

Buddhism in Crisis? Institutional Decline in Modern Japan

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ABSTRACT

Concerns that established temple Buddhism in Japan is in a state of crisis have been voiced by priests in various sectarian organizations in recent years. This article shows that there is a very real crisis facing Buddhism in modern Japan, with temples closing because of a lack of support and of priests to run them, and with a general turn away from Buddhism among the Japanese population. In rural areas falling populations have led to many temple closures, while in the modern cities people are increasingly turning away from the prime area in which Japanese people have traditionally engaged with Buddhist temples — the processes of death and their aftermath. Partly this is due to competition from new secular funeral industries, but partly also it is because public perceptions of Buddhism — which has become over-reliant on death rituals in Japan — have become highly negative in modern times. Even practices which have often been seen as areas in which Buddhist temples have been able to attract people — such as pilgrimages — are proving less successful than in the past, contributing further to a sense of crisis that threatens to undermine Buddhism's roots in Japan.

Keywords

Crisis, temples, households, death, funerals, *butsudan* (household Buddhist altars), ancestors, secular funerals, depopulation, urbanization, nuclearization, ossification, pilgrimage

The Japanese Buddhist newspaper *Chūgai Nippō* regularly carries reports on the meetings of the councils and governing bodies of Buddhist sectarian organizations in Japan, and of conferences organized by Japanese Buddhist organizations that focus on contemporary Buddhist issues. In the past three years, a term that has appeared repeatedly in such reports is *kikikan* 'a feeling of crisis'. This word

crops up regularly in the questions posed by priests when discussing sectarian policies and in the reports of sectarian scholars on surveys they have carried out into the state of contemporary Japanese Buddhism. It has also appeared frequently in conversations and discussions I have had with Buddhist priests in Japan during fieldwork visits there in 2008, 2009, and 2010, and in a real sense it sums up a general mood within contemporary Japanese Buddhism, and that is found in every sectarian branch of the tradition.¹ That there is a ‘sense of crisis’ at present is also evident in the statistical data available on contemporary Buddhism – data that shows significant declines in Buddhist support structures, a general turn by the Japanese public away from Buddhism, and an increasing sense that Buddhism is outdated and focused on issues no longer immediately relevant to ordinary Japanese. Such is the ‘sense of crisis’ that many people in the Buddhist world now think that the tradition will have a much reduced physical presence in Japan in future. The most dramatic expression of this sentiment came from a senior Buddhist figure and leading light in the Japanese Buddhist Federation (Nihon Bukkyōkai) whom I interviewed in Tokyo in April 2010, and who predicted that within a decade 50% of the Buddhist temples of Japan would have disappeared. Yet this figure is not a wild or dramatic overstatement of the problem, judging by the analyses different sects have done about their own longer term prospects; the Contemporary Religions Research Office of the Nichiren sect (Nichirenshū), for example, has recently estimated that 45% of its temples would be empty in the foreseeable future (Murai 2010, 65). The issues involved – temples closing down, temple priests unable to find anyone to succeed them, and declining support levels among *danka* (households that support temples and that have for the past four centuries been the mainstay (see below) of Japanese Buddhism) – have been reported extensively also in the secular media. Thus the July 7 2008 edition of the Japanese magazine *Yomiuri Ui-kurii* (‘Yomiuri Weekly’) contained an article whose Japanese title translates as ‘Temples are dying out: priests suffering because of the lack of successors and declining numbers of households that support Buddhist temples’, in which the closure of temples and declining numbers of priests were highlighted as examples of the weakening foundations of established Buddhism in Japan (Akimoto 2008).

So dramatic is this ‘sense of crisis’ that the writer on Buddhist affairs Murai Kōzō (2010, 140) has called it the *Heisei haibutsu kishaku* – a phrase that refers back to the *haibutsu kishaku* (‘destroy Buddhism and kick out the Buddhas’) movement of the early 1870s, when the state and its minions (notably Shinto priests) declared Buddhism to be an alien, foreign institution that should be banned.

1. See *Chūgai Nippō* Jan. 31 2009, p.1, for a report on the discussions at a conference organized by the Sōtō sect in Tokyo on this issue, and *Chūgai Nippō* Mar. 19 2009, pp.4–5 on Jōdo Shin (True Pure Land) sectarian meetings, and Oct. 24, 2009 p.4 on Rinzaï sect meetings, in which such issues were raised.

In checking reports in *Chūgai Nippō* and in related databases and publications that carry reports of religious news items, I have noticed the term ‘feeling of crisis’ more often since around 2008 and have focused my examination on items being published since that time. I do not mean to imply that this feeling only emerged three years back, although for reasons that are developed later in this article, it has in my view become more intense in very recent times. The areas where I have primarily conducted field visits during these recent trips (March–April 2008, October–November 2009, and March–April 2010) have been in northern Kyushu, Hiroshima prefecture, Shikoku, the island of Shōdoshima in the Inland Sea, the Kansai region and also Nagoya and Tokyo.

During that campaign thousands of temples were destroyed throughout Japan, and huge numbers of Buddhists were driven out of the priesthood (Ketelaar 1990). The term '*Heisei*' refers to the current era in Japan² that began with the accession of the current Emperor in 1989. While Murai may be speaking in overly dramatic terms here, there is an underlying reality to his comment: organized, established Buddhism in Japan is in a serious state of decline, one that threatens the continued existence of a major religious tradition that for over a millennium has been an important element in the socio-cultural fabric of Japan.

This crisis is at its most acute in the arena of 'temple Buddhism' — a term that relates to organized, established, institutionalized Japanese Buddhism³ and to the main location of interaction between Buddhism and the Japanese public, namely the local Buddhist temple. Implicitly, too, it points to the primary arena in which Japanese people have interacted with Buddhism — the arena of death, funerals and rituals for the deceased, and of memorialising the dead and caring for their spirits, where Buddhism has for several centuries had a virtual monopoly.⁴ This predominant social function is found across the spectrum of Japanese Buddhism, whose numerous sectarian organizations and traditions, despite differences in doctrinal terms, operate very similarly in terms of death rituals, funerals, and associated practices and functions. Moreover, the 'sense of crisis', and the problems involved in it, also appear to vary little if at all across the Buddhist spectrum in Japan today; all sects appear to be similarly affected. The problems are endemic to the whole corpus of established mainstream sectarian Buddhism in Japan.

One should note that it is not Buddhism alone that is facing such an erosion of support in present day Japan. Surveys have shown declining levels of support for religious organizations of all types in Japan throughout the period since 1945, and provide clear evidence that in the modern context of Japan, as in many other technologically advanced societies, religion is becoming regarded as something of an anachronistic anomaly.⁵ Shinto also suffers from falling support levels: the numbers of priests are declining while shrines unable to support a priest are on the increase (Breen and Teeuwen 2011, 219). The new religions of Japan, too,

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2. Japanese dating systems utilize the era name of the Emperor who is head of state at the time.
 3. The term 'established Buddhism' *kisei Bukkyō* is used in Japan to refer to the Buddhist tradition that has its roots in the pre-modern era, and that includes the various sectarian traditions (the Nara, Tendai, Shingon, Pure Land, Zen and Nichiren sects and their sub-sects) that developed in earlier eras, are organized around temples and the notion of an ordained Buddhist priesthood, and that continue to have a presence in Japan. This institutionalized form of Buddhism is generally differentiated from the Buddhist-oriented new religions that have emerged in Japan since the nineteenth century and that have more commonly been developed around lay teachers and places of teaching and worship that are generally referred to as 'proselytising places' *fukyōsho* or 'churches' (*kyōkai*) and not 'temples' (*jiin, otera*).
 4. See Covell 2005, esp. pp. 23–61 for a fuller discussion of 'temple Buddhism' and for a general description of the relationship between households and temples.
 5. Ishii 2007 contains collated details of the frequent statistical surveys conducted by a variety of organizations and scholars since the end of World War Two, in which levels of belief have declined significantly especially since 1995, and in which the numbers of people stating that they had some form of religious affiliation have likewise declined. I have recently completed an extensive paper on the broader patterns of secularization and religious decline in contemporary Japan (Reader 2012) that will be published shortly.

have struggled in recent years, with many admitting to falling support levels.⁶ However, it is temple Buddhism that has suffered perhaps the sharpest decline and where the crisis appears to be the most profound.

The problems established Buddhism faces in Japan have been raised in academic contexts in Western languages by Stephen Covell (2005) and George Tanabe (2006). Japanese scholars such as Tamamuro Taijō (1963) and Tamamuro Fumio (1999), who have both criticized Japanese Buddhism's heavy reliance on death rituals, Ueda Noriyuki (2004) and Murai Kōzō (2010), have also examined such problems. Yet such studies, even while drawing attention to issues of decline, focus more on either looking for shards of hope of revival (as do Ueda and Murai) or on arguing that institutional Buddhism is addressing the problems and has developed various innovative ways to deal with the challenges it faces. This is, for example, a theme of Covell's work, which draws attention to various activities — from temple relationships with local faith groups and confraternities (Japanese: *kō*) and the readiness of temples to promote and engage in pilgrimage practices — that he sees as helping generate continuing economic support and dynamism to temples.⁷ To that degree, studies thus far on Buddhist problems in Japan have been framed by an underlying sense of optimism that in my view diminishes the very real level of crisis that the tradition faces. Moreover, although both Covell and Ueda offer some optimistic perspectives for innovative practices that could restore the vitality of Buddhism, while others such as Mark Rowe (2000) have shown that some temples and priests are displaying a degree of innovation and creativity in developing new modes of funeral that could boost clienteles at temples, there is rather little evidence to indicate that these are having a significant effect on the overall position. Indeed, in the period since Covell, Ueda and Rowe's studies have appeared, the evidence has continued to point towards decline rather than the reverse. The repeated reports in recent Buddhist newspapers and meetings about a 'sense of crisis' among ordinary Buddhist priests coupled with statistical evidence of further decreases in the performance of Buddhist rituals and the like, all point to continuing decline, even as one can see evidence of attempts at reform appearing. The picture I paint here is of a rather endemic decline and its causes at institutional levels — and this, I suggest, is important to understand because of the underlying implication that Buddhism as an *institutionalized* form of religion centred around sectarian structures and around the relationship between local temples and a household-based clientele may be in its death throes.

