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Abstract:

This article challenges claims that the Japanese neologism *shūkyō* (as a translation for “religion”) lacked an established nature prior to the twentieth century and had little to do with experiences of the urban masses. It accordingly problematizes the term as a largely legal concept, highlighting historical newspapers as underutilized sources that offer insight into Meiji popular discourse and attendant conceptualizations of “religion.” This article endorses a shift in both our chronological understanding of *shūkyō*’s conceptual history as well as its sociocultural mobility. By expanding the milieu understood as being familiar with debates on a range of “religious” issues, this article thereby offers a counter-narrative in which regular use of *shūkyō* begins to clearly emerge from the mid-1880s, exponentially increasing with the following decades.

Keywords: Anti-Christian; Conceptual history; Constitution; Japan; Meiji; Newspapers; Popular discourse; Religion

In the West there is [something they call] the “True Teachings” [*seikyō*, 正教].

These teachings [*kyō*, 教] come from Heaven...

[And] they also establish their laws according to them.

Government [*sei*] and teaching [*kyō*, 教] are thus one in the same...

There are Three Teachings1 [*sankyō*, 三教] in our country [of Japan]...

Today we see many evils committed both by government and their teachings [*seikyō*, 政教].

— Yokoi Shōnan, *Numayama kankyo zasshi* (Poems Composed in the Quiet Solitude of Numayama)

Penned by the reformist intellectual Yokoi Shōnan (1809–1869) between 1855 and 1856, these excerpts from one of his miscellaneous poems grapple with the historical particularities of the Japanese language in talking about “religion.” Indeed, the absence of a universal religious category in the mid-nineteenth century manifests itself in his writing through the use of the broadly inclusive
term kyō/oshie (教—“teaching/s”). In this poem, such “teachings” are at once a reference to Christianity (seikyō), to the traditions of Shinto, Buddhism, and Confucianism (sankyō), and to the didactic function of government (seikyō). To this end, Yokoi’s use of kyō is demonstrative of its long premodern history as a concept that embodied matters not only of “religion,” but also education, science, politics, and ethics. This unity in diversity thus begs questions of conceptual boundaries when it comes to enduring essentialist understandings of religion as a shared set of beliefs, practices, and institutions across time and space.

As a compound of shū (宗)—meaning a (Buddhist) “sect,” “lineage,” or “principle”—and the previously discussed kyō/oshie (教), the indigenous neologization of the term shūkyō was prompted by “Japan’s incorporation into the capitalist and imperialist world of the West” following the reopening of its borders for the first time since the mid-1600s and the subsequent signing of commercial treaties with the United States, France, Britain, Russia, and the Netherlands in the mid-nineteenth century. In so doing, Japanese officials were confronted with the English term “religion” (as well as the Dutch godsdiest) and its linguistic cognates in diplomatic negotiations. After the reinstatement of the imperial system—commonly referred to as the “Meiji Restoration”—in 1868, shūkyō slowly emerged as an umbrella term to categorize the traditions of Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam among others. To this extent, scholars have identified the 1870s as a period of significant linguistic change as policymakers (and those reporting on their actions) grappled not only with the term “religion,” but also the foreign conceptual frameworks underlying its use and application in a Japanese context. Drawing on existing concepts of Buddhist sectarian belief, a number of earlier terms (such as oshie—教, shūshi—宗旨, shūmon—宗門, kyōmon—教門, kyōhō—教法, and hōkyō—法教) were employed, but it was ultimately shūkyō that succeeded
as the official translation for “religion” in political and legal discourse by the 1880s and whose use continues to this day.5

In recent years, however, a scholarly reappraisal has ushered in what Jolyon Baraka Thomas refers to as a “reflexive turn in the field of Japanese religious studies.”6 Prompted by a broader shift led by the likes of Talal Asad, Jacques Derrida, and Timothy Fitzgerald the concept of religion has come to be understood “not [as] a universal entity[,] but [as] a culturally specific category that took shape among Christian-influenced Euro-American intellectuals and missionaries.”7 Accordingly, research in the field of Japanese studies has also critiqued the continued and uncritical use of the term shūkyō as the modern conceptual equivalent of “religion.” In this, scholars have continued to trace the history of the term in political, legal, and diplomatic discourse, in its use and reception among Buddhist reformists, and in the development of the modern Japanese discipline of religious studies (shūkyō-gaku, 宗教学).8 This article intends to contribute to this diverse discussion by contesting Isomae Jun’ichi’s claim that the concept of “religion—shūkyō—was not [yet] familiar in Japanese society before the twentieth century and was not the expression of something . . . rising out of the lives of ordinary people.”9 Ōsumi Kazuo has similarly claimed that a basic understanding and popular use of the term shūkyō was not common outside privileged social circles until after World War II.10 It will be argued that these kinds of perceptions are borne out of neglect for primary sources that can offer us critical insight into Meiji popular discourse and thus an opportunity to understand how the concept of shūkyō featured outside of these privileged social circles, particularly among the urban masses. In so doing, an approach to popular discourse will be employed via the work of Gregory M. Pflugfelder and Peter Nosco who prioritize commercial dynamics in their analysis of journalism, fiction, and poetry among other literary genres.11 Put differently, popular discourse is understood as being
particularly accessible through “written texts bought and sold upon the commercial market,” by which the “mediation of market mechanisms offers an indication . . . that the texts under consideration were intended for consumption by a relatively broad audience to whom the terms of their discourse were, if not already familiar, at least readily intelligible.”¹² For the purposes of this article then, concepts of religion will be examined in the popular discourse of newspapers (the reasons for which will be addressed in the following section), specifically the prominent *Yomiuri Shimbun*, a vernacular daily news publication established in 1874.

