

Article

# Women between Religion and Spirituality: Observing Religious Experience in Everyday Japanese Life

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**Abstract:** A large majority of Japanese people describe themselves as *mushūkyō*, ‘non-religious’, even though they participate in several religious-related cultural practices that socialize them to accept spiritual attitudes without the mediation of organized religion. This phenomenon fits well into the ‘spiritual but not religious’ formula of the contemporary Northern European and North American sociological debate, in which the ‘religion’ and ‘spiritual’ categories denote interdependent, although not always reciprocated, domains. Drawing upon two sets of qualitative data on women belonging to five religious organizations (Shinnyoen, Risshō kōseikai, the Roman Catholic Church in Japan, Sōga Gakkai, and God Light Association (GLA)), in this study, I argue that the religion–spirituality distinction not only fails to capture the empirical reality of contemporary Japanese religions, it also does not take into account new modalities of religious and spiritual experiences of people with such affiliations. Their experiences are expressed through the socio-cultural milieu and the language of religion and spirituality available to them in contiguous and complementary ways. In this respect, the aim of this article is to discuss such aspects of Japanese women’s religious and spiritual experiences that have often eluded scholars writing on Japanese religiosity in order to broaden the focus of reflection to include the *mushūkyō* aspect and the presumed religion–spirituality mismatch.

**Keywords:** Japanese religions; spirituality; *mushūkyō*; spiritual but not religious; gender

## 1. Introduction

In April 2016, two strong earthquakes hit Kumamoto prefecture in southern Japan. During an interview, Aiko-san, a member of Shinnyoen<sup>1</sup> in her late thirties from Kumamoto city, recalled a spiritual story:

My mother lives alone in the countryside. She called in the middle of the night after the quake and asked [me] to bring her water and food. I was driving fast, although roads were quite damaged. As I was going around a corner I heard a voice: ‘Slow down, slow down’. I looked around and then up on the side of the road, there was a white figure. It wasn’t like a human, a sort of a light, a white spirit form. I felt I had no control over my body: my foot went deep into the brake and my car stopped. (Interview held on 7 July 2016)

Having been warned to slow down, she avoided crashing into a car stopped around the corner. As a member of Shinnyoen, Aiko-san is used to the practice of *sesshin* meditation, in which a *reinōsha*, or a spiritual medium, mediates between the adherent and the spirit world. Therefore, Aiko-san was

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<sup>1</sup> Shinnyoen (meaning “borderless garden of truth”) is a new Buddhist religious movement founded in 1936. In 2017, the movement had 927,405 members, including 17,256 male and 73,857 female teachers of faith (Bunkachō [Japanese Agency for Cultural Affairs] 2017, p. 71). For a profile of the organization, see (Cavaliere 2015, 2019a, pp. 46–57).

not surprised by the appearance of the ‘white spirit’. She felt it was one of her ancestors, a guardian spirit (*shugorei*), and she was grateful as it saved her life.

Oita-san, a fifty-year-old Catholic from Kumamoto city, spoke of the following:

(... ) not being able to sleep well after the quakes. I used to suffer from insomnia and in the evacuation center the condition worsened, I couldn’t sleep at all. Also, I couldn’t say my usual prayers because I didn’t want to seem odd to people in the shelter. After three days the priest visited the shelter and we prayed together with a few others who are not Catholic. While I was praying I had this experience: I felt my body relax and my mind flow, I felt a warm and fluid sensation, I felt God was with me. Since then, I have been able to fall asleep much easier and I sleep much better. (Interview held on 7 July 2016)

Both respondents found, in their own cultural and religious milieu, ways to articulate their spiritual stories. They speak the language of the religious community of which they are a part and use the vocabulary and cultural symbols that Japan has developed in the long process of accommodation of folk beliefs, Buddhism, Shintō, and Christianity to talk about and live transcendence. However, they express a new modality of religious experience, one that sources from both religious frameworks and the holistic, engaged, embodied milieu of present-day Japanese spirituality. This simple recognition inspired the driving research questions for this study: What is the meaning of spirituality for Japanese women adherents of organized religions? How does spirituality relate to the *mushūkyō* (non-religious) identity claimed by a majority of Japanese people?

Women continue to outnumber men in organized Japanese religions (Cavaliere 2015, p. 8), while also making up the majority of present-day spiritual movements in Japan (Arimoto 2011, pp. 148–67; Gaitanidis 2012, p. 275). Although this study draws upon field interviews with women belonging to religious organizations, the discussion is not primarily concerned with the gendering of religiosity and spirituality—a discussion that can be found in several extant scholarly works (Hardacre 1984; Gaitanidis 2012; Komatsu 2015, 2017; Inose 2017; Kawahashi and Kobayashi 2017; Cavaliere 2018a, 2018b, 2019a). Still, the gender gaps in religiosity are among the most consistent findings in the social sciences (Miller and Stark 2002; Kawahashi 2006; Woodhead 2007; Baker and Whitehead 2016; Komatsu 2015, 2017), and more women than men tend to be both religious and spiritual (McGuire 2008; Palmisano 2010; Chaves 2011; Woodhead 2011; Ammerman 2014a), which raises the question of what meaning affiliates attach to their spiritual life and vice versa. The goal of this article is to develop an argument that simultaneously accounts for the religious character of the respondents’ religiosity and religious belonging and their spiritual commitments. According to the ‘spiritual but not religious’ formula of the contemporary Northern European and North American sociological debate (Marler and Hadaway 2002; Swatos and Giordan 2011; Ammerman 2013, 2014a; Palmisano and Nicola 2017), the ‘religion’ and ‘spiritual’ categories should be treated as interdependent but mutually exclusive (Heelas et al. 2004) in that religion implicitly refers to institutional organizations characterized by an official doctrine expressed through belief systems and rituals systematically arranged, while spirituality focuses on the empowerment of actors who do not refer necessarily to a set of meanings within a system of belief (Pace 2011, p. 23). The argument of such sociological theorizing relies on the idea of a lasting secularization process, which, in the Japanese case, can find supporting evidence in the majority of people who claim to be without religion (*mushūkyō*), because they do not identify themselves as members of one particular religious group.<sup>2</sup> Although some scholars do observe an increasing secularization among the Japanese population (Reader 2012), others point to a lively expansion of spiritual practices in many settings of everyday life—from professional (Komatsu 2017; Gaitanidis 2012) to social (Horie 2010) and even during leisure time (Satō 2004). The following

<sup>2</sup> According to the 2013 survey conducted by the Institute of Statistical Mathematics, 72% of the population asserts that they do not believe in any religion (Institute of Statistical Mathematics 2013, p. 71).

two sections show that both these observations are valid and supported by evidence, as they are closely interrelated.

Perhaps the most important issue to clarify at the outset is what ‘religion’ and spirituality’ mean in the Japanese context. To many Japanese people, ‘religion’ means the sort of committed faith expressed through religious affiliation with which the majority of them are unlikely to identify (Ishii 2007, p. 182), whereas spirituality functions as a narrative that reconciles with the subjective turn (Taylor 1991, p. 26), enabling people to “hide and keep their intrinsic religiosity by positioning themselves closer to secularism” (Horie 2009, p. 11). Section 5 will provide further analysis on how this movement away from institutional religion overlaps with the American and European phenomenon, along with an expanding spiritual culture in the form of holistic well-being practices (Gaitanidis 2012) that has similarly led to the popularization of forms of non-institutionalized religiosity and spiritual techniques that promise to offer greater subjective self-awareness (Gaitanidis 2012, p. 271).

