Mitsutoshi Horii

The Category of “Religion” in Contemporary Japan. Shūkyō and Temple Buddhism.


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At first glance, Mitsutoshi Horii’s book The Category of “Religion” in Contemporary Japan (2018) is straightforward and addresses a question about “religion” in Japan: Is it possible to use the term religion, or its Japanese counterpart shūkyō, as an analytical category to examine religion in Japan? A spontaneous answer to that question would probably be yes, it has been done several times, and will probably continue in books to come. However, through analysis of several different types of material Horii show us the problems surrounding the common way of using the term religion and instead suggests that shūkyō should be seen as the object of study rather than as an analytical concept or tool.

The introduction raises questions about the problem of using the concept of religion – embedded in Western Protestant Christianity – to understand Buddhism in Japan. “‘Religion’ is a modern western folk category,” Horii states (p. 3) and sets out to examine what he calls the classificatory practice that makes Buddhism into a “religion.” Even though shūkyō, the Japanese equivalent to religion, emerged in the discussion about the legalization of Christianity in Japan during the late nineteenth century, it wasn’t until after the Second World War that the concept became part of the popular discourse in Japan. To put it differently, the question addressed in this book is what happens when an invasive concept such as religion (with all its Western Protestant connotations) gets incorporated into another, non-Western, non-Protestant context, and what societal consequences such a process may have for, in this case more specifically, temple Buddhism in Japan. It is important to say that it is not only the idea of religion that stranded on Japan’s shoreline during this period, but also notions of nationalism and the nation state. From Horii’s perspective Buddhism should not be taken for granted as a “religion”; in fact shūkyō was imposed upon temple Buddhism, and he examines the category of religion in contemporary Japan, focusing on how people engaged in temple Buddhism deal with – adapt to, resist, negotiate – the concept. Perhaps most importantly, Horii argues repeatedly throughout the book that religion is “useless as a tool of analysis” (p. 4) and should instead be the object of study. In addition, it is not only the concept of shūkyō that is problematic, or even useless as he puts it, but also the
binaries religious-secular and sacred-profane when it comes to analysing temple Buddhism in Japan.

In chapter 2, Horii positions himself in the “critical religion” field where severe critique is directed towards the \textit{sui generis} model of religion and the tendency to comprehend religion as an essence in religious studies and elsewhere. The concept of religion should, according to Horii, be analysed as a social category, rather than a given, something that is already out there waiting for a scholarly description. In the subsequent chapters of the book, Horii sets out to analyse how “religion” is used and understood in Japan, rather than describing or analysing religion(s) in Japan (i.e. Buddhism, Shinto, Christianity, and new religions). The questions posed are the following: “Why are certain beliefs and practices seen as ‘religious,’ while other are not? What kinds of norms and imperatives are governing such classification?” (p. 28). To make his case, Horii scrutinizes a number of previous books that treat religion in Japan, and manages to point out some of the more severe problems that are based on an essentialist notion of religion and a \textit{sui generis} religion. Horii also highlights problems using notions such as transcendence-immanence and the religious-secular binary that are embedded in a Western Christian tradition, to understand the Japanese concepts \textit{seken/shusseken} and \textit{ōbō/buppō}. He argues that religion and other related concepts are not useful analytical categories if one wants to examine religion in Japan. Instead of using the term religion and imposing it on material where it doesn’t fit, Horii argues for the use of emic, indigenous categories as analytical tools. And when it comes to the term \textit{shūkyō}, the researcher should set aside his or her previous understanding of the term and instead listen carefully to how people talk about the term and ascribe different types of meaning to it. “I suggest to drop the term religion as an analytical concept when examining Japanese society. Instead we should be specific about which movements, organizations, activities, practices, or behaviour we are analysing in their own terms. Without labelling them ‘religious’” (p. 47). After setting “religion” aside, there is however an opening for the use of generic categories in religious studies, such as “ritual” or “practices.”

