Environmentalism

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Published in: *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Japanese Religions*, edited by Erica Baffelli, Andrea Castiglioni, and Fabio Rambelli, 65-72. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

In recent decades, religious traditions worldwide have been reinterpreted in the light of environmental concerns. Various scholars and religious actors have described Asian worship traditions such as Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism, and Hinduism as vestiges of ‘holistic ecological wisdom’ and ‘ancient sustainability’ – in contrast to Abrahamic religions, which are often said to legitimize or even encourage exploitation of the natural environment (see White 1967). They have suggested that Asian traditions contain important resources – philosophical, practical, and physical – for overcoming today’s global environmental crisis (e.g. Duara 2015; Smith 1972; Tucker & Berthrong 1998; Tucker & Williams 1997). As some critics have pointed out, such interpretations are often anachronistic and orientalist, and may be employed to support nationalist or other ideological agendas (Kalland 2002; Pedersen 1995). Although this critique is justified, there is no denying the fact that environmental concerns have contributed to the actual transformation of religious identities and practices. Today, religious leaders and laypeople throughout the world are expressing concerns with environmental issues. Some of them are making serious attempts to put these ideas into practice, ranging from mosque and church communities investing in alternative energy to temple and shrine communities actively resisting the destruction of local environments (e.g. Darlington 2012; Kent 2013).

These global trends have exercised considerable impact upon Japanese religious organizations. Scholars and religious leaders in Japan have combined contemporary notions of Asian religions as ‘holistic’ and ‘sustainable’ with earlier modern ideas of Japan as a nation characterized by a unique attitude to nature. In popular discourse and nationalist scholarship, this spirit of ‘harmonious co-existence with nature’ is typically presented as a defining feature of ‘the Japanese people’ since times immemorial, which is said to have had a strong impact on aesthetic and religious traditions. In reality, this famous Japanese ‘love of nature’ is largely the product of Meiji-period nationalist mythmaking, and therefore not nearly as ancient or traditional as it is commonly imagined (see Kalland & Asquith 1997; Morris-Suzuki 1998: 35-59; Rots 2017b: 47-63). Moreover, the popularization of these ideas in Japan and abroad paradoxically coincided with the emergence of large-scale industrial pollution and environmental exploitation by Japanese state and corporate actors, domestically as well as abroad (Dauvergne 1997; Walker 2010). Nevertheless, although demonstrably at odds with reality, the perception of Japan as a ‘green archipelago’ possessing outstanding natural beauty, preserved throughout the centuries because of the Japanese people’s unique love of nature, remains widespread. In recent decades,

numerous scholars and religious leaders in Japan have drawn upon such modern nationalist imagery, combining it with newly conceived ideas about Asian traditions as resources of ‘ecological knowledge’ said to be diametrically opposed to Abrahamic (i.e. ‘Western’) religions. As a result, Japanese religious traditions have been reimagined as ‘ecological’ traditions that offer suggestions for living sustainably today, and there is a large body of literature discussing the green credentials of Japanese worship traditions.

In this chapter, I discuss some of the ways in which (Zen) Buddhism, Shinto, and other religious traditions have been reinterpreted in the light of contemporary environmental concerns. It is divided into two sections. I begin by giving a brief sketch of the discourse on Japanese religion as ecological and sustainable, as it has developed in the past decades. My focus will be on the two traditions that have received the most attention and are associated most often with ‘nature’ and environmental issues: Zen Buddhism and Shinto. In addition, I briefly discuss some of the main post-war Japanese theories on religion and nature. These claims centre on the notion of ‘animism’, which has become a core trope not only in nationalist ideology but also in academic debates. Having discussed some of the main theories, in the second part I focus on actual practices. I give some examples of environment-related initiatives undertaken by Japanese shrines, temples, and popular lay religious movements (‘new religions’). As I will show, there is a widespread concern with forest preservation and reforestation on the part of Japanese religious actors. Other than that, however, cases of environmental activism are few and far between, and the impact of Japanese religions on environmental policy-making has been limited.