Japanese new religions,<sup>3</sup> especially those founded in the early twentieth century and in post-war Japan, such as Shinnyoen, Risshō Kōseikai, and God Light Association (GLA), which are analyzed in this study, are institutional organizations concerned with fulfillment in life, which they pursue through “counter techniques such as meditation, ascetic training, bodywork, and psychotherapy... combined with the study of ancient mysticism, archaic religions, and myths and shamanistic rituals, and psychological theories” (Shimazono 2004, p. 233). The qualitative data used in this study comprise 32 interviews collected in Tokyo and Sendai (2010–2012) and in Ōsaka and Kumamoto (2015–2018) with women belonging to four Japanese new religions (Shinnyoen, Risshō kōseikai,<sup>4</sup> Sōka Gakkai,<sup>5</sup> and GLA<sup>6</sup>) and the Roman Catholic Church in Japan.<sup>7</sup> The respondents of this study articulated spiritual stories while being religious affiliates of organizations that often consider membership to be exclusive, such as in the case of Japanese new religions (Reader 2015, p. 3), indicating a positive attitude toward performative actions that, in one way or another, can be called spiritual. They embrace syncretic and non-committal modes centered in self-developing values, ideas, sensitivities, and practices derived from a broad secular movement that resists institutionalization, affiliation, and doctrinal traditions. In this regard, the respondents, who openly express their religious identity while also relating to a general spiritual discourse, constitute an interesting phenomenon to investigate through the lens of the ‘spiritual but not religious’ formula. This article questions this ‘boundary problem’ (Roof 1999, p. 204) by looking at Japanese women’s responses to explore possible interrelations between religion,

<sup>3</sup> Japanese new religions (*shinshūkyō*) are those groups founded in Japan between the mid-nineteenth and the twentieth century. They have been chronologically divided into four waves: mid-to-late nineteenth century, early twentieth century, immediate post-war years, and late 1970s onwards. Shinnyoen, Risshō kōseikai, and Sōka Gakkai belong to the second wave, while God Light Association belongs to the fourth wave. For an overview of Japanese new religions, see (Reader 2005, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> Based on the *Lotus Sūtra* (*Hokekyō* in Japanese) and inspired by Nichiren Buddhist tradition, Risshō kōseikai is a new religious movement founded in 1938 on the initiative of Niwano Nikkyō (1906–1999) and female co-founder Naganuma Myōkō (1889–1957). Risshō Kōseikai has 2,705,319 members (Bunkachō [Japanese Agency for Cultural Affairs] 2017, p. 79). For an overview, see (Cavaliere 2015, pp. 37–46).

<sup>5</sup> Sōka Gakkai, founded in 1930 by educators Makiguchi Tsunesaburō (1871–1944), Toda Jōsei (1900–1958), and Ikeda Daisaku (1928–) is a new religious movement composed primarily by lay practitioners. The most detailed sources for membership numbers are the group’s website, which suggests that 8,270,000 households are currently registered as members (see [https://www.sokanet.jp/hajimete/gaiyo.html?gclid=EAIAIqobChMIoqrN28uy3gIVk6mWCh24FQGqEAAAYASACEgJnTvD\\_BwE](https://www.sokanet.jp/hajimete/gaiyo.html?gclid=EAIAIqobChMIoqrN28uy3gIVk6mWCh24FQGqEAAAYASACEgJnTvD_BwE) accessed on 23 February 2019). For a profile of Sōka Gakkai, see (McLaughlin 2012).

<sup>6</sup> GLA is a new-new religious movement (*shin-shin shūkyō*) founded in Tokyo in 1969 by corporate manager Takahashi Shinji (1927–1976) (Shimazono 1995, pp. 195–98). From a popular shamanistic and neo-Buddhist religion where ‘speaking in tongues’ was a central practice under the founder’s leadership (Whelan 2007), GLA became an increasingly rational and psychologically oriented religion under his daughter and current leader, Takahashi Keiko (born 1955) (Watanabe 2014). This shift marked Takahashi Keiko’s subjective turn and her goal to attract a growing middle class by focusing on the enhancement of the individual soul as a purpose of life and its realization through mind rectification. GLA does not provide the Japanese Agency for Cultural Affairs with data on membership. According to the GLA official website, as of March 2018, the organization counted 54,953 members (<https://www.gla.or.jp/about/outline.html> accessed on 12 April 2019).

<sup>7</sup> The Roman Catholic Church is a traditional denomination of Christianity introduced in Japan by the Jesuits in the fifteenth century. It has 453,239 members (Bunkachō [Japanese Agency for Cultural Affairs] 2017, p. 81). For an overview, see (Cavaliere 2015, pp. 58–65).

non-religiousness (*mushūkyō*), and spirituality. The meanings of these concepts will be reviewed in the following two sections.

Two methodological considerations require acknowledgment at this point. First, although the alleged distinction between religion and spirituality would also require responses from women who are not affiliated with religious organizations, it is precisely the meaning that religious affiliates see in the performing of spiritual practices of the holistic milieu that this study tries to clarify. Second, with regard to data sampling, the majority of the narratives analyzed here articulate post-disaster experiences. As will be discussed below, the March 2011 triple disaster and the 2016 Kumamoto earthquakes were significant events that shifted the cultural orientation towards the spiritual world and related practices to heal the emotional dimensions of grief in the public sphere. I am aware that more varied qualitative data would help to obtain factual information that may be more representative of the general population while also helping with the purpose of analyzing my research questions. However, in this particular inquiry, I utilized “theoretical sampling” (Reid 1991, p. 123) as a way to collect indications of a general conceptual category and its interrelationships from a pool of life stories in order to generate theory. This methodology allowed me to account simultaneously for the respondents’ religiosity and their spiritual practices.

## 2. Japanese as Non-Religious People?

At first glance, Japan can be regarded as a very religious country where major traditions, such as Buddhism and Shintō, coexist with numerous *shinshūkyō* (Japanese new religions) and *shin-shinshūkyō* (new-new religions) that were founded in the late nineteenth and mid-twentieth century, along with Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and other international religions. However, with reference to individual religiosity, religious membership, and religious organizations, contemporary Japanese religious studies have been largely dominated by the *mushūkyō* (non-religious) discourse that sees a large majority of Japanese claiming to be without religion, because they do not identify themselves as members of one particular religious group (Iwai 2004; Shimada 2009; Ishii 2008, 2010a; Dorman 2012).

In recent years, the nature and meaning of *mushūkyō* has been increasingly analyzed as a narrative deeply complicit in mirroring religious mistrust while constructing spirituality as the non-religious alternative (Horie 2018, pp. 96–99). In line with this, religious scholar Shimada (2009) suggests that such secularism reflects public distrust in Japan’s traditional religions of Shintō and Buddhism as institutions of spirituality, because they secularized themselves to secure their places in society (p. 18). Political authorities long used them as tools to consolidate their rule over the country. Tokugawa shogunate (1603–1867) used Buddhism to control the population through the *danka seido*, a system requiring every household to register at a local Buddhist temple. It also aimed to eradicate Christianity, which was showing signs of spreading in the early seventeenth century, thus challenging the control and power of the shogunate (Shimazono 2012, pp. 12–13). In the Meiji era (1868–1912), when a vigorous debate on ‘civilization and enlightenment’ (*bunmei kaika*) became a normative project, modernizing political leaders deemed it necessary to eradicate Japanese popular religious beliefs and practices that were unsuitable for a modern Japan. Such a secularizing effort was implemented through reforms that stripped Buddhism of its long-enjoyed government patronage, while purging it of cosmological elements that were not confirmed by science (Hardacre 2011, pp. 6–7). At the same time, a newly introduced educational system included anti-superstition measures that eradicated any popular beliefs that did not align with the ideal of secularity (Hardacre 2011, p. 8). Meanwhile, Japanese nationalism, adopted as a defensive reaction against Western imperialism, flourished into an ideological, semi-religious phenomenon known as State Shintō, which became an important element of Meiji secularity and was used to suppress any established, popular, and folk religious phenomena that hindered the forging of the subjects dedicated to the imperial project. Folk healers, shaman-magical practices, and spiritual mediums that used to help the general populace before Meiji Restoration faced continuous harassment and systematic eradication by the authorities (Cavaliere 2018b). It is not surprising that it was at this time that *shinshūkyō* (new religions) emerged offering alternative modes of

religious faith and belonging, distinguishable from the prescriptive nationalistic one. Many of those *shinshūkyō* were established by a prophetic foundress experiencing a revelatory experience, a shamanic practice that traces its history back to Japanese folk traditions (*ibid.*). Whereas Shintō was re-invented and renovated into a secular tool for obligatory expression of loyalty to the nation, folk practices, traditional religions, individual beliefs, and spirituality were relegated to the private sphere. When the Allied Occupation (1945–1952) further privatized religion through a constitution that separated state from religion and removed State Shintō—which had served to unite the nation around a common set of symbols and institutions for half a century—from public institutions, a new rapid secularization process decisively redefined and negotiated the boundary between the sacred and the profane, framing today’s understanding of religion and what pertains to public and private in Japan.