My aim in this article is to draw attention to the problems facing established institutional Buddhism in Japan by introducing evidence indicating the scale of decline while outlining the main factors contributing to this decline, so that it might be better understood in a wider context. In addition, this article represents a preliminary step in my wish to contribute to an area of academic study that

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6. In the past five years, I have had discussions with senior officials in a number of new religions, all of whom have said that they are in an era of falling membership levels.
 7. Covell 2005, esp. p.143. John Nelson is finalising a book manuscript on what he terms 'Experimental Buddhism' outlining attempts by a number of priests to develop new ways forward for Buddhism (personal communication). However, while these may indicate individual cases of development, the broader picture is somewhat less optimistic. Mark Rowe has a new book (2011) on attempts by some priests to develop innovative practices related to funerals and death.

has often been neglected — namely that of what happens when religions go into decline.⁸ There is an understandable tendency, in studies of religion, to focus on areas of growth and vitality — but the corollary is that scholars of religion have often neglected to examine what happens when religions become moribund. This point has also been made recently by Clark Chilson (2010), in his study of how secretive lay Jōdo Shin Buddhist organizations in Japan are fast disappearing, and my article in many ways reinforces this. In examining the evidence relating to Japanese Buddhism's current decline, my hope also is that this may facilitate further research into a topic that requires attention now, especially from scholars in the field of Buddhist Studies.

TEMPLE BUDDHISM: THE CONTEXT

For Japanese people in general, the main function of Japanese Buddhist temples, especially since from the Tokugawa era (1600–1867) onwards, has been to deal with death, funerals and the memorialization of the deceased as ancestors. While there are temples famed as centres for pilgrimage, meditation and monastic training, or faith-healing, and/or as aesthetically beautiful places that feature on tourist itineraries,⁹ these are in a small minority compared to temples that focus on (and in effect specialize in) such death-related issues and on caring for the needs (largely centred around caring for the dead) of local parishioners. The large majority of Buddhist temples in Japan — at least three-quarters of the total — belong to this category, and they are commonly referred to as *bodaiji* (lit. 'temple of enlightenment' but in reality better translated as 'family temple').¹⁰ Such temples — along with the general contemporary structure of Japanese Buddhism — are grounded in the *danka* (household temple) system formally constituted in the Tokugawa era, when every household had by law to be affiliated to a temple in its vicinity. Since sectarian affiliation went through the temple, this meant that people were formally obliged to join a sect because of where they lived, and because of the household they belonged to or were born into, rather than because of specific faith orientations. Individuals had no choice, either, for in Tokugawa Japan they had no legal autonomy; they were component parts of the household, which was the prime unit of social and legal belonging — a status that still pertains to a great degree even though it is being eroded by modern trends towards nuclear families and individual autonomy.

In Tokugawa Japan, the local temple served as a registry of births and deaths and was a mainstay of social identity and local belonging. It also served the key function of caring for the dead, providing funeral services through which the dead are (in Japanese Buddhist terms) transformed into ancestors and given

8. This article and the research on which it is based are the first steps in a larger project, which will examine the broader contexts and not just locate the issue of decline in wider processes within the religious spectrum in Japan, but will also investigate in greater depth the problems that appear to be prevalent in the relationship between sectarian headquarters and the relatively small number of better-off temples on the one hand, and regional and poorer temples on the other. It is also located within a wider study of religious decline and what happens when institutions suffer from loss of support.

9. See Reader 1991, 83–101 for a fuller description of such types of temple.

10. Murai 2010, 46 states that around 60,000 of the 75,866 temples registered in Japan according to the 2007 *Shūkyō Nenkan* are solely of this local type.

Buddhist posthumous names (*kaimyō*) to denote their transition from this world to a new status in the next, from whence they also served as benevolent guardians over their living kin. Such rituals also gave solace to the living, who were assured that they would similarly be cared for after death and be saved from unpleasant fates such as a descent into the Buddhist hells or unpropitious rebirths.¹¹ Although this system was legally abolished in the nineteenth century, its imprint remained strong; a key reason for the failure of the aforementioned 1870s *haibutsu kishaku* attempt to eradicate Buddhism was that the vast majority of Japanese people at the time felt its role of dealing with death and the ancestors was too important to allow Buddhism to be eradicated (Collcutt 1988). This relationship has remained pivotal to Buddhism and it provides the main bond of affiliation between Japanese people and Buddhist temples. Indeed, the continuing influence of this relationship and its expression via death-related practices and rituals, is such that Japanese Buddhism has become very largely dependent on it in economic terms, with around 75% of temple income derived from such sources.¹² If that income stream is reduced, the impact falls not just on local temples, since sectarian organizations and all the things they do — from attempts at proselytising and teaching about Buddhism to simply governing the sect, as is required by law, and being answerable to the state for the conduct of the institution — are financed by the taxes that sects are able to levy on their temples (Murai 2010, 141, 159).

Since the end of World War Two this traditional relationship has been in decline, a decline that has been especially exacerbated in the past two decades. This is partly because of social and structural changes in Japan, with mass urbanization and changes in family structures. Traditional extended families (the basis of the *danka* system and the temple-household relationship) have given way to the now more common nuclear family structure, birth rates have declined and, increasingly commonly, many people are deciding not to marry or have families at all — a pattern that has led to concerns about population decline in the near future.¹³ Other factors have included a general turn against established Buddhism and negative feelings towards its priests — something that is especially pronounced among younger people, for whom Buddhism's association with death has given it a 'dark' and 'gloomy' image and made it something to be avoided as a result.¹⁴ In addition, Buddhism's monopoly of death has been challenged by new funeral service businesses that have marginalized the role of temples and increasingly are encouraging non-religious funerals devoid of Buddhist content; these

11. For a full discussion of Japanese concepts of death and the concept of ancestors, see Smith 1974, while for the *danka* system see Marcure 1985.

12. Covell 2005, 144, cites statistics to this effect. The percentage is a lot higher for many local temples, which are often wholly dependent on such income, according to some of my priestly informants.

13. While Japan had a population of around 127 million in 2005, general estimates (based on a declining birth rate, currently at around 1.29 children per woman and one of the lowest in the world) are that it will have fallen to around 105 million by the middle of this century (Chapple 2004).

14. These views are commonplace among Japanese young people and have been frequently expressed to me in conversations and interviews over the past two decades, with the word *kurai* ('dark/gloomy') being the most commonly used term to describe Buddhism,

are increasingly successful and are putting the economies of large numbers of temples in severe jeopardy. All of these issues will be explored further below.

STATISTICS AND OTHER DATA RELATING TO DECLINE

There is plentiful data to indicate how severe the crisis is. Statistical data indicate a general erosion in religious affiliation in Japan over several decades. The numerous surveys and questionnaires carried out by public bodies, newspapers and scholars over the entire post-1945 period have shown a general decrease in the numbers stating that they either have religious beliefs or have specific religious adherences. In the Yomiuri newspaper surveys, which have been conducted regularly since 1952, the figures have fallen consistently — from 64.7% having religious belief in 1952 to 56% in 1965 and progressively until a low of 20.3% in 1995 — the year of the Aum Shinrikyō subway attack, which impacted dramatically on public perceptions of religion — and while it has risen marginally (to 22.9% in 2005), it remains far lower than in previous decades (Inoue 1999, 24–25, Ishii 2007, 4). The Yomiuri surveys delineate levels of belief not just among the general population but also among age-sets, in ten-year groups, and this showed that such decline is especially strong among the younger generations, with the 20–29 year-old age-set having the lowest levels of belief of all. However, the surveys also show that even the older generations are turning away from religion in large numbers, with the age-set with consistently the highest levels of belief (those aged seventy years old and above) similarly showing a declining commitment to religion; belief levels have virtually halved in this age group between 1989 and 2005, from 69.3% in 1989 to 36.8% in 2005 (Ishii 2007, 11). This downward trend has affected Buddhism as well as other traditions. Between 1976 and 2002, for example, the number of people between the ages of 13 and 59 who expressed faith or even interest in Buddhism fell from 54.3% to 25% (Ishii 2007, 29), while the nationwide Japanese General Social Survey of 2003 showed that only 11.8% claimed to have faith in any religion, including Buddhism (Ishii 2007, 31).

There is also a manifest lack of trust in religious institutions, which have scored poorly in such terms in Japan recently; an extensive nationwide values survey in 1998 placed religious institutions as the least trusted (at a mere 13%) of any social groupings in Japan — lower than the media, political groups or business companies (Kisala 1999, 59). Such hostile attitudes are especially strong among the younger generations. A major survey of student attitudes conducted over a number of years by Kokugakuin University in Tokyo¹⁵ showed that Buddhist priests were not highly rated by students. When asked which religious figure they might ask advice from in a time of trouble, only 11.8% chose a Buddhist priest (the same amount as chose a fortune teller!), with Christian priests (a tiny minority religion in Japan with only 1% of the population as adherents) scoring twice as highly (Inoue 2003, 33). One factor in these attitudes was the 1995 Tokyo subway attack by the religious movement Aum Shinrikyō, which led high numbers of Japanese to state that religion was ‘dangerous’ and to express a distrust

15. Kokugakuin University received a sizeable grant from the Ministry of Education to establish a ‘21st century Centre of Excellence’ in the study of religion, through which it has been able to carry out numerous extensive sociological surveys of attitudes to religion in Japan that are cited in this article.

of any form of religious engagement,¹⁶ but in many respects what the attack did was simply to intensify and exacerbate an existing negativity towards religions such as institutional Buddhism. Terms such as *shūkyōbanare* ('alienation from religion'), *terabanare* ('alienation from temples') and *bukkyōbanare* ('alienation from Buddhism') have become common in recent times (Murai 2010, 55 and 70) and have surfaced frequently in interviews I have conducted in the past three years with Japanese Buddhist priests and sect officials.