Green Zen, green Shinto

The association of ‘Zen’ with the natural environment goes back to the 1960s, when the beatnik generation in the US discovered the texts of D. T. Suzuki and started producing their own hybrid popularizations of the tradition (e.g. Borup 2004). Drawing on pre-existing nationalist myths, Suzuki had promoted ‘Zen’ as the essence of Japanese culture, characterized by harmony with nature – in contrast to the supposedly ‘Western’ mentality of conquering nature (Suzuki 1959: 331-95). Historian Lynn White, Jr. was clearly informed by this discourse when he wrote his influential article in *Science*, ‘The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis’ (White 1967). In this article, White famously argued that modern environmental degradation is grounded in the Judeo-Christian view of nature as subordinate to man, which is used to legitimize the exploitation of natural resources. By contrast, he argued, Zen conceives of ‘the man-nature relationship as nearly the mirror image of the Christian view’ (1967: 1206). This argument was copied by subsequent authors, who asserted that Zen – reimagined as the quintessential expression of the Japanese spiritual tradition and its attitude to nature – could serve as the basis for a new environmental ethics (e.g. Earhart 1970; Watanabe 1974; Shaner 1989). Similar arguments have been made repeatedly since, by numerous Zen philosophers and practitioners, in Japan as well as abroad (e.g. Habito 1997; James 2004). Many of them have pointed to Dōgen’s statements that physical objects have Buddha nature, which they see as an example of Zen’s eco-centric worldview (e.g. Parkes 2010).

The association between Zen and nature is not merely philosophical: it has been made so often that it has become a recurring theme in popular texts on ‘Zen’ gardening, cooking, interior design, and so on. One of the problems of such representations of Zen – whether popular or philosophical – is that they are far removed from the daily reality of actual temple practices and do not necessarily translate into environmentally sustainable behaviour. In Japan, Zen temples are similar to those of other Buddhist denominations; most of them are primarily concerned with funeral practices, as this constitutes their main source of income, and in some cases with tourism. Environmental activism is not high on most temples’ agendas, if at all. That said, it is worth mentioning that the Sōtō Zen sect has developed a ‘Green Plan’, which encourages temples and their members to consume less, reduce energy use, and clean litter (Williams 2012: 376-9). Furthermore, there are some noteworthy examples of temples developing local initiatives for environmental conservation. For instance, Sébastien Boret has studied an interesting case of a Zen temple in Tohoku that has been a pioneer in the development of ‘nature funerals’, investing in tree-planting and landscape conservation (Boret 2014). This is a rather unique grassroots project, however, which is not necessarily representative for Zen as a whole. Despite the existence of initiatives such as the ‘Green Plan’, there is little evidence suggesting that Zen priests are more concerned with the environment than, say, those belonging to other denominations. Zen’s green credentials are primarily due to the association with natural aesthetics and simplicity, but this does not necessarily translate into environmentally sustainable behaviour, let alone activism.

A similar argument can be made for Shinto. The association between Shinto *kami* and natural phenomena is made often, and the claim that Shinto is a ‘nature religion’ and *ipso facto* concerned with environmental issues has become commonplace in popular discourse on the topic. However, the fact that certain designated natural elements (e.g. particular trees, rocks, and rivers) are seen as the embodiment of divine beings does not necessarily imply that Shinto practitioners are concerned with the protection of the environment *as a whole*. The idea that Shinto might have some significance for contemporary environmental issues was first put forward by the American scholar of religion H. Byron Earhart in 1970 (Earhart 1970), but did not gain currency in Japan until the late 1990s. Of particular significance in this respect was the organization of the international ‘Shinto and Ecology’ conference at Harvard University in 1997, which was one in a series of large conferences on ‘Religions of the World and Ecology’. Whether the conference was a success or not may be subject to debate – reportedly, there was little interaction between representatives of Shinto and foreign scholars, and the conference proceedings never made it into a book, unlike the other conferences in the series.¹ However, the event did teach the Japanese participants one important lesson: environmental issues constitute an important concern for religious organizations worldwide these days, and associating one’s tradition with these issues can be an effective strategy for asserting its ongoing significance and for acquiring positive

