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Why Scholars of Religion Must Investigate the Corporate Form

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ABSTRACT

A growing body of research describes connections between religion and economic activity through the language of commodification and marketization. Although this scholarship rightly challenges the assumption that religion is or should be divorced from worldly concerns, it still relies on distinctions between religion and the economy as isolable, reified entities. Rejecting this binary approach as untenable, we argue that studying the *corporate form* enriches the academic study of religion by providing concrete examples of how people create institutions and how organizations turn human bodies into resources while also fostering individuals' devotion to collective agendas. Attention to the corporate form enables us to keep money and power in view as we trace historical formations and current manifestations of religious organizations. We investigate Japanese genealogies of the corporate form to elucidate some generalizable principles for how nonprofit religions and for-profit companies alike generate missions, families, individuals, and publics.

A TRANSCENDENT CORPORATE FOUNDER

ALIGHTING at Nishi Sansō station, a modest train stop in an industrial suburb of Osaka, two of this article's authors cross the street and walk past a kindly guard at the entrance of the

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Panasonic Museum. A slightly larger-than-life bronze statue of Panasonic founder Matsushita Kōnosuke (1894–1989) beckons visitors, his right hand extended in greeting. Friendly multilingual staff invite us into the free exhibition, which begins unassumingly with photos of Matsushita's life, preceded by a block of text featuring a single calligraphic character in enormous font: *michi*, "the path."

What follows is a pilgrimage. We join busloads of company employees as they walk through the museum to learn from this paragon of Japanese corporate achievement. The exhibition is a winding journey past dioramas, antique machinery, and text-filled posters in which the history of Panasonic is conflated with the apotheosis of Matsushita. It is a hagiography punctuated by "episodes" (*episōdo*) headlined by bold-print homilies that pilgrims are to take home with them. Each station on the route provides a slip of paper formatted in the same manner as talismans at Shintō shrines or Buddhist temples. These takeaway messages bear such titles as "Making People Before Products" and "The Company Is a Public Entity." They are excerpted from Matsushita's collected works, a massive repository that functions as Panasonic's canon and is available for perusal at the end of the tour.

A particularly striking section of the exhibition is an episode titled "Realizing the True Mission," which describes Matsushita's revelation in May 1932. Panasonic declares its own calendrical era with this moment, designating 1932 the "first year of *meichi*," a word left untranslated in the English text that means "epiphany of mission." Upon visiting a popular religious headquarters that year, Matsushita realized that "religion guides people out of suffering toward happiness and peace of mind, and in that sense is a holy pursuit. Business, too, can be sacred in that it provides the physical necessities for improving one's life." The corporation transcends the individual, and the individual works not just for profit, nor strictly for the benefit of society, but for the sake of humanity as a whole.[1]

The narrative enshrined at the Panasonic Museum perpetuates a vision of the ideal person, one placed in an institution built to persist beyond a single human lifetime. It offers a set of teachings aimed at cultivating a way of living and being, individually and collectively. Matsushita's vision paves the way to a future of social harmony and material prosperity. It is a program created within the corporation, which is established as the vehicle for humanity to proceed toward a utopian future.

The museum exemplifies an urgent need for scholars of religious studies to investigate the corporate form.[2] Insights into the corporation help us understand individual and group motivations and the distribution of power and resources within collective enterprises. The corporate form as a tool of analysis enables investigations of how realms often considered separately—politics and economics, state and corporations, law and religion, economics and religion, morality and finance, the private and the public—have always been intertwined in the constitution of collective organization. Researching the corporation tells us how individuals and collectives understand themselves through the power of myth, definitions of personhood, notions of how a family should look and act, and how society should function—concerns equally present in religious traditions and in ostensibly "secular" organizations. Investigating the corporation tells us about the interdependency of belief and practice, the workings of charisma, and the sacrifice of the individual to a mission greater than the self. As arguably the most powerful and

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[1] Though Matsushita does not name the religion, his description makes clear that he underwent his spiritual transformation at the headquarters of Tenrikyō, a major religion with its own small city (Tenri) that in 1932 was amalgamated into state-supporting Shintō enterprises. See Matsushita 1962 and Nagaoka 2015.
[2] We use religious studies as shorthand for the nonconfessional academic study of religion, acknowledging that the field goes under different names in different countries, regions, and university departments. Earlier use of "the corporate form" appears in Avi-Yonah 2005 and Welker et al. 2011.

adaptable collective entity in the world today, capable of eluding the control of the modern nation-state and of setting standards for governmental and nongovernmental oversight, the corporation has become a framework with which organizations of all types must comply. This includes religious ones.

THE CORPORATE FORM: A MANIFESTO

This article is not intended as a review of work to date on religions and corporations, though it does contain useful resources. It is a manifesto; a delineation of reasons why religious studies scholars must research the corporate form. Our main argument is that the study of corporate cultures, histories, and missions is essential because it illuminates *religion* as a category and *religion-making* as a social phenomenon that crosscuts different spheres. The corporate form provides a theoretical tool for analyzing religion as an interface of various projects of collective formation and management.

Although we describe a globally pervasive social arrangement that affects and reflects material conditions, familial relations, bodily labor, politics, and law, we resist the essentialist notion that any of these fields can be reduced to the corporation. Similarly, we do not claim that corporations *function* as religions or vice versa, although we do identify structural similarities between corporations and religions. Rather, following the recent constructivist turn in religious studies (e.g., Schilbrack 2010; Dressler and Mandair 2011; Cavanaugh 2014), we show through the study of corporations how stakeholders bring religions into being. We stress that this is not merely religion-making as discursive practice (the "linguistic fallacy;" see Schaefer 2015). Collective religion-making is material, embodied, and concrete at least as much as it is discursive and ideological. This is why we designate the corporate *form* as our analytical framework, for we intend to show that human bodies, ambient cultural expectations, and material conditions shape corporations and religions alike. Conversely, corporations, like religions, also shape human bodies and the environment (Welker et al. 2011, S3–S4).