Such disaffection has led to increasing numbers breaking their previous household-oriented affiliations with Buddhism. According to the *Shūkyō Nenkan*, Japan's annual religious data book, between 2000 and 2009 the numbers of people affiliated to Buddhism — as indicated in censuses and in the returns made by religious organizations that under Japanese law are registered as such under the aegis of the *Bunkachō* (Minsitry of Culture) — fell by almost eight million (a drop of almost one million a year) from 95,420,000 in 2000 to 87,506,504 in 2009 (*Bunkachō* 2000, 2006, 2009; *Shūkan Daimondo* 2009, 34). One should not be misled into thinking that such large numbers (the latter indicating that three-quarters of the population appear to be affiliated to Buddhism) indicate continuing size and strength. As has been noted, Buddhist affiliation has been a *de facto* default position for the Japanese since the Tokugawa period, while that system and household-temple relationship has remained to the extent that it has been commonplace for people to say that they are 'Buddhist' even if they do nothing apart from belong to a household whose members have traditionally had Buddhist funerals at death. Yet in very recent years even that sense of traditional belonging is disappearing; the very fact that some eight million less people feel obligated to identify themselves as 'Buddhist' (and that Buddhist sects are having to report lower figures) in the first decade of this century alone, indicates that people have become increasingly inclined to eschew formerly held traditions and publicly distance themselves from Buddhism.

Various concepts and practices commonly associated with Buddhism in Japan have also been affected by changing public attitudes. These include beliefs about the continuance of spiritual life after death and the transformation of the deceased spirit into an ancestor who should be venerated at a *butsudan* (the household Buddhist altar used to memorialize the deceased in the home), and the consequent need to own a *butsudan* at which such memorial and veneration activities could take place. Belief in the continued existence in some form of the spirits of the dead — a critical aspect of the household, temple and ancestor system — had fallen below 50% in the early years of the current century (Covell 2005, 174–175) and the indications, based on the attitudes of the younger generations, is that this trend will continue. The extensive surveys done by academics from Kokugakuin University in Tokyo show that among college students belief in the existence of 'buddhas' (a term that in Japanese contexts indicates ancestor spirits and spirits

16. The broader public turn against religious organizations after the Aum attack is discussed in Reader 2001, which argues there was a 'paradigm shift' in public attitudes to religion, with the public ready, after 1995, to support increasing strictures on religious organizations of all sorts and to view them with suspicion, along with an increasing readiness among the mass media to critique religious organizations of all sorts and to produce hostile stories about them. As Inoue (2003, 28) notes, 65% of the students surveyed in the Kokugakuin surveys viewed religion as 'dangerous' and considered that religions of all sorts should be banned from proselytising in the streets.

that continue to exist after death¹⁷), dropped from 19% in 1999 to a mere 9.2% in 2009; similarly the number who believed in the existence of a soul or spirit (that would live on in some way after death) fell from 31.8% to 15% (Inoue 2003, 42–43). Since a crucial element in the traditional Japanese Buddhist ritual processes of death and the memorialization of the dead is the belief that the spirit (*hotoke* or *butsu* — see note 17) exists after death, this has grave implications for the future engagement of the younger generations in Buddhist rituals.

Certainly there has been a clear decline in practices associated with ancestors and with the *butsudan*, which have been a mainstay of lay Buddhist engagement in Japan and a means of emphasizing bonds between the family and temple (Reader 1993). Studies of *butsudan* ownership and uses in Tokyo in 1951 showed that 80% of households had *butsudan*, and that worship at them was widespread, with under ten percent of household members surveyed saying that they paid no attention to such altars (Dore 1958, 306–316). The Japanese sociologist Morioka Kiyomi conducted extensive studies in rural and urban Japan between 1964 and 1966, showing that 92% of households in the rural area studied (Yamanashi prefecture) owned a *butsudan*, while in Tokyo 69% of working class households and 60% of white collar households had them (Morioka 1975; Ishii 2007, 76). Numbers have fallen since, with the levels falling below 60% in the Asahi newspaper survey of 1995 and down to 56.1% of households overall, and 48.3% in the main cities, while a 2004 Kokugakuin survey showed 56.1% of households overall and 46.9% in major cities having *butsudan* (Ishii 2007, 76). Strikingly, too, it was not just ownership that declined; practices carried out at such altars have fallen significantly since the period of Dore's 1951 research cited above. According to the studies by Kokugakuin University, between 1999 and 2004 the number of households where daily worship occurred at the *butsudan* declined from 30.6% to 25.9% (Ishii 2007, 78).

Nakamaki Hirochika, who has examined a number of Japanese studies of household altar ownership over the past decades, also has noted that these show a 'significant difference' in terms of *butsudan* ownership between extended families and nuclear families, with the former outstripping the latter (2003, 24–25). Given that the tendency in modern, especially urban, Japan has been increasingly towards nuclear families, this has longer-term implications for the future ownership and use of such altars.

Along with this decline in Buddhist altar ownership and in beliefs that the deceased continue to retain a spiritual presence after death, there has been a fall in the numbers of funerals and death-related rituals being performed by Buddhist temples. Statistics from the Sōtō sect indicate that the number of death-related ritual services performed at its temples decreased by 18% between 1985 and 2005.¹⁸ Yet this decline in the number of death rituals at Buddhist temples comes in a period in which death rates in Japan — due to the country's aging population — have been rising. In the mid-1980s the death rate in Japan was

17. In Japanese terms, the term *butsu* — also read as *hotoke* — refers both to the historical Buddha and the myriad buddha figures that are found in the Buddhist pantheon, and also to spirits of the dead, all of which are integral to Japanese Buddhist belief.

18. These figures are given in two articles in the *Bukkyō Taimusu* ('Buddhist Times') newspaper, from May 8 and May 15 2008; the figures (from a survey of a representative set of sect temples) showed a fall from 75,893 rituals in 1985 to 62,003 in 2005.

around 6.5 per 1,000 of population; in 2000 it had risen to 8.15 deaths per 1,000; in 2005, 8.55; and by 2010, 9.83.¹⁹ The decrease in Buddhist mortuary rituals impacts significantly on the economic viability of temples, most of which depend heavily on such rites for their income. It has caused some temples to succumb to the temptation to increase the fees they charge for such services in order to compensate for this shortfall — and this has in turn risked alienating the traditional support-base further.

Further evidence of the problem comes from the falling number of active temples in Japan. Exact statistics are unclear (since temples can continue to exist in name even if they are inactive and without a priest), but overall a picture of continuing decrease is evident. In 1970, there were 96,000 Buddhist temples in Japan according to government statistics (Akimoto 2008). The *Shūkyō Nenkan* of 2007 gives a figure of 75,866 registered temples — a decline of over 20,000 temples in 37 years — with approximately 20,000 of these lacking a resident priest (Murai 2010, 46). Often, especially in rural areas, where depopulation has become a major problem, priests may look after several temples, both in order to obtain enough income to support themselves and because otherwise the temples concerned would have no-one to look after them or the local community. Often, though, temples simply close due to lack of support. A striking example here is of Taisanji, a prominent temple in Tottori prefecture in western Japan, an area that has suffered especially severe depopulation. Taisanji has a history dating back 1300 years, has close links to mountain religious traditions, and was long a major regional religious centre which formerly had 160 branch temples in the region; by 2009 that number had fallen to just seven and the temple was desperately engaged in a battle for survival (Kumamoto 2009, 29–30).

It is not just that temples are falling into abeyance; many do not have priests and many of those that do, have no successor. It is a duty of temple priests to ensure that they have a successor, but in recent decades, this has proved to be increasingly difficult because the numbers of those entering the priesthood, including priests' sons, has been falling, and those who do become priests are increasingly unwilling to take on temples that are unable to sustain them. While not entirely a new problem (in 1965 the Sōtō sect reported that 23.3% of its temples had no successor), it has become increasingly acute in recent years. By 2005 35.4% of Sōtō temples had no successor priest, with these numbers rising every year, while in the Nichiren Buddhist sect, too, temples without priests have increased in number over the past two decades (*Shūkan Daimondo* 2009, 34–35).

