

Promotions, Inventions and Exhibitions: Strategies for Renewal or Evidence of the Secularisation of Pilgrimage and the Decline of Religion in Contemporary Japan?

Ian Reader, Lancaster University

1. Introduction: An example of pilgrimage promotion in Japan

In August 2008 three well-known Buddhist pilgrimage routes, each comprising 88 sites (one of the standard forms of Japanese Buddhist pilgrimage) held a publicity and promotional event at Centrair, the new international airport near Nagoya in central Japan that was opened in 2005. The three pilgrimages concerned, Sasaguri (near Fukuoka in Kyushu), Chita Hantō (in the Chita peninsula south of Nagoya) and Shōdoshima (in the Inland Sea), have all faced uncertainties and declining pilgrim numbers in recent years, and the event at Centrair had been devised by priests in charge of the routes as a means of trying to revive interest in them. The event comprised an exhibition centred on the pilgrimage and a small replica of the routes, with statues representing each of the sites on the three routes, plus a sachet of soil from each site, being lined up to form a miniature replication of the pilgrimages. Priests were on hand to perform rituals as visitors 'walked' each pilgrimage, and to encourage people to visit the real sites; the airport authorities (keen to promote their airport as well as to make it a local attraction) cooperated fully with the pilgrimage associations, providing not just the space and publicity for the miniature pilgrimage event but also special lunches and the like for those who took part.

This event was one of a number of activities and events put on by Buddhist temples involved with pilgrimage routes in Japan in recent times. In this article I examine the above event and three others, all of which occurred in the period between December 2007 and the end of 2008 and all of which, like the airport mall pilgrimage event, involved temples seeking to promote themselves and/or to revitalise their pilgrimages. Although the four were separate from each other, they had some underlying connections in that each pointed to an underlying concern among Buddhist temple priests not just about falling pilgrim numbers but about declining levels of support for Buddhism and, indeed, for institutional religion in general in Japan (Reader 2011 and 2012). They also provide evidence of some of the strategies being adopted by Buddhist temples to try to counterbalance this apparent decline. In examining and contextualising the four events I will discuss their significance and implications for Buddhism in Japan in the context of the secularising trends that are a striking feature of contemporary Japan.

2. Three further examples of contemporary pilgrimage promotion

2.1 *Promoting a traditional historic pilgrimage*

The three regional pilgrimage routes putting on the aforementioned airport promotion event were not the only pilgrimage temples engaging in special publicity activities at this time. Also in 2008 the Saikoku Reijōkai (西国霊場会, Saikoku Pilgrimage Temple Association; the body coordinating the pilgrimage activities of the 33 temple Saikoku

pilgrimage centred on the Kyoto-Nara region, and one of the most prominent Buddhist pilgrimage routes in Japan historically) was involved in two campaign events to publicise its pilgrimage. One was a cooperative venture with Japan Rail (JR) to increase pilgrim numbers. Together the temples and JR embarked on a publicity campaign entitled '*Eki kara hajimaru Saikoku 33 kashomeguri*' (「駅から始まる西国33カ所巡り」, 'Starting from the station: the 33 stage Saikoku pilgrimage'), highlighted by colourful posters and pamphlets with pictures of the temples and their scenery that were prominently displayed at JR stations. The campaign involved various incentives for pilgrims to use JR to visit the temples in this period, including concessionary train tickets that included admission to the temples and special pilgrimage souvenirs for participants.¹