This forced secularization, however, has never truly reconciled with everyday practices in ordinary life, in which traditional temple and shrine devotions, private ceremonies, popular beliefs, collective rituals, and individual everyday practices were, and still are, overwhelmingly religious in character and to which Japanese people are deeply attached. While 72% of the population asserts that they do not believe in any religion ([Institute of Statistical Mathematics 2013](#), p. 71), most Japanese people participate in several religious-related cultural practices, annual events, and festivals that socialize them to accept a wide range of practices, beliefs, expressive lexicon, and customs connected to household, community, and multiple religious traditions and institutions. More than 60% of Japanese people visit family or ancestral graves during the annual *obon* festival of the dead in August ([NHK Broad Casting Cultural Research Institute 2019](#), p. 15) and go to a Shintō shrine on New Year’s Day (*hatsumōde*) ([Ishii 2007](#), p. 65). Based on the number of visitors during the first three days of the new year celebration, the popular Japanese travel agency Jorudan Co. provides information on the *hatsumōde* popularity ranking: in the 2019 rankings, Meiji Shintō Shrine in Tokyo was visited by 3.17 million people; Narita Shinshōji, a Buddhist Shingon temple, had 3.12 million visitors; and Kawasaki Daishi hosted 3.09 million people.<sup>8</sup> Choosing a Shintō Shrine over a Buddhist temple for the *hatsumōde* is related to the type of practical benefit for which one is looking, regardless of the religious tradition of the institution. Meiji Shrine provides several benefits: prevention of danger (*yaku yoke*); scholastic success and academic performance (*gakugyō*); successful matchmaking, love, and marriage (*en musubi*); traffic safety (*kōtsu anzen*); and protection of one’s family from illness and accidents (*kanai anzen*). Narita Shinshōji temple is very popular among students as its *gakugyō* power helps them pass entrance examinations and gain acceptance to prestigious schools. Kawasaki Daishi temple, also of the Buddhist Shingon school, offers prevention of danger (*yaku yoke*), and it is popular for its effective traffic safety amulets. Pregnancy and protection in childbirth are also very popular subjects in temples and shrines around Japan. Suitengu shrine and the Kishimonji-dō in Tokyo are best known as *parwā supotto* (power spots) for safe pregnancies and deliveries. The Enmanji temple in Ōsaka is very popular among parents-to-be, because it offers personalized rituals for safe pregnancy and delivery, along with parenting classes and workshops.<sup>9</sup> It also deals with adverse events, such as abortion and miscarriage, offering funerals and loss rituals, as well as individual consultation for healing purposes.

In these terms, religious organizations are associated with their role of contributing to the this-worldly well-being and happiness regardless of their centrality in the abovementioned collective rituals, life-cycle ceremonies, funeral rites, and ancestor veneration. However, while the benefits sought are very practical in their goals, they are not exclusively materialistic: they also relate to spiritual states of the individual and entail ethical obligations across social institutions, as well as cultivating and preserving a diffused sense of religiosity and spirituality that embraces popular or folk religious practices and beliefs. According to the respondents, who are also consumers of such shrine and temple rituals and amulets (*omamori*), most people acknowledge that they have little faith in their real efficacy.

<sup>8</sup> [https://sp.jorudan.co.jp/newyear/rank\\_visitor.html](https://sp.jorudan.co.jp/newyear/rank_visitor.html) (accessed on 21 February 2019).

<sup>9</sup> <https://enmanji.com/> (accessed on 21 February 2019).



However, they still engage in such collective rituals and purchase amulets for the affective component of such practices,<sup>10</sup> which helps reassert the relatedness to their contextually constructed social identity. They are also attached to the feeling of spiritual protection that they convey: “It is better have it and not need it”, the Catholic Misako-san said (interview held on 4 July 2017).

In such a context, it can be concluded that individuals with non-religious affiliations also share a vague religious awareness through which they cultivate a spiritual dimension without the mediation of organized religions. Because the large majority of Japanese people describe themselves as *mushūkyō*, ‘non-religious’ but are passionate consumers of religious commodities and collective practices, the case of Japan seems to comply well with the ‘spiritual but not religious’ formula of the contemporary Northern European and American sociological debate discussed above. In this regard, the Japanese case seems to entail a multifaceted, holistic, engaged, embodied, and natural spirituality-based religiosity that is neither alternative nor exclusive to institutional religion. I suggest that such culturally constructed discourse can be better examined through two sociological frameworks: ‘diffused religiosity’ (Cipriani 2017) and ‘intra-religious spirituality’ (Palmisano 2010, p. 231), which view aspects of institutionalized religious life as complementing the spiritual experience. I will discuss these concepts further in Section 5.

### 3. Spiritual but Not Religious? The Holistic Milieu of Japanese Religiosity

‘Spirituality’ is rendered in the Japanese language in two ways: *reisei*, written in Chinese characters, and *spirichuariti* in *katakana*—the syllabary used for transcribing foreign words. Together with other related terms, such as ‘spiritual’ (*supirichuaru*), ‘world of spirit’ (*seishin sekai* and also *reikai*), and ‘healing’ (*iyashi*), in recent years, Japan has witnessed the spread of a new spirituality that can be characterized as aiming for the awakening or transformation of the consciousness of the individual (Arimoto 2011).

Spirituality as a culturalized discourse was popularized in the 1970s through the ‘Suzuki effect’ (Faure 1993, p. 54), which deconstructed monastic and elitist Zen Buddhism, transforming it into a lived religion and a ‘Zen culture’ through a process of ‘reverse orientalism’ (Borup 2016, p. 73). Except for the ‘Suzuki effect’, however, up until the late 1980s, the language of spirituality was still very limited in Japan. It was in the first half of the 1990s that the word *reisei* started appearing in the titles of books (Kamata et al. 1993), while the second half of the 1990s saw the arrival of ‘spiritual’ (*supirichuaru*) or ‘spirituality’ (*supirichuariti*) in *katakana* (Shimazono 1999, p. 122). Still, nowadays, large bookstores have a section next to the one for ‘religion’ displaying books on self-transformation, reincarnation and *karma*, near-death experiences, yoga, meditation, shamanism, animism, evolution of consciousness, occult experiences, transpersonal psychology, spiritual care, psychotherapy, and such. The fitness section has also been expanded to include books on aromatherapy, reflexology, acupuncture, healing, holistic medicine, and *shiatsu*. In a study titled *Spirituality, Gender, and Expressive Selfhood*, Sointu and Woodhead (2008) claim that “holistic spiritualities and health practices are more likely to be concerned with the cultivation of bodily well-being for the benefit of the woman herself” (p. 269). Such ‘spiritual therapies’, transcribed from English into *supirichuaru serapii*, are also very popular among Japanese women, who are the predominant suppliers and consumers of Japanese beauty culture (Gaitanidis 2012, p. 278).

Although many spiritual techniques and therapies are undoubtedly foreign imports, their appeal in contemporary Japanese society should also be considered within the context of Japanese traditional medicine and religious healing rituals, both of which possess a long history in Japan and have been re-interpreted by Japanese new religions, especially among the last wave of religious

<sup>10</sup> Reader and Tanabe (1998) discuss religious behavior in terms of cognitive and affective belief. Cognitive belief draws upon ontological discussions in the mode of theology or its secular counterpart, philosophy (p. 129). Affective belief is described as belief of a more emotive order and is characterized by “affective sincerity” when engaging in rituals and acts of prayer that involve interactions with culturally postulated supernatural agents or their earthly representatives (*ibid.*, p. 129).

groups that appeared in the 1980s, such as GLA. The spiritual dimension of practices, such as yoga, meditation, *shiatsu*, tai-chi, *reiki*, aromatherapy, reflexology, acupuncture, moxibustion, hot spring therapy, chiropractic therapy, hot therapy, magnetic therapy, and *kanpō* medicine,<sup>11</sup> is anchored in Japanese traditions, such as Zen and Tantric Buddhism, Taoism, Shintō, and folk practices. In these terms, religion and spirituality interpenetrate, because such religious practices are a basic cultural model of reference for those who undertake a spiritual journey.