Such problems have been highlighted also in studies carried out by various Japanese Buddhist sects. One such, conducted by the Sōtō Zen sect and based on an extensive sociological examination of the attitudes and practices of sect members and priests, was presented to the sect's governing council in October 2009 by two sect researchers, Kawamata Kōsoku and Suzuka Daigaku. In it, Kawamata and Suzuka summarized the problems indicated by their survey as follows: the number of Sōtō temples and priests was declining, temples without successors

19. These figures come from the US government's Central Intelligence Agency's World Factbook, and are reported in the <http://www.indexmundi.com/g/g.aspx?c=ja&v=26> and from <http://www.tradingeconomics.com/japan/death-rate-crude-per-1-000-people-wb-data.html> and from the Japanese government's statistical data service (see http://www.stat.go.jp/english/data/handbook/c02cont.htm#cha2_2); sites accessed September 9th 2011.

were increasing, and the number of funeral services the sect conducted was falling. All of this was eroding the sect's economic and social base and creating a very uncertain future. While some large temples in urban areas retained a sizeable clientele and were well-off, the gap between them and the majority of temples was increasing, with the large majority of poorer temples becoming increasingly marginalized and richer temples (which can afford to support priests who wish to get involved in sect politics and administration) carrying more sway because of their financial clout. This was not, they stressed, a Sōtō sect problem alone, but one symptomatic of Japanese Buddhism in general, with studies and surveys conducted by researchers in the Jōdo Shin (True Pure Land) and Nichiren sects producing similar results.²⁰

A further indication of Buddhism's problems comes from the world of education. Buddhist sects have — along with various other religious denominations in Japan — maintained a prominent position in the education world, and have established high schools and universities of high repute, which have both trained the next generations of priests and attracted many other students due to their academic reputations. Yet here too troubles appear to be afoot. Komazawa University — Sōtō's flagship institution — has faced major financial shortfalls that have become a matter of major sectarian concern, while student numbers are in decline at Buddhist universities throughout Japan and several have closed courses as a result.²¹ Kōya University — the flagship education institution of Shingon Buddhism based at its national headquarters at Mount Kōya and long an academic training ground for its priests — has had to close various courses due to recruitment problems.²² Universities in general in Japan have been facing problems due to the low birth rate that has meant that the numbers of eighteen year olds — who form the bulk of all university entrants — was by 2008 down to 1.3 million, around 40% lower than in 1992, when there were 2.05 million eighteen year olds. This has produced a crisis in which universities (save at the most elite levels) struggle to fill their places, and recent research suggests that a large number of institutions may have to close as a result.²³ As such, the problem of declining numbers is not specific to Buddhist universities, which are affected along with many other secular universities by the wider pattern of population change and low birth rates. However, in an age in which universities have to be increasingly competitive to gain students in a declining market, it is striking that an immediate reaction of several Buddhist academic institutions has to been to discuss whether to jettison the term 'Buddhism' (*bukkyō*) from their titles, aca-

20. The report of this Sōtō symposium and of the academics' remarks is carried in *Chūgai Nippō*, Jan. 31 2009, p.1.

21. Details of the problems at Komazawa are contained in *Rāku tayori* 2009, No. 41, p.14 and 2009. No. 42, p. 7. On the closures of university courses with 'Buddhism' in the title, see *Rāku tayori* 2008, No. 40, pp. 8–9.

22. *Rāku tayori* 2009, No. 42 p 12. Shingon priests I know have informed me that in 2009, for example, the university could only recruit around 40 new students — a drastic under-recruitment. They also said that Shuchuin University, in Kyoto — another Buddhist university of the Shingon sect — had such a low new intake that it needed to be bailed out by the sect in 2009 — but that the financial drain incurred was such that closure was a serious future option.

23. The general patterns of this fall in university entrants are discussed in detail by Goodman (2008); a summary of these findings is outlined by Shepherd (2008), online at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2008/jan/15/internationaleducationnews.highereducation>.

demetic departments and curricula, because it was seen as off-putting to potential students.²⁴ In a university recruitment crisis, it would appear that being associated with Buddhism is seen as being especially disadvantageous, while the very fact that universities run by Buddhist institutions feel the need to distance themselves from formal identifications with Buddhism, can be viewed as indicative of the wider problems the tradition now faces.

FACTORS IN THE CRISIS

The crisis has its roots in various structural and social factors that relate in part to Japan's modernization, and many have already been hinted at above. Modernity has had similar effects in Japan as in other post-industrial societies with highly developed education systems, in reducing the status of religious institutions and leading to an increasing number of people who declare that they have no interest in religion. As was noted above, this indifference has been a recurrent theme in surveys on religious attitudes in Japan, but it has developed more recently into a feeling of hostility towards religion in general and religious organizations, in particular after Aum Shinrikyō's 1995 Tokyo subway attack. Even though Aum was not an established, traditional sectarian Buddhist organization, its activities are widely regarded as having tarnished the image of all religious groups in Japan — something that has been said to me by numerous Buddhist priests I know, who have commented that religious groups in general have been tainted by Aum in a form of 'guilt by association of being a religious organization'. This hostility has led to a greater public readiness to challenge and attack Buddhism and to cast aspersions on its social roles and values — a point touched on earlier that I will return to later.

I have mentioned how the decline in the numbers of Buddhist death rituals has impacted on Buddhist temple viability, but a corollary of this — and a factor in Buddhism's contemporary problems in Japan — is that Japanese Buddhism has been overly dependent, at least since the Tokugawa period, on funerals and death-related services. Buddhism's very association with death and death rituals may be its main source of economic support but it also contributes to a problematic image in Japan, leading to criticisms that in its death-centred focus Japanese Buddhism has neglected the living. The Sōtō priest and academic Mizuno Kōgen put it succinctly in saying that Japanese Buddhism had ended up being a 'specialist in dealing with people after they had died' (*ninzen no shigo wo toriatsukau koto wo sennyōsuru yōni natta*) (Mizuno 1978, 7). His point is clearly reiterated by a Sōtō survey that asked its members in what circumstances they would turn to or visit a Buddhist priest: for the vast majority — 78% — the *only* time they would do so would be in connection with a family death and funeral, while only 8% said they would do so on matters of spiritual concern or worry (Sōtō shū shūsei iinkai 1984, 23–27).

This sense of being less relevant to the living has been compounded by the perception that the Buddhist priesthood nowadays is largely an inherited position, appears to lack a vocational dimension and appears (at least in popular perception) to be little more than a business in which priests are akin to salaried workers rather than vocational specialists. The roots of this perception lie in the system

24. *Rāku tayori* 2009, No. 43 pp. 9–10.

that developed in the modernizing process of the late nineteenth century, when government decrees made it legal for Buddhist priests to marry, eat meat and grow their hair — all of which had previously been prohibited. This change made priests more like ordinary people, reducing the gap that formerly existed because they abstained from various worldly activities. While not legally obliged to marry or eat meat thereafter, the tendency (fuelled by the need to find successors for their temples) ever since has been for priests to marry and for temples to become family centres.²⁵ While statistics are not reliable on this front, it has become the norm that those who become priests are inheriting the position and come from temple households; Covell (2005, 83) cites studies that say that 74% of priests are from this milieu, while unofficial estimates made to me by priests I know, and by officials in a number of Buddhist sects, place the figure far higher.

Many priests have argued to me that growing up in a temple and inheriting its mantle means that the priest is closely tied to the local community and knows its ins and outs. To a degree their point is valid, as I understood well on a spring evening in 2010 while viewing the cherry blossoms at a temple on the island of Shōdoshima, with the priest and several of his parishioners. All were in their sixties and all had gone to primary school together and grown up with the priest, and this had helped ensure that they all retained strong links to the local temple and remained loyal to it. They also expressed feelings not uncommon among parishioners who are happy with the idea of a priest who has grown up with them and in their community, and for whom the hereditary system represents a form of continuity and stability. Yet even so, these parishioners recognized that such a system was vulnerable to the vicissitudes of time and circumstance. In their case, the priest and his wife had no offspring, and hence there would of necessity be a break in this local pattern of succession — if, indeed, a successor could be found when the current incumbent died or had to stand down. Moreover, the parishioners were amply aware that such patterns of traditional succession might not endure even when priests had offspring. While the parishioners I was talking to were of a generation that had stayed on the island and pursued the paths of their parents, in fishing and farming, most of their own offspring had not done so. They had left the island to go to college or university, or simply to seek employment in offices and businesses in the large cities on the mainland, and had not returned. The parishioners recognized that such paths would also be attractive to the sons of priests, who might not want to stay on catering for temples whose parishioners would decline in number as successive generations moved away.

For many people the hereditary system has had negative rather than positive connotations. The general perception is that it has led to a largely non-vocational priesthood, with most priests entering the priesthood simply because of a sense of family duty and of following in their father's footsteps; surveys indicate that only 20% of priests state that they entered the priesthood out of a desire to be a priest (Covell 2005, 83). The hereditary issue — coupled with a strong sense that the costs incurred in Buddhist funerals and related rituals are exorbitant (see below) — has shaped a public view of Buddhist priests as little more than salaried workers running a business — perceptions that reduce any sense of respect they might otherwise have acquired and that contribute to the aforementioned

25. On the wider issue of clerical marriage, why it occurred and why it was embraced by so many priests, see Jaffe 2001.

reluctance of Japanese people to turn to Buddhist priests when they have problems. Because priests marry and have families, any sense that the priest is 'different' and somehow spiritually set apart from (and hence with higher spiritual credibility than) ordinary people has been eroded. The natural human wish to care for their families and provide the same consumerist delights for their wives and offspring as ordinary people, ensures that priests, too, are identified with the modern consumerist world — again, something that lowers the levels of respect they might otherwise attain.

The temple inheritance system has also made it hard for those who are not from temple families to find a way into the system or at least to find temples that offer a decent living that could support a family (Covell 2005, 82–83). One example from my acquaintance serves to illustrate this point. It concerns a young Sōtō priest I met in 1981, who had entered the priesthood without family connections. His prime interest was in a pastoral vocation and in running a family temple and caring for parishioners — but he could not find any such temple, because any that was economically viable remained within the hereditary system and was reserved for the offspring of the incumbent. Eventually, unable to find a temple, he gave up on his ideal and returned to lay life. While those with vocations to the priesthood are thus often thwarted in their aims, those within the hereditary system are nowadays turning away from the priesthood and are choosing not to follow in their father's footsteps — partly because of the modern tendency for younger generations to no longer follow in the career footsteps of their parents but also because the number of temples that are sustainable economically and that enable priests to earn a living, support their families and focus their energies on the temple and its parishioners, is rapidly shrinking. This is especially an issue in more rural areas, where the offspring of priests may be inclined to follow others in their age cohort and go off to universities and to large cities to work, rather than staying behind to look after a temple whose clientele may be steadily declining.

