

## Research Statement

“What is religion?” is the question that drives my research program. I get at this ultimately unanswerable question through two types of projects. Both investigate how competing stakeholders define a notoriously ambiguous term, and both are related to public understandings of religion.

On the one hand, I have published extensively on the **visual and material culture of religion** through work on illustrated media in contemporary Japan. This approach characterized my first book *Drawing on Tradition: Manga, Anime, and Religion in Contemporary Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2012). Using media studies terminology like *closure* and *compositing* as guiding metaphorical language, the book showed how the category of religion can be defined and applied in a society where clerics lament lay estrangement from religion, most laypeople deny having any religious affiliation, and manga artists and anime directors liberally deploy religious imagery to create compelling worlds and characters. I showed that while manga and anime contribute to audiences’ familiarity with traditional religious ideas, conservationist attitudes that view illustrated media as mere repositories of tradition overlook how authors, directors, and their audiences use manga and anime to develop new religious ideas and practices.

On the other hand, my more recent work examines **the place of religion in policy and law**. My current book manuscript *Japan, The American Occupation, and the Problem of Religious Freedom* looks at the Allied Occupation of Japan (1945–1952) as an example of the construction of “religion” and “freedom” in ways that privileged American geopolitical interests. Against the prevailing understanding that prewar Japan was dominated by “State Shinto” and therefore devoid of “real” religious freedom, the first half of the book examines how various interest groups advanced competing understandings of religious freedom during the time that Japan’s first modern constitution was in effect (1890–1945). The second half focuses on the Allied Occupation itself, when the U.S.-led occupiers aimed to reconfigure Japanese religious and political life by eradicating “State Shinto” and inculcating a “desire for religious freedom” in Japan’s citizenry. Through trial and error, the Americans and their Japanese interlocutors collectively constructed a new understanding of religious-freedom-as-human-right. The new model reflected the legal peculiarities of a military occupation characterized by overlapping jurisdictions (both the American military government and the Japanese government bore responsibility for protecting rights and freedoms in Japan). It also reflected the ideological imperatives that marked the onset of the Cold War. Religious freedom became a universal right and a useful tool in the American fight against “godless communism” all at once.

Building upon the religious freedom project, I have recently begun a new comparative project about how the ambiguous concepts of “morality,” “patriotism,” and “security” mediate religion/secular distinctions in debates about public school education in both Japan and the United States. I focus on the question of how “secular” public schools foster morality, diligence, and patriotism in students without resorting to religious language; I also consider how apparently “religious” commitments and practices sometimes inform public school curricula. I have presented preliminary findings on this work at meetings of the Association for Asian Studies (2016) and the International Association of Buddhist Studies (2017) and in an invited lecture at Columbia University (2017). I am submitting my first publications on the subject in the 2017–2018 academic year; I have also been applying for grants to support new research in Japan.

One aspect of the education project that deserves special mention is its focus on improving public understanding of religion. Religious education is a controversial and therefore newsworthy topic, but journalists often get basic facts wrong. For example, in the recent furor over Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzō’s controversial land deal to the private educational corporation Moritomo Gakuen, many journalists referred to Shinto as the “indigenous animistic religion of Japan” when discussing Moritomo’s alleged celebration of wartime values. The phrase makes for a tidy description of a tradition that is difficult to define, but it is diametrically opposed to current academic understandings of Shinto.

Journalists within and outside of Japan tend to resort to hackneyed stereotypes when describing the contemporary Japanese politics of religion. If they are to be believed, Japanese Buddhism is dead or dying and militarist “State Shinto” is resurgent. By generating a primer for journalists on some of the recent trends in religious studies scholarship, I hope to provide them with conceptual tools that disaggregate ideological claims made for and about religion from historical and sociological facts. Doctrinal and ritual innovation in the face of demographic change does not presage the death of Japanese Buddhism, for

example, and political lobbying by religious groups like the Shinto Association for Spiritual Leadership (Shintō Seiji Renmei) is not necessarily inimical to Japan's postwar democracy. This is probably an uncontroversial point for scholars of religion and political science, but it is frequently lost in journalistic treatments on both sides of the Pacific. Public understanding and policy both suffer because of it.