Our claim is not that all corporations are religions, nor is it that all religions function as corporations. Rather, examining how stakeholders and shareholders make and maintain corporations helps us understand relationships between nonempirical claims, economic activity, and collective life without relying on potentially misleading analogies (e.g., "corporation as sect"), metaphors (e.g., "the religious marketplace"), or processual terms that offer monocausal or teleological accounts of change over time (e.g., "commodification").

We are scholars of religion who work primarily on Japanese cases using archival and ethnographic methods. We co-wrote this manifesto in a convivial engagement largely conducted in person; each section includes input from all four of us. We were inspired to collaborate because we had become aware individually of an efflorescence of scholarly work on religion and economy but saw a comparatively small amount of attention to the corporation.[3] This article presents our finding that seemingly unique aspects of Japanese corporate life provide generalizable ways of understanding, both within and beyond Japan, how the management of people, the establishment of shared missions, and the creation of publics in historical and cultural contexts give rise to collective forms of life and labor that are simultaneously religious and corporate.

We proceed by providing a brief overview of recent scholarship on religion and the economy, "the religious marketplace," and "commodified" or "consumed" religion. Although informed by this body of research, our approach differs from it in important ways. We then

[3] Exceptions include Lambert 2009; Moreton 2009; Lindsay and Smith 2010; Curtis 2016; Schwartzman et al. 2016; Horie 2017; Weiner 2017; Lofton 2017; Porterfield 2018.

define *the corporate form* and show some of the organizational dynamics religious studies scholars can apprehend by using this term. Next, we offer a genealogy of modern religions and corporations that centers the Japanese experience while decentering the histories of Europe and the United States. This is a productive historical exercise because it allows for the concept of the corporation to precede, perhaps even give birth to, the category of religion, rather than the other way around. Finally, drawing on Japanese cases, we give concrete examples of the kinds of insights that attention to the corporate form provides.

BEYOND THE RELIGIOUS MARKETPLACE

In proposing the corporate form as a theoretical tool, we value existing scholarship on economic aspects of religion even as we suggest a complementary, alternative approach. The economics of religion has become a popular field of study since it was reestablished in the late 1990s (Iannaccone 1998; Stark 2006), and the number of publications in this field has increased rapidly in recent years, written both by scholars of religion and economists (see Iyer 2016 for a comprehensive overview). These works have contributed to a growing awareness of the fundamental fact that religious practice is always, in one way or another, economic. However, much of the existing scholarly discourse is still grounded in the assumption that religion and economics, while intertwined and interrelated, are ontologically distinct entities. Like much scholarly work on religion *and* politics, religion *and* science, religion *and* art, and other putative binaries, this distinction privileges *religion* as an epistemic category, reflecting the modern differentiation of religion from other societal fields, including economics (Casanova 1994).

By contrast, we do not see religion as something intertwined with, yet ontologically different from, economics. Studying the corporate form, we argue, provides scholars of religion with conceptual tools that allow us to conceive of power, capital, rituals, and other social practices as co-constitutive. Specifically, the corporate form allows social phenomena to manifest *as* religion or *as* market activity without assuming from the outset that a particular behavior is properly one or the other, or *not* one while it is the other. For example, the case of Panasonic in the opening vignette shows the centrality of myth-making, visions of a better society, and managerial and capitalist power in ways that evade clear demarcations of *religion* meeting *economics*. Starting with the corporate form as the framework of analysis permits examination of how individual and collective aspirations, conceptions of transcendence, value inculcation, and labor may coalesce as religion, corporation, family, or another collectivity. Such formations can be situational, as when a family becomes a corporation as a way of preserving wealth; they can also be simultaneous, as when stakeholders present their religion as a corporation for the purposes of tax exemption even as they present it doctrinally as a family with an established lineage. We offer more concrete examples of this below.

Because it is concrete rather than metaphorical, the corporate form provides an avenue out of the problematic trope of the *religious marketplace*: the notion that, in modern capitalist societies, religious entrepreneurs are competitors seeking patronage from individual consumers. This marketplace may be a physical one—as in the case of "spiritual fairs" where entrepreneurs operate stalls—but more often the term is used metaphorically to describe the contemporary situation of religious diversity, rivalry, and consumption. Some scholars have treated potential adherents and religious practitioners as "rational actors" who select religious affiliations like other consumers select brands and products (Iannaccone 1995; Stark 2006; Stark and Finke 2000; Young 1996). Others have treated religious actors as entrepreneurs (Lu 2005; Stalker 2008) who brand and market religious services (Porcu 2014; Wilson 2014, 133–58; Jain 2014, 42–94). Still others have analyzed the religious strategies employed by business owners to gain access to, and increase their share of, consumer markets (Kirk 2018; Moreton 2009). Notably, scholarship on the religious marketplace addresses not only the American, Christian, neoliberal capitalist context (e.g., Hinton 2011; Lee and Sinitiere 2009; Roof 1999) but also countries with profoundly different political-economic systems, including nominally socialist ones (e.g., Endres 2011; Gaitanidis 2011; Kendall 2009, 2012; Kitiarsa 2008; Reader and Tanabe 1998; Shimazono 1998; Smyer Yu 2012).[4]

This religious marketplace scholarship has shed much-needed light on the economic dimensions of religious activity. However, one of the problems we see is that many scholars use the term "religious marketplace" matter-of-factly, as an apparently neutral—and natural—analytical category (e.g., Hill and Olson 2009; Hinton 2011; Lee and Sinitiere 2009; Reader 2014; Redden 2005; Roof 1999; Sandıkcı 2018; Smyer Yu 2012). Although it has benefits, the metaphor is by no means neutral, and naturalizing competition and consumption as *the* defining characteristics of economic activity does not help us understand the multiplicity of motivations that people may have for engaging, or not, with religious institutions and practices (Moberg and Martinaiken 2018, 425, 429; Palmer 2011).

