



Title	Is Religion Social Capital in Japan?
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Citation	Journal of the Graduate School of Letters, 7, 21-29
Issue Date	2012-03
Doc URL	http://hdl.handle.net/2115/48756
Type	bulletin (article)
File Information	JGSL7-2.pdf



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Is Religion Social Capital in Japan?

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Abstract: This paper was originally presented at the Beijing Forum 2010, held on November 5th-7th, 2010, at Beijing China, which was sponsored by the Peking University, the Beijing Municipal Commission of Education and the Korea Foundation for Advanced Studies. The objective of this forum is to promote the study of humanities and social sciences in the Asia-Pacific region, and the theme of 2010 was “The Harmony of Civilizations and Prosperity for All—Commitments and Responsibilities for a Better World.”

This term “harmony” was used by the Chinese state leaders, and given the rapid transit railway the name “和諧号.” Inside China, it is used as “harmonious society (和諧社会)” and also it means the realization of the “harmonious world (和諧世界)” in international relations. PRC President Hu Jintao proposed the concept of “the harmonious world” at the Asia African summit meeting in 2005, when it was extended to various fields such as politics, economy, culture, security, and environment. It is China to carry out not by an idea but by a substantial policy and state apparatus in order to adjust the structure of the conflicts among different interest groups as well as nations.

The Beijing forum is a part of politics that aimed at “harmonious society,” and the world of arts and sciences is not unrelated to political practice, either. Therefore, my paper was given the political meaning that contributes to the construction of the humanities researchers’ network which leads to “harmonious world” of East Asia.

In addition to that, it is obvious that religions carry out charitable actions under the control of Chinese religious policy. Probably, in that sense my argument that discussed whether religions contributed to the formation of social capital was understood as a thing in alignment with Chinese political intention. It is the right science in China that a scientific result contributes to politics.

Apart from Chinese context, my paper aims at seeing the social context of religion carrying out social actions in Japanese society. This paper focuses on the role of religious institutions, organizations, and the spirit of cultivating reciprocity, trust, and social networks, which develops social engagement. First, I will glance at “individualization of a family, neighborhood, and workplace” in recent Japan, which resulted from the low birthrate and longevity, differentiation in class and regions, and various social changes in globalization. Second, I will review the theory of social capital and the academic literatures of social services and social capital provided

by Christianity in the US and Theravada Buddhism in Thailand. Last, I will extend my argument to the case of Japan, where both religious pluralism and secularism are institutionalized.

(Received on December 16, 2011)

1 The “No-Relationship Society” and Social Capital

Over the past couple of years, the Japanese media has often used the expression “no-relationship society (a society with no human ties between members).” This expression reflects the distress in individualized contemporary society, as seen among solitary-living elderly people preparing for their departure from life and single middle-aged and older people feeling anxiety about their future. Since it has been increasingly difficult for people to receive social support from their family, neighbors, or workplace, at any time, anybody’s life may take a sudden turn for the worse due to sudden crises such as unemployment or illness. The expression “no relationship” hints at those social uncertainties.

The level of trust toward Japanese society as a community (order, for instance) is high compared to other countries. In contrast, however, the level of trust toward contractual organizations and institutions is not necessarily high (distrust of the government and bureaucracy, for instance). Therefore, no matter how many times a Scandinavian-type high-welfare high-reassurance society (confident in entrusting one’s tax burden) is introduced, the likelihood of trusting the government to effectively steer the welfare society is low. On the other hand, neither is their orientation toward individualism, localism, and volunteerism as high as that in the North-American low-welfare, great-gap society (where confidence in private organizations is higher than in the government). The Japanese are still exploring the future ideal society in between those two poles. However, the reality remains that the media helps fuel the anxiety for their future and helps lower trust in the community while at the same time pretending to be in line with public opinion (opinion poll figures).

