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## RELIGIOUS ALTRUISM

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### Abstract

The Great East Japan Earthquake, an unprecedented calamity, has brought people together in dealing with a common issue and has helped form new bonds between them. Connections between people in society had been on the decline, but this caused a major change. Our fairytale about the safety of nuclear power plants collapsed, and the views and relationships that modern people have toward technology are fundamentally being called into question.

In modern Japanese society, there are people who do not consider the act of helping others or other altruistic actions to be a form of self-sacrifice. These people feel a sense that we are all in this together, and they feel a spirit of reciprocity and a sense of solidarity. Religion has often gotten involved in assuaging hardships throughout our long history. Now the beliefs and lifestyles of these religious individuals are truly being put to the test.

Most religions teach and practice altruism and warm-heartedness toward others. So it is possible that the sense of awe and the sense of gratitude that one feels toward being protected by God or Buddha humbles them and makes them respect the lives of others as they respect their own. Gratitude for assistance and the repayment of someone's favor can motivate acts of compassion.

This paper will outline religion, altruism and social capital, and exam the relationship between religions and social capital in civil society, and present a foundation for future research.

Key words: religious altruism, social capital, disparities in compassion

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## 1. Introduction

On March 11<sup>th</sup>, 2011, a tremendous earthquake and following huge Tsunami hit eastern Japan and claimed many lives. Facing this unprecedented major disaster and ruinous damage, everyone felt the powerlessness of human beings and the fury of nature. Some thought, “What can I do in this situation?” “I can’t sit around and just watch,” and began conducting relief activities. Religious individuals were no exception, and over 100 religious facilities such as temples, shrines and churches became emergency shelters and bases for relief activities.

As a researcher of religious altruism and social contributions for nearly 20 years, and one of those who experienced volunteer activities at shelters after the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake, I had languished over what to do from my faraway location. On March 13<sup>th</sup>, 2 days after the huge earthquake, I called for some researchers to form the Faith-Based Network for Earthquake Relief in Japan. After that, I helped establish the Japan Religion Coordinating Project for Disaster Relief (JRPD) and I still continue activities as a facilitator there. Additionally I visited the affected area to conduct hearing investigations on religious individuals while interacting with them and local residents.

I have a great regard for the continuous relief activities of religious individuals and groups. On the other hand, after Aum Shinrikyo’s sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway, how to maintain distance and communicate with the target religion in an investigation has been called into question. It goes without saying that the differences between attitudes of empathy toward the investigation target and the attitudes of the researchers who investigate and analyze the target’s activities are conscious differences. However, in this case, the researchers’ method of investigating the support activities of religious individuals within the affected area would likely require a different approach. Without this, investigations that emphasize objective and detached attitudes will only cause more damage to the target areas (Miyamoto, 1972). Researchers who adhere strictly to objectiveness as a golden rule are an unwanted presence from the point of view of people in affected areas.

This paper will introduce a summary of the author’s previous research on religious altruism while addressing the positionality of the researchers involved there.

## 2. New Indications

Japanese society is rapidly changing. In January 2010, NHK broadcast a special program called “Unconnected society.” In a society where there are no connections between people, people passing away without being noticed by anybody has become a social problem, and it has come to affect over 30 thousand people a year, the same as the number of suicides. Bonds and connections such as ties to the land, relationships within a company, or blood relationships have weakened, and leading a lonely life has become the norm.

Solitary life in an unconnected society overlaps with living without considering others. A modern society in which neoliberalism and self-accountability are widespread WAS a society of strong egoism in which people only think of self-benefit. The previous sentence being in the past tense indicates not only the reality but also the author's intuition and hope that Japanese society is making a drastic shift.

In a public opinion survey on social awareness conducted by the Cabinet Office in 2010, Japanese people that considered the current social situation to be a form of egoism accounted for 38.9%. In comparison, those that felt that consideration existed in society accounted for 12.4%. However, the author had expected that this number would change largely at the time of the Great East Japan Earthquake. And in fact, the same survey conducted in January 2014 showed that 36.5% of Japanese citizens voted for egoism, and 20.3% for consideration. It could be said that once they face an unprecedented calamity, sleeping feelings deep inside of people such as consideration, the idea that we are all in this together, and sympathy are awoken.