This article’s contribution to the field can be defined as follows. By looking to the pre-twentieth-century prevalence of the term *shūkyō* in the *Yomiuri Shimbun*, it seeks to shift the chronology of understanding about popular use of the term, highlighting a hitherto neglected kind of everyday encounter with concepts of “religion” among a readership of the urban working class. Although much of the term’s presence is due to journalistic coverage of events and debates in the political and legal sphere, this very act of reporting is nonetheless significant. In this, we can observe how vernacular journalism on matters “religious” incorporated use of the term *shūkyō* into popular discourse for working-class consumption.¹³ In other words, the simple act of journalistic reporting and relative adoption of a previously legal/diplomatic vocabulary was critical to public education. As such, we can look beyond scholarly classifications of *shūkyō* as merely a political or legal category in Meiji Japan. Indeed, as a popular news outlet, the *Yomiuri Shimbun* offered a unique space for a working-class demographic to read and sometimes even write about a range of social issues pertaining to matters of Christianity, Buddhism, Shinto, and other traditions. This article will examine the *Yomiuri Shimbun* throughout the formative decades of the term’s institutionalization until the first decades of the twentieth century. What it does not seek to replicate, however, is the now well-trodden path of tracing the history of the term *shūkyō* and its
equivalents throughout East Asia (zongjiao in Chinese; chonggyo in Korean). Rather, by focusing on popular discourse, it intends to rethink the sociocultural mobility of the concept in Meiji Japan. While this is not to deny that the term and its underlying conceptual framework was nevertheless forged at the intersection of the political, legal, and diplomatic spheres, it is a motion to understand how this very intersection itself was engaged with by the Yomiuri Shimbun and how varying concepts of religion were thus addressed and expressed via the popular press.

**Japanese Newspapers as Historical Sources**

Approaching newspapers (in this case the Yomiuri Shimbun) as historical sources allows us to see not only how intellectual, political, and legal debates over “religion” were presented to a predominantly urban working class population, but also the application and currency of various approaches to the concept of shūkyō among this demographic. In this way, newspapers played a vital role in shaping the conceptual worlds of readers as to how they understood, used, and modified certain vocabularies for particular purposes. To this extent, James L. Huffman has demonstrated that newspapers were fundamental to the creation of a “public” in Meiji Japan:

> Without denying the importance of education, political movements, or economic transformation, . . . no single institution did more to create a modern citizenry than the Meiji newspaper press, a collection of highly diverse, private voices that provided increasing numbers of readers—many millions, in fact, by the end of Meiji—with both a fresh daily picture of the world and changing sense of their own place in that world.
Put differently, these publications not only acted as communicators and agents of social change but also paved the way for the collective consciousness of a Japanese “public realm” (kugai).17

Although forerunners to the modern Japanese newspaper already existed in the Tokugawa era (1603–1868), there is a general consensus on locating the industry’s origins in the distribution of shimbunshi (news sheets) during the turbulent years of the Meiji Restoration.18 Although these publications were short-lived, they nevertheless spoke to a growing demand for commercial news. By 1871, Japan had witnessed the establishment of its first daily newspaper, the Yokohama Mainichi Shimbun. Along with other companies, such as the Tokyo Nichi Nichi (established in 1872), this new genre of ōshimbun (large newspapers), was characterized by an early use of provocative political commentary written in literary Japanese. Unsurprisingly, such publications catered to a well-educated readership due to their exclusionary use of language. However, from its very inception, the industry acknowledged the need for a publication that catered to the working class. In 1868, Fukuchi Gen’ichirō (1841–1906) established the Kōko Shimbun. Driven by an editorial policy to use only colloquial Japanese, Fukuchi strove to reach even the least literate of readers—the so-called sobokuna taishū, or the “rustic,” “simple public.”19 Although its print run only lasted a few months, Fukuchi’s push to reform the language of the popular press indicates a broader concern with making political debate—and by extension, the discussion of “religion”—accessible to the entire public realm.20 In 1874, the Tokyo-based Yomiuri Shimbun was established, among four other daily publications, to address the needs of this “simple public.” Classified as a koshimbun (small newspaper), it catered predominantly to the so-called minshū (“the masses” or “the people”) —the urban working class—employing vernacular language articles that reported on local news, human interest stories, and light fiction. Along with other koshimbun, the Yomiuri Shimbun initiated a modernizing of journalistic language through the use
of greater colloquial vocabulary as well as standardizing the use of auxiliary verb forms (e.g., -masu and gozaimasu) and the copular da, desu, and nan da.21 Furthermore, Chinese characters were accompanied by furigana (use of syllabic characters to indicate pronunciation) to assist less literate readers. In this language shift we can observe the inner workings of broader social and cultural transformations that made information more readily available to the public realm than ever before. Indeed, the Yomiuri Shimbun itself defined its mission as paving a “rapid road . . . lead[ing] the people [minshū] to enlightenment.”22