The background to the current discussions of social capital is this: when exploring social progress in post-global times, the creation, preservation, and further development of social relationships has begun to carry an extremely significant meaning. Thus, long debated in the discussions of social theories and social policies and measures is how we can implement them to foster and preserve social capital. (Putnam, 1994; 2001; Sato, 2002) Some may point out that, realistically, social capital cannot be generated by force since it is historically and culturally shaped, but that is perhaps a little too pessimistic an observation. Why can’t we propose a new way of thinking or policy by which to expand trust and reciprocity within a possible range (Inaba, 2004)? However, at this time, let us not start with the argument to create from scratch a completely new alternative theory and practice it, or to establish a spiritual entity. Rather, we can find a new outlook by utilizing existing resources, i.e. reconstructing traditional elements that seem to be on the verge of collapse (by the logic of forming a relation between beliefs and institution).

And this is the place where religion and the concept of social capital can meet. In the past, in terms of religious mentality, religious institutions and religious relationships were crucial to

maintain the ethics of reciprocity and mutual trust. At present, although ultimate existence and transcendental ethics have been lost in secular society, however, the social functions of religion are still maintained. Thus, the time is ripe to analyze and explain religion as a reality that can help foster social capital and restore interpersonal relationships, as well as play a useful role in regaining a sense of trust and nurturing reciprocity. In addition, we can also discuss religion as a potential factor.

2 Social Capital and Religion

One can observe that both historically and in contemporary society, religious cultures, relationships, and institutions can help evolve and inculcate the ethics and relationships of reciprocity. However, strictly speaking, that simply means that the norm of reciprocity, in particular, works among those of the same religion. In a community with a plurality of religious types and sects, the functional range of the norm of reciprocity is limited. Thus, where all-inclusive religious cultures (public and civic religions) are available, the norm of reciprocity can possibly be transformed into social ethics. Those discussions have been taking place in the sciences of history and religion. However, when structuring an analytical social theory, the above fact needs to be verified in more direct and observable religious cultures and with individuals and organizations that define the norms of reciprocity and trust.

In this section, while reviewing studies of religious groups and social capital in the United States as well as case studies of regional development by Theravada Buddhist monks in Thailand, I will build a middle-range theory with which to examine the relationship between religion and social capital more directly.

Christian churches in the United States can be divided into a number of denominations. Yet, the attendance rate of congregations of each sect and the participation rate in various activities are considerably higher than those in European nations. The activities of megachurches (in which several thousands of members can attend services) and parachurches (church-based, faith-based organizations that engage in activities of education, welfare, and politics) underscore the fact that Christianity has not been a mere façade of a traditional culture but remains a religion of missionary and social activities.

One characteristic of American Christian churches is that they are mixed yet divided by race (groups of immigrants) or class as in a “salad bowl” and they have grown in correspondence to the social needs of their members. The mainstream Presbyterian church today is significantly older and smaller in membership in contrast to the respectable urban church organizations. On the other hand, many immigrants from Central and South American countries gather in magnificent Catholic cathedrals. Black churches, many of which are Baptist and Pentecostal, are politically very active and have played a significant role in supporting the Civil Rights Movement. Expanding in recent years is the Evangelical Church; many have built megachurches in the suburbs. Korean churches provide Korean-American members with a variety of services including livelihood support for recent immigrants (Choi, 2003). In other words, in the United States, citizens can obtain social capital by belonging to a Christian church and starting reciprocal relationships with other church members or from the sect to which they belong (Smidt, 2003).

Furthermore, American people from certain sects actively attempt to intervene in personal and family matters (as with the issues of abortion and homosexuality) in the name of Christian values while American politicians talk openly about the U.S. position in their diplomatic policy with a sense of Christian mission. This can lead to political-sociological discussions since Christianity plays the role of civil religion (Bellah, 1970). Still, we should confirm that its foundation lies in the role of Christian churches in communities.

Next, let us examine cases in Thailand. In Thailand, the word development (*phathana*) has a distinctive political connotation different from both Japanese and English equivalents. *Phathana*, the slogan for the National Economic and Social Development Plan that General Sarit Thanarat initiated in 1961, was a concept denoting not only economic development but also order and progress in public spheres such as politics, education and sanitation. Sarit, steadfastly preaching that the King, Buddhism, and the Nation compose the three pillars of Thailand, launched the Royal Project, Development by Buddhism, and Development by the Government (conciliation with Communism and nationalism). This politics of developmentalism lasted till around 1990 (Sakurai, 2003).