In chapter 3 Horii sheds light on how \textit{shūkyō} became part of Japanese society during the late twentieth century, and functioned to give support to the configurations of power represented by the Japanese state. After a genealogical analysis of how the term \textit{shūkyō} was invented and used in Japan, Horii stresses that “religion” is the object of analysis, and not the tool. He notes that after the Second World War the pre-war category \textit{shūkyō} was broadened to include other religions than Buddhism, Christianity and sectarian Shinto, and discusses the shifting ideological foundations that were at work when categorizing what counted as religion and what was excluded. In the next chapter, Horii turns to more contemporary material when analysing in a similar manner how “religion” is comprehended in popular discourses and popular literature. The ambition is to turn from the “literate elite” to the non-elite by asking what “ordinary Japanese people” mean by \textit{shūkyō}. The material analysed ranges from the World Value Survey, where the majority of the Japanese people (53.3 %) reported to have “no religion,” to popular discourses and web-based material. What seems to be evident in the popular discourse is that \textit{shūkyō} is negatively associated with cults/sects such as the Aum Shinrikyo, well-known after the deadly Tokyo subway sarin attack in 1995. Thus, religion is generally something that Japanese people will distance themselves from, at least at a verbal level. The more positive connotations of the word \textit{shūkyō} are family affiliation with a Buddhist temple or Shinto shrine. In that case, it is viewed as culture and tradition rather than religion, and is thus not negatively charged. The online material examined consists of mainly negative views of religion (as brainwashing people, mentally retarded, irrational, dogmatic, violent, etc.). In popular discourses there are other aspects of religion that are picked up and
seen as the core of religion, for example the Buddhist notion of \textit{k\={u}} ("emptiness" is one way of translating the term), which is thought to distinguish Buddhism from other religion.

Chapter 5 shifts the focus from "discourses" about \textit{sh\={u}ky\=o} to a historical analysis of how Buddhist priests and temple Buddhism have been conceptualized in Japanese history. This chapter differs from the others by being a more conventional scrutiny of the history of religion. The development of the \textit{danka} system during the seventeenth century is intriguing to read about, as it meant that all Japanese people, or more specifically their families, belonged to a Buddhist temple. This was a new way of organizing Buddhism as parishes in Japan and part of an anti-Christian campaign led by the government. Furthermore, it was the household, not the individual, that was affiliated to the Buddhist temple, and the individual belonged to the family's temple for generation after generation. A central part of the work carried out by the Buddhist temples and priests revolved around funerals, memorial services, and death rites. During the Meiji period (1868–1912) and until the Second World War the temple Buddhism was radically transformed and much of the official status, power and privileges it enjoyed has vanished. The \textit{danka} system was replaced by a national registration structure, and during this period Buddhism became a "religion" modelled on Christianity, with its emphasis on personal beliefs and new scriptural readings. After 1870 the Buddhist priests were no longer a distinct class in Japan but instead viewed as "Japanese citizens," and during the period after 1945 the Buddhist priests were labelled as a "religious profession". What strikes me after reading chapter 5 is that this chapter would work just as well in a more conventional book about the history of (world) religions, or religion in Japan. The main difference might be that the concept of \textit{sh\={u}ky\=o} is historicized and not taken for granted in Horii's case, and that Horii avoids falling into the problems concerning the \textit{sui generis} model of religion.

The following chapter deals with the construction of \textit{sh\={u}ky\=oka}, that is, the religious professionals, the Buddhist priests. One role of the Buddhist priests has to do with \textit{shukkesha}, where the priest is thought to transcend worldly concerns, and thereby is able to "reflect the state of one's kokoro [sentiments and feelings located at the inner self of the individual] and try to transcend one's attachment, selfishness and greed" (p. 146). In this type of discourse, Horii points out, the concept of \textit{sh\={u}ky\=o} retreats to the background, together with its Western, Christian connotations. The rest of the chapter is spent on a discussion of different views on and ideals concerning the Buddhist priest's role, and how one becomes a Buddhist priest.