From September 1st 2008 the Saikoku temples also initiated a promotional event titled the '*Saikoku 33 kasho kechien gokaichō*' (「西国33カ所結縁御開帳」, 'Saikoku 33 temples' good fortune exhibition of hidden icons') that continued until May 31 2010. In this extended campaign the *hibutsu* (秘仏, hidden Buddha icons) – sacred Kannon images possessed by the individual temples on the route – were put on display for the general public. Such displays, known as *kaichō* (開帳, literally 'opening the curtain' (that hides the image)), rest on the notion that certain images are so sacred and powerful that they are normally not seen but kept hidden from the public. This does not mean that the icons are never seen, but that they are displayed only periodically, at which times they are seen to be especially efficacious and may attract crowds of visitors; such thinking and such events have been a recurrent feature of Japanese Buddhist history and there are plentiful examples of temples that hold such *kaichō* events on a periodic basis, usually accompanying them with festivals and ritual events designed to further boost crowds. Zenkōji 善光寺 in Nagano, for example, holds a *kaichō* for its sacred Amida image every seven years, an event that has brought large crowds to that temple and helped the temple raise funds for major renovation works (McCallum 1994: 169-170; Hur 2009: 64). Several of the Saikoku temples have main icons that are supposed to be displayed only very rarely – some only every few decades or even longer, and usually only for very brief periods. One hidden icon had not been seen since 1872 and was not due to be opened to display for many years to come, while others also had not been seen for half a century or more and several were not scheduled for their next public display for many years or even decades to come. Yet from September 2008 onwards all were, on a rolling basis (i.e. a small number of icons at a time for a set period, after which the next set of icons was opened up at other of the 33 temples), displayed at their temples, breaking the historical pattern and custom of display that had been operative for many centuries. Accompanying the rolling *kaichō* were a series of exhibitions related to Saikoku, such as an exhibition of Saikoku temple images at the Nara National Museum (August 1st – September 28th 2008: 'Worshipping Kannon: Treasures from the Thirty-Three Pilgrimage Sites of Western Japan') that was

¹ See JR Nishi Nihon (initially accessed October 27th 2008) for details. Such linkages between train companies and pilgrimage temples or organisations are not uncommon. Hindu and Buddhist organisations in India, for example, worked closely with Indian Railways from the 1920s on to help promote pilgrimages and develop national rail travel (Huber 2008: 304-310).

sponsored by the temples along with prominent media organisations such as NHK and the *Yomiuri shinbun*.

2.2 *Inventing a new pilgrimage*

My third example is the founding, in 2008, of a new pilgrimage – the *Juzu Junrei* (数珠巡礼, ‘Rosary Pilgrimage’) – in the region around Kyoto. This incorporates (as of 2012) 63 shrines and temples, at each of which the visitor/pilgrim acquires a rosary bead inscribed with the name of the shrine or temple visited. The pilgrimage has a flexible structure; one can visit as many, or few, of the temples as one wishes, collecting at each a special rosary bead. By collecting the beads of specific numbers of temples one can make rosaries that have symbolic numerical value (for instance, one can have rosaries of 108 beads, symbolising the 108 evil passions and their eradication, or significant numerical divisions of the 108, such as 36 beads representing 36 passions in this realm). The beads can be used according to pilgrimage promotional literature, to make attractive rosaries or bracelets or other items according to one’s wishes.²

2.3 *Seeking to make a traditional pilgrimage into a World Heritage site*

My fourth example relates to the campaign waged by various agencies in Shikoku to get the island’s famous pilgrimage – the *Shikoku henro* 四国遍路 or *Shikoku hachijūhakkasho* (四国八十八ヶ所, pilgrimage to the 88 temples of Shikoku) – nominated for consideration for UNESCO World Heritage status. This has involved the island’s secular authorities (such as regional governments and tourist boards), various commercial concerns (the island’s various Rotary Clubs and Chambers of Commerce, plus numerous travel firms and transport groups, along with the *Shikoku Reijōkai* 四国霊場会, the association of the 88 Buddhist temples on the Shikoku pilgrimage). These interest groups together submitted an initial application in December 2007 to the Japanese Ministry of Culture asking it to nominate the pilgrimage to UNESCO.³ Although this was unsuccessful at the time – the Ministry required various clarifications about the proposal but remained positive towards it – it continues to be an issue in Shikoku, with the temples and related regional agencies and interest groups continuing to promote the idea.

3. Common themes: decline and fears for the future

While the four examples – all occurring within a few months of each other in late

² The sites together have produced a number of pamphlets and posters advertising the pilgrimage and in which they suggest various uses of the beads (*Juzu Junrei* pamphlets collected by author in Kyoto, January 2012; see also its website (*Juzu Junrei Jimukyoku*, initially accessed April 2012). On the significance of beads in the Buddhist tradition and especially in Japan see George Tanabe’s article in this journal (2012).