Two crucial historical and contextual factors should be considered when analyzing the construction of spirituality as a popularized cultural discourse in Japan. First, the increased use of the terms spiritual and spirituality in the late 1990s should be framed against the background of the sarin gas attack on the subway in central Tokyo by the Japanese new religion Aum shinrikyō in 1995. The Aum incident resulted in a strong mistrust in new religious movements, as well as intense scrutiny of religious institutions from the state, media, and police (Shimazono 1995; Baffelli and Reader 2012). In this context, *rei* (spirit) and its related terms, which had been used by Aum and other religious groups, were rapidly replaced by terms, such as *supirichuaru* (spiritual) or *kokoro* (heart/mind), which offered much weaker connections with the traditional religious vocabulary of *shūkyō* (religion). These comparatively neutral substitutes served the purpose of distancing one's spiritual attitude from dangerous religious or cultic groups and the legacy of disturbance created by the Aum incident (Horie 2009). When, in 1998, the World Health Organization (WHO) expressed the need to integrate spirituality in the development agenda of the United Nations by suggesting that "health is a dynamic state of complete physical, mental, spiritual, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity",<sup>12</sup> the legitimacy of *supirichuariti* and spiritual-related activities was ultimately confirmed. With the WHO statement, spirituality in Japan was elevated to a rightful component of the individual and social well-being discourse while distancing itself from the troublesome connotations of religion (Kasai 2003). Such increased popularity of spiritual discourses has also had an impact on the *supima* (spiritual market),<sup>13</sup> which saw an expansion of the demand for and the supply of 'spiritual services', such as fortune telling, aura reading, and the calling upon guardian spirits, along with the selling of lucky bracelets, spiritual accessories, and organic food and house products, in addition to goods promoting physical and mental well-being (Ueda 2014, p. 58).

A second turning point in the development of the spiritual movement was the March 2011 triple disaster in Tohoku and Fukushima. This disastrous event had a strong impact on the expansion of two streams of spirituality: the establishment of spiritual care as a non-religious practice performed by both religious and lay actors alike; and the proliferation of ghost stories and appearances in the tsunami-affected sites. The respondents' stories in this study are filled with instances of both types, voicing how the disaster brought about an increased demand for long-term psychological assistance to heal the stress and anxiety of those who were hit by such calamities. In this context, Japan's religions' post-disaster aid and reconstruction activities gave them new opportunities to demonstrate their social relevance. Their social contribution has effectively entered the field of post-disaster recovery programs (Inaba 2018; Cavaliere 2019b) in the form of spiritual care, rendered variously as *kokoro no kea* (heart/mind care), *kaunseringu* (counseling), or *supirichuaru kea* (spiritual care). Religious groups of any tradition have activated programs and support activities to meet the needs of a Japanese

<sup>11</sup> *Kanpō* medicine is a Japanese traditional herbal medicine integrated in the national health care system since 1961. It is similar to the psychosomatic medicine in that the disease is considered to be a condition where mind and body are unbalanced. Other complementary and alternative medicine, such as acupuncture, *shiatsu*, moxibustion, hot spring therapy, chiropractic therapy, hot therapy, and magnetic therapy are also covered by health insurance. For an overview, see (Katayama et al. 2013).

<sup>12</sup> A recommendation to amend the WHO constitution so that it includes 'spiritual health' was made by the WHO Executive Board. See 'Resolution EB101.R2' at [http://apps.who.int/gb/archive/pdf\\_files/EB101/pdfangl/angr2.pdf](http://apps.who.int/gb/archive/pdf_files/EB101/pdfangl/angr2.pdf) (accessed on 3 March 2019). Although a debate on took place at that time, the WHO eventually did not amend its constitution.

<sup>13</sup> 'Spiritual market' is a trade fair dealing with spiritual and healing products and services. It is held in major cities nationwide. Exhibitors are experts of spiritual techniques, such as fortunetelling, healing, counseling, and spiritual products. They also provide trial lessons and sample products. It is advertised primarily in women's magazines, such as *an an*, which in 2010 published a special issue titled 'Spirituality Book' (<https://magazineworld.jp/an/an-an-1750/>) (accessed on 3 March 2019).

public that welcomes therapeutic interventions for disaster victims (McLaughlin 2013). In doing so, both established and new religions have gone through a process of redefinition of their public image that downplays or even completely obliterates explicitly religious dimensions of disaster aid and spiritual care.

#### 4. Between Religion and Spirituality: Women's Stories

I will offer in this section some examples of how women belonging to a religious organization try the holistic milieu in seeking spiritual experiences that will satisfy their spiritual needs, while maintaining some connection with institutionalized religion. The interviews analyzed here were audiotaped and transcribed for use as NVivo qualitative analysis software-managed data. Personal names have been replaced by pseudonyms throughout. A framework analysis (a set of codes organized into categories) was used to identify themes. My analysis aimed at exploring what female members of religious organizations mean by 'spiritual life': their self-assessment of religiosity and spiritual life; their relationship with organized or institutionalized religions; their opinion of traditional authorities; their involvement in holistic activities and those sponsored by their religious organizations; and their quest for spiritual growth. Above all, the goal was to explore whether they identify spirituality with their beliefs or whether spirituality contradicts them and whether they carry out a spiritual life independent of their organization.

##### 4.1. The Case of Megumi-San, Catholic (Interview Held on 4 July 2017)

Megumi-san (52) from Sendai (Tōhoku prefecture) is married with two adult children. She converted to Catholicism at the age of 22 before marrying her husband, already a member of Sendai Catholic church. Megumi-san trained as a nurse and studied health counseling. After graduation she worked part time at the local welfare agency. In order to respond to the demands of her clients, after the 2011 disaster, she trained in *kokoro no kea*, along with *keichō* (attentive listening), at a local Zen Buddhist temple. Still feeling the limitations of both clinic and religious *kokoro no kea*, she upheld the request of a regular client, and she started studying fortune telling using cards. After that, she quit the welfare agency and opened a healing salon where she combines mental health and psychological counseling with tarot fortune telling. She also treats clients with aromatherapy and *shiatsu* to "remove the evil spirits from their bodies", she says. She asks clients to join her in simple Christian prayers after the treatment, but she does not pressure them if they refuse. When I asked to address the relationship of her spiritual practices with Christianity, she replied: "Being a good Christian means living a good life: it's what you do for others, how you help them. Our Christian God cannot directly address people's everyday problems, so I supplement with spiritual techniques. I am working for him".

Megumi-san identifies herself as a Christian, although she thinks that its belief system appears out of touch with ordinary people's lives and world views. She is capable of making interpretations herself regarding what Christianity means: she no longer needs an external authority to express her religiosity, which she can find in her mission to help people in ordinary, everyday living, such as when she meets her clients or when she prays with them. At the individual level, she maintains her religiosity within herself, and she cultivates her religious feeling with a multifaceted, often contradictory amalgam of beliefs and practices that are not necessarily those that her religious institution considers orthodox. Megumi-san's willingness to be a good Christian has encouraged her to blend 'traditional' Catholic practices—such as praying—with spiritual techniques that speak to her clients' values and to their individual lives. She has been consciously experimenting with ways to engage in new patterns of spirituality, but she has done so as a Catholic. As Megumi-san asserts that her spiritual practices make her a better Christian than she was before, Megumi-san's personal religion should arguably be classified as Christian, because she is working hard to stay true to her Catholic identity. Yet, she seems to have much more in common with the values of spiritual movements. Thus, Megumi-san's narrative tells us that in order to understand the complex and creative ways in which many Japanese practice



their beliefs, researchers should go beyond the idea of religion being exclusive of the many cultural resources upon which people selectively draw, transform, and amalgamate. Indeed, as discussed above, many spiritual elements are now embedded in the routine practices and beliefs of the majority of Japanese people.