'THE PRIEST MAKES MONEY' AND THE COSTS OF DEATH

Itami Juzō's famous 1984 satirical film *O-sōshiki* ('The Funeral') was popular in Japan for the ways in which it lampooned the complex ritual practices that are traditionally enacted when a death occurs, and because it encapsulated the unease modern Japanese people felt at having to deal with such formalities. At the start of the film the father-in-law of the main character dies suddenly; the family feels obliged to hold a traditional Japanese funeral complete with various rituals — a process family members know little about, leading them to consult funeral consultants, friends and books that inform them what they should do. In this process a telling moment occurs — one that causes much laughter from Japanese audiences — when a chauffeur-driven Rolls Royce draws up at the family home. As the car door opens, a foot, enveloped in a traditional white Japanese *tabi* (split-sock) and straw sandals and flanked by a dark robe, emerges; the audience laughs because it is immediately aware, from this footwear and robe, that this is a Buddhist priest. The priest then chants Buddhist sutras as part of the death ritual process and engages in dialogue using excessively formal polite Japanese (thereby causing discomfort for the family struggling to maintain appropriate levels of

politeness) that helps make the family aware what their ‘donation’ should be, and departs, having been provided with an envelope containing the money for his services. The scene sums up a popular image of priests as living well while carrying out brief and arcane rituals that few understood but that led to the extrication of a large sum of money from a grieving family.

While the film is intentionally satirical and portrays an unlikely scenario (in thirty years of conducting research in Japan, I have yet to come across a priest who owns a Rolls Royce, or who makes such a fleeting visit to a bereaved family), it makes a point about broader public views of priests as mercenary – a view summed by the phrase *bōzu marumōke* ‘the priest makes a profit’, that encapsulates the perception that priests exploit the situation of death in particular and make excessive amounts of money.²⁶ This is based especially on the fact that Japanese funeral costs are high – perhaps the highest in the world – with consumer groups estimating in 1995 that the cost of a funeral (including coffin, cremation, receptions for the guests and so on) was around 2.71 million yen (over £22,000 at current rates of 120 yen to the pound), of which the Buddhist elements, such as the Buddhist funeral ritual and the bestowing of the *kaimyō* (posthumous name) – amounted to around 870,000 yen (around £7,250).²⁷ Costs have fallen a little since then due to recession, but death when done via traditional ritual processes remains very expensive, with the Buddhist elements forming a high percentage of them, and thereby seemingly confirming to ordinary Japanese that priests are, indeed, ‘making a profit’.

This image may be unfair to some degree, since priests incur a significant amount of expenses, costs and obligations – notably those involved in running and maintaining a temple, along with paying sect taxes to help maintain the sect’s infrastructure and support its activities – and largely rely on funeral-related fees to do this. It is, in this context, generally considered that a temple needs around 400 affiliated households to remain financially sound and to maintain a temple family (and perhaps some additional help at special occasions, plus supporting the temple successor through his period of training and study). Many less than 400 and problems will occur; even with 400 affiliated households, many priests feel the need to seek alternative income sources to supplement what they get from the temple.²⁸ Overall, sectarian surveys have shown that probably 80% of all priests have a job outside of the temple (e.g. *Sōtōshūshūmūchō* 1981, 102), either because they need the extra income because their temple is in poor financial health or because they lack a vocational drive and hence are content to devote much of their energy to external activities. Despite there being economic factors that contribute to the charges Buddhist temples make on those that seek their

26. This phrase occurs widely in popular Japanese history and culture; see Inoue 2010, for a questioning look at this issue coupled with a discussion of how priests should be more ‘business-like’ in their activities by confronting its money-making image and providing better services for, and better meeting the needs of, people.

27. These figures come from Horii 2006; Murai 2010, 87–88, has slightly lower figures at around 2.38 million yen in all, and around 550,000 for the *kaimyō*, perhaps due to Japan’s recession, but even so the costs remain high.

28. See Nakajima 2008 for a detailed examination of the economic situation of Buddhist temples in Japan, and Murai 2010, 49–53 and 157–159, for a break-down of the types of cost a temple might incur and the amounts of funerals and related rituals needed to ensure standard temple income.

ritual services, however, the notion of priests as money-making agents focused mainly on running a family business, has become a prevalent image in Japan, and plays a role in undermining Buddhism in institutional terms.²⁹ This perception has certainly not been alleviated in recent years as Japan has been mired in the economic doldrums, with stagnation and recessions causing growing unemployment and causing families overall to seek ways of tightening their belts. In such contexts, the perception that Buddhist temples charge exorbitant sums for their services — whether valid or not in reality — hardly endears the tradition to the wider public.³⁰

SOCIAL PROCESSES, RURAL DECLINE AND URBAN CHANGE

Social changes have impacted heavily on Buddhism in Japan. In particular, it has been badly affected by the massive population movement and changes to family structure that have occurred since 1945. In this period Japan has moved from being largely an agricultural, rural country and economy to an overwhelmingly urban one; nowadays less than 5% of the population relies on agriculture, and well over two-thirds of the population lives in cities, with nearly one-third of the entire population in the greater Tokyo region alone. The move from rural to urban Japan continues apace and has had a devastating effect on rural Japan, with many areas suffering from severe depopulation, which thereby denudes temples of supporting households and individuals. Peter Matanle and Yasuyuki Sato, for example, show how Niigata prefecture — which in the late 1880s had the largest population of any Japanese prefecture — has lost population progressively as people have moved to the major cities; between 1950 and 1990 cities such as Tokyo grew by more than 30%, while outlying rural areas declined proportionately (Matanle and Sato 2010, 191–193). According to the Japanese government's National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, there has been a progressive population shift from areas such as Tōhoku (northern Japan), the islands of Shikoku and Kyushu, and the Chūgoku region in western Japan — all

29. In a recent visit to Japan I was surprised at the vehement antipathy to Buddhist priests expressed by friends of mine; two in particular (both university professors, one a sociologist, the other a biochemist) whom I have known for over a quarter of a century. These volunteered the view, when I told them that I was examining Buddhist decline, that this was a good thing since, in their view, priests were little more than mercenaries running businesses rather than providing any real moral support for people. This was the first time that either had expressed any personal opinions about religious matters to me, even though they had long known of my field of research and interests. The vehemence of their views was striking, and the attitudes they expressed can be seen as evidence of a more general public lack of empathy for priests and the troubles they and their temples face.

30. This raises the question of whether temples might lower their financial demands, for example in relation to posthumous names and the like. However, a number of problems arise here. One is simply that any temple that does so will be seen to be undercutting other temples — a factor that may produce opprobrium or sanction from within the temple's sect and that might reduce the potential of the temple to call on the help of neighbouring temples and priests if they need more than one priest for a service. Another is that, as has been outlined in this section, the temples are in essence caught in a trap because of the financial needs they have in terms of maintenance. Reducing fees significantly might merely reduce income while not boosting the numbers who use temples; as is discussed later in this article, the real problem is the threat posed by external, non-religious funeral services that can reduce costs greatly simply by dispensing with religious aspects of the process.

of which have seen their share of Japan's overall population fall significantly by several per cent each — to the main metropolitan areas of Tokyo, Nagoya and Osaka. Between 2000 and 2005 alone, the population fell in every region of the country save for the main metropolitan areas — with the Chūgoku region, for example, experiencing a loss of 57,000 people (National Institute of Population and Social Security Research 2008, 110–116). Earlier I mentioned how the temple Taisanji in Tottori prefecture had suffered a massive loss of branch temples; Taisanji is in one of the areas of the Chūgoku region (which includes Tottori prefecture) most heavily affected by depopulation, and it is a salient example of what happens when populations fall, leaving temples with not enough parishioners to sustain them.

In my travels in rural Japan I have come across numerous examples of such problems, and here will mention three examples of the effects of depopulation. The first comes from western Kōchi prefecture in Shikoku (the fourth of Japan's main islands and the setting for the famed 88 temple Shikoku pilgrimage). On my first visit there, with my wife, in 1984, we met a young man in his twenties who informed us that he was the last of his age cohort to remain in the region; as with many other rural places there were no jobs apart from farming — an increasingly uneconomic enterprise in Japan — and all his age set apart from him had left, either to study at universities in the big cities or to seek work there. None ever came back. He remained because he had special needs, and spent his time doing part-time work for the local temple, whose priest he took us to meet. The priest told us about how, as the population declined, it was harder to maintain the temple; the next generation had already left, and as the older people left behind died, so too would the temple. It is a familiar case, being repeated in numerous of Japan's 47 prefectures.

The second example comes from the island of Shōdoshima — also the setting for a well-known pilgrimage — in the Inland Sea, which I visited regularly in the 1980s and 1990s. In 2008, I returned there after an absence of a decade and was shocked to see the number of houses and business premises that had become derelict and the number of shops in the main town, Tonoshō, that had closed. The evidence of depopulation was more severe still on my next visit two years later, in 2010, when I had discussions with the mayor of Tonoshō, senior local government officials and a number of priests, all of whom told a similar story of steady population decline over many years as younger people left the island to move to the cities. The island population was, in 2010, around 30,000 but was falling at a rate of 500 people a year — as it had for some time past. This was affecting all aspects of island life; there is no young generation to take over, local industries such as fishing and farming are disappearing, the local bus company that provided vital links between villages on the island had fewer passengers, and hence was reducing services (and thereby making life harder for older people in the villages) and so on. The temple priests all said the same thing: population decline was eating away at their support structures, with each temple losing the equivalent of a household or two per year. Before long some would become unsustainable and temple mergers would be needed. Moreover, as this process continued, the next generation of priests was less likely to want to stay. Although I met two young priests who had returned to the island after training and university studies on the mainland, they both recognized that they were an exception to the more

common pattern of the offspring of island priests either trying to find temples elsewhere in better populated and more urban areas or, more commonly, following the paths of their age-sets and leaving the island for other work.

