

HOW DO WE MEASURE SECULARITY?

A Secular Age beyond the West: Religion, Law and the State in Asia, the Middle East and North Africa.
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When he wrote *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor discussed the trajectory of societies of the North Atlantic influenced by Western Christianity and the changes in secularity they experienced.¹ He had conceptualized three types of secularities: Secularity I, as separation between religion and state; Secularity II, *qua* decline of belief and practice over time; and Secularity III, or a condition of belief, “where religious belief is one option among others, and not necessarily the easiest one.” Taylor, however, acknowledged the limitation inherent to his work as contingent on a specific cultural area. In his approach, which combines phenomenology and hermeneutics with intellectual history, he has emphasized one particular path and its variants, but he has shied away from applying to non-Western societies the categories originally devised to analyze the forms of secularity that have unfolded in the West. Yet in our “secular age,” which is also the age of globalization, it has become difficult to avoid the question of whether the trajectory of secularity within Western Europe and North America represents a secular exceptionalism that cannot be replicated elsewhere and precludes any Gadamerian “fusion of horizons.”² This has implications that go beyond religion and the definition of the “secular” as it affects human rights, freedom of conscience, international law, and, in the end, global politics.

This issue has attracted the attention of an increasing number of scholars. Hence, the team of scholars assembled around the theme of multiple secularities, under the direction of Monika Wohlrab-Sahr and Christoph Kleine at the University of Leipzig, which includes one of the editors and one contributor to *A Secular Age beyond the West: Religion, Law and the State in Asia, the Middle East and North Africa*.³ Looking at multiple secularities in Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa, editors Mirjam Künkler, John Madeley, Shylashri Shankar, and the contributing authors tackle this issue head-on. All of the contributors look at how relevant Secularity III is to non-Western societies and pay attention to the interaction between religion and the two spheres of law and politics. The non-Western societies discussed include a variety of case studies in the “Islamic arc” from Morocco to Indonesia and the two East Asian societies of China and Japan, as well as those of India, Russia, and Israel. A remarkable aspect of this study that deserves recognition and has been celebrated elsewhere is the effort at inclusiveness. The editors have sought to

- 1 Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).
- 2 Hans-Georg Gadamer defined “horizons” as the situated and perspectival nature of knowing and pointed to the open and dynamic nature of horizons: He argued that “the fusion of horizons” reveals the unity of past and present. See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 302, 306.
- 3 For an early statement of the project, see Monica Wohlrab-Sahr and Marian Burchardt, “Multiple Secularities: Toward a Cultural Sociology of Secular Modernities,” *Comparative Sociology* 11, no. 6 (2012): 875–909. Full disclosure, I am also a participant in that research team.

include all the major traditions outside of the West (although this can be quite challenging for East and Southeast Asia, as I discuss below). I have especially appreciated the fact that the three co-editors have included no less than six cases of societies with a Muslim majority, which helps dispel any notion of a cultural determinism at work within the countries that identify with that religious tradition, a finding that I think applies as well for societies where other traditions prevail.

In their conclusions, Künkler and Shankar test one of the central axioms of Taylor's account of secularity. They note that most case studies they have included do not validate his central claim that the condition of the optionality of belief (Secularity III) has made possible the separation between religion and state—Secularity I. This may be the case in the West, but the case studies they present tell different evolutions. A tension that runs through the case studies, and which becomes especially salient in the opening chapter by Philip Gorski is the difficulty to distinguish between Secularity I and “secularism,” or the political principle that favors separation between religion and state. Gorski proposes to use the concepts of Niklas Luhmann and Pierre Bourdieu to provide more nuanced descriptions and better explanations for the variety of forms of secularity found among Western countries and *a fortiori*, among non-Western ones (43).