³ According to UNESCO rules, nominations for heritage status need to be channelled through a relevant government ministry in the country concerned.

2007-2008 – are independent of each other, they share a common thread. Buddhist temples, and indeed religious institutions as a whole, have been facing difficult times in recent years in Japan, with falling numbers of worshippers, and a general turn away from religious engagement that is hitting rural temples particularly hard and is eating away at the viability of institutions across the country. One can see this most starkly in the first example cited. The pilgrimage routes mentioned initially – Sasaguri, Shōdoshima and Chita Hantō – are all regional pilgrimages that have for long attracted a clientele from relatively close to their locations. In recent years they have all experienced quite sharp falls in pilgrim numbers. This is partly because the falling population of rural Japan means that there are far less potential pilgrims now in the areas from which pilgrims have traditionally come to do these pilgrimages; the clientele for Shōdoshima, for example, has come mainly from areas in northern Kansai, that have been especially hard hit by depopulation. This has significantly reduced the ability of the local pilgrimage confraternities (講, *kō*) and faith associations that in past years had been central to the three pilgrimages' vitality, from gathering enough people together to do the regular group pilgrimages that have until recently been their standard practice. Such confraternities have a rapidly ageing, and diminishing, membership, with little sign of the next generation taking on their practices. This will impact further on pilgrimage support structures in future years. The members of such associations I have spoken to in recent years all say that they feel their confraternities will soon disappear; priests in Shōdoshima, Chita Hantō and Sasaguri have all informed me of this decline and expressed concern that this will fatally damage their pilgrimages unless they took special steps to do something about it. The decline has been most marked in Shōdoshima, which has seen its pilgrim numbers fall dramatically over recent years, until by 2008 the number was a mere 12,500 – less than a quarter of the total of two decades earlier, and falling sharply each year – but similar concerns are also found in Sasaguri and Chita Hantō.⁴

Likewise the Saikoku promotion campaigns outlined above are a response to the problems that that pilgrimage has faced in recent times. Long-vaunted as Japan's pre-eminent Buddhist pilgrimage (and promoted by the Tokugawa Shogunate as a form of national institution, as James Foad (1981) has showed), the Saikoku pilgrimage had, until the 1980s, consistently attracted many more pilgrims than the Shikoku pilgrimage, and it reached peak pilgrim numbers of around 85,000 pilgrims per year in the 1980s. Since then the numbers have steadily fallen – often by as many as 5000 per year – to around 50,000 per year in the early 2000s, a figure now well below that of Shikoku.⁵ The 2008-2010 *kaichō* campaign, the museum exhibitions and the cooperation with Japan Rail to promote the pilgrimage temples via special excursion tickets and presents, were – as I was informed in interviews

⁴ I base the information in this paragraph on interviews with the heads of the pilgrimage associations of all three routes (Chita Hantō in 2004, Shōdoshima on several occasions between 2008 and 2011, and Sasaguri in April 2007 and April 2010), as well as discussions with local government officials, pilgrim lodge owners, and pilgrimage confraternity leaders in Shōdoshima in April 2010.

⁵ For detailed statistics on Saikoku's pilgrim numbers and recent decline, see Satō (2004, especially pp. 139-143).

with officials at some of the temples, and also by people I spoke to at JR's offices⁶ – responses by the Saikoku temples to this decline, and an attempt to boost the popularity of the temples and increase visits to them. The invention of the new pilgrimage based on the notion of rosary beads can be seen also as a response to the concerns of Buddhist temples at falling numbers, and concerns for their longer-term viability. Turning to pilgrimage as a means of trying to counter such problems is in no way a new strategy for temples; indeed, this has been a recurrent pattern and strategy adopted by numerous Buddhist temples over the centuries in Japan, as I discuss below.