One further point should be made about Megumi-san's mentioning of "evil spirits". Since the Great East Japan Earthquake and tsunami in 2011, there has been a proliferation of ghost stories throughout disaster-affected areas (Horie 2016). The confirmed death toll caused by the Great East Japan Earthquake of 11 March 2011 and the ensuing tsunami was 15,894, while, as of 8 March 2019, the number of people still missing was 2558 (National Police Agency of Japan 2019). The disaster caused serious damage and trauma to the Tōhoku region in northern Japan where survivors had to come to terms with the dead and how to maintain their relationships with them. Horie (2016) suggests that there have been two types of representations of and relationships with the dead: the 'familiar spirits' and 'unfamiliar spirits' (p. 200). The scholar's qualitative data are filled with narratives about spiritual experiences with beloved deceased persons, although those stories are rarely heard in the mass or social media. Since the Aum incidents in 1995, the Broadcast Act has prohibited Japanese media from disseminating non-scientifically proven facts on television, banning, in particular, programs that deal with spiritual or occult phenomena, because they can be understood as supporting cult groups (Ishii 2010b). However, in 2013, the national Japanese Broadcast Corporation (NHK) aired a documentary program titled 'Reunion with Deceased Persons', which reported several touching stories narrated by bereaved victims who somehow sensed the presence of the dead (NHK 2013). Survivors described different subjective experiences, with some perceiving spirits as familial and benevolent and others describing frightening encounters with unknown, anonymous, and strange spirits. While experienced in different ways, both reactions represent a bond with the dead that Horie calls an "inner psychic bond (*kokoro no kizuna*)" (Horie 2016, p. 203).<sup>14</sup> This expression helps distance it from other common words, such as ghosts (*yūrei*), demonic spirits (*yōkai*), and *hitodama* ('fireball', spirit of dead people), which represent the relationship between the living and the dead that draws upon traditional Japanese folk and popular religious beliefs. Beliefs in spirits in the form of *yūrei*, *yōkai*, and *hitodama*, as well as *senzō* (ancestors) and *rei* (here meaning a ghost or supernatural being), among others, have a long tradition in Japan, a country where the Buddhist cult of ancestral spirit veneration fuses the world of the living with that of the dead. *Rei* itself, in Chinese characters, is imbued with the meaning of a spiritual presence beyond this worldly life (Nishihira 2000). Popular beliefs in possession by animal spirits, such as foxes and badgers, as well as the power of curses, divination, and belief in *tengu* (winged spirits, combining bird and human characteristics, which represented evil mountain ascetics reborn in monstrous forms) had been largely extirpated through the secularization effort of the Meiji religious reforms (Hardacre 2011, p. 7) along with the advancement of rationalism and the scientific progress of the twentieth century. However, interest in *rei* (spirit) and *anoyo* (life after death) has persisted in both personal and organizational or institutional beliefs and practices (Hayashi 2010).

In fact, the belief in the existence of spirits and ghosts in the Tohoku damaged areas was present long before the 2011 disaster (Aizawa 2015). Survivors of the disaster, such as Megumi-san and her clients, had only a few opportunities to express and heal the spiritual and emotional dimensions of their grief and pain in the public sphere, which resulted in unbearable frustration and a strong wish to comfort the spirits of the deceased (Saito et al. 2016). In the post-tsunami Japan, the psychosocial experience of survivors has drawn upon the well-known language of the 'spirits' that is reflective of and alleviated by traditional folk beliefs, Buddhist doctrine, and an established spiritual belief system, while distancing itself from the troubled one used in pre-Aum Japan. In this context, religious specialists were required to develop a type of emotional care to respond to survivors' spiritual

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<sup>14</sup> It must be noted here that the translation of *kokoro* as 'inner psychic' is very peculiar and reflects the scholar's own interpretation of the phenomenon to express both the emotional and the psychological facets of the experience.

experiences, which they reframed on a psychological, rather than religious, understanding of ‘spirits’, also accounting for secular factors when considering how to best treat the people who come to them for help (Takahashi 2016, p. 177). Their *kokoro no kea* took the traditional forms of funerals and memorial services, while also including exorcism and rituals for the deceased when needed, along with newer forms of psychological help and counseling providing moral support and promoting self-care for the afflicted (Takahashi 2016, p. 184). Religious specialists have been working with mental health care workers who, in turn, ascertained how to incorporate the need for spiritual support into their relief work (Saito et al. 2016). On a collective level, the spiritual care needed to handle the post-disaster experiences of the Japanese population further framed a shared meaning of *supirichuariti* as legitimate and beneficial for Japanese society at large. Megumi-san’s *kokoro no kea* draws upon such communal understanding of spirituality that mirrors the need to heal survivors’ spiritual experiences and that intersects with one’s personal religious beliefs and shared values. The following story tells us that such religious and spiritual eclecticism typifies other representatives of the religious population.

#### 4.2. The Case of Keiko-San, Member of Shinnyoen (Interview Held on 17 September 2016)

Keiko-san (38), a Shinnyoen affiliate from Ōsaka, worked as a part-time employee at a bookstore. She is married with one 11-year-old daughter. She grew up in a family affiliated with Shinnyoen, but she had not been involved in it since college, when she met her future husband who discouraged her religious affiliation. Before that, she regularly practiced *sesshin* and other Shinnyoen religious practices but limited her daily practice to ancestral worship at home after marriage. Four years earlier, after several arguments with her husband who wanted her to leave her part-time job and become a full-time house worker, she left with a friend and her daughter and went to Kyūshū in the south of Japan. While her daughter was playing at the seaside, Keiko-san drew a sketch of her. Her friend, a vegetarian who practiced yoga regularly, said the shape in the drawing looked like an angel. In that moment, Keiko-san heard a voice asking her to “return home”. The voice continued after returning home, so her friend recommended that Keiko-san meet a channeling specialist at the *Iyashi Café Ōsaka* (healing café Ōsaka). The specialist told her that she needed to “learn how to channel [her] spiritual energy”. Keiko-san remembered that she was told something similar at one of the last Shinnyoen *sesshin* she attended before getting married. As a result, she returned to Shinnyoen and became an active member who regularly attends ceremonies and *sesshin* at the local Shinnyoen temple. She also attends channeling sessions at the *Iyashi Café Ōsaka*. She quit her job and her relationship with her husband improved. She said: “We think our guardian spirits are different from bodhisattvas, but they all belong to the same spirit world. We need to learn how to hear their voices and let them be part of our life. I am much happier now.”

Since the 2000s, Japan has seen a proliferation of *supicon* (spiritual convention), *iyashi café*, and *iyashi fea* (healing fair) that have been regularly held every year in Tokyo (*Iyashi fea in Tokyo*), Ōsaka (*Iyashi fea in Ōsaka*), Kōbe (*Iyashi fea in Kobe*), and Hakata city, Kyūshū (*Hiyashi fea in Kyūshū*).<sup>15</sup> The product categories for the last *Iyashi fea in Tokyo* in 2018 included healing and health services, such as macrobiotic, vegetarian and organic food; organic beauty products; aromatherapy; ayurvedic products; natural food and holistic trimmer services for pets; children’s toys and games made from natural materials; house furniture made from natural materials; organic soap and detergents; power stones and spiritual ornaments and accessories; natural products and supplements for pregnant women; and trial sessions of counseling, fortune telling, aura reading, pranotherapy, healing counseling, channeling, massage, and meditation.<sup>16</sup> One big incentive for the popularization of such ‘consumeristic spiritual culture’ (Shimazono 2012) was the ‘Ehara effect.’ Since the early 2000s, the self-proclaimed spiritual counsellor

<sup>15</sup> The *Iyashi fea in Tokyo* attracted 24,994 participants in 2005 and 30,844 in 2016. The number of participants is reported on the *Iyashi fea* website at <http://a-advice.com/> (accessed on 3 March 2019).

<sup>16</sup> See [http://a-advice.com/tokyo\\_2018/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/TOKYO\\_press-release.pdf](http://a-advice.com/tokyo_2018/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/TOKYO_press-release.pdf) (accessed on 3 March 2019).