The editors have made the bold choice of starting off with the societies whose experience with Secularity III maybe the most different from that of the West: China and Japan, in particular, shared the characteristic of strong states and weak or fragmented religious authorities, while India differs from Western societies because of what Rajeev Bhargava described as “deep religious diversity.”⁴ One could indeed look at the three cases described by Ji Zhe, Helen Hardacre, and Shylashri Shankar as parts of a cluster of societies distinct from the others discussed in this volume, which are influenced by one of the three Abrahamic traditions. In all societies influenced by Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, political authorities have sought to demarcate themselves from the sphere of the religious. In societies where Shinto, Confucianism, Hinduism, and Buddhism hold sway, the ambiguities surrounding these traditions, often defined as a way of life, an ethical system, a philosophy, or a spirituality, make the distinction between the religious and the secular problematic.⁵

Ji Zhe's study of secularism in China documents this ambiguity by looking at education as a key node in which religion and politics intersect.⁶ This dense chapter tackles many issues at once: although the condition of religious pluralism is “a new condition of belief in the Christian West” (64), it has a rather long history in China, which has seen a variety of religious traditions for centuries. Most of the chapter deals with the unravelling, through the crucial nineteenth century, of a social order that fused together political power, moral education, and the sacred, a conflation encapsulated in the character for teaching (*jiao*), a component for education (*jiaoyu*) and religion (*zongjiao*). Ji somewhat reassuringly concludes that we cannot infer from the case of China that despite its cultural specificities its path to secularity constitutes an incommensurable case (81).

4 Rajeev Bhargava, “Reimagining Secularism: Respect, Domination and Principled Distance,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 48, no. 50 (2013): 79–92.

5 For earlier statements about this intermingling between religion and state in China, see the contributions to Ashiwa Yoshiko and David L. Wank, eds., *Making Religion, Making the State: The Politics of Religion in Modern China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

6 Ji has presented that argument in detail in a special issue devoted to the issue of education in East Asian societies: Ji Zhe, “Introduction: le *jiao* recomposé. L'éducation entre religion et politique dans la modernité chinoise” [Introduction: Rethinking *jiao*. Education between religion and politics in Chinese modernity], *Extrême-Orient Extrême Occident*, no. 33 (2011): 5–34.

In her examination of Japan, Helen Hardacre recasts the well-known story of secularism in that country as part of a strategy adopted by the bureaucratic elite to resist Western domination (104). Although Japan has been culturally closed to China in its religious and political system, its divergence from the People's Republic of China shows how much the colonial encounter, however brief, could prove capital in shaping a country's path to secularity. The debates among bureaucratic elites about the status of Shinto and that of other religions that Hardacre documents reveal to what extent the involvement in religious affairs of the imperial Japanese state predates some of the policies in China today. The asynchronous similitude raises the tempting hypothesis of a distinctive Sinitic approach to secularity. The different path dependencies of the People's Republic of China and postwar Japan, however, suggest how open such an approach could be.⁷

India differs from East Asia because of the domination of the Indic religions, but also because of the strong presence of Abrahamic religions, to a much larger extent than in China or in its Eastern neighbors. India also contrasts with China and Japan because of the direct experience of colonial rule, a condition that may have prepared it to accept Secularity III early on, but as the rise of the Hindutva suggests, may have also contributed to undermine it. Shankar's account of India offers a surprisingly upbeat account of secularity in India, seen by outsiders as threatened by the rise of Hindu nationalism: she argues that the "multiple imaginaries associated with Hinduism" have not eliminated the possibility of solidarity and creativity (149). She based this assessment on the distinction made by Indian scholars such as Sudipta Kaviraj between "thick and thin religions" and Ashis Nandy between "religion and faith" (145). The story of India's secularity deserves to stand out as a starting point of our comparative inquiries.⁸

Six of the other case studies offer a nuanced portrait of Islam. Taken together, they help us appreciate the relevance of the state in the shaping of secularity in these societies. More importantly, they serve as a very well-informed rebuttal to the facile theses that look at a reified Islam incompatible with modernity. Each of the authors of the chapters dealing with Muslim majority societies points to the negative impact following the imposition of secularity by state bureaucracies, whether authoritarian or democratic. Although the circumstances behind this imposition differ, whether it is in postcolonial Indonesia, Pakistan, Egypt, and Morocco, or post-monarchic Turkey and Iran, the backlash of Islamist militancy is the outcome. Of the six Muslim-majority societies studied in this book, only Indonesia and Morocco have so far escaped this predicament, but only partially. As Künkler explains, the democratic transition of multi-religious Indonesia since 1998 has not changed fundamentally the nature of the state as "unsecular by law" because citizenship requires identification with one of the six officially sanctioned religions (108). Although pluralism is affirmed by this state recognition, it is seriously limited by the imposition of orthodoxy within each religion and it does not allow for the legitimacy of non-religious worldviews.⁹ Writing about Morocco, Jonathan Wyrzten presents a rare case of a

