcome the limits of a frightening situation, don't we? We can find portents in catch phrases many citizens take up, sayings that emerge naturally in the situation. During the Great East Japan Earthquake disasters, the phrase was "bonds" (kizuna). Before, during the Second World War, it was "this cannot be helped" (shikata ga nai). You are probably going to think this is a very negative way of expressing things, but the Japanese people believe in a theory of destiny (unmeiron). Even if they don't use the word "destiny" openly, they are part of a culture of accepting everything that happens to them. This manifests in the words they use.

A traditional saying that provides many with consolation now is:

Nodomoto to sugireba

Atsusa mo samusa mo higan made

Fukusuibon ni kaerazu

Literally "once the [drink] has passed the throat, [memory of] its heat or cold will not return to the vessel until [one attains] enlightenment," Asahikawa invoked a *kotowaza*, a Japanese aphorism. It resonates to a certain extent with the English proverb "once on shore we pray no more, danger past and God forgotten," with the notable difference that the Japanese expression offers promise that understanding of pain and its origins will come with awakening.⁸ Ultimately, what's done is done. We seek delivery from suffering in the moment, but once suffering is past we do not linger on it. This expression is apt, Asahikawa stressed. It is a form of taking responsibility, an indirect way people in Japan are employing to exhort one another to overcome the impulse for

recrimination in the heat of the moment. "It is imperative to see this as wisdom (*prajñā*) borne of a long history of quarantining and avoiding ostracism in village society (*Murahachibu*)," she explained.⁹ Dwelling on stress fosters social discord. The pandemic requires some painful swallowing of emotions, but this is pain to be put aside.

Pain is put aside, but religions are repositories of memory. Their activists retain experiences and layer them atop one another to build a foundation for informed responses to calamity. Asahikawa's wisdom was echoed in the messages I received from other clergy and from lay followers. My respondents hailed from Buddhist and Shinto organizations, New Religions, and other groups that intersect with religion in some fashion. All of them reprised Japanese religion's long history of combining ritual with pragmatic social engagement in the face of disasters of all kinds. They expressed hope, at times in prophetic terms, that persevering through COVID-19 would lead into a brighter future. At the same time, they made realistic assessments about how the pandemic will exacerbate difficulties that afflict their groups, and Japan as a whole.

The Pandemic Exposes the "New Religions" Stigma

Trends in Japanese religious reactions to the coronavirus were apparent months before Abe declared a nationwide state of emergency. There was a notable divide in operational shutdown measures taken by groups that bear the label "New Religion"—that is, groups founded in the last two centuries that are institutionally and categorically distinct from older sects—and organizations that enjoy the "traditional" designation, such as Buddhist denominations and Shinto shrines. New Religions mostly suspended in-person contact

in mid-February while traditional groups curtailed operations later and less completely. There was also an urban and rural divide. “Until March 16, there was a sense of danger, but we could travel freely and attend talks and the like,” reported Reverend Asahikawa. “From March 19, everything changed when Osaka and Kobe enacted calls to self-restrain movement. We were to maintain two meters between people and limit gatherings to no more than five.” As late as April 22, Reverend Masaki, a Jōdo Shinshū (True Pure Land) priest at a temple in rural Hyōgo prefecture, reported only minor shifts. “Ours is a farming village. We don’t have epidemic patients here like they do in cities, so I’m making my regular rounds. However, we have decided to delay our temple’s usual rites and ceremonies. There has been only one funeral, and we were forced to limit attendance to close relatives because of corona. We’re under emergency orders, so this can’t be helped (*shikata nai*).”

Journalists picked up on the fact that New Religions were among the first Japanese organizations to shutter their offices and strictly require that their participants communicate remotely. “On Sunday, February 16, most districts held their monthly study meeting (*zadankai*),” reported Mr. Andō, a Tokyo-area member of the Nichiren Buddhism-based lay association Soka Gakkai. “Then on the next day, late in the evening, we received an email just as we held our district planning meeting. From February 18 until mid-March, we were to persevere in a new direction by completely canceling all activities—holding big and small meetings, carrying out home visits, operating Culture Centers.” Tabloid reports indicated that Soka Gakkai closed its general headquarters in Tokyo at Shinanomachi on February 17.¹⁰ Articles in the religion’s daily newspaper *Seikyō shinbun* announced that all Shinanomachi facilities would shut from February 22. By March 20, Soka Gakkai

announced a nationwide shutdown to April 19, and on April 28 the Gakkai administration extended full-scale shutdown until May 31.¹¹ “We are practicing self-restraint (*jishuku*). We’re learning [about the teachings] by watching video-on-demand as a family. Some are studying doctrine by reading the *Seikyō shinbun*. Communication between members is only via telephone and messaging. I’ve decided to set 10 a.m. to noon every day as my time to chant *daimoku* [the title of the *Lotus Sūtra*].” I was informed of this by Mrs. Shibata, a long-term Gakkai friend. Her response typified a new normal that set in early for housebound adherents.



Streets around Soka Gakkai’s Hall of the Great Vow of Kōsen Rufu remain empty after it closes its headquarters in Shinanomachi, Tokyo. Photo: Ogawa Kandai

Fears of coronavirus outbreak triggered preset Japanese biases. Rather than simply delivering news on how New Religions were closing their headquarters, media investigations in fact activated their shutdown. Soka Gakkai members confirmed to me that their religion’s administrators were concerned about media-driven effects should COVID-19 infection be

linked to their group. “I heard from an administrator at the headquarters that numerous outlets were inquiring at Soka Gakkai in regard to the religious group in South Korea that became a cluster,” wrote Mr. Nishino from Chiba prefecture. On February 18, it was confirmed that a 61-year-old parishioner of Shincheonji Church of Jesus in Daegu, one of the first Korean carriers, had transmitted the disease among her congregation. By early March, more than 60% of thousands of confirmed Korean coronavirus cases were traced to the church. On March 2, the 89-year-old charismatic church founder Lee Man-hee bowed on his knees in apology at a press conference. The mayor of Seoul launched a lawsuit on that day against Lee and eleven other church leaders, accusing them of homicide and injury through violating Korea’s Infectious Disease and Control Act. There were nationwide calls to dismantle the church after it was revealed that Lee and others church members initially refused to be tested. Police raided the Shincheonji Church, acting on suspicions that it was falsifying information about government-mandated testing of its congregants. Subsequent investigation revealed that there were no significant differences between infection statistics gathered by the church and the Korean government, and the church remained operational in late April.¹²



Shincheonji leader Lee Man-hin bows in apology at a press conference in Seoul, 2 March 2020.