¹ The Association of Shinto Shrines (Jinja Honchō) did publish a report, which contains summaries of most of the conference papers in Japanese (Jinja Honchō 2000), but this report is not endorsed by the conference organizers and was not distributed widely.

publicity abroad. It is no coincidence that several of the participants at this conference would move on to become leading figures in Shinto and contribute to the popularization of the notion of Shinto as an ‘ancient nature religion’ that contains important lessons for living sustainably today (e.g. Sonoda 2000). Today, this view has achieved paradigmatic status even within conservative circles, to the point that the former president of the Association of Shinto Shrines (Jinja Honchō), Tanaka Tsunekiyo – significantly, one of the participants in the 1997 Harvard conference – asserted that the foundation of Shinto is ‘nature worship’ in ‘sacred forests’ (*chinju no mori*) (Tanaka 2011). Thus, the Shinto environmentalist paradigm, as I call it, has now achieved mainstream status, as even the shrine establishment endorses it (Rots 2015, 2017a, 2017b).

The popularization of notions of Zen and Shinto as ‘nature religions’ with green credentials is clearly related to the global trend to associate religion with environmental issues. However, within Japan, such ideas are also influenced by domestic scholarship and ideology. Of particular significance in this context are the writings of a diffuse group of scholars, collectively referred to as ‘spiritual intellectuals’ (Shimazono 2004: 274-92), who have made attempts to define the ‘spirit’ or underlying ‘religiosity’ of the Japanese nation. Authors such as Iwata Keiji, Kamata Tōji, Nakazawa Shin’ichi, Umehara Takeshi, Yamaori Tetsuo, and Yasuda Yoshinori have all argued that the foundational value orientation of the Japanese people lies in their intuitive appreciation of nature as sacred – or, put differently, in the ‘spirit of animism’ that supposedly goes back to the ‘forest civilization’ of the prehistoric Jōmon period and has survived until today. This ‘animism’, scholars such as Umehara and Yasuda have argued, constitutes the foundation of Shinto and Japanese Buddhism (including Zen); it has been largely forgotten as a result of the twin evils of modernization and Westernization, but a return to these values would lead to the rediscovery of the spirit of sustainability that supposedly characterized ancient Japan and help us overcome today’s environmental problems (e.g. Umehara [1991] 1995).

In this narrative, ecological decline goes hand in hand with moral decline, and the solution to the global environmental crisis is found in a return to ‘traditional Japanese culture’. The term ‘animism’, then, serves as a marker of difference, and is used to distinguish between an essentialized Japan and ‘the West’ (or, alternatively, ‘monotheism’), which is seen as morally degraded and responsible for environmental destruction worldwide (Rots 2017b: 107-20). These ideas have been taken over by leading Shinto priests and constitute an important foundation for the Shinto environmentalist paradigm. Critics of the narrative have pointed out that notions of nature as ‘sacred’ could not prevent the depletion of resources, neither in the past nor the present, and that Japan has a poor track record when it comes to environmental protection (e.g. Reader 1990; cf. Totman 1989). Nevertheless, notions of Japan as a nation characterized by some sort of unique ‘animism’ – today expressed in robot technology and popular culture, according to some – that may offer alternative ways for conceptualizing human-nature relations continue to fascinate, and the association has been endorsed by leading anthropologists (Allison 2006; Robertson 2007). In fact, there are several methodological and ideological problems associated with the term ‘animism’, not least in the Japanese context (Thomas 2019; Wilkinson 2017). But even if we do accept the controversial premise that Shinto and Japanese Buddhism have some

sort of underlying animistic worldview, the question still remains: how does such a worldview translate into concrete practices, and how do such practices contribute to solving environmental problems?

