

Sophia University Institute of Comparative Culture Lecture Series on Cultural Responses to 3.11
Organized by the ICC Project Unit "3/11 as Crisis and Opportunity"

Assessing the Place of Religion in Recent Japanese Disaster Responses

Levi McLaughlin

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18:30-20:00

Room 2-510, 5F, Building 2

On March 15, 2011, Tokyo Governor Ishihara Shintarō reacted to the Great East Japan Earthquake by characterizing the disaster as “divine punishment” for the “egoism” of the Japanese people. On the same day, religious groups of all types were setting aside moral condemnations to instead muster the largest mobilization of disaster aid by religions in Japanese history. This contrast of an “other-worldly” invocation by a public official with “this-worldly” reactions by religious practitioners was perhaps most glaring in 2011, yet it represents a noticeable trend in Japanese reactions to recent disasters: in the wake of catastrophes, both natural and man-made, nominally “secular” people may turn to religion for meaning, while religious groups and individuals tend to devote themselves to pragmatic means of aiding victims and caring for the dead.

In this presentation, I examine the current Japanese generation’s struggle with “religion” through the lens of disaster. I draw on examples from two sources – “religious” commentary reported in popular media on the one hand, and data on responses by religious practitioners and scholars on the other – following the 1995 Awaji, 2007 Niigata, and 2011 Great East Japan disasters. Through these, I outline complexities and paradoxes within the “religion” narrative that has taken shape during recent periods of crisis. I pay particular attention to how Japanese people, who mostly self-identify as “non-religious,” move between skepticism regarding religious groups and an acknowledgement of the persistent importance of religion in making sense of catastrophe, and what this ambivalence tells us about the place of religion in contemporary Japanese society.

Levi McLaughlin specializes in the study of religion in modern and contemporary Japan. He received his B.A. and M.A. from the University of Toronto and his Ph.D. from Princeton University. From 2009 to 2011 he was Assistant Professor of Religion at Wofford College (South Carolina), he is spending academic 2011-2012 as a Post-Doctoral Scholar at the Center for Asian and Pacific Studies at the University of Iowa, and from August 2012 he will be Assistant Professor of Asian Religions at North Carolina State University.

Free and open to all / Lectures in English

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