In their conversations with me, members expressed sensitivity to the negative repercussions they, their fellow adherents, and their group as a whole would face should a coronavirus outbreak be linked to a Gakkai gathering. Soka Gakkai, like all large New Religions, is a veteran survivor of moral panic. Ever since “religion” was imported from English into Japanese in the mid-nineteenth century, groups dubbed “false sects” (*jashū*), “newly-arisen” or “upstart religions” (*shinkō shūkyō*), or “cults” (*karuto*), have served as functional opposites for those keen on declaring religious orthodoxies.¹³ “New” and “traditional” are arbitrated by politically motivated classification schemes that cleave boundaries between “real” and “false,” or “good” and “bad.” Groups that violate convention through aggressive proselytizing, attracting socially marginalized converts, seeking influence in electoral politics, and by otherwise not lining up with the status quo are regarded routinely as “false” and “bad” examples against which to determine “real” and “good” religion.¹⁴ Debate persists in religious studies about whether or not “New Religions” is a viable analytical category, given that distinctions between “new” and “traditional” practices tend to fall apart under scrutiny.¹⁵ The stigma that accompanies COVID-19 reinforces the fact that, scholarly concerns notwithstanding, the new / traditional religions divide has real-world consequences. What happened to the Shincheonji Church removed all doubt about what was at stake, but New Religions in Japan most likely did not need the reminder. Between mid-February and early March, numerous groups that bear the label “New Religion,” including Risshō Kōseikai, Shinnyo-en, Seichō no Ie, and Sekai Kyūseikyō, like Soka Gakkai, were some of the first

Japanese organizations of any sort to close their headquarters and cancel in-person events.

Reprising Ritual Responses through New Media

Of all of Japan's New Religions, Kōfuku no Kagaku, known in English as Happy Science, probably gained the most attention for its COVID-19 response. Indeed, thanks to coverage in the *New York Times*, Happy Science almost certainly represents the Japanese religious response to the pandemic for readers outside Japan. A 16 April 2020 *Times* article titled "Inside the Fringe Japanese Religion that Claims It Can Cure COVID-19" mobilized two click-bait tropes: "nefarious cults" and "those quirky Japanese."¹⁶ By leaning heavily on eyebrow-raising details, the article gestured toward prurient fears of an exotic "cult" and reprised the tried-and-true cliché of Japan as wacky Other—a perennial, and essentially racist, media standard that encourages readers to assure themselves of their comparative normalcy.¹⁷ To be fair "nutty cult" and "nutty Japan" clichés fit Happy Science like a glove. For a fee, the religion offers "spiritual vaccines" to fight COVID-19, made available by its spiritual leader Ōkawa Ryūhō.¹⁸ This service caught the attention of the *Times* writer when sash-wearing Happy Science adherents began handing out brochures in the streets of virus-stricken Manhattan. In thousands of books that bear Okawa's authorship, through extravagant use of big budget animated films and other media, and via outreach by missionizing believers, the religion publicizes *reigen*, or "spirit words," which Ōkawa channels from aliens and the spirit world. These are messages from protector deities that hover above famous figures, living and dead, such as Donald Trump, Xi Jinping, and John Lennon. Relying on his authority as a reborn Buddha and the manifestation of a creator divinity called El

Cantare, along with other beings, Ōkawa highlighted messages he received about coronavirus as an existential threat to Japan.¹⁹ Happy Science caught media attention for defiantly gathering large numbers of members just as other New Religions closed down; Ōkawa addressed approximately 1300 followers and guests in Kagawa prefecture on February 22 and 1200 in Miyagi prefecture on March 14. In his speeches and in the religion's publications, the spiritual leader advanced Happy Science's rightwing Japanese political agenda as it advertised his signature ritual practice as the most effective means of eliminating the disease.²⁰ "This infection is made in China," Ōkawa announced. "To combat a godless communist dictatorship that is spreading sorcery across the world to oppress human rights and exert its hegemony, I am thinking of a divine protection. Services at our branches and Viharas (*shōja*) focus primarily on watching and listening to videos of dharma talks and praying. We are not curtailing these services, but we are taking sufficient precautions by using alcohol-based disinfectant and monitoring health conditions."²¹



Happy Science founder Ōkawa Ryūhō addresses followers in Sendai on 14 March 2020.

There is no question that Happy Science is a spectacle. However, the *Times* report ignored

the fact that, rather than setting itself apart as a “fringe religion” by promising delivery from disease via ritual, Happy Science in fact relied on what are longstanding religious conventions, in Japan and elsewhere. Though they elude lurid journalistic treatment, Japan’s mainstays of temple Buddhism, shrine-based Shinto, the mountain asceticism tradition Shugendō, and just about every other religious exponent, new and old, carried out comparable rituals to combat the pandemic. Ritual protection is, after all, religion’s job. From the earliest Japanese chronicles, the country’s written record makes clear that illness was not differentiated categorically from other calamities, such as political disarray, economic distress, earthquakes, typhoons, tsunami, drought, or agricultural blight. All were attributed to cosmic imbalances caused by people’s improper actions. Bad actions resulted in internal medical problems, small- and large-scale disasters in the human world, and cosmic upheaval. These linked phenomena could be put right through propitious actions along with rites and edification offered by a network of government-supported Buddhist temples called *kokubunji* that were tasked with protecting the land, and by ritual specialists who interceded with the *kami*, deities understood to occupy sacred sites across the land and throughout the heavens. Scholars in fact suggest that the impetus for the *kokubunji* system was a smallpox (or similar) epidemic in the 730s that killed as much as one third of the population, including many powerful aristocrats.²² Today, reliance on biomedical expertise encourages people to categorize ritual responses to disease as lingering historical artifacts. Following classification systems that developed from the nineteenth century as people in Japan embraced the modern scientific episteme, rituals and teachings about the *kami* and buddhas are sorted into legal entities that now exist separately as either Shinto or Buddhist. But people in Japan today still live, at least nominally, as parishioners of both. And even though most are liable to self-describe as non-

religious, many will attend temples, shrines, and other sites to perform rituals at set points during the year and at other times to satisfy personal needs. The vast majority will rely on data-driven scientific understandings of the coronavirus epidemic to guide their actions and to seek treatment, but aid from the *kami* and buddhas for deliverance from pestilence still holds appeal.

This appeal is apparent in how mainstream media outlets held up examples of temple and shrine rituals as positive measures taken against coronavirus. Affirming a role it has fulfilled since it was invested by governmental authority in the eighth century as the center of the *kokubunji* system, charged with alleviating suffering from calamities of all sorts, the massive Kegon sect temple Tōdaiji in Nara began daily noon expiation rituals on April 1.²³ On April 3, Sagawa Fumon, the temple’s *bettō* (chief administrator), sent out a message via the Tōdaiji homepage calling on all Buddhist temples, Shinto shrines, and Christian churches, and for all lay people, to join in prayer at noon every day to memorialize those who have died of coronavirus and to usher Japan toward rapid delivery from the disease. In an April 24 tweet, the Tōdaiji priesthood posted what became a widely forwarded photograph of clergy from other major Buddhist and Christian institutions lined up in solidarity before their temple.²⁴



新型コロナウイルス感染症の早期終息と罹患された方々の早期快復、及びお亡くなりになった方々の追福菩提のため、宗教・宗派を超えて我々は共に祈ります。5月から高野山真言宗の皆さんもご一緒いただけることになりました。さあ、皆さんも一緒に。#奈良 #東大寺 #疫病退散 #共に祈ろう #利他

Translate Tweet



Tweet by Tōdaiji priest Morimoto Kōjō sending out a photo of Buddhist and Catholic leaders united at the temple to pray for a quick end to coronavirus and the suffering it causes.