In the case of the Shikoku pilgrimage the situation appears on one level to be rather different. Shikoku has been the most popular and successful pilgrimage in Japan in recent times. Pilgrim numbers there have increased almost tenfold over the past four decades, and in the process overtaking Saikoku as Japan's pre-eminent Buddhist pilgrimage route. Whereas in the 1960s Shikoku had half the number of pilgrims as Saikoku, nowadays (based on general estimates that Shikoku gets well over 100,000 pilgrims per year and Saikoku little more than 50,000) the balance has been quite significantly reversed.⁷ To a great degree this has come about because the pilgrimage has been skilfully promoted by the temples in conjunction with various local and regional interest groups (regional government organisations, tourist offices, travel companies and media outlets) in ways that have transformed Shikoku in terms of its public image into the epitome of tradition and of Japanese cultural heritage, and in the process elevating it to the status of Japan's most significant national pilgrimage. Such imagery has been central to its popularity, and has made it the chief pilgrimage of choice of urban Japanese in the modern day.⁸ This success in turn has been a contributing factor to the decline of other pilgrimages; priests in Sasaguri and Shōdoshima have commented to me that some of those who in earlier eras would have done the shorter Shōdoshima or Sasaguri routes now are more likely to go to Shikoku instead. Shikoku's rise to 'national' status – a process helped by various television documentaries on the pilgrimage by the national broadcaster NHK (Reader 2007) – has similarly contributed to the shift in pilgrim numbers from Saikoku to Shikoku and hence has been a factor in the former's decline.⁹

However, priests in Shikoku are also aware of the wider decline in support for Buddhism in Japan and realise that other pilgrimages are losing support; they are aware that, just as Saikoku appears to have lost its standing in recent times, so might Shikoku in the future if they do not take steps to secure the situation now. They are also mindful of how the acquisition of World Heritage status has been of massive

⁶ These interviews were carried out in early April 2008 in Osaka at the offices of Japan Rail, and in the Kyoto region at some of the Saikoku temples.

⁷ See Maeda (1971) for sociological analysis of pilgrim numbers in both routes from Tokugawa times through to the 1960s – a period when Saikoku always had more pilgrims – and Satō (2004, esp. pp 139-143 and 162-167) for comparisons of Saikoku and Shikoku numbers.

⁸ See Mori (2005), Reader (2005: 150-186) and Reader (2007) for discussion of this process and about the ways in which such imagery has been constructed and proved popular.

⁹ I base these comments on various discussions with priests from Sasaguri, Shōdoshima and Saikoku in the past four years.

benefit to the Santiago de Compostela pilgrimage in Spain¹⁰ and they, and regional authorities and commercial concerns in Shikoku, have paid careful attention to how Santiago de Compostela has acquired such heritage status and successfully marketed itself as a result. There is a general sense among those involved in promoting the Shikoku pilgrimage that the Santiago pilgrimage serves as a marker and guiding point in their own strategies of development. As a result they have become interested in acquiring similar World Heritage status for their pilgrimage. This is not a view just of committed priests from the temples, but also a strategy supported and pursued by Shikoku local and regional government authorities as well as by commercial interests in the island. During spring 2008 I conducted a series of interviews in Shikoku with numerous figures involved in the campaign to be nominated as a World Heritage site, including representatives of the four regional governments of Shikoku, officials in the island's tourist offices, and representatives of the island's Chambers of Commerce, as well as with temple priests. All indicated that there was a consensus in Shikoku that making the pilgrimage a UNESCO World Heritage route is a vital element in their hopes of regenerating the island's falling economy. Such heritage status would, they hope, turn the island and pilgrimage into an international tourism destination and increase pilgrim numbers, in the same way as has happened with Santiago de Compostela.