Environmental practices

Despite all the rhetoric on the ‘animistic’ orientation of Japanese religion and its alleged tradition of sustainability, the number of religious actors that are actively engaged with environmental issues is small. Shrines and temples are competitors in a crowded, shrinking religious market; most priests are primarily concerned with performing rituals and maintaining relations with their sponsors and parishioners. Few of them are inclined to engage in environmental activism, which could jeopardize such relations. As Duncan Williams has observed, ‘much of mainstream Buddhism [is] aligned politically with the right-wing political conservatives and big business’ (2012: 384). Similarly, Shinto is a corporate religion, which is highly dependent upon sponsorship from business enterprises (Rots 2017b: 132; see also McLaughlin et al. 2020). Priests are generally interested in preserving shrine and temple grounds, but most of them are reluctant to engage in protests that challenge the socio-political status quo. There are a few noteworthy examples of priests who have become active in local environmentalist movements; for instance, some Shinto and Buddhist priests have protested the destruction of sacred forests in order to make way for highways, dams, or nuclear power plants (Breen & Teeuwen 2010: 207-8; Rots 2017b: 135-6; Williams 2012: 373-5, 384-6). These are exceptions, however; generally speaking, religious actors in Japan refrain from protesting infrastructural or industrial projects, even if these go at the expense of sacred land (Rots 2017b: 133-5).

Much more common is the development of initiatives focusing on forest conservation, environmental education, and cultural activities, taking place at local shrine or temple forests. Williams characterizes Buddhist attitudes to nature as ‘conservative conservationism’ (2012: 376), and this term arguably applies to Shinto as well. In recent decades, sacred shrine forests (*chinju no mori*) have become the core symbol of the Shinto environmentalist paradigm (Rots 2015). The preservation of these ancient forests, present-day Shinto scholars argue, is a result of the Japanese tradition of worshipping ‘nature’ as sacred, which should serve as a model for present-day environmental ethics (e.g. Sonoda 2000; Ueda 2013). Although their historical narrative may be challenged – many shrine and temple forests were planted in the modern or early modern periods, and even ‘sacred’ lands were subject to periodical deforestation and resource depletion (Domenig 1997; Rambelli 2001, 2007: 129-71) – it is true that many shrines have small forests around them, as do some Buddhist temples. Some of them have created projects focused on preserving these forests, improving species diversity, and engaging local citizens with the shrine (or temple). For instance, at Shimogamo Jinja, a World Heritage-listed shrine in Kyoto, forestry scientists and priests have developed a project to improve the ecosystem of the historic shrine forest, Tadasu no Mori (Rots 2017b: 120-9). Likewise, at Meiji Jingū, a modern shrine surrounded by a large forest in central Tokyo, a non-profit organization has been set up, members of which are active in collecting and planting acorns that are used for

reforestation projects elsewhere, giving guided forest tours, and growing rice on a small urban paddy (Rots 2017b: 171-81).

The focus on ‘forests’ as the main symbol of Japanese religious sustainability – or even, in Umehara’s terminology, as the essence of Japanese civilization – is not limited to Shinto, but can also be observed in Buddhist initiatives. For instance, the Jōdo Shinshū sect has set up the Honganji Forest Network, ‘which intends to foster respect for the environment through a national database of forests and trees’ (Dessi 2017: 71). There are various local Buddhist forestry initiatives as well: for example, the abbot of Hōnen-in, a Jōdo Shū temple in Kyoto, has set up a ‘forest centre’ for environmental education purposes (Singer 2012), while his colleague at Rinnō-ji, a Sōtō Zen temple in Sendai, organized an ambitious reforestation project after the previous temple forest was demolished and has been involved in post-tsunami tree-planting initiatives (Rots 2019). In sum, forest conservation has emerged as an area in which religious actors can become active, contribute to local environments, and gain social capital, without challenging existing economic or political structures. One organization that is worth mentioning in this context is Shasō Gakkai (‘Sacred Forest Research Association’). Founded in 2002 by a group of scientists and Shinto priests, the association is devoted to preserving sacred forests nationwide and to promoting ‘sacred forest studies’ (*shasōgaku*) as an interdisciplinary research field (Rots 2017b: 101-5). Through its annual journal, book publications (e.g. Ueda 2004), documentaries, conferences, and forest conservation courses, Shasō Gakkai has contributed to the establishment of social relations between religious actors (mostly Shinto priests, but some Buddhist members as well), forest scientists, and environmental activists, providing them with an opportunity to share experiences from different local forest conservation and environmental education projects.