The Yomiuri Shimbun is taken as a case study in this article for two primary reasons. The first is an essential matter of statistics. The Yomiuri Shimbun was the first entertainment-based newspaper distributed in large numbers to a wide audience. By 1877, there were roughly 225 newspapers in circulation, reaching some 470 within the next decade.23 Of this ever-growing market, the Yomiuri Shimbun emerged as the most widely read publication, selling 5,457,000 copies for the period of July 1877 to June 1878.24 It was also commercially oriented with daily circulations to 10,000 subscribers within its first year of business, increasing to roughly 33,000 by the end of the decade.25 As emphasized by Huffman, we can also note a significant decline of the ōshimbun press by the mid-1880s and the consequent rise of “less partisan, more news-oriented, and more popular” koshimbun publications. Of the latter, the second largest was the Yomiuri Shimbun, which had become “more political [and thus more engaged in discussions of religion] without sacrificing readability or its populist approach[.]”26 While it is a fundamentally difficult task to measure how many people actually read each newspaper (as purchasing does not necessarily imply reading and reading does not necessarily imply purchasing), it does appear that an even greater number of individuals read newspapers without purchasing them.27 To this end, Huffman discusses at some length the existence of “reading rooms” (shimbun jūransho or shimbun
etsuransho) from the early 1870s where low-income villagers and townspeople could read Tokyo-based newspapers or, if they were of poor literacy, could have them read and explained to them. Nevertheless, the newspaper industry both took advantage of and contributed to an exponential growth in national literacy. By the end of the Meiji era, Japan’s literacy rate had increased from roughly 30 percent to 70 percent, with almost every school-age child attending elementary school and, increasingly, many continuing education at middle and upper levels, with growing numbers attending one of the two imperial universities. We can also observe in these considerations of literacy an intersection with the consumption of newspapers. Andrew Gordon, for instance, has noted that by 1919, 80 percent of all households in Tsukishima, a working-class island in Tokyo, were subscribed to at least one newspaper, and 19 percent to multiple newspapers. In considering an emerging Meiji culture of reading news alongside the above commercial statistics, we can begin to gain a sense of readership size and the influence the Yomiuri Shimbun had in this time period. Therefore, in identifying a widely consumed newspaper whose readership was largely composed of the urban working class, the Yomiuri Shimbun emerges as a most fitting source for analysis. The second consideration is that as a commercial company, the Yomiuri Shimbun was a space in which editorial articles, opinion pieces, serials, and debates were printed alongside advertisements for goods and events connected to a wide variety of “religious” matters. It is therefore an indispensable historical source whose diverse content reflects the sociological, political, and cultural landscapes of Meiji Japan. In this way we can approach the Yomiuri Shimbin as an archive of everyday, grassroots movements, occurrences, and opinions that are otherwise without a historical record of their existence. In what follows, this article will employ the Yomiuri Shimbun as a case study to demonstrate: (1) how newspapers reported on political and legal debates about “religion” in the Meiji era; (2) how newspapers offered a critical space for public debate over definitions of religion
and how this was linked to anti-Christian movements; and (3) how a unique concept of a “universal religion” came to the fore at the turn of the twentieth century.

**Defining Religion against the Grain**

In analyzing the total output of the *Yomiuri Shimbun* throughout the Meiji era, we can observe that use of the term *shūkyō* follows a general upward trajectory, sharply increasing with the turn of the twentieth century (see Figure 1). Despite an outlying peak between 1899 and 1900 (the reasons for which will be explained later in this article), the statistics nevertheless suggest a gradual cumulative adoption of *shūkyō* in popular discourse as Japan entered into the 1900s. But how can we explain these trends and in what ways is “religion” represented and discussed in the first decades of the *Yomiuri Shimbun*?

In tracing the use of *shūkyō* in newspapers one is unavoidably confronted with the history of Christianity in Japan. Indeed, this “foreign teaching” was intrinsically tied to the conceptual history of “religion” itself in the second half of the nineteenth century. In this, the prevalence of Christianity’s coverage in the *Yomiuri Shimbun* is attributable to the fact that in 1873, the Japanese government issued an edict of toleration, lifting a two-hundred-year-old ban on the practice of Christianity by Japanese citizens. A de facto legalization of these “evil teachings” (*jakyō*), the decree ushered in a sudden flood of Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox missionaries. A national anxiety loomed large in the face of this radical social transformation and the 1880s to 1890s were consequently marked by a particularly anti-Western sentiment. With the decree issued only one year prior to the establishment of the *Yomiuri Shimbun*, Christianity had already
become the central axis around which concepts of religion were passionately debated. To the extent that this toleration of Christianity was, however, understood as empty rhetoric, the topic of “religious freedom” came to the fore at the turn of the 1870s. While an overview of the decree’s history need not be replicated here, we can nevertheless summarize the propelling forces of its origins as both foreign (growing international pressure to uphold the “civil” notion of religious freedom in Japan) and domestic (an increasing understanding of Christianity’s denominational differences among the Japanese).35