Prior to this, the temple uploaded a broadcast of its expiation ritual before its famed Great Buddha via Nikonikodōga, a popular Japanese video site akin to YouTube.²⁵ Tweeting on April 20, Tōdaiji priest Morimoto Kōjō sought to eliminate misunderstanding about what viewers were seeing. This is not you looking in on the Buddha, he asserted; this is the Buddha Vairocana looking out at *you*. “It is not as if you are looking at an image. We want you to feel that the Great Buddha is looking out to protect you all.”²⁶ The celestial and primordial Great Sun Buddha gazes out, deftly employing the internet to cast its benevolent and all-encompassing compassion over a beleaguered populace.



誤解の無いように申し添えますが、昼間は室内より屋外の方が明るいので、実際には写真のように見えません。今回の観相窓開扉は、皆さんに現地で観ていただくことが目的ではなく、大仏さまが皆さんを見守ってくださっていることをより感じていただきたいとの想いからです。#奈良 #東大寺 #疫病退散

Translate Tweet

森本 公種 @kojomrmt · Apr 20

東大寺の大仏さまの正式名称は「盧舎那仏」或いは「毘盧遮那仏」。これはサンスクリット語のVairocanaの音訳で「光明遍照」を意味します。今回「三密」を避けるためやむを得ず堂内での参拝を停止しますが、大仏さまの光は観相窓を通して必ず皆さまの元に届くと信じています。#奈良 #東大寺 #疫病退散



10:21 AM · Apr 20, 2020 · Twitter for iPhone

Worship inside Tōdaiji before the Great Buddha is prohibited during the pandemic, but it casts its protective gaze over all.



Worshippers gather before the Great Buddha at Tōdaiji on 31 March 2020.

Ritual expulsion of COVID-19 is widespread

across Japan. On April 8, Shinto priests at Matatabisha, a branch shrine of the famed Yasaka Shrine in Kyoto, performed a *Gion goryōe*, or “assembly at Gion for angry spirits,” specifically aimed at quelling malevolent powers for the quick elimination of coronavirus.²⁷



Rites at the Shinto shrine Matatabisha in Kyoto to quell COVID-19.

This ritual was, in a sense, business as usual for the shrine.²⁸ An annual spring festival at Gion began in the year 869. The Gion Festival is a huge event that now attracts tens of thousands of participants from all over the world. Worship in the district, which comprised part of the capital Heian-kyō (now Kyoto), still centers on reverence for “disease divinities” (*ekijin*), which are understood to cause pestilence, earthquakes, and other disasters. The spectacular annual Gion festival—sadly, and perhaps ironically, canceled for 2020—began as one of many rituals to quell powerful personages that manifested as *goryō*, spirits of deceased members of the ruling class whose anger at political events was credited as the cause of epidemic.

Shinto priests informed me that Jinja Honchō, the Association for Shinto Shrines that

oversees 80,000 ritual sites, has sent their clergy newly-composed *norito* (prayers to the *kami*) that include wording aimed at ridding Japan of COVID-19. The priests have been enjoined by their Association to perform these prayers daily. Across Japan, Shinto shrines are highlighting their historical contributions as providers of solace and healing from epidemics. In western Tokyo, for example, Seta Tamagawa Shrine priest Takahashi Tomoaki has turned public attention to the role his shrine has played in invoking the power of Japan’s deities to counter epidemics. In a series of guest blog posts for a website that serves his neighborhood, Takahashi guides readers on a virtual pilgrimage to Kasamori Inari Jinja, one of several branch shrines that lie within the territory consecrated for Seta Tamagawa; worship at the small outdoor facility does not require the presence of a priest, and social distancing residents can walk over there to pray.²⁹



The modest shrine Kasamori Inari Jinja, disease protector in Futago Tamagawa, western Tokyo.

This branch shrine was founded in the Tokugawa era (1603-1867), when it was sited near the fifty-third station of the Tōkaidō, the

highway that ran from Edo (now Tokyo) to the historic capital Kyoto. Tradesmen, pilgrims, and other travelers would avail themselves of the worldly pleasures that awaited them at the stop, thus necessitating a specific deity for the treatment of *kasa*, skin lesions resulting from syphilis. The shrine's syphilis-relieving deity has since been patronized during epidemics of all sorts, and it now hosts an annual festival every April 15—sadly, like the Gion festival, canceled in 2020 thanks to understanding of viral contagion.

Reverend Takahashi is an experienced disaster responder. He oversees Seta Tamagawa in Tokyo, but his birth family's shrine is in a region of coastal Iwate prefecture that was devastated by the 11 March 2011 tsunami. Takahashi's family shrine and home housed hundreds of refugees for months after the disaster, an experience that inspired him to found dynamic reconstruction efforts, including an NGO that combines reverence for the *kami* of land and sea with expertise from participating scientists to encourage large-scale replacement of old growth forests in the devastated region.³⁰ For Takahashi, responding to COVID-19 is contiguous with other revitalization efforts. The current crisis calls for pragmatic use of the most effective means to generate care for people and tradition. It demands cutting-edge scientific research in concert with cultivating public reverence for the *kami*.

Ritual Crises, Online Adaptations, and Technical Difficulties

Innovation in the face of emergency is nothing new for Japanese religions. However, online access now allows practitioners unprecedented chances to innovate across physical divides. Striking examples of this can be found in Shugendō, a combinatory mountain asceticism tradition that maintains institutional bonds with Shingon Buddhism and includes *kami* worship,

challenging bodily austerities, secret teachings and initiations, and other distinctive elements for worship at remote mountain sites. Major Shugendō affiliate temples have been responding to the pandemic in ancient ways. For example, the Shingon temple Daigoji in Kyoto on April 15 dedicated the centerpiece of its three-week-long *sakurae* (cherry blossom assembly), a *goma kuyō* (fire *pūjā*) and performance of *kyōgen* (comic ritual plays), to eliminating the disease.³¹ Another *goma kuyō* was performed at noon daily at the Shugendō-affiliate temple Kinpusenji in Nara's Yoshino district to drive away the virus. On March 6, fifty *shugenja* (Shugendō renunciants) gathered at a *daikitōe*, a "great prayer assembly," a *goma kuyō* put on jointly by Kinpusenji and the temple Ōminesanji. This was the first ritual collaboration between these sites since they were separated in the Meiji era (1868-1912).³² The event was broadcast over social media and received hundreds of supportive messages.³³



Shugendō ascetics gather on 6 March 2020 at the *daikitōe* (great prayer assembly) at the temple Kinpusenji to ritually expunge COVID-19.