During this period of development in Thailand, certain Buddhist monks, mobilized by the government, helped regional areas to adopt and internalize the ideology of development; they, often natives of the rural areas themselves, contributed to overcoming underdevelopment and poverty while collaborating with the government and local development NGOs. Thus, the expression “Buddhist monks engaged in development” symbolically evokes the practice of those monks during that period of rural development in Thailand.

The author analyzed the cases of over 100 Buddhist monks engaged in regional community development in “‘Development’ Monks in Northeast Thailand” (Sakurai, 2008), revealing that it was implemented based on social capital that Buddhist monks, temples, and rural communities had traditionally built. Discussed in the study were 1) cultural resources (the trust of monks, religious protection), 2) historical and political rationality (while following the government policy of social development, those monks maintained their independence and occasionally implemented development projects considered to be critical of the government), and 3) the use of social capital (some monks become information conveyors and mediators through ascetic practices; networks of monks and *sangha*).

Please refer to the author’s books and papers (Sakurai, 2006) for the relationship between Theravada Buddhist temples and rural villages, the moral influence of ‘development monks’ on villagers, and the process by which those did not stay within the realm of regional development based on localism, but would be elaborated upon by NGO activists and Thai social critics and scholars as alternative theories of development and social capital.

3 Religious Cultures and Social Capital in Japan

In Japan, are religious group members actively engaged in the activities of their own local community and civil society? If religion cultivates social capital, we should be able to observe certain facts as to how the activity and experience of religious organizations have inspired political interest, promoted the activities of citizens’ groups, and enhanced confidence in social

systems and social reciprocity.

To examine these issues, a secondary analysis of extensive observation data sets was conducted. Using the data from the 4th World Values Survey, We measured whether the respondents' social attributes and the membership in religious groups have influenced their political interest, sense of trust in general, and political action.

Meanwhile, Soka Gakkai (SGI) of the Nichiren Buddhist sect, a new religion in Japan boasting 8.21 million nominal household members, created a political party called Komeito. In the 2010 Upper House election, Komeito received over 7.64 million votes (nine candidates were elected in the electoral districts and proportionally-represented constituencies).

In terms of the number of votes received or vote-gathering capability, the Komeito party shared third place with "Your Party," a new conservative party, following the ruling party, the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), and the largest opposition party, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), accounting for 13% of the total votes. In general, since religious groups in Japan are well connected with certain political parties and persons, when election time comes, their members turn into vote-getting machines as party-endorsed candidates or personally endorsed candidates; however, only Soka Gakkai has its own political party. Therefore, it is better to separate Soka Gakkai from other religious organizations since being a Soka Gakkai member means being a Komeito supporter and one is expected to possess high political awareness and be highly politically active. Now, analytically, we can read the general political awareness and action of religious groups in Japan. We decided to analyze data by separating the membership of religious groups including Soka Gakkai from the membership without it.

Specifically, We quantified the following responses to the question items as variables of attitude.

The findings obtained from this analysis are: there is no relationship between membership in a religious group and political interest, general trust and confidence, institutional confidence, and political activity. Only when Soka Gakkai is included, is there a significant relationship between membership in a religious group and political awareness. By contrast, social position and attributes such as age, gender, education, and income all have a significant relationship with the above attitudes. In all the samples, the percentage of membership in a religious group was not high from the beginning. Thus, it is possible that the effect of religious-group membership was not measured appropriately.

Next, let us briefly examine the social activities of religious organizations in general. From religious organizations listed in The 2007 Religion Almanac published by the Religious Affairs Division, Agency for Cultural Affairs, we sampled 903 groups of inclusive and independent religious corporations under the jurisdiction of prefectures and the Ministry of Education,

Table 1 Citizens' Attitudes

+Political Interest: How interested are you in politics?
+General Trust and Confidence: Generally speaking, do you trust people?
+Institutional Confidence: How much confidence do you have in the government, political parties, the Diet (Congress), and public administration?
+Political Action Experience: Have you engaged in any of the following political activities: a petition drive, a boycott of particular products or a corporation, a demonstration, or a strike?