In recent years, there has been much research on altruism conducted within various study fields. In 2009, a special section on Altruism, Morality and Social Solidarity was created within the American Sociological Association. As for research on religious altruism, movements for social contribution activities based on faith have become a research target.

*RITA* (altruism) in Japanese literally means actions taken on behalf of others and not for oneself. In modern society, social organizations such as companies and universities, as members of society, are expected to provide consideration toward society as a form of social contribution. How about religious groups as another social organization? Is it possible for religion to develop altruism? What is religious altruism or social contribution? Questioning these possibilities and their definitions is a very important sociological theme.

We who live in this advanced information society receive information on events happening around the world through various media. However, even though we are deeply concerned about the world's future and are aware of the issues facing society within this giant political and economic system, at the same time, we are immersed in powerlessness—the feeling that an individual can do nothing to help. This feeling of powerlessness will at some point convert into a feeling of omnipotence about surviving these predicaments as well as a feeling of indifference. With this attitude, it will not be possible to solve a number of serious problems facing modern society. The age in which the country or giant organizations will take care of things is over. Dynamism by large political or economic and national or organizational systems is being handed over to individuals and the public.

Now, in the area affected by the Great East Japan Earthquake, mental healthcare is becoming more important for those who have lost connections within their community, lost family members, or lost various other connections. It supports them in many areas so that they may continue to live. The most important thing is to be with them. This leads to mental health. What is needed here might be sensitivity to hardship and the ability to empathize. Religions have

always been involved in assuaging hardship throughout history, but can religions question the role of economics and politics and demonstrate their social ability despite having values different from economics and politics? Are religious individuals facing the hardships and issues of the world, and are they taking action on them? Before discussing these topics, it is better to look into what altruism is in the next section.

### 3. *RITA-SHUGI* (Altruism)

The Japanese term, *RITA-SHUGI* (to benefit others), is known as altruism in English. The term altruism was coined by Auguste Comte, a French sociologist in 19<sup>th</sup> century. In Japanese psychology, the term *AITA-SHUGI* (loving others) is also used, which carries the same meaning as altruism. The term, altruism, is used even in such study fields as animal behavior and genetic research. When you think of the terms in Japanese, *RITA-SHUGI* (to benefit others instead of benefiting oneself) might be more appropriate than *AITA-SHUGI* in Japanese based on what they mean in Japanese respectively since Comte defined this term as an antonym of the term egoism (*RIKO-SHUGI*: meaning to benefit oneself in Japanese).

The term *RITA-SHUGI* (altruism) has long been used academically, but not in daily life. It signifies an attitude of thoughtfulness toward others instead of for your own benefit. In short, it is *OMOIYARI* (consideration) toward others.

For the sake of convenience, this paper defines altruism as altruistic actions—actions supporting others who are considered to be having some sort of difficulty and their purpose is not mainly for one’s own sake. Altruistic actions also include extending a helping hand to those who are not in serious trouble. To the above definition, I added the supplemental explanation of “their purpose is not mainly for one’s own sake,” and there is a reason for it. This is answering a question that some people might want to ask. Isn’t there the possibility that actions to support others are predicated on a practical motivation that can’t be observed by others? The motivation could be, for example, self-satisfaction, pride, the desire to escape feelings of guilt over being happy while others are not, and the desire to be praised by others. However, trying to clarify these would fall into an endless loop of discussion on whether pure altruism not having any internal factors exists or not. Thus, internal factors have been excluded from the definition, and it is defined as actions taken in real life, and those are the target of research.

The word *RITA-SHUGI* (altruism) is not a common word among people, but the mindsets and behaviors related to altruism have long been discussed throughout the history of man. There are 3 schools of thought: 1) *Xing-e-shuo* (people are naturally bad), 2) *Xing-shan-shuo* (people are naturally good), and 3) neither of these.