Shugendō followers who have been going online are confronting a particular COVID-19 challenge: how can a pilgrimage tradition

persist if practitioners must stay home? Caleb Carter, Assistant Professor of Japanese Religions at Kyushu University who is a Shugendō expert, kindly shared a write-up of his engagement with a ritual led online in early April by a pilgrimage leader:

The service was organized by a Shugendō priest (ordained through the Yoshino lineage) who leads a confraternity (kō) he established some years ago. He's very charismatic and personable. He and most of the members are based in the Tokyo area. Their main activity is to meet monthly in the city and play the horagai (conch shell trumpet) together in a ritual/prayer/training atmosphere. They also regularly go to mountains together on trips he organizes and charges a fee for, where they circuit the temples and shrines, pray to the deities, and play the horagai. He communicates with the group through a Facebook group he set up (about 100 members). Under the current circumstances, he decided to begin 90-minute services over Zoom with members in their homes. There were eight of us, including him and me. In front of an altar of Tibetan thangka (paintings of sacred images) and other Buddhist objects in his friend's home, he led prayers to end the virus, chanted the Heart Sutra, performed mudra (esoteric hand gestures), chanted a number of mantra devoted to various Shugendō and Buddhist divinities, and played the horagai. He then led us in some light self-massage techniques and an Indian-based chakra dhyāna (meditation focused on the seven chakras). We finished with responses from each member. Despite a few technical hiccups, I thought it went smoothly and successfully. Everyone's reactions were very positive. I think it was effective in bringing the group together for a sense of community, sharing

how everyone is coping and advice on how to stay well, mentally and physically. He plans to continue with these services, twice a month. I think he also hopes attendance will pick up over time.

The service Carter described is in keeping with rituals individuals across Japan took upon themselves to move online. It is primarily local-level activists that employed online means of seeing to their parishioners. Sect headquarters, by contrast, focused on measures their priests should follow for in-person services. In some instances, sect guidelines lay out stark reminders of how important it is to curtail activities to halt the pandemic. The Sōtō Zen Headquarters page, for example, reported on coronavirus contagions traced to their events. In mid-March, four COVID-19 cases were confirmed among twenty-one attendees at a Sōtō Zen wake (*tsūya*) and funeral ceremonies in Matsuyama, Ehime prefecture. Investigations revealed that at least one infected person visiting from Tochigi prefecture came into close contact with other attendees. Sōtō Zen also uploaded a highly detailed flowchart with four scenarios for priests to follow in cases of funerals for COVID-19 deaths and other circumstances.³⁴ It warned that the virus could spread beyond Matsuyama throughout Japan, just as it was spreading across Spain and other countries. The sect issued a directive calling for funerals to be delayed, if possible, and prohibited gatherings of more than three people at cremations and its other services until the end of Japan's state of emergency. It is worth remarking that the Zen message, unlike communications from New Religions practitioners, did not dwell on concern about what would befall their organization should it be linked to contagion.

The Tendai sect announced that its head temple Enryakuji and all of its facilities would remain closed from April 15 until May 31, and

it provided a long list of canceled events that ran well into the summer.³⁵ On April 17, [Jōdo Shinshū's Ōtani sect headquarters at the temple Higashihonganji in Kyoto uploaded an eight-point checklist for in-person ritual protocols](#). This included applying sanitizer, requiring that priests and parishioners wear masks, and reducing risk by avoiding the “three closes”: enclosed spaces with poor ventilation, close physical proximity, and physical contact. Offering incense and other acts that require touching were to be curtailed. [The Nichiren sect headquarters issued more modest directives on April 8](#), urging its followers to stay in line with government mandated self-restraint measures and to otherwise seek to perform duties as usual; the headquarters would announce decisions on major events such as ceremonies for the spring equinox and *obon* in the summer one month in advance. A short announcement from February 26 by the Association of Shinto Shrines regarding coronavirus remained at the top of their homepage news feed in late April. [It assured visitors that its shrines had been advised to carefully clean all of their facilities and carry out rituals using disinfectant while wearing masks](#). In all cases, Japan's sectarian headquarters are limiting visitor access, and priests informed me that employees are carrying out much of the headquarters' business remotely via email and video meetings.

Even Buddhist and Shinto denominations that oversee millions of parishioners lack the technological and human resources to provide online services to their temples and shrines. They rely instead on local clergy to organize internet-based solutions. Examples of grassroots-level online outreach abound. The Facebook-based “Online Rosary Linked Sutra Reading” (Onrain Juzu Tsunagi Dokkyō) connects the Gifu Prefecture-based Jōdo Shinshū priest Gotō Hiromi with worshippers, regardless of their sectarian affiliations. He began the group after he was forced to cancel

this year's *higan* (spring equinox) services and home visits to his parishioners.³⁶



Reverend Gotō Hiromi broadcasts ecumenical sutra recitations via Facebook.

Chūgai nippō, a venerable paper that covers temple Buddhist and Shinto news, has turned its attention to how religious professionals across Japan took up this challenge. On April 24, the paper reported on the Pure Land (Jōdoshū) temple Kanchi'in in Tokyo, whose priest Tsuchiya Shōdō has been broadcasting an online twenty-four-hour *nenbutsu* (invocation of the Buddha Amitābha) chanting service for the last fifteen years. “The internet is absolutely our entryway,” Tsuchiya stated. “Meeting face to face is important, but now we can't meet, so we must go online.”³⁷ A *Chūgai nippō* report the previous day featured news of the Nichiren sect priest Kusumi Kenshō, whose online broadcast of *higan* services from his temple Myōhōji in Yokohama served as the example for a Zoom tutorial run for fifteen priests of different denominations.³⁸

Other religions in Japan are also devising online solutions. In mid-March, the Catholic Diocese of Tokyo suspended in-person attendance and began livestreaming its Sunday mass, and the Catholic Tamatsukuri Church, a cathedral in Osaka, limited its masses to

YouTube from March 9.³⁹ In Kobe, the Protestant Nishinomiya Evangelical Church began YouTubing its services from March 12, and the Tokyo-based United Church of Christ in Japan set up a website in March called “Christian COVID-19” that provided instructions for streaming services, prayer services for the housebound, and where to send monetary donations.⁴⁰ [Tokyo Camii and Turkish Culture Center, a mosque and Muslim education center, moved all of its congregational prayers, classes, and Ramadan events into Zoom sessions. The synagogue Chabad Lubavich of Japan in Tokyo put out an online appeal for volunteers to deliver food to those in need during the COVID-19 shutdown.](#)

