

The Asian Studies Conference Japan
July 3, 2022
Panel Proposal & Abstracts

Organiser and Chair: Paola CAVALIERE, Osaka University

Panellists

Paola CAVALIERE, Osaka University

Timothy BENEDICT, Kwansei Gakuin University

Tim GRAF, Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture

Kaitlyn UGORETZ, UC Santa Barbara

Discussant: Prof Erica BAFFELLI, University of Manchester (UK)

PANEL PROPOSAL

Japanese religious communities and institutions in the pandemic: adaptations and innovations

The onset of the pandemic has had a highly disruptive impact on the activities of churches, temples, shrines and religious communities in Japan. This panel discusses adaptations and alternatives that selected Japanese religious communities and institutions have formulated to respond to the old and newer demands that individuals have advanced as an effect of the pandemic. In this panel, Cavaliere looks at the moderating effect of religious and spiritual coping mechanisms on the COVID-19 pandemic-induced emotional distress among a group of Japanese women practising temple meditation and body-mind practices. Benedict demonstrates the historical context for accelerated interest among religious groups to frame religion in Japan in (psycho)therapeutic terms. Graf's paper presents on-the-ground perspectives on ways that prayer temples and shrines in Japan mediated concepts of divine aid during COVID-19. Ugoretz examines how the global pandemic has prompted Shinto shrines in Japan and around the world to (re)negotiate the boundaries of authentic and efficacious ritual practice and community as mediated by digital technology. Overall, results of this panel show that organised religions have come to appropriate more holistic and diversified forms of religiosity and spirituality to respond to newer demands, while body-mind and spiritual practices seem also to have assumed greater significance in institutional religions.

INDIVIDUAL ABSTRACTS

1) Paola CAVALIERE, Osaka University

Japanese women's religious and spiritual coping strategies in the time of Covid-19

This paper explores the mediating effect of religious and spiritual coping mechanisms on the COVID-19 pandemic-induced emotional distress among a group of Japanese

women practising temple meditation and yoga. The study uses a descriptive phenomenological approach drawing upon narratives collected between September 2020 to June 2021 from thirty-two respondents composed of a mix of religious-affiliated and self-identified non-religious women practising temple meditation and yoga. Findings indicate that more women, including religious affiliates, have favoured spiritual coping mechanisms in the forms of meditation and body-mind practices to build emotional resilience. This correlates with a quest for greater subjective well-being to compensate for the increased burden of emotional care during the pandemic. Overall, while organised religions have come to appropriate more holistic forms of spirituality to respond to demands of emotional care, body-mind spiritual practices have become more appealing for younger religious and non-religious Japanese women alike in that they downplay gender-conforming ideas of the care economy with its emphasis on dedication and dependency.

2) Timothy BENEDICT, Kwansei Gakuin University

Vaccinating the Heart: Therapeutic Religion in Japan Before and After Covid-19

This paper examines how a (psycho)therapeutic vision for the role of religion in contemporary Japan is being narrated by both religious groups and the media through the language of “heart care” (*kokoro no kea*). For many centuries, religions in Japan have offered health benefits to its practitioners and continues to do so, whether it be through protective amulets purchased at a shrine or temple, joining a new religious movement that emphasizes healing rituals, or practicing “mindfulness” in one’s spare time. In recent decades, the therapeutic benefits of religion have been especially touted in fields like hospital chaplaincy, where spiritual care is offered to the sick and dying, as well as in the wake of natural disasters, like the 2011 earthquake and tsunami, when many religious groups sought to comfort and offer grief care to traumatized victims. Many of these therapeutic practices are centered on “heart care.” While touting the healthy benefits of religious practice in Japan is nothing new, I show that the mainstreaming of “heart care” in recent decades, and the impact of Covid-19, has accelerated interest among religious groups and the media to more explicitly frame the role of religion in (psycho)therapeutic terms, sometimes even employing the metaphor of religion as a “vaccine for the heart.”

3) Tim GRAF, Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture

Mediating Divine Protection during COVID-19

This paper presents on-the-ground perspectives on ways that prayer temples and shrines in Japan mediated concepts of divine aid during COVID-19. Some religious institutions experienced record sales in prayer rituals and amulets during the pandemic, while others struggled to survive. Based on this observation, I ask how different temples and shrines noted for promising worldly benefits employed different practices, beliefs, and management styles across an economic divide. I then situate these findings by relating questions of post-pandemic innovation to material religion. Technological changes before and after the outbreak of the novel coronavirus have

diversified the means of communicating and performing divine protection remotely and on site. However, the material culture involved in evoking the religious sensation of divine aid in rituals, meditation sessions, or ludic and recreational events at temples and shrines, as shall be argued, is not easily made portable.

4) **Kaitlyn UGORETZ, UC Santa Barbara**

Shinto Shrines' Digital Responses to Socially-Distanced Ritual

Creative use of digital technology has become critical to the continuation of religious This paper explores the online presence of Shinto shrines and the growth of digital Shinto communities in response to COVID-19. Although Shinto shrines have a long history of contributing to the ritual protection of health on individual, local, and national scales, they have generally limited their online presence to informational, non-interactive websites due to institutional pressure against online worship. Without opportunities for in-person ritual practice, however, many Shinto shrines are innovating as demand for services increases, thereby prompting debates within Shinto communities on the relationship between the sacred, ritual, and the Internet. Can rituals be live-streamed, and if so, what should and should not be seen? Can protective amulets be distributed online? One unintended consequence of such innovations is that they make shrines around the world more accessible than ever for thousands of transnational Shinto practitioners involved with Shinto communities on social media. I argue that this greater online presence presents Shinto institutions with a mixed blessing, offering the possibility of greater relevance and international recognition as much as increased scrutiny and challenges to their authority.