*Xing-e-shuo* is the starting point of social thought by Machiavelli, N. or Hobbes, T. It is the thought that man is born egoistical and would do bad things for their own benefit if there were no rules. On the contrary, *Xing-shan-shuo* represented by Mencius is the ethical doctrine that

man's inborn nature is good. And the third way of thinking is that man can be good or bad depending on their environment. After the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a lot of research was published concluding that altruism can be learned through social life, an idea that is based on the third way of thinking. As will be described later, religion has an especially strong connection to altruism.

Why do people lay down their own lives or extend their hands to others in assistance? In what situations do people become more altruistic? This type of research has made up the majority of the positivism research regarding altruism, especially in the psychological approach. Moreover, there are a lot of theses with the hypothesis that the motivation behind altruistic conduct is caused by empathy or emotional involvement with those experiencing hardships. The fact that people build empathy toward relatives or friends more than toward others or adversaries has been established by a variety of research. On the other hand, intentionality toward social codes has been pointed out as another source of altruistic conduct. However, these hypotheses are not simply a polarization of the motivations toward altruistic actions: empathy for closely related people, and intentionality toward social codes for the rest. This can be seen in the fact that the people who ran to the rescue regardless of the risk to themselves at the time of the Nazi massacre of the Jews were based on the empathy, and in another case, that people would give one of their own kidneys to a relative out of moral obligation.

#### **4. Why is Altruism Researched?**

Since World War II, there has been a lot of research in the field of social science on the negative side of human beings. Why do people commit horrible atrocities? Or why does man engage in wars? This was because the people facing the cruel reality of seeing so many casualties held a belief in the necessity of research to find the root cause so that such tragedies would not be repeated.

On the other hand, Sorokin, P., a sociologist at Harvard University in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, had a belief in the positive side, which is to say consideration toward others or altruism, instead of focusing on the negative side of man. He established the Altruism Research Center to advance its study. Sorokin (1977) focused on "How people become altruistic," and conducted his research on altruism in the U.S. as indicated by good neighbors and Catholic saints.

In recent years, in the U.S., the altruism related operations have become more prevalent, as can be seen in the John Templeton Foundation's grant of several million dollars to altruism research. There are many books written in English about religion and altruism (Habito and Inaba, 2006). Why is research on altruism so popular now?

The mood in modern society has largely veered toward neoliberalism and self-accountability, which is based on selfishness, in short, egoism. The author has defined this mood as "disparities in compassion" and discussed it as a situation in which people pursue only their own benefit while pretending that it is because of social segmentation, the reduction of interpersonal relations

or incorrect information (Inaba, 2008). “Disparities in compassion” simply means that there are gaps in people’s level of consideration. People supporting homeless people have increased accompanying the recent economic downturn. At the same time, attacks on the homeless have not disappeared. This is the iconic phenomenon of society having “disparities in compassion” A lifestyle without consideration toward others or lacking consideration will affect children. This is shown in survey results. The degree of consideration shown by elementary school students plummeted during 1970s to 80s, and it has stayed low after the 90s (Nakazato & Matsui, 1997).

Present society faces many issues such as environmental issues, international conflicts, terrorism, economic issues, medical issues, nursing care, welfare, social security benefits, and educational issues, etc. We need a civil society full of voluntary altruism, and we should not rely on a traditional government oriented system. It is necessary to construct a society based on empathy, consideration, and altruism to cope with excessive egoism. Research on altruism is progressing due to these sorts of social requests.

## 5. Religious Altruism

As we know from history, Japanese religious individuals have a long history of conducting charitable activities to help the weak. *Hidden-in* and *Seyaku-in*, shelters established by Shotoku Taishi and *Komyo-kogo*, are known as implementations of Buddhist mercy toward poor and lonely elderly people who are ill and do not have families. A public project conducted by Gyoki in the Nara era is also well known. In the Middle-Ages, *Jodo-shu* priests in the late Heian era performed charitable activities. Catholic activities to help the poor are also noticeable. Religious altruism exists in these activities as an altruism based on religious policy (Inaba, 2011).