Table 2 A Regression Analysis with Citizens' Attitudes as a Dependent Variable (Figures: Standardized Partial Regression Coefficients)

	Political interest		General trust and confidence		Institutional confidence		Political action experience	
	a	b	a	b	a	b	a	b
Age	.407**	.393**	-.003	-.005	.304**	.288**	.031**	.027**
sex (man=1)	.155**	.152**	-.137	-.109	-.010	.004	-.081	-.117
Academic career	.135**	.117**	.339**	.322*	.052	.041	.117	.083
Household income	.052	.051	.071**	.070**	-.004	.000	.041	.053
Spouse (have=1)	-.057	-.055	.242	.291	-.026	-.024	.404	.383
Job (have=1)	-.017	-.018	-.168	-.179	.013	-.011	.113	.054
City size	.019	.026	-.034	-.019	.001	-.002	.085	.092
Buddhism	.038	.042	.142	.008	.036	.036	.262	.198
Judaism-Christianity	-.030	-.024	1.052	.931	.041	.030	-.846	-1.003
Others	-.003	-.012	.648	.701	.029	.019	.029	-.030
No religion	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Frequency of participation	-.211	-.224	.051	.007	-.061	-.059	.031	-.020
Belongingness to religion (yes=1)	.054	.105*	-.021	.011	.015	.051	.256	.463
Buddhism×Belongingness	.164	.195*	-.050	-.002	.043	.046	-.032	.020
Judaism-Christianity×Belongingness	.134	.117	-.056	-.012	-.073	-.078	.000	.049
Others×Belongingness	.121	.118	-.046	-.005	.067	.063	-.032	.017
Adj R ² /NagelkerkeR ²	.197	.202	.048	.047	.088	.088	.113	.110
N	1277	1399	912	960	1146	1200	568	598

(Note) * 5% sig. * 1% sig. N number of samples 4th World Values Survey

a excluding SGI b including SGI

Table 3 Specific Practical Examples of Social Activities

+Disaster Relief: dispatching disaster relief volunteers, donations, providing relief supplies.
+Environmental Conservation: Energy saving, recycling, reforestation.
+Arts and Culture: art, music, theater arts, historical preservation, lectures, research.
+Local Community: participation in events including festivals, participation in activities of various +local organizations.
+International Exchange and Cooperation: overseas aid, development aid, student exchange programs.
+Social Education: parenting class, Boy Scouts, summer camp.
+Welfare: nursing care, visiting the elderly or the disabled, soup kitchen or hospital volunteering.
+Civil Rights: anti-discrimination or human rights movement, residents' movement.
+Peace: anti-nuclear, antiwar and pro-Constitution movements.
+Health and Alternative Medicine: health food, natural farming, Eastern medicine, healing.
+Sports: sports coaching, providing space for athletic activities.
+Corporate Management: management seminar, corporate ethics lecture, in-house training.
+Politics: supporting a political party, making election campaign speeches.

Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, and then conducted a mail-in survey (recovery rate: 27.5%) on the social activities of religious groups. Approximately 85% of the groups responded that they conduct social activities. Table 3 shows the variety and characteristics of activities by religious group.

In traditional Buddhism, common types of social activities are disaster relief (year-end fund-raising drives), conservation of the regional environment (premises such as the grounds of a temple), and the arts and culture (protection of Buddhist culture); in Christianity, they are social education (construction of preschools to higher education schools), welfare (management of medical care and welfare facilities and institutions), and international exchange. In new religions, these activities vary widely including disaster relief.

Table 4 Most Important Social Activity

	Buddhism	Christianity	New Religion	Total
Disaster Relief	19(38.0%)	3(3.9%)	9(19.6%)	31(18.0%)
Local Community	8(16.0%)	0(.0%)	7(15.2%)	15(8.7%)
Environmental Conservation	8(16.0%)	0(.0%)	5(10.9%)	13(7.6%)
Arts and Culture	10(20.0%)	7(9.2%)	4(8.7%)	21(12.2%)
Welfare	1(2.0%)	11(14.5%)	2(4.3%)	14(8.1%)
Social Education	3(6.0%)	16(21.1%)	2(4.3%)	21(12.2%)
Civil Rights	0(.0%)	8(10.5%)	1(2.2%)	9(5.2%)
Peace	1(2.0%)	6(7.9%)	1(2.2%)	8(4.7%)
International Cooperation	0(.0%)	10(13.2%)	4(8.7%)	14(8.1%)
Politics	0(.0%)	0(.0%)	1(2.2%)	1(.6%)
Sports	0(.0%)	0(.0%)	0(.0%)	0(.0%)
Health and Alternative Medicine	0(.0%)	9(11.8%)	4(8.7%)	13(7.6%)
Corporate Management	0(.0%)	4(5.3%)	2(4.3%)	6(3.5%)
Others	0(.0%)	2(2.6%)	4(8.7%)	6(3.5%)
Numbers of Religions	50	76	46	172