Jinja Honchō has likewise expressed an interest in forest conservation. It is actively involved with the Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC), a UK-based non-profit organization that defines itself as ‘a secular body that helps the major religions of the world to develop their own environmental programmes, based on their own core teachings, beliefs and practices’ (ARC n.d.-a). In 2000, Jinja Honchō staff made the ‘pledge’ that all shrine forests in Japan would be managed sustainably, and they have been active in developing an international ‘religious forestry standard’ (ARC n.d.-b). In 2014, Jinja Honchō and the ARC co-organized a large interreligious conference at the shrines of Ise on the topic of religion and sustainability, in which representatives from various religious traditions worldwide took part (*Kōshitsu* henshūbu 2014; Rots 2015, 2017b). This conference is illustrative of the fact that Jinja Honchō has become more concerned with international cooperation and publicity, and has discovered the legitimacy provided by a positive association with environmental sustainability. It is no coincidence that the conference took place at Ise – Shinto’s sacred centre, according to many – for Ise has recently been promoted actively as a place with unique natural beauty, characterized by centuries-old ‘sustainable’ traditions (Rots 2017b: 183-97).

Forest preservation and reforestation have also been high on the agenda of a number of Japan’s lay religious movements. Several of them have developed tree-planting projects, both in

Japan and abroad, directly or through associated non-profit organizations. This applies to Ōmoto-derived religious groups such as Ananaikyō and Worldmate as well as Lotus Sutra groups such as Risshō Kōsei Kai and Sōka Gakkai. Ananaikyō, for instance, is relatively small in terms of membership, but the affiliated ‘non-religious’ development organization OISCA is influential throughout the Asia-Pacific region, where it seeks to spread the Japanese spirit of ‘harmony with nature’ through reforestation projects and organic farming training centres (Watanabe 2019). Some of these movements have gone so far as to embrace environmentalism as a core aspect of their institutional identity, expressing an interest not only in forest conservation but also in alternative energy and organic agriculture. Seichō no Ie, for instance, is known for its ultra-nationalist ideology and involvement with Nippon Kaigi (Mizohata 2016), but it has turned green and now places great emphasis on environmental issues. It has recently completed its new, carbon-neutral and sustainable headquarters, the ‘office in the forest’ (*mori no naka no ofisu*) in Yamanashi Prefecture, from where it wants to contribute to building a society in which humans and nature live in balance (Lian 2019; Taniguchi & Taniguchi 2010). Another large Ōmoto-derived religion, Sekai Kyūseikyō Izunome Kyōdan (Church of World Messianity), likewise expresses an interest in nature and environmental issues. It is especially known for its emphasis on organic farming, and it has been involved with the development of ‘effective microorganisms’ (EM), which are said to purify polluted soil and water (Sekai Kyusei Kyo Izunome 2008).