The Chinese characters for *RITA* are originally from a Buddhism term which means to do for the benefit to others or to save others, but altruism is taught in many religions, not only in Buddhism. In relation to altruism, there is a word *CHARITI* (charity) in Japanese, which has roots in Christianity. *CHARITI* can be translated as *JIZEN* (benevolence) in Japanese, and it has roots in the Latin word *caritas*. Furthermore, *caritas* is a translation of the Greek word *agape*. This is the love of God and neighborly love in Christianity. In particular, making offerings to the poor was a specific implementation of the neighborly love that Jesus taught, and its model was the Good Samaritan, who offered a helping hand to a weakened traveler on the roadside who had been attacked by robbers (the New Testament, Gospel of Luke 10: 25–37). Namely, charity means, in a religious context, good actions with compassion toward others and good deeds that save the needy or the destitute.

In not only Christianity but also other religions such as Judaism, Islam and Buddhism, charity is expounded as a respectful action, and an obligation of the believers. It is related to almsgiving, which means offering your assets and donations. An ideology of mutual aid and altruism exists there. Giving alms or donations as taught by the canonical book in Judaism is considered a

behavior justified by their god. Islam established almsgiving as one of its five religious obligations. In monotheistic religions such as Christianity and Islam, religious altruism means service to God's glory through good actions, and one's relationship with the target of altruistic actions is often understood through God.

While altruism and social contribution activities within Christianity and Buddhism have been discussed, Shintoism based on government-organized shrines does not focus on the salvation of individuals in its doctrines. Therefore, not much research has been done on the relationship between Shintoism and religious altruism and social contribution. However, Fujimoto (2009) focused on the social work performed by Shrines and Shinto priests as well as social welfare work and social policy during the pre-World War II period set by government officials of the Ministry of Home Affairs, and clarified the relationship between Shintoism and welfare during the modern age. He verified, using various materials, that Shinto priests had been involved in establishing preschools during the era right after WWII, and also had been a part of society as social welfare pillars in the field including prison chaplains, volunteer probation officers, and commissioned welfare volunteers. Recently, Shintoism has been drawing more attention as a "location" characterized by the trees around a village shrine and to its own culture (Itai, 2011).

Research on religious altruism analyzes in relation to altruistic actions such as attending church and performing volunteer activities. Gill (Gill, 1999) concluded that there is a clear correlation between church attendance and altruistic actions such as performing volunteer activities after analyzing the statistics databases in the U.K. and the U.S. (British Social Attitudes, the Gallup Poll, and the British Household Panel Survey).

Will religion make people more altruistic? If, as Nelson and Dynes (1976) point out, symbolic religious enhancement (Durkheim, 1991) through the construction of a religious world (Berger, 1979) will develop an altruistic spirit, then a religious individual's altruism should have a positive correlation with that individual's religious commitments. In other words, if a religion creates a believer's sense of value and worldview through the believer's belief in that religion, and if the altruism taught in the religion's doctrine determines the believer's lifestyle and further nourishes the altruistic spirit, then a conclusion can be drawn that the greater the believer believes the altruism of the religion and engages in the religion, the stronger the individual's altruism. An analysis by the European Values Study presented the result that religious commitment has a positive correlation with altruism (Gerard, 1985). Since then, the results of other similar analyses have followed. In recent years, surveys conducted on Japanese people have also pointed out a correlation between religious commitment and altruism (Mitani, 2014).



## 6. Structure of Religious Altruism

Does a religious environment nurture people's awareness of social ethics, and lead them to more altruistic? Through what process does it achieve this? The author conducted field work on religious altruism in the U.K. from January 1997 to spring of 2000. In order to comprehensively cover the religious life of the believers of a Christian group and a Buddhist group, the author sometimes stayed with them in their community houses, wash dishes after meals and took part in soup kitchen activities for homeless people on the street in London. Gradually a rapport formed between the author and the believers (rapport: an amicable and trustworthy relationship between researchers and the research targets). When the author's understanding toward the religious life of the believers sufficiently deepened from 1998 to 1999, interviews were held with 60 believers for this survey (Inaba, 2000).

