JAPANESE SURVEY DATA ON RELIGIOUS ATTITUDES, BELIEFS, AND PRACTICES IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY*

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Introduction

For the most part, studies of Japanese religions and religious practices, experiences, and beliefs rely on qualitative research methods. Ethnographic (e.g., in-depth interviews and participant observation) and historiographic (e.g., diachronic) methods dominate the field, and quantitative research from surveys is rare. One important reason for this trend is that survey data in Japan have been characterized by several serious problems. Namely, public access to survey data has been limited or restricted, few surveys include religion questions, and many studies are limited to exclusive samples (e.g., community samples or samples of certain sociodemographic groups only). There are also questions of validity. Perhaps the most glaring examples are the reports from the Agency of Cultural Affairs that more than 1.5 times the total Japanese population are claimed as ‘religious affiliates’. As discussed below, there are certain reasons to doubt the accuracy of these reports, especially because they contradict most ethnographic studies.

Another concern is that in the past, the few studies that included questions about religiosity tended to rely on religious affiliation or attendance questions only, or they emphasized God- and belief-centered models from Abrahamic religions (i.e., Christianity, Judaism, and Islam). Such question

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types are characterized by monotheistic, exclusive religious beliefs, texts, and practices and they confound our ability to form accurate interpretations of religiosity in Japan based on quantitative analyses. As Isomae argues in this volume such important issues are not limited to survey research, however.

The main objectives of this chapter are: (1) to report descriptive statistics from religion questions on surveys dating from 2000; (2) to address issues of reliability and validity in these surveys; and (3) to discuss the limitations and promising new research directions when using this kind of data for the study of Japanese religions in the twenty-first century. This chapter focuses on descriptive analyses of eight individual-level survey datasets, which will be described in more detail in a moment. By reporting simple statistics, we are able to compare directly findings from multiple surveys at one time, allowing for an in-depth assessment of psychometric properties (i.e., reliability and validity). This is an essential step if we are to continue using any of these data. The present study also aims to serve as a single source for a variety of statistical information concerning contemporary Japanese religiosity. It is imperative for readers to recognize, however, that these data—like all data—must be read cautiously. They are best understood in combination with qualitative sources, and it is important to recognize that no single measure can adequately describe ‘religion’ in Japan or elsewhere.

Survey data have the advantage of revealing social trends that can be generalized across a society or among certain people within a society. Statistical analyses can also be useful in identifying significant relationships between social phenomena that can be used to confirm or repudiate studies that use much smaller samples or are limited by regional or socio-demographic characteristics. On the other hand, survey data are bound by questions on a survey that might be limited in their scope, inappropriate, or invalid. For these reasons, I promote the use of these and other datasets as useful only so far as they can help fill gaps that other research methodologies might be weaker in, or as far as they can reveal general trends in a society, such as common beliefs, practices, or attitudes. By combining methodological approaches with multiple sources of data, we are able to understand more comprehensively organized religions and personal religiosity in contemporary Japan.

This chapter begins with an overview of the data and methods used. Following that is a discussion of the main findings of this study, including multiple measures of (1) religious identification; (2) general religious