The concept of the corporate form is also helpful because it can be productively used in both synchronic and diachronic analyses of religion-making activity. We find this important because although we acknowledge that the scale, speed, and nature of production and consumption have changed in recent decades, we do not assume that religions today are necessarily more market-driven or commercially oriented than in premodern times (see our

[4] In addition, a number of recent collaborative projects study the involvement of Buddhist temples in Asian market economies: the project "Buddhism, Business and Believers" at the University of Copenhagen; the "Economics and Capitalism in the Study of Buddhism" seminar of the AAR; and the research group "Buddhist Temple Economies in Urban Asia" at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology.

discussion in relation to Japan below). For example, two common buzzwords in the recent boom of academic works on religion and the market are “commodification” (Borup 2016; Kitiarsa 2008; Shirazi 2016; Sinha 2011) and “marketization” (Borup 2018; Gauthier and Martikainen 2018; Usunier and Stolz 2016). Some scholars deplore religious “commodification,” especially in the case of Asian religions, which were ostensibly devoid of this element prior to the corrupting influence of “the West” (e.g., Hyland 2017; Žižek 2001). Others applaud it, presenting commodification as an antidote to ongoing state involvement with religious affairs (e.g., Brekke 2016). Either way, scholars often link “marketization” to other macrosocial processes such as “globalization” and “secularization.” To us, these passive and teleological constructions reduce individuals’ actions to seemingly neutral social processes. They also tell deceptively simple, often subtractive, stories about historical change.

We stress that the term *corporate* as we use it is not necessarily synonymous with free-market, neoliberal competition (see Borup 2018; Carrette and King 2005, 169; Comaroff and Comaroff 2000; Foxeus 2018; Huss 2014; Urban 2003, 250–60; Yamanaka 2017). It refers to institutional practices that have a strongly collective and collaborative character, involving money and power but often predating the rise of neoliberalism. We focus on the corporate form as a generator and mediator of religious sensibilities because individual commitments are constructed in collectivities (Lofton 2017; Weiner 2017). We also acknowledge that the subjects molded in for-profit corporations are not uniformly neoliberal or even profit driven (e.g., Welker 2014).

DEFINING THE CORPORATE FORM

Organizational ethnography reveals that religions, like corporations, require management (Burton et al. 2018). Management includes refined techniques of membership and exclusion, accountability, compliance, asset control and expansion, conflict resolution, secrecy, and transparency. Although the corporation today is understood, at its most basic level, as an institution based on a "set of purposes related to capitalism, business, and profits" and with legal standing as a "person," we approach it as a framework that can travel and change depending on the context (Welker et al. 2011, S6). For example, the corporation as tied to private profit and commerce is not universal and is a relatively recent phenomenon (Stern 2018), but the corporate form as a durable entity designed to last beyond a human lifetime has a much longer history. With this historical plasticity and morphological diversity in mind, we take the corporate form to be *plural*, *internally multiple*, *enacted*, and *contingent*.

The corporate form exists in the *plural*; that is, there are different forms that the corporation can take. In countries that have a legal tradition based on Roman jurisprudence, "corporation" has meant an assembly of individuals who are responsible for the actions of the collective (Vargas-Cetina 2011, S127–28). This differs from the nineteenth-century Anglo-American definition in which a corporation has "limited liability" and shareholders are not held accountable for what the company does. In many countries outside Europe and the United States, however, limited liability was not a main feature in the development of corporations (Hioki 2016, 8). The former Soviet Union was officially not capitalist but did have corporations with its own management styles (Vlachoutsicos and Lawrence 1990). In Japan, the corporation in legal terms is known as a *hōjin*, "juridical person," which refers to associations that US law would not count as corporations, such as schools, public interest groups, social welfare and medical service providers, and even kin groups (Riles 2011, 32–33). In the United States, corporate personhood is increasingly protected by the constitution, such as in its freedom of speech and freedom of religion, as well as becoming an influential basis for human citizenship (Coleman 2014). And as the lawyers for Hobby Lobby argued, the corporation seeks profit but not at the expense of other values (Johnson and Millon 2015).[5] In sum, although the corporate form might be primarily associated with for-profit, capitalist entities, its contours and effects vary depending on the context.

In legal terms, corporations are often represented as "persons," but the corporation as person is not necessarily internally coherent or sealed off from external forces. From an anthropological perspective, just as the bounded individual in liberal conceptions of personhood and *homo economicus* are reductive understandings of humans, the legal axiom shaping views of corporations as coherent, willful persons is an impoverished theory of the "personhood" of the corporation (Welker 2014). Like other persons, corporations are "partible (subject to external claims and extractions), composite (made up of heterogeneous parts), and permeable (assimilating ideas and substances from the outside)" (Welker 2016, 408). Because it is *internally multiple*, the corporate form mediates between what some have called "industrial religion" (Callahan, Lofton, and Seales 2010) and "individualized religion" (Martin 2014). As incorporeal entities that may be privately owned or publicly traded, corporations traverse and erode the artificial division of public and private on which many conceptions of religion depend. Thinking of the corporate form in this way allows us to consider how people treat the organization as a person even as it is constituted through multiple, shifting parts.

[5] In the 2014 *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby* case, the Supreme Court ruled that two closely held for-profit corporations, whose founders, directors, and shareholders were Christian, could refuse to comply with federal regulations requiring businesses to include contraceptive services in employees' insurance based on the constitutional right to religious liberty.

The corporation as multiple compels questions of power: who is allowed and who is not allowed to be part of the multiplicity of the corporation, and what positions do they occupy in the hierarchy? We follow Marina Welker in her argument that corporations are *enacted* by "the everyday work that people perform as they struggle to deploy corporations as actors with particular components, relations, interests, and boundaries" (Welker 2014, 4). Whether it is ethical or profit driven, seeing the corporation as a discrete unit, and even as a legal person, is an outcome of social and political labor, with some people's labor having more influence than others.