Speaking of policy, I have recently been participating in the U.S.-Japan Network for the Future, a program that connects junior academics with policy makers in Tokyo and Washington, D.C. As someone who takes history seriously I tend to resist prediction, and as someone trained in the non-confessional academic study of religion I am loath to make normative statements. These inclinations make me naturally reluctant to offer policy prescriptions. But my research on the Occupation convinced me that policy decisions often occur in haste, with minimal background information, and with an unfortunate emphasis on short-term solutions. When policy makers are pressed for time, catchphrases often stand in for rigorous analysis.

I think that policy can be done better, and I think that the relatively "slow" academic perspective can provide context and caution that counterbalances the excitement of a given moral panic or the exigencies of an unexpected political crisis. As a humanist, I am particularly interested in the power of words, and my research on religious freedom has shown that stakeholders often tactically define operative terms to suit their narrow ends. I am therefore cautiously entering the world of policy by generating policy briefs based on my recent research on religious freedom and public school education. I am critical of the way that the category of religion is differentially applied at home and abroad, and I am furthermore concerned that religion features very differently in policy decisions about, for example, security and education. Rather than simply playing naysayer, however, I intend to help policy makers think about how commonsense categories like "religion" can be problems in themselves. For example, in their newfound haste to take religion seriously, some policy professionals make the mistake of reifying religion in order to assess it as a security threat. A constructivist approach to religion can counteract the inimical effects of the essentialist or functionalist understandings that currently dominate policy decision-making.

Even as I work on the education project, I am working on another book that revisits my longstanding interest in religion, media, and objects by considering the problem of *desire* in Japanese religions. This book will revise old-school anthropological and religious studies terminology like "animism," "fetishism," "idol," and "cult" to show that Japanese religion is fundamentally about sex and money and crass consumerism, but not in a reductive sense. Focusing on quotidian objects like trains, televisions, USB sticks, robots, and plastic figurines, this study will examine how desire—one of the fundamental problems diagnosed by Japanese Buddhism and also one of the primary drivers of Japanese religious practice—structures the political economy of contemporary Japanese religion. I expect to argue that contemporary Japan provides a model for understanding the co-constitutive relationship between religion, capitalism, and sexuality that characterizes many wealthy economies today.

Examples of this kind of analysis can be found in two recent publications. In "The Buddhist Virtues of Raging Lust and Crass Materialism in Contemporary Japan" (*Material Religion*, 2016), for example, I used the media outreach strategies of a small Buddhist temple in western Tokyo to argue against common conceptions of Buddhist decline in contemporary Japan. The article highlighted the political economy of the decline narrative by showing how clerics, journalists, scholars, and social media users all "buy in" to and "cash in" on a narrative that is as alluring as it is factually incorrect. Meanwhile, a book chapter in preparation titled "Spirit/Medium" critiques the oft-repeated argument that Japanese animation is unique because it draws upon Japan's ancient animistic traditions. I argue that when scholars and journalists describe anime as "animistic," they use a politically fraught and technically inaccurate term to engage in recuperative or obscurantist political projects related to environmentalism or cultural nationalism. I also argue that when these professional observers repeat the essentialist idea that "Japanese people believe that spirits exist in everything," they categorically ignore the potentially "spiritual" qualities of the material objects that are actually used to make anime in the first place (celluloid, ink, computer screens, cameras, cables). I conclude by offering alternative language that can more accurately depict what anime directors and their audiences do when depicting or observing relationships between spirits and nature in animated film. These attitudes and ideas can be deemed meaningful and even religious, I argue, without relying on the loaded language of "animism."