Within the first month of its distribution, the Yomiuri Shimbun was publishing stories about local encounters with Christianity. On 24 November 1874, an article, penned under the name Sharakusai,36 speaks of the author’s observation of two children following a mountain path. Along the way, one child mocks the inequality of size between pumpkins and their fragile vines, claiming that such a “design flaw” clearly disproves the existence of a mighty Christian Creator. A gust of wind suddenly causes chestnuts to fall from a nearby tree upon his head, triggering both children to immediately drop to their knees in prayer.37 This reflection of the author introduces the reader to a unique vocabulary forged in the early- to mid-nineteenth century to convey a number of key Christian concepts. In this article zōbutsushu (造物主) —literally the lord/superior of “creating things”—appears alongside other expressions such as aruji-sama (主さま) —(divine Christian) “lord”—and osore kami wo uyamau (恐れ神かみを敬う) —to “fearfully respect God.”38 Through this local news piece, we can thus see the Yomiuri Shimbun as a facilitator of public education on basic Christian concepts, presenting terminology that was otherwise restricted to intellectual circles and literature tied to European and American missionaries and their Japanese congregations. Indeed, these kinds of cursory introductions to Christian theology would have undoubtedly assisted readers in understanding subsequent discussions of its various denominations.
that were increasingly being published by the 1880s. However, as a space for public debate, the *Yomiuri Shimbun* soon began to publish editorials, essays, and advertisements by individuals and associations who opposed the presence of Christianity in Japan. As such, this pervasive anti-Christian sentiment demonstrates the ways in which the construction of a new category of religion came to be illuminated through a focus on how certain groups were excluded from it, and thus conceptualized through opposition. In this way, the simultaneity of conceptualization and exclusion can be understood through theories of identity formation inherent in “religious othering,” that there is a dichotomous relationship in the way language establishes the positionality of “self” and “other.”

“We cannot allow the power of foreign teachings to spread throughout our country.” So claims the front page of the *Yomiuri Shimbun* on 25 May 1884. “Foreign teachings” or *gaikyō*, as we encountered earlier, refers to Christianity as a whole (i.e., all denominations of Protestantism, Catholicism, and the Orthodox Church). In invoking a foreign-outside (外)/domestic-inside (内) dichotomy, the term *gaikyō* subordinates Christianity, offering its practitioners, and simultaneously relegating them to, “subject positions as others in discourse.” Indeed, the author’s anti-Christian sentiment is grounded in a moral judgment that clearly articulates that *gaikyō* has no place in Japanese society. He goes as far as to say that Christian missionaries should abandon their activities in Japan and, rather, go to Africa where they should “convert that completely ignorant race” (其の全無智の人種を教化し). While the author sympathizes with poverty-stricken individuals who may be seduced by Christian promises, he nevertheless appropriates the faith’s own terminology to make a moral judgment on these people. In this instance, the author uses the English word “sinful” (シンフル) to condemn this act while offering the Buddhist concept of *zaigō* (罪業)—or “sinful karma”—as an emic expression of moral disapproval. This kind of
anti-Christian rhetoric was also picked up by grassroots associations, such as the Greater Japanese Youth League (大日本青年會), who advertised their meetings “on the extermination [taiji] of Christianity” in the Yomiuri Shimbun, many of which provoked Christian retaliation and consequent police intervention. Through this, we can identify a turbulent period of violence between Christians and Buddhists/nationalists that was thoroughly reported in the popular media throughout the 1880s and 1890s.

From riots at niwaka performances (a light comedy with an improvised text) depicting debates between Christianity and Buddhism, to the destruction of lecture halls and the hurling of stones at Christian congregations, the Yomiuri Shimbun paints a vivid image of Japan’s nationalistic reaction to the rise of gaikyō and the later introduction of constitutional protection of “religious belief” (shinkyō no jiyū, 信教の自由) in 1889. However, the relevant Article 28 of the Meiji Constitution was not, in fact, an articulation of religious freedom in its most true sense, but a nominal form of protection limited by the very terminology employed in its composition. As Jason A. Josephson has articulated, this freedom was granted to shinkyō (信教), but not shūkyō (as a universal category for all denominations and sects). To this extent, shinkyō was also a common “religious” term present in the Yomiuri Shimbun before the turn of the twentieth century, reflecting a high proportion of journalistic reporting on political and legal debates in popular discourse (see Figure 2). The development of this neologism speaks to the very limits of power being drawn by the Meiji government—shinkyō offered policy makers a specific kind of conceptual subtlety not easily expressed in English, allowing them to distinguish between a freedom of belief that was “interior, private, bounded, and something distinct from preexisting Japanese cultural systems” and “religion” as institutionally and culturally external. To this extent, the public sphere of religion was made open to policing and, as we will see, both political
and lay associations sought to curb Christian activities. We can observe the impact of this in the *Yomiuri Shimbun* itself, which published a number of open letters penned by Japanese Christian practitioners grappling with the legal limits of their “belief” and to what extent the Constitution actually protected their religious interests. On 29 September 1892, for instance, a front-page letter, penned by Christian protestors, claimed that the exclusion of their children from schools and public institutions on the basis of their belief was a constitutional breach of “religious freedom.”

Referring to the governor of Kumamoto’s openly anti-Christian campaign, Inoue Kaoru (1836–1915), national Minister of Internal Affairs, reported to the *Yomiuri Shimbun* that politicians should avoid intervention in the “religious spirit” (shinkyō no kokoro, 信 教 の 心) of their prefecture’s residents. However, we can observe that this discourse was still limited to the interiority of people’s private beliefs and less so the problem of public practice and how this related to the cultivation of a Japanese national identity or “essence” (kokutai).