Moving examples of COVID-19’s harsh consequences and online solutions devised by clergy attracted attention from major Japanese media outlets. On April 14, the newspaper *Asahi shinbun* reported on a lonely service in late March for a woman in her sixties who died after she contracted coronavirus while traveling overseas. Her cremation could only be attended by her son and two funeral company employees, and no funeral oratory was performed. Even funerals for those who died of causes other than coronavirus were made wrenching by preventative measures; a gesture as simple as passing a handkerchief to a weeping mourner sitting two meters away had to be curtailed. Across Japan, Buddhist priests, the most familiar facilitators of death rituals in Japan, did their best to overcome painful divides created by anti-contamination measures. Priests from fifteen temples affiliated with eight different denominations who performed services for a Nagoya funeral company called Shūroku, for example, provided video links to their sutra recitations for the bereaved via their smartphones.⁴¹

Priests who connected with me confirmed that they had embarked on a wide range of web-based outreach efforts. “I’m a stubborn and tenacious person,” asserted Reverend

Asahikawa. “COVID-19 will not put a stop to my activities. No matter what it takes, I must transmit the teachings of the Buddha! I have begun broadcasting my thoughts via YouTube because I can’t meet with people directly. From last year, I started an internet radio broadcast, and I’ve been putting my efforts into that as well.” Reverend Ōmori, a Jōdo Shinshū priest who lives in Tokyo as a salaried employee while he still serves his family’s temple in rural Yamaguchi prefecture, discussed his online connections with parishioners:

To get close with those who are suffering because of coronavirus, we are broadcasting sermons via YouTube and Zoom. Even when I am not performing duties at my temple, I am able to stream services from my home. All of this for no charge, of course. In terms of my own activities, all of my lectures and sermons between March and June are canceled. However, I have received many invitations to write books, columns, and essays, and to stream dharma talks.

Up to now, there were many opportunities to meet directly with people to spread the dharma. Now, we are distanced as we continue with our mission—this is a big difference. We have not yet completely adjusted to this style, and it still feels inconvenient, but we’re figuring out how to reach out to those who are experiencing dukkha (suffering). The result is new challenges.

Groups of every sort are relying on local-level participants to stream regular activities. Mrs. Takeda, an enthusiastic participant in the ethics training organization Rinri Kenkyūjo, reported to me that she is keeping her local members active by connecting with them daily via Line. At 5:00 a.m. 364 days a year, Rinri

Kenkyūjo members assemble at hundreds of locations across Japan in “Good Morning Ethics Academies” (*ohayō rinrijuku*), at which they share testimonials and recite writings of the group’s founder Maruyama Toshio (1892-1951) on filial piety, gratitude, reverence for Japan and the Emperor, and other values.⁴² In my ethnographic engagements at Rinri Kenkyūjo meetings in Tokyo between 2018 and 2020, I observed that almost all regular Academy participants were women in their seventies and eighties. Mrs. Takeda, a gregarious person in her fifties, has been tasked by the group to recruit new members. She ensures that her housebound charges overcome any technical difficulties by connecting to them every day at 5:00 a.m. through a Line stream.

But not every group is able to connect virtually. When I asked my Soka Gakkai friends if they were conducting *zadankai* or other meetings online, they laughed. “I feel that Soka Gakkai’s internet skills are a bit behind,” chuckled Mr. Watanabe. “Think of it this way: there is an assistant regional headquarters leader near me who to this day remains one of those who steadfastly refuses to own a mobile phone. There are probably examples of districts where young leaders with exemplary skills are running meetings online, but here we’re basically encouraging one another other via telephone and letters. We make contact to decide on a time to chant *daimoku* together.” Mr. Nishino, a Chapter (*shibu*) leader, confirms that communication is mostly limited to letters (by post or fax), phone messages, and calls. He supplements older communication methods by uploading short video encouragements (*gekirei*) to YouTube. “Encouragements” are staple features of regular Gakkai meetings in which leaders urge their members toward success by overcoming this-worldly troubles, frequently by quoting speeches and writings of Soka Gakkai’s Honorary President Ikeda Daisaku (1928-). In a video dispatch on March 9, Nishino read aloud from a recent *Seikyō shinbun* article that reprinted an

encouragement Ikeda had delivered in 2003 at a satellite broadcast held during the SARS epidemic. “Hardship necessarily transforms into treasure,” Ikeda declared. “For the public, for people, for society, fight through this!”

Harsh Financial Realities

A major motivator for religious professionals to move their duties online is fear of losing income. Clerics like Reverend Ōmori who rely on a salary can offer their Buddhist services free of charge, but most full-time priests need donations to support their families and maintain their temples. Reverend Asahikawa laid out the economic realities she and other priests faced: “Buddhist practitioners live as temple priests (*jūshoku*) and as tonsured monastics (*sōryo*). Priests are legal representatives of religious juridical persons who manage temple operations and finances. Their activities gather earnings. Because of COVID-19, community-related activities, such as funerals, sermons, and festivals, have been reduced or canceled. Economic security that depends on voluntary donations, alms, and support payments for these services has suffered a blow, and priests have no choice but to endure a loss of income.” Lost income does not mean lost commitment, the Reverend confirmed. “We still lead the life of the monastic. Though we cannot expect to see results revealed before our eyes, we perform daily rites (*gongyō*), praying to protect the nation (*chingo kokka*) and for a bountiful harvest (*gogoku hōjō*).”

Japan’s religious juridical persons (*shūkyō hōjin*) are included among organizations that may apply for special financial assistance included in a 108 trillion yen (US\$997 billion) stimulus package negotiated by Japan’s governing coalition in early April.⁴³ Part of the package provided aid to businesses that suffered losses occasioned by COVID-19. On March 31, the Ministry of Health, Labour and

Welfare laid out parameters on applications for “employment adjustment grants for businesses affected by the COVID-19 pandemic” that would be covered; the measures received Diet approval on April 7.⁴⁴ These grants supported businesses that were forced, either by voluntarily complying with self-restraint guidelines or by government directive, to shut down operations, and for those that suffered drops in customers or orders during the period of voluntary quarantine. The Diet bill essentially enhanced measures already in place that guaranteed salary payout by employers in the event of voluntary business shutdown and clarified that the national emergency initially declared on April 7 constituted a necessary condition for businesses to receive special government aid. For a “special response period” between 1 April and 30 June 2020, the amount the Ministry ordinarily supplied for business relief increased for employee leave allowance, up to 8,330 yen per employee per day.