However, in Japan, the general public is not very aware of the social contributions and activities of religious organizations. The schools, hospitals, and social welfare institutions founded by religious organizations and missions are valued only for their convenience and service the same way other public and private facilities are appreciated. The ideals of their foundation are not recognized by ordinary citizens when they use those facilities. And thus, institutions that strongly promote religious aspects will be avoided.

4 Summary and Issues

Next, we shall summarize the main points in this paper.

1) The Japanese government cannot continue to finance the ever-increasing cost of social security, so what is urgently needed is a new policy to restore interpersonal ties and reciprocity in order to entrust social services to the private sector. In developed countries in the post-welfare state era, attention has been focused on implementing social inclusion policies and cultivating social capital in hopes of easing the anxiety and tension that are associated with the increasing divides between classes and ethnic groups.

2) When the concept of social capital is employed as a middle-range theory, one is led to the impression that analyses of social process are lacking. Findings of studies of Christian churches in the United States commonly conclude that the participation by a church in its construction facilitates social participation as well, yet the degree of relevance varies depending on inter-denominational differences and the social standing of the church (whether it is the confessional type or the regional culture type). Concerning the relationship between Buddhist monks and regional development in Thailand, although macroscopic analyses of time periods and regional variations may be possible, how Buddhist monks, village temple committees, villagers, and out-of-village organizations and persons have implemented services regarding individual issues and through which affiliation have not necessarily been clarified in a sufficient manner. Thus, both survey research and ethnographic research are needed.

3) Based on World Values Survey results, we analyzed the relationship between membership in a religious organization and participation in civil society; in particular political action, and relations were observed only in some sects and denominations. Thus, the argument that religion can become social capital is supported only limitedly. However, the survey results of the main religious organizations in Japan revealed diverse social participation by each church, confirming that they provide social services to the general public.

Lastly, there are the issues raised in this study.

In the case of Christian churches in the United States or Buddhist temples in Thailand, it is possible for them to establish their position as an official religion (public religion) and become more or less an integral part of the community. They can also be subject to political mobilization because of the large membership base, community center-like functions of their institutions, and the potential to bring a great many votes. That is why religion has social capital and can facilitate social participation. By contrast, regarding the religious situation and the religion-and-politics relationship in Japan, this argument must be examined from a rather different viewpoint.

In fact, Japanese society was ahead of others in adopting religious pluralism. Shintoism is rooted in the cultural tradition of nature worship as well as *mura* (village) festival and rituals, while Buddhism is based on ancestor worship. With this spiritual basis, there are a number of religious groups in Japan for individuals to join: Buddhist temples, Shinto shrines, “*ko*” religious associations, and organizations of foreign religions such as Christianity and Islam, as well as new religions. The sense of secularism in which religious groups and people do not bring their religious beliefs into public spaces is thoroughly practiced in terms of the separation of church and state. Behind the scenes, though, there are strong relationships between religious groups and political persons aiming to get the votes of the groups’ members. Still, in contrast to that religious situation, 70% of the citizenry claim to be irreligious in that they have no religious affiliation or commitment, supporting secularism.

That religious cultures and religious organizations possess social capital or engage in social and political activities by utilizing social capital—what does this mean and what does this signify? Perhaps it means that those groups can help maintain the psychological stability of their members and provide social services through a network of social bonds in the case of minority religious cultures and religious institutions. But those are often closed to the general public and other religious groups. On the other hand, there are religious workers who mediate between denominations and work with the general citizenry, and thus their religious action of social bridging serves to link their own denominations with outside groups.

In conclusion, while cautiously observing the traditional and emerging qualities of religious workers and religious activities, researchers who look to examine the relationship between religion and social capital should continue to reflectively ask what can be done to address the issue of fostering interpersonal bonds and restoring reciprocity in contemporary society.

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