In Shōdoshima the situation has been complicated by a decline in pilgrim numbers. For the past two centuries the island's pilgrimage route — a smaller scale version of the more famous Shikoku pilgrimage — had flourished, usually performed by people doing it as a substitute pilgrimage instead of the longer Shikoku route. Its primary clientele came from farming communities in Tottori, northern Hyōgo and Shimane prefectures on the main island of Honshu, to the north of Shōdoshima; members of such communities traditionally made the pilgrimage at the start of the farming season, in organized groups and pilgrimage confraternities known as *kō*.³¹ The areas that provided the bulk of the pilgrims who came to the island (Tottori, Shimane and so on) have been some of the worst hit by depopulation — and as a result the numbers of pilgrims to Shōdoshima has declined sharply. The flight of younger people from those regions means that there may be no 'next generation' in a pilgrimage that has hitherto relied on the passing on of pilgrimage customs from one generation to the next. In the mid-1980s, when I first visited the island and acquired data about the pilgrims, they numbered well over 30,000 per year — and with each pilgrim staying three or four nights on the island (the average time to do the pilgrimage) this represented a steady income both for the temples and for local businesses. By 2010 the number had declined to just over 12,500 per year and, according to the priest who heads the island's pilgrimage association, the annual decline is now around 1,500 per year.³² Discussions with pilgrims' lodge owners on the island also indicated that prominent pilgrimage confraternities that had for generations visited the island annually, bringing with them several generations of pilgrims, were now dying out. In April 2010 I met one such confraternity, whose members told me that they were no longer able to gather enough participants to visit the island every year, and so were now making the pilgrimage — in greatly reduced numbers, and with few people under the age of 70 — every two years. They did not know how much longer they could even manage to sustain that level of activity.³³ With such a decline it is easy to see that the pilgrimage could well die out (as several other regional pilgrimages in Japan have in recent times) before long. This is not just removing a line of income support from temples already suffering from a falling population, but is impacting on local businesses, with inns and restaurants reliant on the pilgrim trade closing down, thereby leading to more people leaving the island because of declining economic opportunities, and hence compounding the problems for local temples.³⁴

31. For a discussion of this pilgrimage (and the wider phenomenon of small scale pilgrimages based on the Shikoku model) see Reader 1988.

32. Information from Rev. Fukuhara Shōken, of Daishōji, Shōdoshima, March 28, 2010. There are major efforts going on to publicize the pilgrimage now in Japan and to regenerate it — but what effect such efforts will have is currently unclear.

33. Interviews at *Daishi no yado* (a pilgrims' lodge) in Tonoshō, March 28, 2010. I have collected data from the records left at pilgrimage temples on the island by confraternities from Tottori and elsewhere, for a related project on pilgrimage flows and changes in modern Japan, and which reiterate the points being made here.

34. In my interview with the inn-keeper at *Daishi no yado* (see above, note 33), she informed me

Even temples in rural areas with sizeable support structures are not immune, as my third example shows. In March 2010 I also visited a Jōdo Shin temple of the Nishi Honganji sect not far from Miyoshi in northern Hiroshima prefecture, where I interviewed the head priest and his son, the associate head priest. The temple had 380 affiliated households — enough, they said, to survive at present, while maintaining a reasonable level of activity, producing various leaflets and newsletters for temple members, putting on occasional talks by well-known visiting Buddhist priests, maintaining local festivals and communal rituals, and thereby preserving the temple as an active place engaged with its membership. It also had, in the son, a young, highly computer literate successor who was dedicated to his faith, and with good connections to the sect's headquarters — all of which he acknowledged would be important in negotiating a problematic future. This picture of current stability with a committed priesthood did not, they recognized, guarantee a secure future. The area was suffering population decline, the temple was losing a household or two per year and the few young people who remained in the region were no longer going to temples. Moreover, a new threat had appeared on the horizon: new funeral businesses that were, the young priest told me, beginning to eat away at the traditional ritual monopoly of the temples. This is an issue I will discuss shortly, as such businesses represent a significant factor in the crisis.

While a temple currently with 380 households could weather this gradual decline for a number of years, the priests recognized that there would come a point when the process of decline could become critical and threaten the activities of the temple, at which point it might lose its relevance to the remaining population, go the way of numerous others in the region, and close. When temples in rural areas face such a problematic future, it is unsurprising that many of the offspring of priests no longer want to follow the family tradition of becoming priests — thereby leaving increasing numbers of temples with no future priest.

URBAN REJECTION AND NEW WAYS OF DEALING WITH DEATH?

Depopulation is thus a major factor in weakening Buddhism in rural areas — its traditional heartlands. The movement of population to the main urban areas is not, however, compensating for this rural decline. Rather, as people move into the cities they appear less likely to engage with religious institutions — a point indicated in the 2005 Yomiuri survey, which showed much higher levels of faith and of people who said that they thought religion was important among rural and village dwellers (42% of whom thought religion was important and 26.1% of whom said they had religious faith) than among urban inhabitants, for whom the figures were 32.2% and 16.0% respectively (Ishii 2007, 17). As was noted earlier, the possession and use of *butsudan* was lower in urban than in rural areas. Moreover, in contemporary Japanese cities, various new competing services have developed to challenge the traditional monopoly that Buddhist temples formerly had over death rituals and funerals.

Urbanization has changed the normative family structures of Japan. The traditional support base of Buddhism was founded upon a household system that

that only 10 pilgrims' lodges remain on the island now, down from around 30 in the mid-1990s.

was built on the premise of an extended family and on related concepts of communal practice and obligations. The move to nuclearized family structures, the increased modern trend towards individual living and eschewing of having children or raising families (Kingston 2011, 66–83; National Institute of Population and Social Security Research 2008, 24–25, 59), and rising emphases on individualism have undermined the former emphasis on extended families and on collective household rituals that sustained the household-temple relationship. The falling birth rate (now among the lowest in the world) also indicates not just a turn away from the social structures that have hitherto supported established temple-Buddhism but also a decline in the numbers of those who feel the need to have progeny so as to be memorialized after death — a notion that is central to the support of institutional Buddhism. The declining levels of belief in an afterlife or in the continuing presence of spirits of the dead mean that fewer people feel the need to have children so as to have someone care for them at death — and this again reduces the need people previously felt for Buddhist rituals at death.

Such social changes and secularising processes are sharpened also by the sense — already mentioned — that the whole funeral process, and the Buddhist rituals involved therein, are too expensive in an era of recession. This view — one that partially underpins the antipathy to Buddhism indicated in the surveys mentioned earlier and the satirical jibes of films such as *Osōshiki* — has become fuelled recently by various books produced by social commentators and scholars of religion that critique the death-oriented practices of Buddhism and argue that they — along with Buddhist posthumous names — are not needed in a modern society. In 2010 Shimada Hiromi — a prominent writer on religious affairs who had earlier published a critical account of Buddhist temples' use of posthumous names — published a book titled *Sōshiki wa iranai* (which translates as 'We don't need funerals') that became a best-seller. With sales of over 300,000 copies in its first year it precipitated a public debate on the subject — along with criticisms from temples and from funeral companies, both of which saw their activities threatened. While being perhaps the most fierce criticism thus far of Buddhism's associations with funerals and the death industry, it followed on from earlier works criticising Buddhism's relationship with death (e.g. Mori 2000) and encouraging people to think beyond the traditional default position of turning to the temple when a death occurred. Subsequently a number of 'self-help' books have appeared outlining how to conduct individualized funerals catering to the wishes of the deceased and close kin or friends, and that point to ways in which the more traditional, communal-style (and expensive) funerary processes involving Buddhist temples can be avoided.³⁵

35. Thus, for example, Watanabe 2011 is a compendium of advice for the types of funeral one could carry out, and includes interviews with Shimada and other advocates of new modes of individualized funerals. The shift away from communal to individualized or family funerals was also noted to me by Okada Masahiko, a specialist in Religious Studies at Tenri University whom I know and who informed me that in the village in which he lived, funerals had changed in the past decade. Whereas until the mid-1990s they had been carried out as community events — a process that inevitably created a social obligation on the bereaved to undertake a whole formal series of rituals including temple rituals — since then funerals have ceased to be community affairs, and now depend on the wishes of individuals and/or families. This has cut down their length and complexity, as well as making it easier to eliminate any religious content from them (interview, Tenri, March 30, 2010).

Other challenges to Buddhism's former hegemony in the area of funerals are also developing. In recent years, independent funeral parlours (*sōgiya*) that offer all-in-one services from cremation to memorialization, and in which one can choose to either forego priestly services altogether or get them bought in by the funeral parlour on an ad hoc basis, have started to capture a significant portion of the market in urban Japan. They offer a 'one stop' service with few frills, and even the Buddhist services they buy in — including the posthumous name if so required — are cheaper than normally acquired via temples. They are also convenient in that they eradicate the need to deal with a number of different agencies, including priests, that are traditionally involved in the ritual processes of death; the embarrassment and awkwardness of families unsure of what to do, so vividly portrayed in *Osōshiki*, is being removed by companies who take on all these duties themselves, usually at a considerably cheaper cost. Priests I have heard from in major cities have said that even formerly staunch temple supporters are now starting to use such services because they are more convenient and less time consuming — a point made by a close friend from the Osaka region who told me that her family had dealt with the death of her mother-in-law in such a way. The friend in question had moved to Osaka from a rural setting — and as such (like many others in similar situations) had not really developed a relationship to a local temple in her new home area. When her mother-in-law died, her family opted for a non-religious funeral conducted by a funeral service agency, because it was more convenient and cheaper.

Such services are increasingly being used by people who opt to omit any Buddhist elements from the process. A report by Ōtani Midori, a researcher from one of Japan's leading insurance companies (Daiichi Seimei), presented to a forum of Buddhist leaders in Tokyo in December 2007 indicated that between 20% and 30% of funerals in the metropolis were 'simple' and dispensed with Buddhist elements,³⁶ while the trade organization representing independent funeral service agencies stated that in 2006 26% of all funerals in Tokyo were non-religious and had no Buddhist elements to them (Murai 2010, 57). The secular funeral industry has vociferously advocated 'non-religious funerals' (*mushūkyōsōshiki*)³⁷ and in May 2009 its campaign was helped when the rock star, Imawano Kiyoshirō, who had died of throat cancer, had a music-based, non-religious funeral that was shown on television (Murai 2010, 57). While such funeral businesses and non-religious funerals are largely an urban phenomenon, they have also recently begun to make inroads also in small town and rural Japan as well — as the above comment of the young priest in northern Hiroshima prefecture indicates. Similarly, Murai (2010, 57) states that the practice has started to develop in the small town he comes from in rural Fukushima prefecture, with two such funerals in 2009 and local reports that these numbers were increasing.