Financial aid would certainly be welcomed by religious professionals devastated by income lost to coronavirus shutdown. However, while large organizations with salaried employees may suit the relief grant parameters, it is less clear how small-scale, family-based temples, shrines, churches, and other religious institutions might fit the application. Additionally, religious groups applying for government assistance will almost certainly invite public skepticism. Critics are liable to point out that Japan’s 1947 Constitution assures a division between religion and government, and that government aid to religions may violate constitutional intent. Criticism may also be inspired by the fact that Japan’s 1951 Religious Juridical Persons Law, amended in 1996, ensures that “religious activities” are not taxed. This means that a large proportion of religions’ income-generating undertakings are not subject to taxation, and that many religious activities elude state scrutiny. Religious juridical persons

also enjoy significant breaks on property taxes. Recent decades have seen a rise of public debate over the status of religions as *kōeki hōjin*, or “public interest juridical persons,” a legal designation that requires that they conduct activities intended for the public good in exchange for tax relief.⁴⁵ Critics accuse religions, particularly large ones, of being elaborate tax evasion schemes. Religious groups have been forced to defend their activities as contributions to social welfare initiatives and to Japan’s national wellbeing. They also point out that the vast majority of religious juridical persons are modest financial entities that rely on parishioner donations for their survival.⁴⁶ In short, it should not be surprising if applications by religious groups for emergency governmental COVID-19 financial assistance revive debates over the use of taxpayer money.

Conclusion: Pandemic Isolation and Beyond

For the clerics and lay practitioners profiled here, the compound earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear meltdown disasters of March 11, 2011—best known now as 3.11—loom large as their most recent reference point for Japanese calamity. When the earthquake struck that day at 2:46 p.m., adherents immediately put aside regular activities to travel to northeast Japan. They waded into the wreckage to rescue survivors and pull out corpses. They put in thousands of man hours, brought thousands of tons of emergency supplies to help survivors, and gathered millions of yen in donations. They opened their temples, shrines, and other facilities as refugee centers, sometimes for months at a time. Religions were frequently on the scene before government agencies and NGOs arrived, and religion-affiliated activism comprised a major percentage of the funding and volunteer hours dedicated to the disasters’ aftermath. Long after the Japanese government

declared recovery efforts a completed success, religious aid providers remain active in what is now mostly designated a former disaster zone, caring for the bereaved and the dead. They perpetuate memory of the 3.11 disasters while most of the country leaves these calamities in the past.⁴⁷

COVID-19 raises difficult questions for religious individuals and groups on how best to mobilize, and if activists can turn to their 3.11 experiences for cues on how to proceed. How can volunteers attend to those in need when they are supposed to remain quarantined? How should religions respond when the crisis is not in one afflicted zone but is everywhere people are to be found? How should religions coordinate with a chaotic Japanese government response that has seen waffling at the national level and inconsistent leadership by prefectural and municipal politicians?

Religion in Japan, as it is elsewhere, tends to be intensely social. For the devout, life consists of frequent in-person meetings. In religious gatherings of all types, believers depend on inspiration from one another. Their sense of self relies on group activities, and the survival of religious groups relies on solidarity their participants cultivate through interpersonal bonds. Prolonged social distancing may exact a toll on Japan's religions. It remains to be seen how isolation will exacerbate differences between internal constituencies and how it will affect parishioners' desire to return to regular participation.



Members of the Rengekai (Lotus Association), the monthly women's meeting at the Jōdo Shinshū temple Tenshinji in Chiba prefecture, practice the obon dance for the summer festival in 2015. Countless local-level gatherings like this are on hold during the coronavirus crisis.

It is likely that, as the pandemic continues to unfold, Japanese religious reactions will mirror the variegated responses COVID-19 has triggered worldwide. Coronavirus has seen indeterminate responses by the same activists who bridged sectarian divides to create bold ecumenical aid provisions after 3.11. Participants in the Interfaith Chaplaincy Training Program, a dynamic initiative based at Tohoku University in Sendai that grew out of post-3.11 religious aid to train clergy and lay practitioners as clinical caregivers, have been urged to pray at 6:00 a.m. daily to memorialize those who have died of coronavirus and for the quick elimination of the disease; they are otherwise still working out how best to mobilize.⁴⁸ Open questions remain about how, and if, chaplains who work in Japan's hospitals and other care facilities will be allowed to offer their services. Timothy Benedict, an authority on chaplaincy who is an Assistant Professor at Kwansei Gakuin University, reported that chaplains at a Christian hospital in Osaka have basically stopped visiting new patients and can

only attend patients on wards if they specifically request a visit. Visiting chaplains must wear protective gear, which has become notoriously difficult to acquire. Attendance at the hospital's chapel services is restricted, and the hospital is asking overwhelmed staff to watch streamed services remotely. In other words, the COVID-19 crisis has called into question whether and how clinical chaplaincy can secure its place in Japan during a medical crisis.

Nonetheless, religious aid workers will continue to operate on the front lines of Japanese social welfare provision. The Buddhist priests who connected with me detailed their efforts. "We are gathering supplies from volunteers at the temple, from parishioners and their families, to help those who are afflicted by difficulties that result from the call to self-restraint," Reverend Ōmori told me. Reverend Asahikawa laid out comprehensive aid plans that will address those who are suffering. She looked beyond the current crisis to plan how best to help as Japan's socioeconomic tribulations deepen:

The virus will necessarily disappear. All things are in a state of continual change (shogyō mujō), so the virus will cease its movement. I'm thinking about what to do once it's gone.

In Japan, working from home is rare, and there is a custom of needing to commute to the office. Because of COVID-19, the overall working from home percentage across Japan has gone up 35%. If it is possible to work from home and not travel, it's possible for workplaces to shift from being concentrated in cities to residential zones in local areas. Also, personal income has diminished since 1997. Particularly for those under forty—they are making half of

*what people over fifty make. And this year half of women in Japan are over the age of fifty. To help women with a low income of a lower age (because I'm a woman), I think I want to build a shared house.*⁴⁹

The city where I live in Wakayama is one hour by train to central Osaka. Houses here were built about thirty-five to forty years ago without any concern for accessible facilities for the disabled. The number of elderly residents is going up. They are moving to care facilities and apartments, and the number of empty houses is increasing. I want to contribute to activity in the region by providing housing and meals (I'm vegetarian, you see) for women in my community.

We've been forced to remain home, but this has given me time to plan.

Reverend Asahikawa provides an exemplary model of how Japan's religious activists fuse commitment to enlightenment and well-informed assessments of this-worldly challenges to devise meaningful contributions. COVID-19 is a daunting reality, but it is a temporary stage in a longer struggle with profound difficulties. Buddhist sects like Reverend Asahikawa's Shingon, like all Japanese religious institutions, face a grim future because of population decline and changes in attitudes among younger generations. Yet religious activists, clergy and lay alike, greet catastrophe with age-old rituals as they initiate new means of meeting present-day needs. Their steady perseverance in the face of calamity deserves more attention than it receives.

Russian-language summary of this article by Aliise Eishō Donnere, a scholar based in Sendai, Japan, is available.