Thus, generally speaking, Japanese religious organizations have shown an interest in relatively apolitical topics such as forest conservation and organic farming, which are compatible with conservative, nationalist, and corporate ideologies, but refrain from engaging with more controversial issues. There has been a strong interest in forests and tree-planting, but more pressing environmental problems, such as climate change and industrial pollution, have received considerably less attention. Until very recently, few (if any) Japanese religious organizations were concerned with maritime environmental issues such as overfishing, toxic pollution, or plastic waste. In 2019, however, the problem of plastic pollution was discussed at the G20 summit in Osaka, leading to more awareness of the issue in Japan. In response, an editorial in *Jinja Shinpō* (the Jinja Honchō newspaper) called for shrine priests and practitioners to recognize the importance of the ocean and consume less plastic (*Jinja Shinpō* 2019). This was not the first time the shrine paper stated that Shinto should be concerned with environmental issues, but unlike previous editorials, this time the focus was not on shrine forests and moral education but on marine pollution. As usual, however, suggestions for concrete environmental actions were lacking.

Recent years have also seen an emerging interest in energy issues on the part of some religious actors and organizations. After the Fukushima crisis in 2011, various Buddhist organizations and new religions have spoken out against nuclear power and argued for a nationwide transition to alternative energy (Dessi 2017: 74-82). Konkōkyō, Seichō no Ie, Risshō Kōsei Kai and two Buddhist temples have set up ‘the Religious and Scholarly Eco Initiative (RSE) and the Religious Based Solar Power Generators Association’, pleading for the

installation of solar panels at temples, churches, and shrines that can provide energy to surrounding communities (JNEB n.d.; Watts 2013). Similarly, some scholars and priests have argued that Shinto shrines could take the lead in producing solar power (Rots 2017b: 138). Thus far, however, such initiatives have had a limited impact, and have not (yet?) resulted into the widespread installation of solar panels at shrines and temples. After all, most religious denominations in Japan employ environmentalist rhetoric, but few of them seriously challenge existing economic structures and consumption patterns.

The main exception to this rule is Okinawa, which suffers from serious environmental problems ranging from toxic pollution to rapid biodiversity loss, partly caused by the large US military presence on the island. In recent years, a sizeable coalition of citizens' groups has tried to prevent further military expansion, in particular the construction of a new base at Henoko Bay. Among the regular protesters are members of a small Lotus Sutra movement, Nipponzan-Myōhōji, a radical pacifist organization that is known for its peace pagodas, peace walks, and anti-nuclear stance (see Kisala 1999). Furthermore, some of the most prominent Henoko protest leaders are Protestant Christian ministers and Buddhist (Shingon and Jōdo Shinshū) priests. The protest movement also includes some vocal Okinawan *kaminchu* (ritual specialists). Thus, in Okinawa, a shared pacifist and environmentalist agenda has provided different religious actors with an opportunity to establish new interfaith relations. Yet even here, they constitute a minority; the majority of religious specialists are reluctant to join such explicitly political movements, even if they support them in private.

Conclusion

Religious actors in Japan are predominantly conservative. Most Shinto, Buddhist, and new religious organizations see it as their task to preserve Japanese traditional culture and corresponding social structures, not challenge them. They are eager to employ nationalist myths about the unique Japanese love of nature, and perceive today's environmental problems as symptoms of the moral degradation that comes with individualization and a decline in 'traditional values' such as patriotism and respect for nature. A return to these values, many of them believe, will automatically result in more sustainable behaviour. By contrast, the economic, ideological, and technological reasons that lie behind the widespread environmental pollution, climate change, rapid species loss, and large-scale waste problems facing today's world are not widely recognized. There is no doubt that some Japanese religious actors have played a positive role in the preservation of local (forest) environments. Few of them, however, have joined forces with other environmental groups in Japan, or used their influence to change policies. For instance, although Jinja Honchō and several new religious and Buddhist groups are prominent members of the powerful nationalist lobby organization Nippon Kaigi (Guthmann 2017; Mizohata 2016), they have made no attempts to push for greener national policies. Despite the development of some interesting projects for local nature conservation and the promotion of alternative energy, therefore, thus far the environmental engagement of Japanese religions has been limited.

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