In addition, other alternative ways to conduct funerals and deal with the dead are emerging in Japan, from the individualized modes mentioned above, to 'friends' funerals' — a mode of funeral developed by the new religion Sōka Gakkai — to 'nature funerals' — a practice that, as Satsuki Kawano (2010) indi-

36. Ōtani's report is summarized in *Rāku tayori*, 2008, No.38, 2008, p. 4.

37. See for example the website of Hibiya Kadan, considered by many to be the first such 'non-religious' funeral agency, which vigorously campaigns for such non-religious services: http://www.hibiya-lsp.com/religion/religion_01.html.

cates, has been recently introduced into Japan based on similar practices in the West and that is now attracting some support. These show just how much people are searching for new alternatives, and how ready they are to dispense with what used to be the socially normative mode of funeral practice — all of which further erodes Buddhism's increasingly weak position.

Thus, Buddhist temples are being decimated in rural areas due to a falling population that means that temples are no longer economically sustainable, while in urban areas population increases are not bringing compensatory benefits to temples there. Rather, in the cities, Buddhism is being threatened by a general turn away from religious engagement, by an antipathy — for reasons of economics, convenience and general indifference — to the institutions of Buddhism, and by increasing challenges to its formerly hegemonic position from the newly developed secular funeral industry. An institution that has been as reliant, as Buddhism has been in Japan, on a system of hereditary priesthood, temples whose prime function relates to death rituals, and a loyal local clientele to support such temples, clearly faces grave problems when that system is called into question to the degree I have indicated here.

INERTIA, OSSIFICATION AND SECTARIAN PARALYSIS

Another element in this decline is what I would term sectarian inertia and ossification. This is hard to prove empirically, but often in the discussions of 'crisis' at sectarian meetings cited earlier, the people raising these concerns were not sect leaders but priests from the regions who had come to express their concerns that sect leaders were not really getting to grips with the problems. In numerous discussions I have had with priests facing these problems, it has been a recurrent complaint that sectarian organizations and leaders have not fully listened when these are raised, or developed strategies to improve the standing of institutional Buddhism. Many priests feel abandoned or isolated with their problems as a result.³⁸ Inoue Fumio, who runs a consultancy agency called Temple VAN, which aims to advise Buddhist temples on how to counter their problems, commented to me that the problem is that to attain senior positions in the hierarchies of their sects, priests have to devote a lot of time to sectarian politics — and that coming from a rich temple that can support them in this process is thus important. Coming from well-off temples means that the senior priests in sectarian hierarchies are less likely to have confronted directly the problems that poorer temples face — and less likely to feel the need for drastic action or reform.³⁹ This is a view that I came across widely among priests frustrated by the lack of action, as they perceived it, from their sect leaders. As one priest commented tersely to me, those who reach the apex of the sect usually are only there for a short, fixed term and do not want to do anything radical such as changing sect tax structures or introducing radical reforms. Having reached the top they are inclined to follow status quo policies and to avoid anything that smacked of change. They are also likely at that stage to be elderly (often sect leaders are in their seventies or

38. This is a problem that goes across every sect I have come across; such comments have been made to me by priests from the Shingon, Pure Land and Sōtō sects in recent years.

39. Interview with Inoue Fumio, Tokyo April 8th, 2010. See also <http://www.jtvan.co.jp/whats-new/info20100408.html> for a summary (in Japanese) of my interview with Inoue.

above) and less likely to have radical agendas of change — and they also tend to regard the ‘young’ priests (who may be merely in their fifties) as dangerously hot-headed.⁴⁰

The inability of senior sect figures to fully recognize what might be happening beyond the domain of their headquarters, came across in two interviews I conducted almost thirty years apart in Japan. The first was on my first visit to Japan in 1981 as a graduate student when I went to the Sōtō headquarters in Tokyo to make preliminary contacts with the sect, since I intended to focus my doctoral research on examining how it sought to transmit its messages to and retain the loyalty of its traditional household affiliated followers and members. I was aware that much of the academic literature of the time focused on the then-rise of the new religions and how their popularity was eating into the core support structures of the Buddhist sects.

I met a senior sect official with whom I raised the question of the new religions and the threat they posed — only to get what I felt then was the complacent response that the new religions were not really a problem, because people would return to Buddhism ‘when they died’. It seemed to me then, analysing sectarian literature at the time, that the sect had only focused on the assumption that people would ‘return when they died’ and the basic conclusion of my PhD was that this was the key focus of Sōtō publications aimed at affiliated temple members — retaining loyalty by emphasizing traditional ties and obligations built up over the generations — and that little or no energy was spent on trying to recruit new followers or provide the sort of services, care and counselling that were so intrinsic to the appeal of the new religions.⁴¹ I felt then that this complacent dependency on the links between Buddhism and death could be a longer term problem. Nearly thirty years later, all the data I have cited about falling support levels coupled with the rise of non-Buddhist funerals, clearly indicate that less and less people are returning to their traditional sectarian links even in the context of family deaths, and that the strategies Sōtō was using have not been successful.

The misplaced complacency manifest by that official in 1981 was reiterated in the comments of senior sect figures in another major Buddhist organization, this time in Kyoto in 2010. In answer to my questions about the state of rural temples, a senior priest stated that the problem really was not that serious and that the sect had a strategy to deal with it; it left things up to the local priests, since they knew the local landscape and were best placed to deal with it. Given that so much of what I had heard from rural priests was that they needed help from the centre, and that they felt abandoned because they did not get it, this suggested to me that sectarian officials were rather out of touch. More striking still was the comment of another official in the same organization, who acknowledged that established Buddhism had problems at the moment but then said that many new religions were now ‘losing energy’ (a point I can confirm from many interviews with officials in various new religions in recent times), becoming older, less vibrant and less able to capture new audiences or even hold on to existing

40. I heard such comments from a number of priests in various parts of Japan during my visits there in 2008, 2009 and 2010; for reasons of discretion, I simply summarize the general tenor of the comments made to me here and in order to protect the priests concerned will not provide the names of those who made such comments.

41. See Reader 1993 for further discussion of this point,

followers. Therefore, the official remarked, this meant people would be returning to Buddhism — ensuring its future. This almost reiterated the comment made thirty years earlier about people ‘coming back’ to the temple when they died — a comment that, as I have indicated, was fraught with misunderstandings about the future. Even if people are abandoning other religions nowadays, there is no evidence whatsoever to show that they are doing so to return to temple Buddhist affiliations. All the available data suggests simply that they are severing ties with all religious groups and affiliations, while the rising tide of non-religious funerals shows that sectarian assumptions about Buddhism holding on to or returning to a market monopoly in this area, are hopelessly misplaced. In other words, the contemporary decline of institutional Buddhism is marked also by ossification, complacency and an inability to confront the problem at sectarian levels. It is perhaps little wonder that not only are many priests feeling abandoned but that sectarian Buddhism looks increasingly incapable of coming to terms with the crisis enveloping it.

PILGRIMAGE, BENEFITS AND FURTHER CAUSES FOR CONCERN

The picture I have painted thus far is of an institution in grave crisis, beset by problems caused both by changing social flows in Japan and by its own over-dependency on (and exploitation of) one arena of practice, and reliant on a clientele once bound to it by obligation. While its clientele has been freed from such obligations, the institution itself has not been able as yet to adjust or respond adequately to the circumstances that have brought about that change. It is clear from the evidence present here that not only is institutional Buddhism facing a severe crisis but that it has thus far been ill-equipped to deal with it.

Yet for some commentators, there remain rays of hope that in some areas Buddhist temples can maintain their standing in the modern day. Two areas that have been frequently cited in such contexts have been practices related to pilgrimages and to prayers for worldly benefits. These have been cornerstones of popular faith and practice in Japan over the centuries and in which Buddhist temples have been very active. Such areas have been cited as potential sources of vibrancy for Buddhism in the present era. Covell, for example, speaks of pilgrimage as a major source of income even for small temples (2005, 143) and as a popular practice that can enable temples to survive without needing to rely on household affiliations and funerals (2005, 23). Reader and Tanabe (1998) have also argued that the innovative ways in which many Buddhist temples have developed new modes of prayer related to worldly concerns, are a sign that they could handle the vicissitudes of change and find new markets and clienteles,

However even here one must make some cautionary remarks. I have already noted the decline of pilgrim numbers in Shōdoshima in recent years — but Shōdoshima is not an isolated example. Satō Hisamitsu (2004, 142–3) has shown that pilgrim numbers on the thirty-three temple Saikoku pilgrimage, commonly regarded as one of Japan’s most prominent Buddhist pilgrimages, have dropped significantly from the mid-1990s, at a rate of around 5,000 per year, an average decrease of almost 10% per year. My research into regional pilgrimages indicates that most such routes are facing similar problems, while local faith-based confraternities that have traditionally been a mainstay of Buddhist pilgrimages, are in

severe decline. Indeed, there is probably only one pilgrimage — the Shikoku pilgrimage — that has been successful in recent years, and this is to a great degree because the pilgrimage has been publicized and represented in recent times as a form of cultural tradition related to Japanese identity and heritage, and because, through this process of representation, its primary Buddhist orientations have been downplayed. Even here there are worries among priests and local officials in Shikoku that its period of success may be under threat — leading them to increasingly publicise the pilgrimage as a form of cultural heritage tour and to eschew any Buddhist connotations to it.⁴² In other words, despite claims that pilgrimage is a viable means of saving or restoring the fortunes of regional and rural temples, the indications are to the contrary. As the Shōdoshima example indicates, even having a pilgrimage route may be no guarantee of survival in the longer term.