Levi McLaughlin is Associate Professor at the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at North Carolina State University. He received his Ph.D. from Princeton University after previous study at the University of Tokyo, and he holds a B.A. and M.A. in East Asian Studies from the University of Toronto. Levi is co-author and co-editor of *Kōmeitō: Politics and Religion in Japan* (IEAS Berkeley, 2014) and co-editor of the special issue “Salvage and Salvation: Religion and Disaster Relief in Asia” (*Asian Ethnology*, June 2016). He is author of *Soka Gakkai’s Human Revolution: The Rise of a Mimetic Nation in Modern Japan* (University of Hawai‘i Press, 2019).

Notes

¹ I am indebted to Micah Auerback, Erica Baffelli, Timothy Benedict, Caleb Carter, Bryan Lowe, Lauren Markley, Mark Rowe, Mark Selden, Shirahase Tatsuya, Jessica Starling, Takahashi Tomoaki, and Brian Victoria for their invaluable feedback. I am particularly grateful to the clergy and lay practitioners who appear here under pseudonyms who so kindly offered insights that appear in this article.

² See the World Health Organization’s novel coronavirus updates [here](#). Japan’s Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare maintained a running update in English on the government’s anti-coronavirus measures, patient caseloads, and related data. The newspaper *Asahi shinbun* posted running updates on COVID-19 broken down by prefecture, *The Japan Times* updated a daily news roundup on coronavirus, as did the *Kyodo News Service* and numerous other outlets. See also *Toyo Keizai Online* for statistical breakdowns of case numbers, testing rates, and other data.

³ The IOC announcement relieved pressure on the Abe administration and Tokyo Governor Koike Yuriko, who had been criticized for delaying anti-COVID-19 measures in the hopes that the 2020 games would proceed. See Kingston, Jeff, “Abe Prioritized Olympics, Slowing Japan’s Pandemic Response.” *Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* Vol. 18 Issue 7 No. 5 (1 April 2020).

⁴ Dilemmas Japan’s low-tech status poses for a quarantining population have attracted media attention (*The Mainichi* 26 April 2020). One third of homes in Japan, and most offices, still have fax machines, and numerous homes lack late-model computers that are linked to high-speed internet.

⁵ See *Kyodo News* 6 April 2020; *Reuters* 8 April 2020.

⁶ *The Japan Times* 23 April 2020; *The Asahi Shinbun* 27 April 2020.

⁷ Except in cases where they publish under their own names, or where they appear under their own names in published accounts, the clergy and lay activists featured in this article appear under pseudonyms. I communicated with my interviewees in Japanese. Here, I provide translated portions of their responses.

⁸ *Fukusuibon ni kaerazu* functions independently as a rough equivalent of “there’s no use

crying over spilt milk.” *Higan*, “the other shore,” is a Japanese rendering of the Sanskrit *paryavasāna*. It denotes persevering through karmic causality to awakening from conditioned existence.

⁹ In a Buddhist context, wisdom (Jp. *chie*, Skt. *prajñā*) is discriminating knowledge of impermanence and the causes of suffering, commonly understood as one of the requirements for attaining enlightenment. *Murahachibu* remains a common expression in Japan today used to describe social rejection of community members. For studies of ostracism and its nomenclatures in Japanese history, see Ehlers, Maren Annika, *Give and Take: Poverty and the Status Order in Early Modern Japan*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018; Ooms, Herman, *Tokugawa Village Practice: Class, Status, Power, Law*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996.

¹⁰ [President Online 4 April 2020](#).

¹¹ *Seikyō shinbun* 19 February, 20 March, 4 April, 28 April 2020.

¹² [BBC News 2 March 2020](#); *New York Times* 10 March 2020; [The Korea Herald 17 March 2020](#)

¹³ For analysis of how “religion” was imported as Japan transformed into an imperial nation-state, see Isomae Jun’ichi, *Kindai Nihon ni okeru shūkyō gensetsu to sono keifu: shūkyō, kokka, shintō*. Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2004; Josephson, Jason Ānanda, *The Invention of Religion in Japan*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012; Maxey, Trent Elliot, *The “Greatest Problem”: Religion and State Formation in Meiji Japan*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014; Sawada, Janine Tasca, *Practical Pursuits: Religion, Politics, and Personal Cultivation in Nineteenth-Century Japan*. Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2004.

¹⁴ For discussion of how these categories have been applied to Soka Gakkai, and to New Religions generally, see McLaughlin, Levi. *Soka Gakkai’s Human Revolution: The Rise of a Mimetic Nation in Modern Japan*. Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2019. For analyses of how moral panic over New Religions has mobilized media, politics, and populism in modern and contemporary Japan, see Baffelli, Erica, “Contested Positioning: ‘New Religions’ and Secular Spheres.” *Japan Review* Vol. 30 (2017), 129-152; Dorman, Benjamin, *Celebrity Gods: New Religions, Media, and Authority in Occupied Japan*. Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2012; Garon, Sheldon, *Molding Japanese Minds: The State in Everyday Life*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997; Klein, Axel, “Twice Bitten, Once Shy: Religious Organizations and Politics after the Aum Attack.” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 39:1 (2012), 77-98; McLaughlin, Levi, “Did Aum Change Everything? What Soka Gakkai Before, During, and After the Aum Shinrikyō Affair Tells Us about the Persistent ‘Otherness’ of New Religions in Japan.” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 39:1 (2012), 51-75; Stalker, Nancy Kinue, *Prophet Motive: Deguchi Onisaburō, Oomoto, and the Rise of New Religions in Imperial Japan*. Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2007; and Tsukada Hotaka, *Shūkyō to seiji no tentetsuten: hoshu gōdō to seikyō itchi no shūkyō shakaigaku*. Tokyo: Kadensha, 2015.

¹⁵ For considerations of the “New Religions” genealogy in its Japanese and American contexts, see Thomas, Jolyon Baraka, *Faking Liberties: Religious Freedom in American-Occupied Japan*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019. For examples of debates over how to apply the “New Religions” category, see Melton, J. Gordon, “Perspective: Toward a Definition of ‘New Religion.’” *Nova Religio* Vol. 8, Issue 1 (2004), 73-87; Urban, Hugh. *New Age, Neopagan, and*

New Religious Movements: Alternative Spirituality in Contemporary America. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015.

¹⁶ *New York Times* 16 April 2020.

¹⁷ See Wagenaar, Wester, “Wacky Japan: A New Face of Orientalism.” *Asia in Focus* No. 3 (2016), 46-54. A Google search for “quirky Japan” or a similar term confirms the media stereotype.

¹⁸ [Happy Science provided information on the service in English](#). By 18 February 2020, the religion had already published [a book in Japanese of mediated spirit messages regarding the disease titled “Spiritual Investigations of the Novel Coronavirus Infection that Began in China”](#).