4. Rearticulating traditional strategies of revival and promotion?

What links all the cases together – besides their background in the fear of decline – is that they all centre on a very traditional Buddhist engagement with pilgrimage in Japan as a common strategy for promoting and/or reviving Buddhist institutions, coupled with the use of public displays, exhibitions and similar events as a further strategy of popularisation. Pilgrimages have been a prominent activity in the development and spreading of Buddhism in Japan, as well as being one of the most standard strategies Buddhist temples have used to revive declining fortunes. Lori Meeks (2010: 24-25), for example, gives the example of Hokkeji 法華寺, a nunnery in the Nara region that had faced decline in the late Heian period but that countered that decline and related loss of patronage by promoting miraculous legends associated with its female 8th century founder Komyō 光明. Such legends spurred a flow of pilgrims, turning Hokkeji into a pilgrimage site and reviving its fortunes. This use of pilgrimage as a means of reinvigorating temples and of attracting visitors has been a recurrent in Japanese history; it is a means whereby temples have countered potential decline in the modern era as well (Reader 1996). The Hokkeji case – in which a temple was in essence reinvented as a pilgrimage site via the creation of tales and legends endowing it with sacred power – also manifests another facet of this broader strategy and process, whereby pilgrimages may be invented by enterprising priests and other activists in Japan in order to boost visitor numbers and

¹⁰ See Frey (1998) and Roseman (2004) for discussions of how acquisition of World Heritage status has boosted the numbers of visitors and pilgrims to Santiago de Compostela. In December 2010 I visited Santiago to participate in a conference on pilgrimage, and local scholars there also emphasised how crucial this UNESCO heritage status has been to the growth of Santiago pilgrim numbers.

bring more people into their temples (Reader 1996). The 2008 invention of the *Juzu Junrei* is another such case in point.

The technique of using hidden icons to attract visitors, too, as I have already noted, is not a new strategy but one embedded in Japanese Buddhist history, and one widely used by pilgrimage routes as a whole, as well as by individual temples, to increase temple fortunes. Studies of such *kaichō* events show that they have been a successful means through which many pilgrimage sites and routes have boosted pilgrim flows. Satō Hisamitsu's study of pilgrim numbers in Japan shows that the 34 stage Chichibu pilgrimage (秩父巡礼, *Chichibu junrei*), located a relatively short distance from Tokyo, regularly used *kaichō* events at which the icons of all the temples (which are normally all hidden) were opened up at the same time at regular intervals in the 18th and 19th centuries. Such events were highly successful in bringing large numbers of pilgrims to Chichibu in the 18th and 19th centuries (Satō 2004: 52). He also shows that the Chichibu temples had faced a period of decline, like many pilgrimage routes after the end of World War II, but managed to revive their pilgrimage after a successful *kaichō* event in 1966, and that Chichibu pilgrim numbers have virtually doubled in *kaichō* years from the normal of around 25-30,000 per year to above 50,000 (2004: 148). Normally the Chichibu temples hold this event every twelve years – doubling their normal yearly average of pilgrims in 2003 – but they also held a special *kaichō* in 2008. The reason for holding the event far earlier than normal was, I was told by pilgrimage priests when I visited Chichibu in spring 2008, because pilgrim numbers were falling. The special early *kaichō* was an attempt to redress the problem.

Similarly the use of exhibitions to promote pilgrimages is another well-used stratagem. Known as *degaichō* 出開帳 (a *kaichō* outside (*de*) the temple precincts), the practice of sending temple icons to be put on display in another place – normally a major population centre – or of constructing a miniature pilgrimage route of icons and soil from existing pilgrimage routes that would be displayed at such venues – was a widely used practice in earlier ages, notably Tokugawa era Japan, as a means of drumming up support for and interest in pilgrimage sites and temples among urban populations. Zenkōji, mentioned above, also used this technique to raise funds for temple renovations, holding *degaichō* events in Edo (Tokyo), Kyoto and Osaka between 1692 and 1694, and then again a few years later, to fund building campaigns (McCallum 1994: 171-173). Satō (2004: 101) shows how Chichibu pilgrimage temples, as well as opening up their hidden icons on a regular basis to attract pilgrims from Edo (Tokyo), also brought images of their temples into the city regularly in the Tokugawa era for similar reasons. In Tokugawa-era Edo certain temples – notably Gokokuji 護国寺 and Ekōin 回向院 – became regular hosts for such *degaichō* events, which were used by distant temples and pilgrimage routes to draw attention to themselves so as to attract potential pilgrim visitors for the amongst the capital's populace. So popular and common were these that Ekōin alone is said to have hosted some 166 *degaichō* events between 1676 (the date of the first recorded such event) and the end of the Tokugawa era (Ishimori 1995: 15).