The themes brought up in previous chapters serve as a background for chapter 7, where the life stories of Nichiren-sh\={u} priests are examined. Here, Horii stresses even harder that we do not have to use the term 'religion,' in order to understand their life stories. Priests themselves may use the term 'religion,' but we should not analyse their lives in terms of 'religion.' We may analyse how priests negotiate with the category 'religion,' but we should not associate Buddhist priests with the term 'religion' in an essentialist sense (p. 172).

The interviews with Nichiren-sh\={u} priests in the greater Tokyo area were conducted during 2002–2003, they do not include any female priests, only men, and the sample is small and limited. Even so, the chapter gives the reader insights into the thoughts and everyday life, of these Buddhist priests, especially when it comes to their training, and their own and others sometimes unrealistic expectation of the priest's role, as well as on how to handle their supposed ability to heal illness. Horii concludes once more that the term religion is useless in this context since it cannot capture the lives of the Buddhist priests sufficiently, and instead
runs the risk of reproducing a negative image of the priests as “nonbelievers” (since they do not fit the criteria defined in the Western Protestant term religion).

Chapter eight focuses on the status and roles of Buddhist temples in Japan and how the term shūkyō is associated with the term kōeki, which could be translated as “public benefits.” That means that the priests, as “religious professionals” (shūkyōka), are part of a religious corporation (shūkyō hōjin), which in turn is categorized as a public benefit corporation (kōeki hōjin). The Buddhist temples status as public benefit corporations is also related to tax benefits and economy. The examples given by Horii show the importance of funerals, rituals, memorial services, and graveyard management when it comes income and tying the temples to the affiliated families. Other religious activities carried out by the priests are faith-healing, divination and counselling. These types of activities also serve to tie people closer to the temple.

From time to time, when reading the book, I can’t help to wonder whether Horii, like Don Quixote, is not tilting at windmills. In inductive ethnographic fieldwork where the researcher conducts interviews, participant observations, and engages with people in the field, the question is more often about how they are Buddhist priests (if that is the focus of the study), rather than about whether or not the priests met the criteria of a predefined concept (such as “religion”). There are numerous examples of fieldwork in religious studies conducted in a more nuanced way, even though that doesn’t leave out the many difficulties involved in the concept of religion and fieldwork. My point is that this is far from a new problem in religious studies, and it has been discussed vividly before Horii’s contribution. Instead of mostly relying on prominent scholars in the field of “critical religion,” Horii could just as well relate his analysis to the ongoing discussions in anthropology and ethnography of religion, or “lived religion.”

In sum, it seems to me that Horii is arguing for a more inductive study of “religion”, where we as scholars in religious studies don’t take religion for granted when conducting research. Even though his arguments are convincing in many respects, I am more puzzled about Horii’s recurring argument about the discrepancy between “religion” as an analytical concept, and “religion” in everyday discourses and in the “lived reality of people [in Japan]” (p. 32). To me this is a weaker argument; there does not need to be an overlapping understanding about the concept in the field (for instance in public discourse) and in science (religious studies). In fact, in much ethnographic fieldwork in religious studies one would not find much informed discussion about “religion,” and the people you meet may for a wide range of reasons distance themselves from “religion,” but still be engaged in religious practices (according to scholars in religious studies, not the informants), in the form of prayer, rituals, myths, symbols, mindfulness, soup kitchen work, etc. The (lack of) emic definition need not rule out the scholarly discourse about religion.

Mitsutoshi Horii’s *The Category of ‘Religion’ in Contemporary Japan* raises fundamental questions about researching religion that should be of interest for anyone in the field, and can definitely be recommended for anyone interested in “religion” in Japan, or anywhere else for that matter. It was probably not Horii’s intention, but I must admit that reading the book has taught me a lot about “religion” in Japan.