¹⁹ For studies of Kōfuku no Kagaku (Happy Science) in Japan, see Astley, Trevor, “The Transformation of a Recent Japanese New Religion: Ōkawa Ryūhō and Kōfuku no Kagaku.” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 22:3-4 (1995), 343-380; Baffelli 2017; Tsukada, Hotaka, “Cultural Nationalism in Japanese Neo-New Religions: A Comparative Study of Mahikari and Kōfuku no Kagaku.” *Monumenta Nipponica* Vol. 67 No. 1 (2012), 133-157; and Winter, Franz, “Kōfuku no Kagaku.” In Pokorny, Lukas and Franz Winter, eds., *Handbook of East Asian New Religious Movements*. Leiden: Brill, 2018, 211-229. See also [Japan Times 4 August 2009](#).

²⁰ Tabloids reported on meetings the group held as Japan went into quarantine; [examples include the magazine Shūkan jitsuwa 20 March 2020](#). Happy Science responded on 7 April 2020 with a defamation lawsuit against the weekly *Shūkan shinchō*, demanding 22 million yen (~US\$200,000) in damages for an article the magazine published on 2 April 2020.

²¹ *Shūkan jitsuwa* 20 March 2020. [Happy Science’s periodical The Liberty covered Ōkawa’s 14 March 2020 address in Sendai](#) at which he expressed suspicion that the novel coronavirus had been developed in Wuhan laboratories and urged an investigation by the WHO.

²² For links between epidemic and premodern Japanese epistemes, see Como, Michael, “Horses, Dragons, and Disease in Nara Japan.” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 34/2 (2007), 393-415; Farris, Wayne, *Population, Disease, and Land in Early Japan*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985; Rambelli, Fabio, “Gods, Dragons, Catfish, and Godzilla: Fragments for a History of Religious Views on Natural Disasters in Japan.” In Starrs, Roy, ed. *When the Tsunami Came to Shore: Culture and Disaster in Japan*. Leiden: Brill, 2014, 50-69; Wakabayashi, Haruko, “Disaster in the Making: Taira no Kiyomori’s Move of the Capital to Fukuoka.” *Monumenta Nipponica* Vol. 70 No. 1 (2015), 1-38. For details on the *kokubunji* system and its founding as a means of combatting epidemics and accompanying calamities, see Yoshida Kazuhiko, “Kokubunji kokubun amadera no shisō.” In Suda Tsutomu and Satō Makoto, eds., *Kokubunji no sōken*. Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kyōbunkan, 2011, 2-28.

²³ *Mainichi shinbun* 6 April 2020.

²⁴ [A tweet by @kojomrmt on Twitter 24 April 2020](#); [NHK News Web 24 April 2020](#).

²⁵ *Asahi shinbun* 18 April 2020.

²⁶ [A tweet by @kojomrmt on Twitter 20 April 2020](#).

²⁷ *Yomiuri shinbun* 8 April 2020.

²⁸ See McMullin, Neil, “On Placating the Gods and Pacifying the Populace: The Case of the Gion ‘Goryō’ Cult.” *History of Religions* Vol. 27 No. 3 (1988), 270-293.

²⁹ See [Takahashi’s blog posts for the Futago Tamagawa neighborhood site](#).

³⁰ For information on Takahashi’s Sacred Forest Project (Chinju no Mori no Purojekuto), see

[here](#). For discussions of ways the “sacred forest” is promoted within contemporary Shinto, see Rots, Aike P., *Shinto, Nature and Ideology in Contemporary Japan: Making Sacred Forests*. London: Bloomsbury, 2017.

³¹ *Mainichi shinbun* 15 April 2020.

³² *Asahi shinbun* 18 April 2020.

³³ *Kyōdo News* 6 March 2020.

³⁴ Detailed explanations of proper funeral procedures, flow charts for procedures in the event of contagion, and histories of Sōtō Zen practices during disaster appear in [documents uploaded by the Sōtō sect’s Tokyo Yūdōkai](#), or [Tokyo Bhavana Path Society](#).

³⁵ Enryakuji updates available [here](#) and [here](#).

³⁶ *Asahi shinbun* 18 April 2020; Also see [facebook posts](#).

³⁷ *Chūgai nippō* 24 April 2020.

³⁸ *Chūgai nippō* 23 April 2020.

³⁹ *Kyodo News* 16 March 2020; *Yomiuri shinbun* (Osaka edition) 13 April 2020.

⁴⁰ *Yomiuri shinbun* (Osaka edition) 13 April 2020; See [updates from the United Church of Christ in Japan](#) and <https://covid19jc.com/>.

⁴¹ *Asahi shinbun* 14 April 2020.

⁴² Information on Rinri Kenkyūjō’s Good Morning Ethics Academies (Ohayō Rinri Juku) is available [here](#).

⁴³ Agreement on the stimulus package was reached after a tense standoff within the national governing coalition between the Liberal Democratic Party and its junior partner Komeito, the party founded by Soka Gakkai. Komeito’s success in forcing the LDP to adopt its payout policy accompanied a drop in public approval of Prime Minister Abe’s handling of the coronavirus crisis. See [Kyodo News 18 April 2020](#).

⁴⁴ Details on application procedures for entities suffering from income lost because of the COVID-19 shutdown and the benefits available to each entity type were updated by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare. See [here](#).

⁴⁵ Discussion of suspicions raised by tabloid journalists and defense of religious practices promoted by temple-based practitioners appears in *Shūkan asahi* 4 June 2010; Nelson, John, *Experimental Buddhism: Innovation and Activism in Contemporary Japan*. Honolulu: University of Hawai`i Press, 2013.

⁴⁶ For discussions of the on-the-ground realities traditional practitioners face, including financial and legal challenges, see Covell, Stephen G., *Japanese Temple Buddhism: Worldliness in a Religion of Renunciation*. Honolulu: University of Hawai`i Press, 2005; Rowe, Mark M., *Bonds of the Dead: Temples, Burial, and the Transformation of Contemporary Japanese Buddhism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Starling, Jessica, *Guardians of the Buddha’s Home: Domestic Religion in Contemporary Jōdo Shinshū*. Honolulu: University of Hawai`i Press, 2019.

⁴⁷ For overviews of religious responses to 3.11, see Berman, Michael, “Religion Overcoming Religion: Suffering, Secularism, and the Training of Interfaith Chaplains in Japan.” *American Ethnologist* Vol. 34 No. 2 (2018), 228-240; McLaughlin, Levi, “Hard Lessons Learned: Tracking Changes in Media Presentations of Religion and Religious Aid Mobilization after the 1995 and 2011 Disasters in Japan.” *Asian Ethnology* Vol. 75 No. 1 (2016), 105-137.

⁴⁸ Details on Interfaith Chaplaincy training at Tohoku University’s Department of Practical

Religious Studies are available [here](#). See also Fujiyama Midori, *Rinshō shūkyōshi*. Tokyo: Kōbunken, 2020.

⁴⁹ For insight into the lives of women Buddhist priests in Japan, see Rowe, Mark, “Charting Known Territory: Female Buddhist Priests.” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 44/1 (2017), 75-101.