The fact that a corporate form is enacted by people with differing motivations exemplifies our fourth perspective: *contingency*. Because the corporate form is plural and internally multiple, it is not a straightforward example of ideology. The corporate form enables analyses that take into account forces of capitalism, neoliberalism, and other "-isms" without reducing the organization to a mere expression or case study of these ideologies. In other words, people involved in an organization become protagonists of our scholarly accounts rather than appearing as mere puppets subject to the workings of behind-the-scenes forces or insidious machinations. Just as scholars of religion know quite well that a religious adherent is not merely a devotee of Buddhism but may have other commitments, a corporate protagonist may have neoliberal tendencies but may also hold other contrasting beliefs (Welker 2014). Corporations are sites of contestation where different people vie for their own interpretations, or enactments, of the organization, religious or otherwise.

MAKING JAPANESE CORPORATE ENTITIES INTO RELIGIONS

Following Max Weber, some have argued that, in Europe, religions gave birth to secular corporations (Porterfield 2018). However, in Japan, legal disaggregation of existing corporate forms into various kinds of for-profit and nonprofit entities created religions. We state this point in strong terms to highlight the potential of decentering Euro-American histories of religions and corporations through attention to other genealogies. Numerous scholars have pointed out that the category *religion* is a modern construct developed in a European context. Engagement with religion, especially in colonial situations, led to the transformation of a variety of non-Western traditions into discrete *religions* (Asad 1993; McCutcheon 1997; Masuzawa 2005). The reification of religion as a *sui generis*, universal category went hand in hand with its differentiation from other societal components, such as politics, arts, and the market economy, which political and academic authorities came to classify as "secular" (Casanova 1994; Asad 2003). Drawing on this body of scholarship, some authors have stated that the category *religion* and the religious-secular dichotomy were imposed upon Japan in the early Meiji era (1868–1912) by Western imperial powers. They contend that the Japanese term for religion (*shūkyō*) did not correspond to preexisting ideas and practices and should therefore be avoided by scholars (Fitzgerald 2000; Isomae 2003; Horii 2018).

In contrast to this polemical approach, some historians have scrutinized the conceptual history of *shūkyō* and investigated premodern equivalents of the term. They have shown that religion was not simply a foreign category that was imposed upon Japan. Instead, domestic actors were heavily involved in its creation, drawing on Japanese premodern concepts and categorizations at least as much as on imported ideas (Hoshino 2012; Josephson 2012; Maxey 2014; Krämer 2015). The most recent work in this vein shows that the formal establishment of secularist logic in the 1889 Meiji Constitution solidified the categories of *religion* and *not-*

religion in Japanese public life even as it prompted anxiety about what counted as religion and what did not. Under this constitutional regime, authorities differentiated between various nonempirical claims, self-cultivation practices, and voluntary associations for the purposes of taxation and administrative control (Thomas 2019, 17–48).

The introduction of the foreign category of *religion* in the mid-nineteenth century (Josephson 2012) served as a catalyst that spurred Japanese agents to recode existing types of consanguineous and lineage-based communities, voluntary associations, and mutual obligation associations: some became private families, others semi-private for-profit corporations, still others semi-private nonprofit religions (see Sawada 2004). Terminological confusion lingered, however, because many of the operative metaphors through which Japanese people imagined collective commitments remained even after the category *religion* was discursively fixed (see Maxey 2014). This is partially due to the fact that for-profit endeavors and nonprofit cultivation movements continued to share operative metaphors (e.g., "the path") and familial structures.

For example, scholars have pointed out how the Japanese household, or *ie*, has traditionally been a unit of production and that this has contributed to the prominence of family structures behind industrial organizations (Bhappu 2000; Nakane 1972). In particular, merchant households of the Edo period (1603–1868) served as prototypes of modern corporations in Japan, and a number of these became the business conglomerates known as *zaibatsu* at the turn of the twentieth century, which later morphed into the *keiretsu* conglomerates of today (Ishii 2016). The merchant households often had family precepts aimed at disciplining the owner's family and his employees, and these became management philosophies. For instance, the Mitsui Group, one of Japan's largest conglomerates, has upheld a management philosophy derived from family precepts for over three hundred years (Sumihara 2016, 90).

As family-based Japanese corporations like the Mitsui Group flourished in the early 1800s, cultivation movements such as neo-Confucian personal cultivation academies, lay Buddhist organizations, shrine-based confraternities, and profit-oriented enterprises arose (Sawada 2004). Many of these groups referred to their training regimens as *paths*. Like the Mitsui Group, some of these groups also adopted shared precepts and creeds. Through such paths and precepts, devotees cultivated *ikikata* (ways of living) in the interest of transforming themselves into *jinzai* (human resources; literally, "human materials").

Holding this history in mind, we contend that the metaphors that Japanese collectives have long used to designate shared ideals and imagine super-empirical realities (Campany 2003) continue to structure how people envision religion and business alike. The pervasive metaphor of a *path* (*michi*; *dō/tō*), for example, long precedes the introduction of the category *religion* to Japan. Today, *path* features in both corporate PR and religious scriptures. Our visit to the Panasonic museum-*cum*-shrine to Matsushita Kōnosuke demonstrates that stakeholders understand the apex of corporate success not as maximizing profit but as awakening to a glorious mission. Profit is a byproduct of self-sacrifice along the path. Just as Panasonic presents Matsushita's philosophy as a path of personal cultivation and social enrichment premised on the founder's homiletic aphorisms, Buddhism (the Buddhist path, *butsudō*), Shintō (lit., "the *way* of the deities"), and other intentional communities have historically used the concept of path to present visions for personal and collective flourishing.