The Meiji construction of “religious” otherness functioned through the conceptualization of gaikyō as a coherent outsider whose opposition reified a sense of nationhood. However, the very question of what constituted the “religious” self was tied up in broader political concerns with national unity, sparking significant debate in popular discourse. An essay, published in the *Yomiuri Shimbun* on 4 January 1891, draws on the ideology of former Shinto priest Kawai Kiyomaru (1848–1917) to critique the demise of “national teachings/religions” (wagakuni no shūkyō, 我国 の 宗 教) and the relative rise of “Western religions” (taisei no shūkyō, 泰西の宗教). In the author’s view, Japan’s waning vitality was directly related to an absence of a “state religion” or “state teaching” (kokkyō, 國 教). Indeed, he invokes Kawai’s belief that the spirit of Japan lay in the “Three Teachings” (sankyō) of Shinto, Confucianism, and Buddhism, whose inseparability from one another constituted the now long-lost “Great Way” (daidō, 大 道). In this essay, the
author makes a claim for a “state religion” as the embodiment of a “nation’s spirit” (kuni no kinsei). In so doing, he asserts that “[t]here is no better way to express one’s patriotism than Shinto, no better way to govern society’s morals than Confucianism, and no better way to liberate oneself from earthly desires (bon’nō, 煩悩) than Buddhism.” However, this movement to revive sankyō as a “state religion” ultimately failed to influence national policy. Such an outcome was directly related to the Meiji government’s alternative interpretation of what the concept of kokkyō itself meant. In understanding kokkyō as a teaching of public national morality, and thus not strictly a kind of private “religion” per se, the government effected the use of Shinto as an “ambiguous system” to unify the Japanese people against Westernizing forces. As Isomae has previously emphasized, the transformation of Shinto into a secular “national teaching” rendered shrines as “non-religious or secular while also fully exploiting the Western idea of religious freedom,” as the politicized concept of kokkyō cut ties with any kind of religious principle that may be considered Christian, Buddhist, or otherwise. In what has been presented so far, we have observed how the Yomiuri Shimbun facilitated a public sphere in which divergent attitudes toward Christianity were expressed and how, in turn, acts of “religious othering” led to instrumental discussions about the concept of religion and its relationship to national identity in popular discourse. In what follows, we will observe how the emergence of shūkyō as a universal category led to speculation about the direction religion might take at the end of the nineteenth century.

Toward a “Universal Religion”

From the early 1880s we can observe an increase in growth of the Yomiuri Shimbun’s use of the term shūkyō (see Figure 1), as newspaper contributors searched for a conceptual framework through which to engage in comparative discussion of Christianity, Buddhism, Shinto, and
Confucianism. To this extent, an illustrative essay was published on 17 December 1885. Appearing on the front page, the author bemoans the waning of Buddhist law (buppō, 仏法). In so doing, he makes an interesting distinction between “reading Buddhism”—shoseki bukkyō (書籍仏教)—and “living Buddhism”—seikatsu bukkyō (生活仏教): the former referring to the scholarly practice of Buddhist teachings and the latter to the everyday enactment of and self-cultivation through said teachings.⁵⁹ In referring to the absence of both forms of practice, the author claims that “shūkyō [religion] is no longer present among the will of the [Japanese] people.”⁶⁰ Implicit in this, is an understanding of Buddhism as belonging to a broader category of shūkyō. The author further outlines four clauses all “religionists” (shūkyōka, 宗教家) should avoid: a desire for fame, the pursuit of vanity, a lack of doctrinal pedagogy, and servility in the presence of nobles.⁶¹ In establishing these universal clauses, the author then turns to Christianity, transposing his definition of Buddhist practice into the terms of shoseki shūkyō (書籍宗教)—“reading religion”— and seikatsu shūkyō (生活宗教)—“living religion.” In his observation, Christianity lacks a clear distinction between “read” and “lived” practice and, in so doing, had “maintained the dignity of shūkyō” in its entirety.⁶² For the author, then, shūkyō in its purest form implies a balanced union between abstract theology and habitus. In understanding how shūkyō is used by this author, we can thus discern a kind of “essential essence” in theory and practice that he believes is common to both Buddhism and Christianity. This thus provides us with a fascinating example of how shūkyō featured in popular discourse as early as the mid-1880s as a “universal” category employed for comparative analysis beyond legal or political frameworks.

We can observe a similar use in an opinion piece published on 18 September 1888 under the title “Comments on Buddhism in the West.” In this, the author approaches a universal concept of religion, even using the English word itself to emphasize foreign frameworks. To this extent,
he summarizes recent Anglophone perspectives on Buddhism and their understanding of the
tradition as a form of “moral philosophy” (dōgi tetsugaku, 道義哲学)—also rendered in English
by the author—to be contrasted with “religion.”63 The author nevertheless includes Buddhism
within the category of shūkyō, disapproving of how Asian populations have come to admire the
“religious doctrines of other countries” (takoku no kyōhō, 他国の教法), changing practices “like
they are choosing goods from a store.”64 In this, he seamlessly flips between the terms “religion”
in English and shūkyō in Japanese, demonstrating an intriguing instance in which this direct
equivalence of terminology was made abundantly clear to thousands of Japanese readers. Despite
the lingering of anti-Christian sentiment into the 1890s, popular discourse reflected a (mostly
reluctant) recognition that Christianity was now an enduring part of Japan’s “religious” landscape.

On 19 July 1891, a significant front-page editorial was published on “Religion in Japan”
(Nippon no shūkyō, 日本の宗教). Throughout the article, the author discusses defining features
of Shinto, Confucianism, Buddhism, and Christianity through the universal category of shūkyō. In
his discussion of Sect Shintoism (to be contrasted with “secular” State Shinto), the author critiques
the contemporary definition of their practices as constituting “religion,” claiming that the moral
mindset of ancestral worship (sosen sūhai, 祖先崇拝) had been confused for legitimate elements
of shūkyō.65 The author thus defines Shinto as a form of “polytheism” (tashinkyō, 多神教). To this
extent, he posits that “[r]evering the virtue and influence of the imperial lineage is the duty of all
Japanese subjects . . . so why does one have to force the label of religion (shūkyō) onto it?”66
Indeed, the author concludes that if one wishes to do so, constitutive “religious elements” (shūkyō
no bunshi, 宗教の分子) would have to be identified and thus would require the establishment of
an entirely separate sect (宗) with a “fair doctrine” (seiseidōdō no kyōri, 正々堂々の教理) to
defend itself.67 Similarly Confucianism, although apparently containing certain “religious
“Way of Heaven” (天道) and “Heaven’s Mandate” (天命)—is defined by the author as a system of ethics that is best used to “serve and promote other religions (shūkyō).”