Informants were recorded with their consent for one hour each, but the informal conversations around the agreed recording time accounted for approximately 200 hours. At the interview, they were asked to talk about their own religious life using the life history method, and asked a question about altruism at the end. However, prior to being asked about altruism, some of them voluntarily started to talk about altruism as answers to questions such as "What were some good things about starting a religious life?" or "What changes happened in yourself?"

The life history method is a research method that consists of intensive interviewing targeting a part of an individual's life or their whole life and thick descriptive writings, and it is the best research method to understand the relevant party's altered consciousness. On the other hand, when an informant talks about their altered consciousness, there is a tendency to convert and restructure their past to the present. In particular, when talking about altruism, because they could talk about their ideal, which is different from the reality, the objectivity and trustworthiness of their stories sometimes raises questions. However, even if the informants' stories are their ideals, this can be attributed to their beliefs, so clarifying the informant's stories is very significant. This is because finding the individuals meaning, which is the core part of the religious life, was emphasized in this research.

Here I will introduce one part of the conclusion. First of all, the meaning of altruism for the Christian group whose bedrock is ethical prophesy (Weber, 1992: 76) was demanding obedience as an ethical obligation based on God's will and serving God's glory through good deeds. Also one's relationship with the targets of the altruistic actions is understood through God. On the other hand, in the Buddhist group, which is based on exemplary prophesy (Weber, 1992: 76) indicating the path to the salvation using models, altruism means any positive effects on others, and self-care as a model is highly valued among them.

The motivation behind altruistic actions is next. Christianity, with its belief in millenarianism, is orientated toward denying the worldly and so it denies secular values and happiness and does not emphasize happiness in real life. Hence rational choice motives are not substantial,

and empathy toward others derived from love of God or soteriology (self-scarification and God's blessing) motivates altruistic actions. On the other hand, in the case of the Buddhist group's empathy toward others facing hardships, the altruistic actions of some of the believers were motivated by empathetic distress (in which one feels the pain of another), but this motivation faded away as their faith deepened. Moreover, in the case of Buddhism, which values personal spiritual development, and which has New Age characteristics is strongly motivated by rational choice which brings internal benefits such as a sense of happiness, but there is a worldview of valuing the connections between people, and soteriology might be motivating the altruistic actions as well.

For the development of an altruistic spirit in both groups, contact with role models who strongly possess the characteristics of communal living, friendships, and altruism is definitely important.

Within the giant system of capitalistic society in which connections between people have become weaker, people might be seeking a foundation for life with confirmable connections a feeling of reality, communal living, friendship and altruism in these target groups might be providing the opportunity for believers to find themselves. This whole thing can be defined as an effort to alter consciousness that works by reconstructing the relationships between oneself and others (and the world) by sharing a kind of spirituality within the groups through exchanges with role models and interaction with other believers.

## **7. Religion as Social Capital**

Organizations and groups with strong and secure trust, codes of conduct and reciprocity that exists at the foundation of various social organizations and groups are organizationally strong. There, people support each other more, and many social issues get improved. I doubt many people will challenge that idea. The trust, codes of conduct and reciprocity in organizations and groups are called social capital.

In 1995, the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake occurred, and many people witnessed volunteers who dashed to help from all over Japan through media reports. According to the World Value Survey that year, the degree of trust among Japanese people in others rose. There were people taking action for the sake of others, and this fact induced a feeling that "There is still some good in Japanese people," and that might have boosted the gauge of trustworthiness among people. Likewise, people in the region where volunteer activities are popular trusted others more than in other places. In fact, looking at data from more than 30 countries in the world, a strong correlation can be observed between mutual support such as volunteering or civil active participation and social trust or trusting others (Putnam, 2006). And many countries in the world have shown a great deal of interest in social capital, and have advanced a variety of public policies.

In Europe and America, religion as social capital draws a lot of interest (Smidt ed., 2003,

Furbey et al., 2006). Religions create connections between individuals and become a base for communities. And they are discussing the relationship with religious altruism.

In the U.S., the opinion that religions as a form of social capital are public goods is mainstream. As for why churches are successful in creating social capital, Cnaan (Cnaan et al., 2002: 255–278) listed up some points: attendance at a church fulfills sentimental demands; the clergy make efforts to anchor members by improving regional society; there is religious education that expounds social responsibility; and in highly fluid societies where neighborhoods change, religious organizations have become the only main actor in the local communities.