At first glance, this centuries-long conceptual ambiguity resonates with the ways profit-making and corporate activity in Protestant Europe and the United States were regarded—notably by Calvinists, according to Max Weber—as evidence of divine providence (Weber [1920] 2010). Indeed, an earlier generation of American sociologists of religion (e.g., Bellah

1957) looked to this period of Japanese history for evidence confirming the universality of Weber's "Protestant ethic" thesis. But our claim is different. We suggest that, if there is a generalizable lesson that scholars of religion can take from the Japanese case, it is not that internalized religious ideals spurred economic activity (or, worse, that Japanese people were crypto-Calvinists). Rather, we argue that subject formation, pursuit of profit, and creation of intentional, fictive communities were and are co-constitutive processes of religion-making and corporation-making that cannot be reduced one to another. We agree with Michael Puett that "many of our current theories are implicitly based at least in part upon Christian, or more specifically Protestant, assumptions. Bringing more indigenous theories into our discussions—in other words, taking non-Western traditions seriously from a theoretical perspective and not simply as objects of our analyses—will help us to overcome the potential biases in our current theoretical understandings" (Puett 2010, 365). Rather than using Japan to verify or falsify theories developed in Euro-American and often explicitly Christian contexts, theorizing the corporate form from Japan is one way that scholars of religion can continue decolonizing our field.[6]

We suggest that Japanese corporate practices and ideas, combined with a history in which the notion of the corporation preceded the notion of religion rather than the other way around, are not merely of significance for understanding Japan. Instead, Japanese histories, terms, concepts, and practices help us understand how corporate stakeholders make religion come into being in various times and places. Terms like *ie* (the corporate household or extended family), *ikikata* (way of living), and *jinzai* (human materials) may be Japanese, but ideas expressed by these terms translate outside Japan. Scholars of religion working on other places and in other

[6] We make this claim in full recognition of Japan's history as an imperialist nation. A more in-depth discussion of this issue must await a separate publication.

time periods can use these Japanese words to analyze the corporation as a mode of personal transformation and focal point for faith in transcendent power—phenomena often related to, but not exclusive to, religion. Doing this work responsibly, however, requires attending not only to operative terms and metaphors but also to prevailing stereotypes about Japanese corporate life.

There is a large body of literature, in English and in Japanese, which has contributed to the popularization of cultural-essentialist stereotypes about the Japanese corporation. Much of this literature dates from the 1970s and 80s, when Japan was believed to be on its way to replace the United States as the new “number one” (Vogel 1979), and Japanese management models were admired by overseas observers (Abegglen and Stalk 1985). Drawing on these works, some scholars conceptualized the Japanese state itself as a single corporation (*kaisha*) or described Japanese political decision-making as essentially corporate (van Wolferen 1989). Academic and journalistic discourse on Japanese companies reproduced essentialist claims about Japanese “groupism” and self-sacrifice (e.g., Nakane 1972), sometimes attributing these traits to the country’s “Confucian” heritage (Chen 2004). Putatively “Japanese” features of corporate culture listed in such accounts included the importance of internal consensus building for decision-making; the centrality of corporate rituals such as morning calisthenics and collective shrine worship; life-long loyalty to the *kaisha*; the conception of the male breadwinner’s spouse and children as a *kaisha* support mechanism; the sharp distinction between in-group and outside world (*uchi* and *soto*); differences between “official” narratives and “real” motivations (*tatemae* and *honne*); the significance of alcohol consumption for solving conflicts; strong pressure to work overtime at the expense of personal health and family life; and the allocation of authority based on seniority, school record, and gender rather than competence.

As with other cultural nationalist tropes, such stereotypical notions frequently function prescriptively rather than descriptively (Befu 2001).[7] Although we acknowledge the diversity and complexity of real-life practices and recognize that they rarely accurately depict what they purport to describe, we think that stereotypes nevertheless have power to shape social expectations and personal behaviors alike. We might put this as a question: do some Japanese people work themselves to death (*karōshi*) because they are ethnically Japanese, or does the conventional wisdom that Japanese people are particularly assiduous create a type of subject that places the needs of the corporate machine over the biological needs of its human resources?

Japanese corporate stereotypes typically feature in essentialist differentiations between "Japan" and "the West." We acknowledge that these stereotypes are "real" in the sense that they shape social practice, but we challenge the notion that they are uniquely Japanese. We contend that they are common ideals and features of corporate cultures worldwide, even if the terminology differs. Many aspects of putatively "Japanese" corporate culture can be found in companies outside Japan as well as in secular NGOs and religious institutions in other parts of the world. These shared traits exemplify our argument that the corporate form underlies activities and commitments that are common to religions and other obligatory-voluntary associations: the company-as-family metaphor, the importance of ritual practices for personal and communal cultivation, the formation of institutional hierarchies, and the centrality of missions and mythologies for the justification of social practice. Stereotypes about Japanese companies, although overdrawn, show how religions are manifestations of collective formation that crosscut the private and the public, an insight that applies inside as well as outside Japan.

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[7] The stereotypes are encapsulated in the *nihonjinron* genre ("discourse on the Japanese" or "theories of Japanese uniqueness"), a body of normative and popular scientific texts published since the 1960s. A prominent example is *The Anatomy of Dependence* (Doi 2014).

WHY SHOULD SCHOLARS OF RELIGION INVESTIGATE THE CORPORATE FORM?

We argue that Japanese configurations of the corporate form are important to religious studies because they help re-theorize *religion* vis-à-vis social practices involving money and power worldwide. Studying the corporate form in Japan enables us to question category formations that appear natural, including well-established legal and discursive separations of *religious*, *political*, and *corporate* institutions. When people organize collective enterprises, however informal or illegal, they need to negotiate their degrees of responsibility and goals of growth vis-à-vis formal members, external stakeholders, and societal expectations.

Below we rely on Japanese examples to show how analyzing the corporate form is relevant for studying religion. We have identified six promising sets of research topics and questions. This is not an exhaustive list but a first indication of the kinds of insights that emerge from analyzing the corporate form in relation to religion-making. Specifically, we discuss how organizations strike a balance between addressing the needs of shareholders and stakeholders, the pervasive idea of making persons (*hitozukuri*), the fact and fiction of corporate contributions to the public good, and how corporations mobilize familial metaphors to rationalize collective enterprise. We also discuss how corporations manage people, property, and secrets, and we investigate how corporate creeds create shared objectives even as they structure subjectivities.