Buddhism, however, is outlined in the editorial as a “religion” in crisis whose practitioners are overwhelming preoccupied with “defending against what’s on the outside [i.e. Christianity], [rather than] making right what’s on the inside.” Once more the reader is confronted by this pervasive dichotomy between “inside” and “outside” as a means of establishing a sense of religious “self” and “other.” The author makes a critical observation in the practice of lay Buddhists who abide by doctrine but fail to visit temples. In this he claims that new followers will continue to diminish in number, resulting in Buddhism surviving only as a philosophy (tetsugaku) and not as a “religion” (shūkyō).

Here too we find parallels with the previously discussed concept of “living religion,” which prioritizes practice over theological study. The present author similarly understands practice as a critical distinction between the concept of “philosophy” and that of “religion.” In turning to Christianity in all its forms, he derides it as “nonsensical” and ill-suited to the Japanese people and their customs. In so doing, he engages in a discussion of Christian concepts of religion, critiquing its division between theology and belief.

[Christians consider] religion (shūkyō) [to be] different from theology (shingaku), as religion is something that exceeds [mere] belief (shinkō), and belief that is [only] in pursuit of theory (gakusetsu) is not true belief. How ridiculous these opinions are! They cannot even comprehend the fact that there are two types of belief: true belief (kakushin) and blind belief (mōshin). True belief is based on knowledge and truth; those without truth and knowledge are all but blind beliefs. If theology had nothing to do with belief, there would be no theology in the first place.
In this the author again reinforces the previous distinction between “reading religion” and “living religion.” By means of critiquing the Christian concept of shūkyō he thus makes implicit the necessarily interconnected nature of doctrine and practice, emphasizing how, in his opinion, Christianity makes an artificial separation between these two components. In concluding this editorial, the author poses a rhetorical question to the reader as to who will be “the final victor” (最後の勝利者), reflecting a certain anxiety at the end of the nineteenth century about the direction of Japan’s future. Such uncertainty, however, also opened space for contemplation about the universal development of shūkyō beyond the “contenders” of Christianity, Buddhism, and Shinto and their relative pursuits of “victory.”

As early as 1887, there are records in the Yomiuri Shimbun about grassroots efforts to forge a religious syncretism. On 5 March of that year, the newspaper printed advertisements for a public lecture in the Tokyo neighborhood of Yotsuya, in which the speaker was to propose a merging (gappei) of Shinto, Buddhism, and Christianity. To this extent, a discourse emerged at the turn of the 1890s in which a “universal religion” was discussed as an inevitable outcome of intercultural exchange and the increasing compression of geographical distance. On 23 March 1891, a fascinating article was published under the title “[A] Universal Religion” (sekai fukyū no shūkyō世界普及の宗教). In its opening statement, the author claims to have read all things, from the Substance Theory of Spinoza, Schopenhauer’s theory of the Will, Hegel’s Idealism, [and] Herbert Spencer’s notion of the Unknowable and Absolute, to [understanding the concepts of] Confucianists’ Daji (“great ultimate”), Buddhists’ Tathātā and Myōkū (“excellent emptiness”), Shintoists’ Amenominakanushi (“lord of the bright
center of heaven”), and the God of the Christians. I have discovered that they are all more or less the same thing.\textsuperscript{76}

The author stresses that the search for some “supreme entity” (至高の現体) appears to be a universal aspect of the human condition. That this search has manifested in the development of distinct “religions” (shūkyō) is only, according to him, due to a difference in geography and points in time. The author cites rising instances of interfaith violence as a cause for a new “age of preventing conflict and declaring harmony.”\textsuperscript{77} In this, he understands the unifying efforts of people such as Kawai Kiyomaru (in the amalgamation of sankyō) and instances of Buddhist members joining Christian associations as a positive sign of things to come. Indeed, the author sees these examples as an early indication of a “universal religion [世界普及の宗教] [emerging] in the near future.” But while some were hypothesizing about the role of religion in establishing harmony in Japan, the government and its ministries were looking to the dawn of this new century as an opportunity to set legal limits on the concept of shūkyō itself.