7 There are very few cases of comparative historical studies that cover the four East Asian societies. A good attempt is offered by the contributions to Arnaud Brotons, Yannick Bruneton, and Nathalie Kouamé, eds., *État, religion et répression en Asie: Chine, Corée, Japon, Vietnam (XIIIe–XXIe siècles)* [State, religion and repression in Asia: China, Korea, Japan, Vietnam (13th–21st centuries)] (Paris: Karthala, 2011).

8 For an extended example of that debate, see the contributions to Rajeev Bhargava, ed., *Secularism and Its Critics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), by T. A. Madan, Ashis Nandy, and Charles Taylor.

9 On Indonesia's secularity, see also Muchamad Ali Safa'at, "Indonesian Secularities: On the Influence of the State-Islam Relationship on Legal and Political Developments," Working Paper Series of the HCAS "Multiple Secularities—Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities" 13, Leipzig University, Leipzig, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.36730/2020.1.msbwbn.13>.

Muslim-majority society where the fusion of political and religious authority has not prevented the country from achieving the condition of Secularity III.

Looking at Pakistan, Christophe Jaffrelot argues for the existence of a Secularity IV as a shift from religious belief to religious identity driven by the state, where religion becomes an ideology (154–56). He argues that Pakistan's leader Ali Bhutto and Zia-ul-Haq have made the state the manager of Islam through their program of Islamization but this process of secularization from above in the name of national unity has paved the way for Islamism and sectarianism. In her study of Egypt, Gudrun Krämer arrives at the sobering conclusion that the option of not believing inherent in Secularity III is difficult in a society where the legitimate expression of religion imposed from above by the state is the law and the constitution concords with the practice shared in the population (295).

In his case study of Iran before and after the Islamic Revolution of 1979, Nader Hashemi reaches the counterintuitive conclusion that the failure of the clerical regime in Iran has provoked “a de facto secularization process” (186). He also sees the state as responsible for the process of secularization and its opposite, desecularization: first by imposing secularism under the Pahlavi regime, and then by imposing religiosity after the seizure of power by Islamist militants (206). Like Iran, Turkey was never colonized, but as Asli Bali argues in her study of Kemalist Turkey, the country was affected by the encounter between the West and the Middle East, as its reformers saw secularization as an essential element of its modernization (235). Bali reaches the paradoxical conclusion that the unravelling of Kemalist orthodoxy may create the pluralized conditions of belief that could make it possible to arrive at Secularity III (259).

John Madeley, writing about Russian orthodoxy, makes the key point that our understanding of Secularity III would benefit if we would pay attention to that tradition and the exceptional circumstances of its demise and revival during and after the Soviet era. His argument is that Russia is an example of a society where Secularity III became possible, but only after what he described as a “virtual caesarean procedure” (267). He seeks to incorporate the Russian case within Taylor's framework of analysis to argue that it is not so much Latin Christianity but “Christianity *tout court*” that explains the development of secularity (266). In her account of Jewish secularization in Israel, Hanna Lerner points to three key differences with the path to secularity theorized by Taylor: she points to the condition of Jews living as minorities, the unresolved issue of Secularity I in Israel, and the link between the religious and ethnic components of Jewish identity (215). Her study offers the humbling lesson that even in a society established with an explicit reference to the secular state, the debate on the place of religion and secularity remains far from settled (230).

Other reviewers of this excellent collection of essays have discussed the choice of case studies and the methodology. However, no one has paid much attention to the attempt in the conclusion of this book to bring together the analytical insights of each of these case studies into a comparative lens, which is a necessary step on the way to theory building and produces hypotheses to be tested. Although the few pages in the appendix presenting these data add up to only a small part of this large collection of studies, they do represent an important component. The construction of this appendix has required a considerable effort in trying to interpret the data and investigate the circumstances behind their collection. In their efforts to build a robust comparative review with large-N comparisons, the editors have sought to develop the tools to find out what processes have made possible the emergence of Secularity III in societies with different religious traditions and political systems.