Shareholders vs. Stakeholders

A longstanding debate prevails in the business world over whether corporate governance should ultimately prioritize *shareholders* or *stakeholders*. Guided by Milton Friedman's dictum that the only social responsibility of a business is to use its resources to increase its profits

(Friedman 1962), the "shareholder theory" posits that investments are in the interest of profit generation and that altruism should be left to the discretion of individual investors who may be involved in churches, government, or other types of organizations—a primacy of ownership that has defined property law and economic growth in the United States (Machan 2017). By contrast, stakeholders are those who invest in a corporation's well-being as customers who consume the corporation's product, taxpayers who pay for educational and material infrastructures that allow corporations to grow, governments that create incentives for corporate expansion, or local communities (Smith 2003). Stakeholders are not necessarily human. Ecosystems, nonhuman animals, and other organisms can be affected by corporate practices as well. The "stakeholder theory" posits that the corporation must take this wider range of interests into account, even if this means sacrificing short-term benefit for long-term dividends.

Although global tendencies toward neoliberalism and a resultant emphasis on the need to conform to market-based quantification have seen shareholders take priority (Machan 2017; Tse 2011), there are enough recent high-profile examples of corporations being forced to cede shareholder profits to perpetuate debate between the two theories (Gelter 2010; Stern 2018). We assert that incorporating debates on the purpose of corporations and who is to benefit into analyses of religion is particularly fruitful because religions tend to be idealized, both legally and discursively, as selfless communities that enjoy tax benefits as contributors to the public good (Hardacre 2003). In this sense, religions seem to operate in the interest of stakeholders, not shareholders. Given doctrinal adherence to beliefs in deities and other transhuman entities, religions' range of potential stakeholders may be the widest of all corporate forms. Thinking about ghosts as stakeholders, for example, may offer new purchase for studies of religion, and thinking about a lab animal as both a stakeholder and a sacrifice can provide new ways of envisioning corporate research and religious ritual alike (Ambros 2012). At the same time, many religious actors also seek to thrive financially, and questions about shareholders come to the fore.

Fragile Person, Transcendent Corporation

Stakeholders may give to the corporation, but the corporation does not always give back in equal measure. Religions and companies alike require individual sacrifice. Institutional survival is their paramount concern, either through generational transmission or conversion. In either case, adherents must put aside individual concerns to serve the needs of the religion/corporation, often at great personal sacrifice. The costs borne by clergy/managers are frequently severe, as they must be willing to follow directives from their administrative superiors to move to distant places, undertake unwanted tasks, and even put themselves and their families in harm's way for the sake of a mission. The greatest benefit is reaped by the organization itself, which spreads its share of territory and followers, expands its material base, and ensures its persistence into the future.

Stakeholders are to cultivate a proper *ikikata*, a "way of living," a disposition toward the world that denies self-interest in favor of a transcendent, collective ideal. It is only through fostering individuals in an ideal *ikikata* that a corporate project can build a reliable base of human resources. Japanese corporate and religious creeds call on their adherents to put aside individual interests and aim to become "human materials" (*jinzai*) for the construction of a collective enterprise built to live beyond the frail bodies of the individuals who people it. Although this nomenclature is Japanese, anxieties about fostering a self-sacrificing attitude in the people who advance corporate projects is a global concern.

The bodies of those who power the corporate mission are necessarily fungible. They must be cultivated as replaceable components that can be repaired, repurposed, or removed when they no longer serve their appointed functions. Standardized training is required to cultivate these human resources. The subjectivities produced by standardized forms of corporate governance not only generate human resources: they also generate people who are eager to demonstrate their loyalty by seeking the right way to consume (Logan 2017). The corporate objective is nothing less than the "creation of the person" (*hitozukuri*).

The Public Good

Both corporate enterprises and religious institutions benefit from their special legal status and fiscal exemptions as semi-private entities situated between the individual citizen and the state. Members of both also claim to work for "the public good." For example, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has become a buzzword and a core PR concern (Rajak 2011; Welker 2014). Airlines, energy companies, the nutrition industry, and construction companies all engage in *greenwashing*, adopting cosmetic changes to show consumers that they are environmentally conscious even as they strive towards more growth, sidelining the fact that these are irreconcilable objectives (Hickel 2018). Japanese companies are no exception. Their staff typically spend a significant percentage of company revenue on projects related to heritage conservation, tree-planting, and education (Rots 2017b, 132), giving substance to the myth that the company cares about the nation and that the two are mutually dependent.

Religious actors, likewise, are eager to assert their institutions' public role. Like the CSR discourse of for-profit businesses, religions' commitment to the greater good is especially visible in the field of environmental issues. Religious leaders worldwide have expressed their concern for the environment without necessarily being able to act to protect it (Chaplin 2016; Rots 2017b). Engagement with the public good is also visible in religious involvement with development aid (Fountain, Bush, and Feener 2015; Watanabe 2019), international diplomacy and peace-making initiatives (Stensvold 2017), and disaster relief efforts and post-disaster mental health care (Inaba and Kurosaki 2013; McLaughlin 2016).

In Japan, attempts to redefine religion or reassert the position of ritual practices and sacred symbols in the public sphere have been particularly pronounced in recent decades. Since the Aum Shinrikyō nerve gas attack on the Tokyo subways in 1995, religious organizations have been eager to downplay their *religious* character and redefine themselves in alternative terms (Baffelli and Reader 2012; Gagné 2017). Through what Aike Rots (2017a) calls "discursive secularization," leaders of religious organizations assert their essentially public character. Meanwhile, the Shintō establishment has gradually increased its political influence through its involvement with lobbying organizations that have close ties with the government of Prime Minister Abe Shinzō. Stakeholders legitimize this active political involvement by arguing that Shintō is essentially a "public" ritual tradition, as shrine priests perform rituals "on behalf of the community," in contrast to Buddhist or Christian priests, who purportedly only perform private rituals on behalf of individual customers (Tanaka 2011).