\textbf{Into a New Century}

Throughout this article, we have come to see how the use of shūkyō in popular discourse of the \textit{Yomiuri Shimbun} began to increase toward the turn of the twentieth century. In explaining the peak in usage of the term between 1899 and 1900 (see Figure 1), we can identify a number of direct correlations between government policies and the newspaper’s coverage of the events surrounding them. The first of these relates to the Ministry of Education’s Ordinance No. 12, enacted in August of 1899. This enforced a rule of law in which “general education [was made to] be independent of religion.” To this extent, the ministry articulated that “religious instruction must not be given, or
religious ceremonies performed, at Government Schools, Public Schools, or schools whose curricula are regulated by provision of law, even outside the regular course of instruction.” Indeed, as the Bureau of Religion (shūkyōkyoku, 宗教局), established the following year, fell under the authority of the Ministry of Education, we can see an inextricable link between pedagogy and the government’s stance on religious practice. Although this prohibition was motivated primarily by a drive to curb Buddhist education, it also had significant impact on Protestant mission schools. In the months following, a number of reports were printed in the Yomiuri Shimbun addressing the objection of Christian schools and communities who petitioned for the uncompromised continuation of their “religious instruction” (shūkyō kyōiku, 宗教教育). This also came only one month after the publication of reports on the increased policing of churches in which the Ministry of the Interior further extended its power to the regulation of missionary activities. The enactment of Ordinance No. 12 precipitated a fervent debate among Japanese scholars about the place of “religion” in modern Japanese society. However, in looking to the popular press, and especially the Yomiuri Shimbun, we can also see instances in which intellectual figures made concerted efforts to convey their own arguments to a working-class readership—to engage with the urban masses on such critical issues. The influential Inoue Tetsujirō (1855–1944), professor of philosophy at Tokyo University, was a critical voice against Christianity and “religion” in general, favoring a system of “national education.” His monumental essay “The Clash between Education and Religion” (Kyōiku to shūkyō no shōtotsu, 教育と宗教の衝突), published in 1893, made clear his opinion that Japanese national values were inherently incompatible with the central tenets of Christianity. Compelled by political developments at the turn of the twentieth century, Inoue published a number of editorial essays in the Yomiuri Shimbun in 1902 articulating arguments in vernacular Japanese for the continued separation of “national education” (kokumin...
kyōiku, 国民教育) and “religious instruction” (shūkyō kyōiku), drawing on nationalistic narratives of Japanese cultural integrity. In this, we can see the critical role of the Yomiuri Shimbun as an increasingly political publication that bridged a gap toward the end of the Meiji era between politics and scholarly debate on the one hand and the urban masses of Japan on the other.

Attempts to control public engagement by Christian and Buddhist associations, among others, can also be perceived in the subsequent introduction of the controversial “Religions Bill” (shūkyō hōan, 宗教法案) in the final days of the nineteenth century. By this, Prime Minister Yamagata Aritomo (1838–1922) accepted the notion of religious freedom “only to the extent that it was harnessed to the goal of strengthening imperial authority, not as an inherent right of Japanese subjects.” Throughout December, the Yomiuri Shimbun reported extensively on the clauses of the bill, topics of debate regarding each “sect” (各宗), and the amendments proposed by the opposition such that the newspaper’s readers were familiar not only with the relevant terminology but also the impact the proposed bill would have on their everyday lives. Although the bill was ultimately defeated in the House of Peers (and again in a revised form in 1900), the extensive media coverage of the debate resulted in an increased frequency of the central term and concept at the heart of this controversy and this very research project itself—shūkyō. Indeed, in comparing Figures 1 and 2, we can also identify the aforementioned peak between 1899 and 1900 as a turning point in the respective usage of shinkyō and shūkyō, with the latter consolidating its dominance over the former after this particular juncture in time. As such, we can identify a dynamic shift in which popular discussion of “religion” moved beyond matters of law and politics, focusing more on the social and cultural dimensions of varied traditions as a part of daily life among the working class.
By the end of 1907, use of the term *shūkyō* had dramatically increased to 163 (see Figure 1) due to an ongoing series written by the young socialist Oda Raizō (1881–1918) entitled “Review of the Religious Sphere” (*shūkyō-kai hyōron*, 宗教界評論). Running from 5 July until 11 November, the *Yomiuri Shimbun* printed, on an almost daily basis, 118 installments of the series covering a wide range of topics from critiques of Shintoism and Buddhist assemblies to an exposition on Christianity and its future in Japan. For instance, in the month of September alone, 22 out of 30 days featured a series installment as a front-page article. We can perhaps conjecture that Oda’s series grew out of the political chaos of preceding years, in addition to the increased presence of “religious” debate in the *Yomiuri Shimbun* more generally, and a readership now more familiar with the term *shūkyō* itself. Indeed, the ongoing popularity of the series speaks not only to the topical nature of its focus in the early 1900s but, more importantly, is indicative of an increasingly informed readership. By the final years of the Meiji era use of the term had skyrocketed to 444 in 1925 and to a lesser 320 in 1926 (see Figure 1). This was in part due to similar short-term series such as “News from the Religious World” (*宗教界だより*), which ran for several weeks in 1925. However, it was with the establishment of a consistent newspaper column about religion (*shūkyō-ran*, 宗教欄) on May 25 in the same year that the term became firmly entrenched in the daily reading of Japanese consumers. By the end of 1925, the *Yomiuri Shimbun* had run some 260 “religion columns” in its print. Certainly “religion” was on the lips of the popular media, and we can see how it facilitated a much-needed conceptual space for the comparative discussion of various traditions toward the end of the Meiji era.