Hiroyuki Ehara has been a prolific writer and TV celebrity who avoids using *rei* to differentiate himself from earlier mediums or psychics, thus calling himself a ‘spiritual counsellor’ (Shimazono 2007, p. 33). Ehara, who founded the Spiritualism Association of Japan,<sup>17</sup> specializes in mediating the messages of higher spirits, has no religious outlook, and offers ‘the map of life’ to clients so that they can lead their own lives successfully (Ehara 2003). For this reason, he always uses the *katakana* terms of ‘spiritual’ and ‘spiritualism’.<sup>18</sup>

Channeling is one of the healing services that clients can find at the *Iyashi Café Osaka*, where people like Keiko-san can find answers to their various sensory spiritual experiences. As it happens, such experiences are central to many of the respondents who are also consumers of so-called spiritual services. Oita-san, the fifty-year-old Catholic from Kumamoto city quoted above, talked about “a warm and fluid sensation” in her body when describing her encounter with God. The Shinnyoen member Aiko-san talked about her vision of a white spirit when she had “no control over [her] body: [her] foot went deep into the brake”. The respondents’ material bodies are intimately involved in their spiritual experiences, and such intense experiential spirituality helps them to connect their bodies with their emotions (Merleau-Ponty 1962, pp. 62–65).<sup>19</sup> As discussed above, in a country where ancestor cults and frequent disastrous events have shortened the distance between the world of the living and the dead, spirits and other-worldly presences are invisible dimensions of reality. Keiko-san’s hearing of the spirit is not the only sensory religious experience the respondents describe. Taste, touch, smell, and other physical senses are evoked. Several religious rituals of the Japanese traditions legitimize sensory experiences as a way to get closer interaction with the unseen or divine world. Examples are the rituals of the mandala in the Tantric schools carried over by the esoteric Shingon Buddhist school (to which Shinnyoen doctrinally refers); the meditation sessions and embodied practices of the Zen schools; the mountain practices of Shūgendō—Japanese mountain ascetism; or the *goma* fire rituals for the dead in Buddhist tradition (Dolce 2015, p. 51). While Japanese people are accustomed to those religious-related cultural practices without the need to formally belong to organized religions, it is through the private rituals and actions that they perform in everyday life that such sensory experiences become manifest. The routine memorial rites for the dead performed in the morning and in the evening in front of the *bustudan* (family altar), such as the one performed by Keiko-san, the apotropaic rituals performed in temples and shrines during the new years’ visit and throughout the year, the reverence to the ubiquitous *jizō* statues (the bodhisattva protector of the children), and the usage of amulets (*omamori*), healing practices, and alternative medicine, to name but a few, are practices that stand in the intersection between the subjective and the social, the sacred and the profane, which remind individuals not only how to interpret their spiritual experiences, but also how to have them. Perhaps even more important for understanding contemporary Japanese religion and spirituality is that many of the respondents reported such sensory experiences without considering them to be extraordinary. Although there might be a trigger event (the earthquake, an argument, childbirth, a stressful experience), such occurrences often happen in the normality of everyday life. In this context, even seemingly mundane activities, such as gardening, walking, teaching yoga to mothers with newborn babies, or striving to live a caring life—as is in the case of Utako-san and Nao-san whose stories will be narrated hereafter—may become potential moments in which to experience spirituality.

<sup>17</sup> [http://spiritualism.or.jp/about\\_spiritualism/](http://spiritualism.or.jp/about_spiritualism/) (accessed on 3 March 2019).

<sup>18</sup> See Ehara’s website at <https://www.ehara-hiroyuki.com/guest/index.php> (accessed on 3 March 2019).

<sup>19</sup> Although the phenomenological approach to human consciousness as rooted in embodiment was developed by philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty in 1962, the sociology of religion has only lately taken a material turn by placing it at the center of the scholarly inquiry into sensory phenomena in religions’ sensory and material practices. Such scholarly analysis has found interesting circulations of processes and practices in and out of the religious milieu into the spiritual one, and vice versa. Such circulation has brought about both religious and spiritual inventions and discourses that intersect both religion and spirituality. For an overview, see (Promey 2017).

#### 4.3. The Case of Utako-San, Member of Risshō Kōseikai (Interview Held on 4 July 2017)

Utako-san, a second-generation member of Risshō Kōseikai Sendai Church, stayed on in her work after getting married and continued working when she found out that she was pregnant. She was in her third month when the Great East Japan Earthquake hit Tōhoku in March 2011. Although she had already planned to take the regular maternity leave, from six weeks prior to the expected birth date to eight weeks after giving birth, a month after the earthquake, she decided to quit her job and dedicate herself to full-time nesting. Above all, she wanted to take care of herself and her baby:

“In one of his Dharma speeches President Niwano [of Risshō Kōseikai] once said: ‘Make yourself your light, make the Dharma your light.’ I knew he meant reviewing what we learn from the teachings of the *Louts Sūtra* and put it into practice, but I had never taken it very seriously. After the disaster, I realized what to do.”

Some of the pregnant mothers she knew were having trouble overcoming the stress of the disaster, and she felt she had to do something. The Tōhoku University Hospital where she was having her regular pregnancy tests offered maternity yoga, *shiatsu*, and breathing training using the ‘pregnancy baby breath hug’ technique and womb visualization.

“What the breathing training teacher said was very similar to what my teacher at the Parenting Classes of Risshō Kōseikai used to say: ‘your baby senses your thought and your feelings. Emotional health is very important. Being active, feeling a sense of belonging and having a caring attitude will connect with your baby. It will know you are a good person if you take care of yourself.’”

She convinced other mothers who were suffering from post-disaster stress to join those classes as much as possible and monitored them, making calls and helping whenever they needed. Utako-san gave birth and continued practicing yoga and *shiatsu* together with her daughter and the other mothers of the circle she created. When her child started going to kindergarten, she decided to become a yoga teacher while training in *kokoro no kea* at her Risshō Kōseikai center. She opened a maternity yoga center afterwards, offering a variety of activities for mothers based on the motto: “Make yourself your light”.

As mentioned above, the post-disaster expansion of emotional care programs has produced a hybrid movement of religious and lay professionals, clinical care workers, and academics who have been reframing religion in the form of an all-encompassing spiritual care, rather than promoting specific faiths and traditions.<sup>20</sup> While on the one side *kokoro* (mind) and *supirichuaru* have been absorbed into medical and social welfare discourses (Ueda 2014, p. 60), non-dogmatic and non-medicalized psychological and mental supports in the forms of *kokoro no kea* have begun to be offered as part of their services by religious organizations around Japan (Takahashi 2016, p. 177). As a result, in present-day Japan religious organizations, along with a vast array of companies and agencies offering various types of care service (such as eldercare, childcare, disability care, residential care, palliative care, end-of-life care, and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder [PTSD] care, to name a few) have included *kokoro no kea* as part of their services and deploy the language of spirituality to indicate the emotional care offered through new routes of self-cultivation, healing, and other services. The emphasis on the power of self-cultivation by means of harmonization of body, mind, and spirit has framed itself as something secular and different from religion—a trend that has been promoted by religious and secular institutions alike. In the hyper-aging Japanese society, such spiritual discourse has become popular in the media with TV programs promoting healthy lifestyles based on salubrious eating and exercising for the elderly. Such practices are believed to bring about spiritual healing (*iyashi*) in

<sup>20</sup> In 2012, Tōhoku University introduced a new program for training interfaith chaplains, called *rinshō shūkyō shi* (literally, clinical religious specialists). These professionals can be regularly hired by hospital and clinics. There were 181 graduates in 2017. See <http://www2.sal.tohoku.ac.jp/p-religion/2017/cn8/pg27.html> (accessed on 13 March 2019).

that they are said to facilitate contact with the inner self by means of harmonization of body and mind. Along with the popularity in the business sector, yoga classes are now offered in most *kōminkan* (state-sponsored community centers) around Japan, along with *shiatsu*, tai-chi, *reiki*, aromatherapy, reflexology, and acupuncture. Similarly, religious organizations, such as Utako's Risshō Kōseikai, have assimilated holistic language and started training its members to become providers of spiritual services. The language used to promote these activities reminds users of the promise that such practices smooth the process of connection with the 'inner self' and the deeper, spiritual self, thus leading to a healthy life. Their methods retain a level of acceptability thanks to the construction of the spiritual discourse that has been endorsed by international organizations as well as by contextual factors in national institutions and media agencies that have stripped the religious component away from Japanese spirituality.