The Japanese Association of Shintō Shrines, the umbrella organization for most of the country's shrines, serves as a clear example of the interwovenness of corporate ideology, ritual practice, and an idealized notion of the public good. Significantly, the former president of this organization, Tanaka Tsunekiyo, does not conceive of corporate organizations as "private" ritual customers. Quite the opposite: according to him, companies are central to the fabric of the *kyōdōtai* (community, lit. "shared body"), as they work for the "common good," preserving the

Japanese spirit in the modern world. The *kaisha* (the company) is analogous to Japanese society, or *shakai*, a word written with the same two characters as *kaisha* and possibly translatable as "meeting in the sacred forest/shrine" (Rots 2017a). Both company and society are dependent upon "a sense of becoming one body" (*ittaikan*) that emerges through shared rituals and sacred symbols (Tanaka 2011, 19). Crucially, Tanaka introduces Panasonic as an exemplar of such corporate spirituality. The cozy relationship between the shrine establishment and this powerful electronics multinational is illustrated by the fact that CEO Matsushita Kōnosuke himself participated in worship practices at Iwashimizu Hachimangū, the shrine where Tanaka is head priest (Tanaka 2011, 17–19).

Concrete Institutions Require Management

Management practices of religious groups—"decision-making processes, leadership and management structures, governance, patterns of accountability, and so forth"—have often been overlooked in religious studies (Burton et al. 2018, 351).[8] Yet religions as corporations employ a variety of managerial techniques that construct subjectivities and organize relations in ways that resonate with other corporate entities. Ethnographies of religious groups, from evangelical churches in the United States (Elisha 2011) to Buddhist humanitarian movements from Taiwan (Huang 2009), show how managerial matters such as accountability and human resources are central to religious actors' concerns. These concerns echo those of other corporate entities such as businesses, universities, and NGOs, where people constantly engage in techniques of audit, documentation, and compliance, among others (Green 2003; Riles 2006; Strathern 2000).

[8] Nevertheless, the field of religion and management studies, or management, spirituality, and religion (MSR), is growing (Burton et al. 2018; Iwai 2017; Nakamaki and Hioki 2009).

One function of management that we can detect in religious groups and other corporate forms is the mitigation of conflicts—arbitrating between factions, managing assets, and controlling who is inside and who is outside the organization. Relatedly, conflict management also clarifies who is accountable to whom, who is to benefit, and who to lose. Structural similarities also reveal ways that nonprofit religions and for-profit businesses similarly manage capital, personnel, and trade secrets (Iwai 2017, 246–49; Lindsay and Wuthnow 2010). Considering secrecy in religions (Teeuwen 2006) in parallel with secrecy in business models (Elyachar 2012), such as intellectual property and trade secrets (Ventimiglia 2017), can elucidate how secrets are not actually things that are hidden from view in an absolute way. Rather, they are important methods of knowing and control that calibrate the relationship between the individual and the collective. Tools of transparency such as organizational charts and audit practices also reveal and conceal in similar ways (Harvey et al. 2013).

Management may focus on corporations' private affairs, but it often simultaneously reflects public relations concerns. As seen in the recent revelations about the Catholic Church's responses to clerical sexual abuse of children in Pennsylvania, protecting corporate secrets may extend to cover-ups of systemic failure, individual wrongdoing, and the victimization of consumers or parishioners (Butler 2018). Because shrines and temples in Japan are effectively run as franchises by priests beholden to the dictates of corporate headquarters (Covell 2005, 211n49), controversial human resources decisions can spur receivership, schisms, and bloody battles over succession (Shūkan Daiyamondo Henshūbu 2017a, 2017b). A recent lurid case in Japan in which a brother murdered his sister with a sword over a contested succession to a coveted shrine priesthood reveals the stakes involved (Sankei Shinbun 2017; Japan Times 2017).

Family Matters

Company discourses routinely refer to the employees, and even their customers, as family. This characterization engenders both loyalty and opportunities for exploitation. The common practice of describing Japanese firms in familial terms exemplifies this point. Anthropologists have long explained the traditional Japanese *ie* (household) as neither consanguineal (by blood ties) nor affinal (by marriage) but corporate (Bachnik 1983; Kondo 1990, 122; Nakane [1967] 2004). That is, it is primarily a unit of production and consumption that holds property, performs communal religious functions, and provides social welfare for its members. Although blood ties are the main form of descent, if no suitable (usually male) successor exists, adult adoption has been a common practice (Lebra 1989). The main aim is "to ensure the continuity of the *ie* over time" and "blood relationship is only one of these recruitment mechanisms" (Kondo 1990, 124).

The *ie* was not the only type of kinship, but it was dominant at least until the Second World War. American-led Occupation forces in Japan abolished the patriarchal *ie* system in 1947, instructing households to divide their properties into equal shares among their members (Riles 2011). Believing that small-scale capitalism would facilitate democracy, the Americans also dismantled large business conglomerates and promoted small enterprises through new legislation. Thousands of small companies rushed to incorporate, and many of them were the very *ie* households that the Americans had tried to eliminate.[9] This was unsurprising, given that the Japanese household had long been a corporate entity. This trend continues today. As of a 2014 survey, 99.7 percent of businesses in Japan are small to midsize companies, with a median

[9] It must be noted that Occupation [should this be lowercase? No, we'd like to keep it capitalized to signal a "major historical event"; it's consistent with the authors' other works] reforms also spurred a wave of schisms and incorporations through the occupier-drafted Religious Juridical Persons (i.e., Corporations) Ordinance (Shūkyō hōjin rei) of 1945.

value of three employees and gross assets of 54 million yen (approximately US$487,000; Small and Medium Enterprise Agency (2018, 29). Approximately 72 percent of them are "owner-managed corporations" in which the shareholders and managers are the same, and about 30 percent of all small to midsize companies only have the manager and their family as shareholders (Small and Medium Enterprise Agency 2018, 84–85). These statistics indicate that a large portion of businesses in Japan deal with questions of management in relation to family matters. Kinship ties have played a major role in succession and asset management even in large conglomerates such as the prewar *zaibatsu* and postwar *keiretsu* (e.g., Mitsui and Mitsubishi; Chau 1991; Hamabata 1994).