**Conclusion**
This article has sought to confute the claim that *shūkyō*, as a concept, lacked an established nature before the twentieth century and had little to do with the experience of “ordinary people.” To this end, studying the popular discourse of the *Yomiuri Shimbun* has offered us an important counter-narrative in which regular use of *shūkyō* began to clearly emerge from the mid-1880s, exponentially increasing with the following decades. Tied to this necessary shift in our chronological understanding is a need to acknowledge the expansion of the social milieu familiar with public debates about matters religious. In challenging previous scholarly treatments of *shūkyō* as a largely legal concept, this article has thus demonstrated how these debates were made intelligible to a working-class demographic through the vernacular foundations of the *Yomiuri Shimbun*. In so doing, the examples explored throughout have offered invaluable insight into how thousands of Japanese people engaged both passively and actively with concepts of “religion” throughout the Meiji era. From early discussions of “foreign teachings” (*gaikyō*) to the legal status of interior “belief” (*shinkyō*) and concepts of state “religion” (*kokkyō*), this article has illustrated the ways in which *shūkyō* developed into a universal category for the comparative analysis of different traditions. Yet, as we have seen, the very definition of this category itself was nonetheless open to interpretation within the public sphere, expressing a certain emic tension with the concept of an abstract “religion” that arguably remains prevalent to this day. From its very beginning, the popular press sought to provide agency to non-governing groups of Japanese society through the simultaneous facilitation of open access to information and a space to express their own opinions. In looking to one of the most influential newspapers of the Meiji era, we have, in this way, seen that popular discussion of “religion” was not only within the purview of politics, diplomacy, and the law, but was also, perhaps more importantly, a critical part of the everyday experience of Japan’s urban working class. Indeed, it was this “ordinary” majority, the so-called *minshū*, who
ultimately looked to the popular press to make sense of Japan’s rapid state of transformation and, in so doing, found concepts to frame their social and cultural traditions for a new modern age.

**Makoto Harris Takao** is Assistant Professor of Musicology and Affiliated Faculty with the Center for East Asian and Pacific Studies and the Center for Global Studies at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. ORCID: 0000-0002-6047-4254. Email: mhtakao@illinois.edu

![Graph](image)

**Figure 1.** Number of times “shūkyō appears in the Yomiuri Shimbun according to year of publication
Figure 2. Number of times “shinkyō” appears in the Yomiuri Shimbun according to year of publication

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1. Yokoi is referring here to the Chinese schema of the “Three Teachings” (Ch. sanjiao; Jp. sankyō, 三教). Devised in the Tang Dynasty (618–907), this division between Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism, was later appropriated by the Japanese to map their cultural landscapes in terms of Japanese Buddhist, Neo-Confucian, and indigenous Shinto traditions.


26. By 1885, daily circulation of the *Yomiuri Shimbun* had exceeded 15,000 copies. Huffman, *Creating a Public*, 142.


32. For a report on this edict, see *The Japan Weekly Mail* (22 February 1873), 113.


34. For examples of newspaper articles on the prevalence of missionaries, see, for instance, *Yomiuri Shimbun* (25 February 1887), 2; (22 January 1888), 1; (8 March 1890), 1.

36. This may refer to the Japanese painter Ochiai Yoshiiku (1833–1904) who used, among others, the penname Sharakusai (酒落斎).


41. *Yomiuri Shimbun* (25 May 1884), 1.


43. *Yomiuri Shimbun* (25 May 1884), 1.

44. Ibid.

45. See, for instance, *Yomiuri Shimbun* (26 October 1884), 3; (2 August 1885), 4; (07 August 1885), 4; (19 November 1889), 3; (6 October 1892), 2.

46. For one of the earliest reports indicating a high level of Christian denunciation (*Kirisutokyō shinjya wo haigeki suru kōdō*), see *Yomiuri Shimbun* (19 July 1881), 1.

47. See *Yomiuri Shimbun* (26 October 1884), 3; (2 August 1885), 4; (7 August 1885), 4; (6 October 1892), 2. For an overview of anti-Christian movements in Meiji Japan, see Notto R. Thelle, *Buddhism and Christianity in Japan: From Conflict to Dialogue, 1854–1899* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987), 135–149.


51. *Yomiuri Shimbun* (29 September 1892), 1.

52. *Yomiuri Shimbun* (11 October 1892), 1. On a petition to guarantee the enactment of constitutional religious freedom, see (11 October 1892), 2.


55. The translation of *kokkyō* as “state religion” in this newspaper essay is arguably more appropriate than “state teaching” as the author uses the category of *shūkyō* not only to speak of Christian denominations, but also the “Three Teachings” of Japan.


59. *Yomiuri Shimbun* (17 December 1885), 1.

60. Ibid.

61. Ibid.
62. Ibid.

63. Yomiuri Shimbun (18 September 1888), 2.

64. Ibid.


66. Ibid.

67. Ibid.

68. Ibid. Emphasis added.

69. Ibid. Emphasis added.

70. Ibid.

71. Ibid.

72. Ibid.

73. Yomiuri Shimbun (05 March 1887), 2.


75. Yomiuri Shimbun (23 March 1891), 2.

76. Ibid.

77. Ibid.


80. See, for instance, Yomiuri Shimbun (1 October 1889), 1; (5 October 1889), 1.


83. See Yomiuri Shimbun (29 September 1902), 1; (13 October 1902), 1; (14 October 1902), 1; (17 October 1902), 1. On the so-called National Morality Movement, see Richard M. Reitan, Making a Moral Society: Ethics and the State in Meiji Japan (Honolulu: University of Hawaii press, 2010).

84. Hardacre, Shintō and the State, 124–125. See also Thomas, Faking Liberties, 60–63.

85. See, especially, Yomiuri Shimbun (27 December 1899), 1.

86. The statistics for use of shinkyō in 1899 and 1900 are 33 and 29 respectively; use of shūkyō is 62 and 93 respectively.

87. See Yomiuri Shimbun (13 April 1925); 18 April 1925; 25 April 1925; 30 April 1925; 6 May 1925; 7 May 1925; 9 May 1925; 12 May 1925; 17 May 1925; 18 May 1925; 19 May 1925.

88. Isomae, Religious Discourse in Modern Japan, xvii.


90. See Huffman, Creating a Public, 8–9.