Qualitatively oriented researchers often overlook the attempts by quantitative scholars because they see the facts of their case as exceptional. Scholars working in the field of Islamic studies, Indology, and Sinology may plausibly invoke the incommensurability of phenomenon such as

“religion” and the “secular” because of huge linguistic barriers, aggravated by asymmetric relations of power.¹⁰ This kind of methodological humility and prudence certainly deserves respect. However, for social scientists with an avowed normative bent like myself, such claims raise problematic issues and risk a drift into dangerous terrain: the above argument can easily blend into the incompatibility between concepts such as “democracy” and “human rights” with those of reified non-Western cultural traditions. Politicians in many non-Western societies have often too readily enunciated such “fact” as truth, and they all too often found a receptive audience in the West.

The three editors of this collection show their acute awareness of this problem and for this reason they have undertaken that reflexive effort about their data. In their attempt to put into comparative perspective Taylor’s three secularities, in their conclusion, Künkler and Madeley approach critically the databases coming from authoritative sources. They frame their critical analysis of the database that large-N studies often rely upon within the interpretive lenses of Taylor: measuring Secularity I, II, and III, employing some of the most widely used data sets developed by scholars of relations between religion and government, they combined different measures to highlight the different dimensions of Secularity I and III, and the World Values Survey for Secularity II. The measurement of Secularity I proved especially challenging, as the case studies each revealed in its own way that most states do not have a clearly defined mechanism of separation between religion and state. Moreover, in some cases, the definition of religion in these datasets itself is problematic, making this idea of separation challenging.

For this reason, in trying to design a more robust line of separation between religion and state, Künkler and Madeley have used more fine-grained indicators. In addition to the government involvement in religion variable developed by Jonathan Fox’s Religion and State dataset, they have used the three International Religion Indexes designed by Brian Grim and Roger Finke.¹¹ Constructed from the US Department of State’s annual International Religious Freedom Report, these indices include the Government Favoritism of Religion Index, Government Regulation of Religion Index, and Religious Persecution Index. After realizing the limitations of the latter, however, Künkler and Madeley developed the Modified Religious Persecution Index, whereby they simply rescaled the Religious Persecution Index scores to victims per million, to make them comparable from one case to the next. The reliance on these indicators is perilous: it can lead to some surprising conclusions.

For example, Jonathan Fox’s index of government involvement in religion shows less involvement in religious affairs from the Chinese government than from the governments of Iran, Egypt, and Morocco.¹² Even before the Chinese Communist Party decided to impose an unprecedented policy of cultural genocide in Xinjiang, its intervention in religious affairs has always reached exceptional levels of intensity. In addition to the State Administration for Religious Affairs, the government has fostered a corporatist governance regime with a monopoly of

10 For a good example of efforts to put the study of religion in China in a broader comparative context, see Yang Fenggang, “The Red, Black and Gray Markets of Religion in China,” *Sociological Quarterly* 47, no. 1 (2006): 93–122. His theory has been criticized as too Christian-centric by scholars of Chinese religions in sociology, anthropology, and history. For a convincing account of Chinese religions that considers Chinese and non-Chinese scholarship and puts that in a broader context, see Vincent Goossaert and David Palmer, *The Religious Question in Modern China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

11 Brian J. Grim and Roger Finke, “International Religion Indexes: Government Regulations, Government Favoritism, and Social Regulation of Religion,” *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion* 2, no. 1 (2006): 1–40.

12 That index itself is coming from the Religion and State dataset compiled and analyzed at length in Jonathan Fox, *A World Survey of Religion and State* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

representation for patriotic associations mandated to ensure compliance of their members to instructions from the government about how to manage their affairs and police their own members. Only five religions legally recognized by the government benefit from that “privilege.”