Although this entanglement of family and corporations is often described as a uniquely Japanese or East Asian characteristic, family firms and the primacy of lineages are prominent in other countries as well. Family businesses constitute two-thirds of all businesses around the world and 70 to 95 percent of all businesses in most countries (Family Firm Institute n.d.). In addition to actually being family affairs, describing a company as a paternalistic, family-like entity is also commonplace in many corporations around the world (Haugh and McKee 2003; Rajak 2011, 69). Furthermore, anthropologists have long analyzed kinship structures as foundations for corporate theories, indicating that family relations have existed as units of property, (re)production, exchange, and political organization in all societies in one way or another (Kuper 1982; Radcliffe-Brown 1935). In this sense, the Japanese case is not an exception but a useful lens through which to understand how corporations are not simply detached, impersonal institutions but are often entangled with emotional and financial family affairs.

Dynamics of corporate kinship can be found in religious organizations as well. Issues of lineage and succession, recruitment, a family-like atmosphere of shared values, and trust are some of the concerns religions and many businesses share (Mullins 1998, 187–91; Gilding 2005). Corporate kinship within religious organizations shows that the economy and the private sphere, financial and intimate relations, the secular and the religious are co-constitutive.

Corporate Missions

There is a particular affinity between credos published by Japan's top companies and those of modern religious movements that took shape as Japan transformed in the early twentieth century into a global economic and military power. Toyota, which began production in the mid-1930s and is now Japan's largest corporation, lists five main principles, which include "Always be faithful to your duties, thereby contributing to the company and to the overall good" and "Always have respect for spiritual matters, and remember to be grateful at all times" (Toyota 2017). They are virtually indistinguishable from the principles of honesty, self-denial, frugality, piety, and gratitude to be cultivated in the interest of individual-*cum*-collective transcendence that comprise the heart of modern Japanese "popular morality" (*tsūzoku dōtoku*) movements. Popular morality teachings, which derived from conflations of neo-Confucianism, Buddhism, and nativist theories espoused by Japanese intellectuals in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, mobilized profound social and economic transformations in Japan. The academies and religions that elaborated upon these teachings established norms that are maintained today within most, if not all, of Japan's modern religious movements and ethics training organizations (Hardacre 1986; Sawada 1993, 2004).

Similarly, Nippon Telegraph and Telecommunication (NTT), which began as a public utility in 1967 and was privatized from the late 1980s, places emphasis on a "value creation" CSR charter. The charter promotes the company as a "value partner" for customers and as a platform for social, ethical, and environmental concerns (Nippon Telegraph and Telecommunication 2017). “Value creation” (*kachi sōzō*) also served as a prime motivator for Soka Gakkai, the “Value Creation Study Association,” the lay Buddhist organization that now claims 8.27 million adherent households in Japan and close to two million followers overseas. Its founders drew on neo-Kantian ideals that were popular in the 1930s and attractive to activists in the postwar era (McLaughlin 2019).

Even the online shopping giant Rakuten, a global corporation founded in 1997 that requires its employees to use only English at its Tokyo headquarters, stands by a code of ethics and four-character “brand concepts.” The first of these is *taigi meibun*, the “Great Principle of designations and duties,” a teaching formulated in the early Meiji (1868–1912) era that employs Tokugawa-period (1603–1868) ideas adopted by the managerial samurai class to authenticate social divisions and selfless duty as timeless values (de Bary 2013; Harootunian 1970). Rakuten translates this term as “on a mission: empowerment” and asserts in its definition that “we believe that the only way for a business to grow over the long term is to contribute to the world so significantly that people can’t imagine life without it” (Rakuten 2018). Its four other four-character phrases are *hinsei kōketsu* (noble/virtuous character), *yōi shūtō* (preparedness), *shinnen fubatsu* (indomitable faith/trust), and *itchi danketsu* (assembling in one [purpose]). These are more general yet still identifiably inspired by neo-Confucian mores. On their own, they could be mistaken for an antiquated adherence to hidebound morality, but Rakuten handily repurposes them in English into shareholder-assuring biz-speak as “behave ethically: integrity,” “prepare to succeed: professionalism,” “complete commitment: get things done,” and “solidarity: succeed as a team.”

THE PROGRAM GOING FORWARD

We urge greater attention from scholars of religion to a social formation that ineluctably affects all of us.[10] The time has come for us to attend not just to religion and the economy as discrete entities, to neoliberalism as ideology, or religious organizations as market actors, but also to how *the corporate form* shapes collective entities that are variably and simultaneously religious, corporate, familial, public, profiteering, and virtuous. The corporate form is demanding, ubiquitous, and intimate. It makes people and publics as much as it makes products. We see this in the Japanese corporation, an entity that demands astonishing self-sacrifice on the part of stakeholders even as it promises them almost unimaginable dividends. We stress that our argument is not exclusively about Japan, nor is it an attempt at leavening the preponderance of American-centric scholarship on "religion *and* the economy" or "the marketization of religion" with an Asian test case. Rather, we argue that attention to Japan compels scholars of religion to see dynamics similar to those we described above in other contexts worldwide. This attention will offer new insights into how stakeholders assess value and risk, how the corporate project of making persons reflects perceptions of gender and embodiment, and how consumers themselves can become products. But describing those things is more than we can do ourselves. We urge others with expertise and skill sets other than ours to take up the notion of the corporate form to advance their own studies of religion.

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