Equally, whether other alternatives such as the offer of worldly benefits could help sustain Buddhist temples, is a moot point. Here there is relatively little clear data to hand, but from recent visits to temples that have long had a reputation in such areas, the outlook does not appear to be all that positive. In March 2010 I had an interesting discussion with a priest at Hōzanji, a temple popularly known as Ikoma Shōten in the Ikoma hills east of the city of Osaka. Widely cited in academic studies of religion in Japan as a temple that attracts large numbers of devotees who come to pray for favours and benefits (Reader and Tanabe 1998, 37–45; Shūkyō Shakai Gaku no Kai 1985, 54–68), it is a temple I had visited many times in the 1990s — always noting the large crowds that thronged its courtyard. However on my visit in 2010 (the first for many years) I was struck by how quiet it was, even on a Sunday afternoon — normally the most common time for people to visit popular temples. I asked a priest if the lack of crowds was an anomaly and he said no — for some years the numbers of worshippers had been in decline, and that nowadays few young people visited the temple. Only on special festival days did the temple get anything like the crowds it received even a decade earlier. Other priests I know whose temples have had long-standing reputations of a similar sort have also commented that in this area of praying for help and worldly support, their temples, too, were experiencing a decline in support in the very recent times.⁴³

42. See Reader 2005 and Mori 2005 for further discussion of how Shikoku has managed to be successful in recent times. With regard to the decline of other pilgrimages, this is research in progress, but thus far interviews with priests running pilgrimage temples in Sasaguri (Kyushu), in the Tokyo region and the Chita Hantō pilgrimage south of Nagoya, all indicate similar patterns, from declining pilgrim numbers to disappearing faith-based confraternities. Chilson's article (2010) on the decline of secretive Pure Land confraternities similarly points to a collapse of such associations. The reasons for such decline are too complex to go into here at any length but include rural decline, the indifference of younger generations to older pilgrimage confraternity practices, the availability of greater travel opportunities overseas, and a general loss of interest in pilgrimage in Japan apart from in the case of Shikoku, which has been skilfully marketed in ways that have cornered the market in the present day. However, even in Shikoku there are now concerns about the future popularity of the pilgrimage. The number of walkers appears to have declined after a peak in the early 2000s according to informants there, and temple priests as well as local tourist officials in Shikoku have expressed worries to me that numbers are beginning to decline. This in turn has led to further promotional activities emphasizing heritage and de-emphasizing Buddhism and faith as component parts of the pilgrimage (see Reader 2010).

43. Interview, Hōzanji, March 21 2010, and numerous interviews with priests in Sasaguri and the

At present there is (unlike pilgrimages, where the signs of decline are clear) no empirical evidence in the form of statistical data to show if there is indeed a general decline in these common areas of popular Buddhist practice and temple visiting. However, there are signs that the malaise that has affected temple Buddhism and eaten away at its primary support structures, may also be affecting such areas as pilgrimage and prayer — areas that are posited by some as areas in which Buddhist temples have thus managed to sustain themselves and as areas for future growth. If that is the case, then the problems Buddhism faces in Japan are graver than has been thus far outlined in the available literature.

CAVEATS, REFORM AND THE POSSIBILITY OF HOPE

Two caveats, however, need to be made to set against this general picture of decline in institutionalized Buddhism. The first is that not all priests, temples or organizations are mired in the inertia I have outlined above, and that there are various attempts by priests — mostly of the younger generations — to seek ways to reform Buddhism or to find new ways to make its practices and teachings accessible to people. Attempts at innovation in the conduct of Buddhist funerals have been discussed by Rowe (2000) and others, while calls from concerned academics and priests for Buddhism to reform itself and find new ways forward in the modern era, have attracted attention in recent times. Ueda's (2004) call for Buddhism to rise to the challenge, illustrated with examples of individual temples that have found ways of being socially relevant in the modern day, along with the writings of Takahashi Takushi (2009), a Buddhist priest in Nagano prefecture who has been at the forefront of moves to enhance Buddhism's social welfare profile in Japan, have highlighted potential new directions for Buddhism. Ueda, among others, has been involved in the formation of networks of younger priests who meet and discuss new ways of putting across Buddhist messages in the modern day, while the activities of young priests who have opened coffee shops and even 'Buddhist bars' in major cities as a way of engaging with the wider public, have garnered some media attention in recent times.⁴⁴

Beyond these networks, a number of commercially oriented groups have emerged in recent years, including the aforementioned Temple VAN, to offer services to temples and advise them on how to enhance their profiles. These may have some effect on the future directions of Buddhism, even if, as Inoue Fumio, the head of Temple VAN, commented to me, the very existence of companies such as his that were set up to advise temples on how to engage with the public and address problems of decline, was as much an indication of the depth of the problem as it was a manifestation of the potential for a solution.

Thus far one cannot tell whether such attempts at reform will have an impact. As George Tanabe (2006) has pointed out, Buddhism in Japan has in the past displayed a capacity for reform and regeneration (as the revivalist movements of the Kamakura period that regenerated Buddhism and extended its remit across

Osaka region during 2008–2010.

44. Ueda is involved in the 'Bozu Be Ambitious' (BBA) network that holds discussion and teaching groups on aspects of modern Buddhism, and which has its web page at <http://www5.ocn.ne.jp/~seishoji/bouzbe.html>. On Buddha bars (some of them run by priests in the BBA network), see Kimoto 2008.

the wider populace from the the thirteenth century onwards, show). Whether this current era will see such a reform and regeneration is at present unclear. At present, it would be hard to be very positive. I have already noted how key areas often flagged up as areas for Buddhist vitality, such as pilgrimage, are in reality areas of problem and decline at present. One must also be aware that the past decade — the period when the reform activities cited above, from attempts at innovative Buddhist funerals to the opening of Buddhist bars, coffee shops and new priestly networks, have come to the fore — has been one in which decline has continued to be the primary pattern in established Buddhism. It has been a decade in which the numbers of non-religious funerals have risen sharply, when best-selling books have been produced arguing against the need for funerals at all, and when increasing challenges in the form of rejections of religion in general, declining levels of belief in the continued existence in some form or other of the spirit after death, and continuing population shifts that have eroded much of Buddhism's traditional support base, have continued apace. To that degree, although one can point to some attempts to reverse the trends of the age, it would be precipitate to claim that they are having any degree of success across the board as yet. The decline in so many levels of active engagement with Buddhist rituals and practices has clearly, from the data available, continued. It certainly has not been reversed.

A second caveat is that no-one at present knows how the tragedies that have befallen Japan due to the earthquake and tsunami of March 11 2011, and the subsequent nuclear disaster that has shaken public confidence in government institutions on issues of safety and health, and that has caused sizeable populations to lose their homes and livelihoods, will impact on religious attitudes. Religious organizations in general were heavily criticized after the 1995 Hanshin earthquake for their perceived failures to have responded adequately or helped the public in a time of grief (Umehara and Yamaori, 1995).⁴⁵ After March 11 2011, it has been widely accepted that this time around religious organizations have been quicker to respond and to act together to help in relief efforts and in comforting the stricken, and that they have been more proactive than in earlier tragedies.⁴⁶ Buddhist organizations (along with other religious groups such as the new religions) have collected money for relief work and conducted prayer rituals for the bereaved and dead, while institutions such as temples have been opened as relief centres in the affected regions, and networks of concerned priests — often working with scholars of religion — have been active in promoting welfare activities.⁴⁷

45. It was a widespread view in Japan at the time that religious groups in general either did very little (a criticism leveled widely at Buddhist and Shinto institutions) or simply cared for their own members without providing wider solace. This was a factor in what Umehara and Yamaori (1995) described as the 'suicide of religion' (*shūkyō no jisatsu*).

46. These comments are based on discussions with various academic colleagues in Japan and on observations during two visits there since the tragedy of March 11, 2011 — in April 2011 and then in August–September 2011.

47. See, for example, <http://www.indranet.jp/syuenren>, the website of the Japan Religion Coordinating Project for Disaster Relief, a group involving scholars of religion and religious organizations, that has striven to coordinate responses and relief in the wake of the tragedy.

It is, of course, far too early to see how far such responses will impact on the position of religion in general or Buddhism in particular in Japan in the coming years. Thus far, most religious organizations have managed to respond to the issue by providing needed welfare support without seeking to make religious capital out of the events. How far this response will help in the longer term is unclear — but it is evident that Buddhism in Japan in institutional terms needs to respond to such issues in appropriate ways and to continue to seek modes of reform if it is to weather the sense of crisis that has been of such concern to priests and sect councils in recent times.

CONCLUSIONS

Unable to cope with the changes brought about by social and population changes, and perceived as spiritually ineffective and dominated by priests who are seen as little more than salaried businessmen mainly interested in people after they have died, Buddhism in Japan is in an institutionally parlous state. It is no wonder that a sense of crisis is now gripping many of its priests, even if sectarian organizations appear unable to respond to that crisis in any meaningful way. As this article has shown, the overarching situation for Buddhism as an institution centred around temples and with a primary focus on funerals, death rituals and the maintenance of household-temple ties, has been one of decline throughout the modern post-war period. In such terms, one of the world's great religious traditions may well be facing marginalization in Japan. While this will be a matter of serious import for scholars of Buddhism, it also represents a salient case study for those concerned about what happens when religions decline, as well as about how religious traditions such as Buddhism cope (or, as the Japanese case suggests, fail to cope) in advanced and increasingly secularized modern societies. Given the powerful modernizing tendencies across much of Buddhism's heartlands in Asia, too, it may well raise questions about the tradition's future situation there as well.

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