Likewise, the Government Favoritism of Religion Index does not fully capture the reality of China. Although the United Front Work Department and the various propaganda organs of that country point to the existence of five religions as “proof” that China recognizes freedom of religion, any historian of religions in China can only scoff at such an assertion. An untold number of sectarian movements that could not fit in this rigid taxonomy have been relentlessly persecuted by the government since 1949, and the process remains enforced as soon as a small religious movement emerges. In other words, China does not differ much from the states with an official religion, or six, like Indonesia. Moreover, if this index had to be rethought today, it would probably show that China stands next to Saudi Arabia, as it shifts to an overt preference for Buddhism and Daoism, and an increasingly hostile attitude to Islam, with Protestant and Catholic Christianity at the mercy of political vicissitudes.

Another issue that Künkler and Madeley identify is the problem inherent in measuring Secularity I: separation between religion and state. Hence, how is one to measure the separation between religion and state in societies such as China, Vietnam, and North Korea, where a “leading” political party asserts absolute authority over religious matters. The International Religious Freedom Report may look at these governments as atheist and antireligious states, but in the case of these “socialist” states, like the Soviet Union before them, their policies do not meet the criteria of secularity when set against the practices of legislating on the acceptable reincarnation of the Dalai Lama, as is the case in China, or the deification of the Kim dynasty in North Korea. As John Lagerwey wrote elsewhere, in its approach to rituals and beliefs, China has been a religious state.¹³ In his chapter on China, Ji Zhe clearly outlines these paradoxes of the intermingling of the religious and the secular in contemporary China.

Moreover, Künkler and Madeley correctly noted the inherent difficulty in measuring Secularity II (decline of belief and practice over time), in light of the three cases of China, Japan, and India. The criteria for measuring secularity used by the World Values Survey relies on answers to questions about “belief in God” or “church attendance” that do not make sense for most people in these three countries. A majority of negative answers to the questions “Do you pray?” “Does religion matter in your life?” or “Do you consider yourself a religious person” has led many analysts to conclude that Chinese and Japanese are atheists or indifferent to religion. And yet, those who have paid attention to widespread social practices and belief in the region would find plenty of evidence that there exists deep religiosity in these societies. In states like China, Vietnam, and North Korea, however, these practices face denial and castigation in categories such as “evil cults” or “superstitions,” or they are sometimes promoted and hidden from sight as “folklore” and “national culture”: celebrated but not rehabilitated.

The case studies presented in this book document realities that do not appear clearly in the large-N surveys. Hopefully, quantitatively inclined scholars will find ways to incorporate these differences in designing their surveys. The surveys done in Taiwan about values and social change give a clear example of what is to be gained with a more inclusive approach to the study of religion and secularity. The Taiwan Academy of Social Sciences asked about whether one believes in God or whether one attends regular worship, but it also asked about beliefs in Karmic retribution (the Buddhist law of cause and effect), the existence of ghosts, and the immortality of the soul, providing

¹³ John Lagerwey, *China: A Religious State* (Hong Kong: University of Hong Kong Press, 2010).

a much more nuanced portrait of people's religiosity.¹⁴ The findings for Taiwan mirror those of other societies influenced by Confucian values, from Korea and Japan to Vietnam. Surveys by anthropologists of Africa make similar findings about traditional religions and the belief in the invisible world, although the identification with Christianity or Islam tends to be more often acknowledged.¹⁵

The problem of commensurability has consequences. However, the hurdle may rest less with the reading of the evidence than its interpretation. For instance, when the International Religious Freedom Report comments on religious persecution, biases and blinders emerge. Persecution against Christians may be more readily identifiable in the People's Republic of China than those that target worshippers of other religions in that country because of the historical and personal links between Chinese Christians and their coreligionists who live abroad and have maintained contacts, sometimes for generations. The recent awareness of the persecution against Muslim Uyghurs, which has been raised by secularized human rights organizations and Uyghur expatriates, suggests that this kind of bias based on religious affinities is eroding. A blinder that remains, however, relates to the religions that do not fit the ethnocentric categories that have for a long time limited the definition of religion to the Abrahamic religions before including the "world religions" of Buddhism, Hinduism, Sikhism, and Baha'ism. All these religions have received some form of state patronage or acceptance in society. However, new religious movements, sometimes defined by governments as "cults," are not always counted. The claims by some of these movements that they are not religious, but rather "spiritual," "philosophical," or even "true science," makes this effort of counting even more difficult.¹⁶ The case of the Church of Scientology and Falun Gong represent cases in point. Although the Japanese government counts movements of that kind, such as "Tenrikyo" and "Happy Science," as "neo-religionists," the State Administration for Religious Affairs of China does not.