#### 4.4. The Case of Nao-San, Non-Religious from Sōka Gakkai Background (Interview Held on 4 June 2018)

Fifty-six-year-old Nao-san lives in Tokyo and teaches at a Catholic high school. Her family is a second generation family of Sōka Gakkai; her parents and her brother are active members, while she says she is non-religious, because she does not recognize her Sōka Gakkai membership, which was imposed on her as a kid. "I don't practice, nor do I belong to any religious organization", she says, although she believes in the Buddhist idea of interconnectedness (*tsunagari*) and suggests that a caring attitude can help individuals go beyond their ordinary nature and discover one's Buddha nature (*bussei*) or true self. Nao-san says she enjoys her job at the Catholic school, because the presence of the sisters reminds of her inner, spiritual life. "I share the Catholic social and moral teaching, with their strong idea of helping each other", she says; however, she does not have much affinity with monotheistic, established, and exclusivist religions: "Also, I don't believe in the Christian idea of sin, I think it is one's own responsibility and duty to care for others as all human beings are interconnected. I think this is what I share with Sōka Gakkai, although I am not part of it". Three years ago, she trained in *kokoro no kea* at the Catholic church, and she now volunteers in church-sponsored social welfare activities for the homeless:

"I like Christianity as it teaches altruism and how to respect the human rights. But I don't believe the clergy have more power in addressing social problems. Neither they are more spiritual than I am because they pray everyday. I pray for my ancestors, I believe it is my duty to help them in their spiritual progress, which in turns helps me in my spiritual journey and makes me feel part of this interconnected world, so I respect it. Religion does not solve problems, but it can teach you how to live a caring life."

In his book *Mushūkyō koso nihonjin no shūkyō de aru* [Non-religion is precisely the religion of the Japanese], religious scholar Shimada (2009) claims that while socio-political and historical circumstances have induced the majority of Japanese to distance themselves from organized religions, they are not becoming secular. They often follow social convention by participating in lifecycle and calendrical rites at Shintō shrines and Buddhist temples and acknowledge their beliefs, values, and worldviews. Such discussion finds an interesting parallel in Woodhead's idea of 'nones' (Woodhead 2016a), whereby a majority of British adults describe themselves as 'non-religious', although this does not mean that they have become less religious, but that, to them, religion has become less attractive (p. 256). Similar to those who identify as *mushūkyō*, the 'nones' do not like organized religion or its traditional leaders and, above all, are people who do not like to be pigeonholed (p. 258). In this respect, the Japanese *mushūkyō* and the British 'nones' look very similar: they show a shared acceptance of beliefs and values from previous generations and the majority of people in their country, although they find that organized religion does not resonate with their lives.

As it happens, although they tell different stories, both the Risshō Kōseikai member Utako-san and the self-proclaimed non-religious Nao-san express the belief that living a virtuous life—one characterized by helping others and transcending one's own selfish interests to seek what is right—is what nurtures real spirituality. Their narratives emphasize the ethical dimensions or meanings of life,



which are concerned with “the basic attributes, capacities, capabilities, potential of individuals, and communal life” (Palmisano 2010, p. 233). Both Utako-san and Nao-san aspire to an ethical spirituality, where moral values free themselves from the religious framework in which they were originally formed. The resulting lay spirituality indicates a this-worldly orientation directed towards valorization of making “oneself one own light” (Utako-san) and “live a caring life” (Nao-san) as a fundamental part of an individual’s spiritual and identity path. The analysis of these profiles shows that the nature of their spiritual life is linked to moral qualities, such as a caring attitude, a sense of right and wrong, authenticity, wisdom, and sensitivity. Whether they belong or not to a religious organization, the socio-cultural religious background with which they are most familiar serves as ‘a sacred canopy’ (Berger 1967) to which they refer to in ordinary life and when they need to express their ethical spiritual experience. Disaffected Sōka Gakkai member Nao-san is one who found spirituality in exploring and deepening her own inner self and living a moral life, with both Sōka Gakkai and the Catholic teachings becoming sources of critical self and social reflection. This framework supplies the repertory of moral values and individual and collective behaviors and practices which, in line with the individual respondent’s ideological position, can be articulated polemically against religion in general, within a traditional religious framework, or, finally, towards a spiritual itinerary, which, at least partly, liberates itself from the religion ascribed by birth. This process is well exemplified by Fuyuko-san’s story below.

#### 4.5. The Case of Fuyuko-San, Member of GLA (Interview Held on 3 March 2018)

Fuyuko-san, a 36-year-old woman who lives in Ōsaka prefecture, has been a member of GLA for five years. Her family was affiliated with the local Jōdo Buddhist temple where the family grave is located. Since her father’s death, Fuyuko-san has taken over the duty of scheduling the commemorating ceremonies for the ancestors, but after getting married, she missed several memorials. Meanwhile, she could not get pregnant, and she felt the pressure of such expectations. One day, she received a call from the head monk of the Jōdo temple, reminding her of a memorial for her father. While she was on the phone, she heard a distant voice saying that the cause of her problems was her inability to communicate with “the spirit of the eldest son”. In her search for a way to talk to the spirit of her elder brother who had died at a young age, she consulted with other GLA members who directed her to try out some spiritual techniques, such as channeling. When she attended a session, she felt she could interact with the spirit world and would be able to communicate with the spirit of her brother. Fuyuko-san got pregnant after she was able to pacify her brother’s spirit, who was upset because she had discontinued the family ancestor worship. Later, she trained as a channeler, and she now holds channeling sessions at the beauty salon where she works. She says:

“Channeling is the ability I have discovered in my soul (*tamashii*) and developed by myself. GLA helped me to find my real self, my family’s Jōdo Buddhism is my own religion where my ancestors are revered. I care very much about it. I respect both GLA and Jōdo Buddhism equally because they make me be a good person.”

Fuyuko-san’s narrative shares themes and occurrences similar to the previous stories: her individual biographical narrative is a microcosm of her father’s Jōdo Buddhism grand narrative, although she did not identify with it, nor did she feel compelled to perform her filial duty and commemorate the ancestors. However, when she had a sensory experience, she immediately rationalized her distress as a manifestation of her disrespect toward such an important family and social obligation. While she initially used the traditional religious vocabulary to express it, she soon moved to a secular lexicon under the influence of the less religiously colored GLA humanism. Because the movement emphasizes self-development as a way to find one’s mission in life and role in society, it is not surprising that Fuyuko-san eventually associated her spiritual experience with the prescriptive need for self-discovery in pursuit of her ‘authentic’, ‘natural’, or ‘real’ self, as required by GLA. In these terms, the self-development type of spirituality exemplified by Fuyuko-san is associated with life lived in close connection with one’s own unique self that thus became the primary source of significance

for her actions, although it should not be misread as a form of selfishness and egoism. As a whole, Fuyuko-san's experience is expressed through the socio-cultural milieu and the language of religion and spirituality available to her: while maintaining some connection with her family religion, she tries out the holistic milieu in seeking spiritual experiences that will satisfy her expressive needs and encourage a positive view of processes concerning self-awareness and a discovery of a real self. Above all, her narration shows how religion and spirituality are contiguous and harmonious, rather than separate and contradictory, categories. The spiritual dimension of her experience is anchored in institutional religion, whereas the answer to her distress is found in spiritual practices. This demonstrates how religion and spirituality interpenetrate, because, as mentioned above, diffused religiosity works as the cultural framework for those who undertake a spiritual itinerary. The positions of those Japanese people, such as Fuyuko-san, who engage in spiritual itineraries outside their organized religion and of those who claim to be non-religious are still critically and reflexively built on the basis of the dominant Japanese socio-cultural and religious milieu that is constructed through diffused religiosity. While *mushūkyō* (non-religious) Japanese people refute religious organizations' authority and eschew affiliation, their worldview, moral values, and collective behaviors are still anchored in such reference prototypes.