Wuthnow (2002) discusses status-bridging as a type of social capital. He points out that status-bridging has a lot to do with authority, influence, wealth and fame, and will create profitable connections such as employment, wealth, as well as educational and medical assistance. Church members are mostly neither political leaders nor business managers, but church attendees tend to have more friends like those than non-attendees. This tendency is defined as the status-bridge social capital. By attending church activities, the attendees get acquainted with those that are of a higher social status than themselves, and attendees learn a variety of social skills from them. At the same time, those attendees also meet people less well-off economically and socially than them. In such cases, the upper ranks feel more social responsibility, which likely motivates them to perform welfare activities. After all, attendance at church widens the attendees' awareness and sphere of actions regarding civic participation and participation in politics. Wuthnow (2004) reasons, using data from his own survey (Civic Involvement Survey: samples from 1500 individuals), that churches are social capital in that they create connections between individuals and their environment, regardless of group size, with group members they can rely on when they need help.

In the U.K., an exclusive society was created under the Thatcher Administration in 1980s. In 1997, the New Labour Party led by Anthony Blair strove to create an inclusive society, and they introduced the idea of social capital into their policies. There, partnerships based on public initiative were promoted. Charity groups based on belief are widely engaged in a crusade on the frontlines of poverty and social welfare (Furbey et al., 2006).

Previously, I have defined religious social contribution related to religious altruism as “contribution to trouble shooting within the scope of various fields, and contribution to sustaining and improving the quality of public lives through religious individuals, groups, or culture and thoughts related to the religion” (Inaba & Sakurai ed., 2009: 40). In this definition, religion as social capital, that is, relief created through religious culture, space, thoughts, and connections between individuals in the local community are included. The probability of forming a community's bedrock with religion is discussed as well (Sakurai & Hamada ed., 2012; Otani & Fujimoto ed., 2012).

Today, volunteering and social contribution activities by religious groups or individuals are gradually increasing. Meanwhile, the backbone given by religion, namely the worldview and

faith, supports volunteers' spiritual side. Moreover, the connections themselves between volunteers who share this worldview and faith are important spiritual support. Therefore, activities consisting of members sharing the religious worldview might project a closed feeling to those who don't. It is the so-called bonding type social capital.

There is another possibility. Social contribution activities by religious groups or religious individual's volunteering might induce social empathy, and communicate an altruistic ethical view with the society regardless of religion. This is the bridging type social capital. Social contribution activities by religious groups and individuals seem to function both as a public space where the spirit of consideration for others can be nurtured as well as substantial support for the activities.

## **8. Closing Remarks**

In the areas affected by the Great East Japan Earthquake, religious facilities including temples, shrines and churches became emergency shelters and many of them accommodated over 300 individuals who spent up to three months. The primary activities of religious individuals in the affected areas include soup kitchens, water supply, sorting/delivering of supplied goods, dredging, removing debris and scraps using heavy machinery, funeral related activities, recuperation programs for children in Fukushima and mental care. Some of these activities still continue even now. Some religious individuals stay close by those who wish to die or the financially poor on a daily basis. Religions have always been involved in helping during various predicaments.

Japan is sometimes referred to as an irreligious country, but there are actually over 180,000 religious corporations, and religious altruism practices and social contributions are conducted by religious individuals and groups. Contrary to the theme presented by modern society of strong self-standing individuals, individual accountability, and absolutist economics, religious altruism, which is alternatively presenting another sense of values and lifestyle will be an important theme from now not only as a social power in public spaces but also when considering future coexistence.

Research on religious altruism is getting more popular. Words such as altruism and social contribution require a value judgement. Needless to say, all research includes value judgements somewhat from the target selection stage. Having your seriousness in undertaking the value judgement questioned while being conscious of your positionality—this is an element common to all research. The researchers' altruism and social contribution are called into question, that is, whether such researchers have exploited the research targets under the curtain of objectivity or neutrality.

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