Another blinder relates to the even more ambiguous case of "ethnic" or "folk religions." Grim and Finke have borrowed from the Pew Research Center's methodology to count people in China who fall within the category of "Taoism and folk religions." The problem with this approach is that it lumps together too many different phenomena: from the Daoist association of China to the widespread belief in the stove God or the practice of ancestor worship, which stand at both ends of a continuum that ranges from institutionalized religions to the most informal kinds of diffused religious practice. Moreover, the distinction between these different forms of religiosity does not make sense, as many people identify with both forms of religion, depending on circumstances. Hence, as Künkler and Madeley note, the anomaly of Japanese statistics, which totals more religious believers than inhabitants in the country, reveals the reality of people who identify with more than one religious community or belief.

What is missing in this otherwise superb collection of essays dealing with secularity in Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa is a consideration of Buddhism as a source of influence in the

14 Zhang Yinghua, *Taiwan diqu shehui bianqian jiben diaocha jihua. Diwuqi. Diwuci diaocha jihua zhixing baogao*. [Fifth basic plan to survey social change in the Taiwan area: Report on the fifth survey] (Nangang: Zhongyuang yanjiuyuan shehuixue yanjiusuo, 2000).

15 Stephen Ellis and Gerrie ter Haar, "Religion and Politics in Sub-Saharan Africa," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 36, no. 2 (1998): 175–201.

16 For a good treatment on redemptive societies, or religious movements with a strong emphasis on morality see Prasenjit Duara, *Sovereignty and Authenticity: Manchukuo and the East Asian Modern* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003).

shaping of secularity since the colonial era.¹⁷ Although most chapters have assessed how much Islam, Hinduism, Christian Orthodoxy, and Judaism have shaped different trajectories toward Secularity I, II, and III—or did not do so—it would have enhanced the value of the comparison to add Buddhism, the fourth most important religious tradition in number of followers. Like Islam, that tradition has spread in many societies and has diverged over centuries in its modes of worship, doctrinal schools, and relationship between lay people and clergy. Although Mahayana Buddhism, as practiced in East Asia, contends with other religions, it represents the religion of the majority, if not a hegemonic tradition, in the countries of the Theravada school in Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka, and the Tibetan tradition practiced in the Himalayas and Mongolia. It would have been interesting to contrast and compare the influence of Theravada Buddhism in countries that have embraced that tradition: despite the similarities in religious identity and the relative similarities in their political destinies—between fragile democracies and authoritarian regimes—the relations between the *sangha* and the heads of government have varied considerably.

Perhaps the editors or others should consider a second volume about Asia looking at the cases of Buddhist societies, which could also include important cases studies, such as Vietnam and the Philippines, both nations of over a hundred million people. The former presents another example of the ambiguity discussed above in the case of China. To what extent the direct experience of French colonial rule has impacted the contour of Secularity I and III is an important empirical question. Moreover, it could also help to identify whether there exists a distinctive sinitic path to secularity extending from Vietnam to Korea. The case of the Philippines also deserves scrutiny as a society that has experienced centuries of colonial rule. Although Catholicism prevails nominally in the archipelago, its influence is overlaid on top of the multiple original folk religious traditions that existed before colonial rule and still remain important as separate minority religions or as syncretized parts of Christianity or Islam. How much this pre-existing condition of plurality can share Secularity III is another question that deserves scrutiny. These calls for adding new case studies do not take away from the enormous contribution of this collective effort, but an endorsement to continue this line of inquiry. This collection of empirical studies and the in-depth theoretical discussions that frames it make this volume a model for the genre.

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¹⁷ A key text on this issue is Christoph Kleine, “Religion and the Secular in Premodern Japan from the Viewpoint of Systems Theory,” *Journal of Religion in Japan* 2, no. 1 (2013): 1–34.