## 5. Discussion

The respondents of this study are affiliated with religious institutions but also engage in practices and activities linked with spirituality. Some claim they are spiritual but not religious, because they do not belong or have disassociated from traditional forms of religion while concentrating on activities through which they cultivate their spiritual dimension of life. Many speak of spirituality in terms of morality, being a good person, and living a life of caring, which is also part of the logic of the socio-cultural framework drawn from traditional Japanese religious traditions. Others find in spiritual practices a dimension of affectivity and emotion through which they can experience a profound and immediate unity with oneself and society. Whether the respondents' experiences are expressed through structured modes of spiritual occurrences drawing upon the variety of Japanese popular religious and folk traditions or through forms available in their religious setting and spiritual market, it is the actual practices they choose or the social contexts in which they use them that make their spiritual experiences blur the boundaries between religion and spirituality. As suggested by the stories narrated above, the respondents' spiritual dimensions are not altogether independent of institutional religion, but rather, the latter is the fundamental cultural model of reference for those undertaking a spiritual-type itinerary.

One important point is the innovative tendency that these women share: each demonstrated a creative way of experiencing their religious and spiritual quests—one that was tailored to a personal selection and assembling of religious teachings and spiritual techniques and practices. While this fits the idea of 'designer-religion' (Rountree 2004), which highlights women's creative aptitude to build or (re-)invent the sacred, it also signifies that it is not possible to understand Japanese spirituality without positioning it within the socio-cultural environment where it interacts with a diffused, collectively shared cultural understanding vaguely associated with multiple religious traditions. Such an idea corresponds to the concept of 'diffused religion' that Italian scholar Cipriani (1984, 2017) developed to examine the persistence of values traditionally linked to Christianity that are increasingly becoming independent from it. 'Diffused religiosity' is a contextual non-institutional aspect of a society resulting from a vast process of socialization that pervades cultural reality based on values largely shared by individuals (Cipriani 2017, pp. 3–22). The *mushūkyō* discourse that sees a large majority of Japanese claiming to be without religion because they do not identify themselves as members of one particular religious group is itself part of such contextual socio-cultural milieu where individuals with non-religious affiliation also share some degree of moral consensus and a sense of transcendence, although such components can hardly be measured by looking at control variables, such as religious practice, affiliation, or attendance. As discussed above, such findings are not dramatically different from the 'non-religious' discussed by Woodhead (2016a) in her comparative analysis of religious change in the United States and United Kingdom. The majority of British and American 'nones',

while bothered by organized religions, are, to a different degree, interested in spirituality (Woodhead 2016a, p. 250). In Japan, the post-Aum socio-cultural legacy, the construction of the spiritual discourse endorsed by international organizations, and the post-disaster negotiations and redefinition of the boundaries of the category of religion have led to the diffusion of spirituality, along with an increase of self-claimed *mushūkyō* people. However, the respondents of this study display variegated beliefs, which are impossible to fit into neat religious, non-religious, or spiritual schemas. While this movement implicitly conveys a general aversion to the term *shūkyō* (religion), it does not necessarily mean that the Japanese are more secular or unreligious. As Woodhead (2016b) observes for the British case, “‘non religious’ is not really an identity category at all, it’s an artefact of pre-existing, modern survey categories” (p. 43). Ammerman (2014b) similarly points out that many people in the USA these days seem to be complexly spiritual, religious, and secular, even when they are within a single institutional domain. The results in this study are in line with those findings, suggesting that the categories that the state, religious leaders, and many academics continue to use for analyzing religion, non-religion, and spirituality in Japan and elsewhere do not fully grasp the varied, often contradictory, amalgam of beliefs and practices of people’s stories.

As such, beyond the specific religious connotations of the given geographical and socio-cultural context, Japanese *mushūkyō* and spirituality are sociologically close to other geographically located groups of people. The respondents’ practices and narratives in this study suggest that spiritual resources are generated, nurtured, and deployed across the many religious and secular contexts in which Japanese people live their lives. However, in order to avoid social scrutiny, seeking a spiritual path or engaging in a holistic milieu for spiritual fulfillment, whether one belongs to a religious organization or not, has been translated into a secular language that distances itself from the historically constructed negative discourse that the word *shūkyō* (religion) conveys. This trend is close to the movement away from institutionalized religion in the United Kingdom and in the United States, where an increased interest in spirituality does not seem to fit into the secularization paradigm. In Japan as well as in The UK and USA, for several contingent reasons related to the cultural shifts of late modernity, people have lost trust in organized religion and are finding them less attractive. On the other hand, the respondents’ narratives in this study show that religious communities are not an otherworldly sacred retreat, but a place where religious and mundane concerns mix freely with supply and demand in the spiritual market. Spirituality is defined by and interchangeable with the experiences that religious communities have offered them and taught them how to interpret. For those who are actively involved in a religious community, this is a discursive and experiential world, shaped by their organized religion and the presumed secular socio-cultural context in which they are set.

## 6. Conclusions

By looking at Japanese women’s responses to explore possible interrelations between religion, non-religiousness (*mushūkyō*), and spirituality, this study suggests that active religious participants are likely to be more solicited than those with only loose or no ties to any religious community to experience spirituality in their everyday lives, because they are offered a cosmology and a language that address directly the spiritual world. Still, the numerous religious-related collective rituals and events in which the Japanese participate as non-religious (*mushūkyō*) members of society socialize them to accept values, moral sensibilities, and a culture of spirituality that is grounded in everyday life and that does not set symbolic boundaries between believers and non-believers. When I asked the respondents about their involvement in collective activities such as Shintō shrine festivals, *hatsumōde*, or the *ohakamairi* (visit to family graves), they confirmed their regular participation because of their importance as family gathering occasions. The respondents claimed they attend family-related rituals and commemorations along with those sponsored by their own religious organization, because the latter deals with their individual and collective religion, while the former reasserts their relatedness with their family and the community.

In this regard, whereas secularization theory can provide, to some extent, the rubrics for explaining religion's disappearance from most public discourse in Japan, the 'spiritual but not religious' discourse does not suggest an explanation for the level of diffused spirituality and personal religiosity that the respondents in this study show. It also does not account for the continued formation of religious communities sponsoring spiritual activities nor for the continued salience of religious worldviews that connect sacred realities with mundane practices, thus providing an ontological interpretation of the everyday life occurrences of the majority of the Japanese population. Among the respondents who are affiliates of religious organizations, the idea prevails that spiritual life can develop irrespective of official institutions. For them, we may use the idea of 'intra-religious spirituality' developed by Palmisano (2010) to express the experience of those Italians who draw upon the prevalent forms of Catholic religious sentiment to express their link to the sacred while claiming to be non-religious (p. 231). Similar findings have been suggested by other scholars, such as Bender (2003); McGuire (2008); Ammerman (2013, 2014a), who use the expression of 'lived religion' to distinguish the actual experience of religious persons from the prescribed religion of institutionally defined beliefs and practices. Similarly, while believing that a community of believers may be important for spiritual growth, the respondents indicated that institutionalized religion does not possess a monopoly on spirituality, which may enter people's daily lives irrespective of their affiliation. They recognize the plausibility of spiritual paths undertaken outside the organization, while the latter acknowledges that non-organized religious and spiritual cultural sites can play roles in producing ways of expressing human connections to the sacred.

To conclude, this study shows that while spirituality is produced within a diffused cultural-religious framework that is still vaguely anchored to a shared understanding of folk beliefs, traditional Buddhist doctrines, and Shintō collective rituals, individuals make personal decisions about what it means to be a religious and spiritual person. Because the Japanese cultural-religious world is very heterogeneous, even believers' relationships with spirituality vary according to their degree of involvement in cultural- and religious-related activities. In this study, we have found some active and convinced adherents; some convinced but not always active; some religious by tradition and/or education; and the 'in my own way' ones, who share only some of a religion's ideas but claim to be *mushūkyō*, non-religious. Regardless of their degree of involvement, all of them are willing to recognize the occurrence in their daily lives of spiritual experiences. Such everyday unstructured spiritualities are expressed through the socio-cultural milieu and the language of religion and spirituality available to them, suggesting that institutional boundaries are very porous, and women carry frameworks and expectations from one part of their individual life to another, thus making religion and spirituality both subjective and communal. Overall, they are quite comfortable being both religious and spiritual.

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