In modern times, the focus of such events has changed. While they used to be held in 'religious' arenas, at temples such as Ekōin, from the nineteenth century onwards

there has been a tendency to hold such displays in what might be seen as more overtly 'secular' contexts – notably in department stores, which have served as a modern commercial *and* cultural institution associated with display and the exhibition of arts and related cultural phenomena ever since their emergence in nineteenth century urban Japan (Mori 2005). Pilgrimage *degaichō* exhibitions have been common in department stores in recent decades: the Chichibu temples, for example, held a *degaichō* exhibition in 1986 at Matsuzakaya Store in Asakusa, Tokyo, and in 1987, the Saikoku temples held a series of such events in department stores owned by the Kintetsu Company (which also owns railway lines that could be used to access several of the Saikoku temples) as part of a campaign to publicise the pilgrimage. The Shikoku temples have been highly successful in holding such events in the modern era, starting with a *degaichō* in a park in Osaka in 1937 partially sponsored by the Nankai Railway Company (Mori 2005: 71-85) and continuing with numerous such events in the post-war era along with exhibitions put on at museums and similar places, in order to draw attention not just to the religious symbols of the pilgrimage but also to its artistic merits and the beauties of the statuary that could be seen at the temples (Reader 2007) – a theme evident also in the aforementioned exhibitions of Saikoku art held at museums in 2008.

5. Displays, inventions and heritage applications

Thus, holding displays and exhibitions in itself is also not a new phenomenon but a tried and tested one – albeit one that has in the modern day been more commonly located in secular spaces such as museums and department stores rather than temples. In many respects the decision of the priests of Sasaguri, Shōdoshima and Chita Hantō to take their pilgrimage to an airport mall is a strikingly modern extension of this process. It was, as priests in the Sasaguri and Shōdoshima pilgrimage associations informed me at separate times, an attempt to 'take the pilgrimage to the people'. Nowadays, the head of the Shōdoshima pilgrimage association said, people are not going to temples so, in order to attract their attention, the temples needed to go to the people and find ways of engaging them in the places where modern people gather – such as shopping malls and airports. Hence it was to such places that temples needed to go in order to gain the attention of modern consumerist crowds.¹¹ Certainly the intentions of the three pilgrimage associations, to take the pilgrimage to the people in the places – the malls and airports – where they now gather may reflect an intention to break Buddhism out of its secluded temple environment, but it also involves making the temple/pilgrimage into an entertainment spectacle in the commercial world, an exhibit to be gazed at by curious visitors to an airport mall that is itself seeking to become a tourist attraction. In such terms this can be seen as another aspect of the ways in which temples and pilgrimage sites are transforming themselves into items of display and into artistic exhibits to be gazed at for their cultural splendour and visual attractiveness rather than to be venerated for their religious power.

¹¹ This comment was made to me by Rev. Fukuhara from Shōdoshima in April 2008, as he and his colleagues were making plans for the event in question.

The increasing pace at which *kaichō* events are being held, also, as the recent 2008 Saikoku and Chichibu events indicate, appears to be part of this process. While *kaichō* are historically embedded practices, the recent *kaichō* events indicate also a breach in their normal modes of practice. The potency of hidden icons rests on their scarcity value and on the fact that they are on display only occasionally or very rarely. In Saikoku and Chichibu holding such events more frequently and shortening the intervals between such displays has been done because of the need to reverse the decline in pilgrims. Yet this raises serious longer-term questions about what happens if, for example, in a few years time, the Saikoku or Chichibu temples again feel that declining numbers require a dramatic response. Will they organize another *kaichō* of all their icons, so that an icon that had traditionally been displayed only every one hundred or more years, becomes put on show more and more often? At what point, then, does the potent allure of secrecy and display so crucial to the attraction of hidden icons, become diluted or removed altogether?

Turning to the invented pilgrimage centred on rosaries and beads, this, as has been noted above, represents a pattern common to Japanese Buddhism, of pilgrimage invention as a means of regeneration. Yet at the same time one cannot but note that there are distinct changes in context between earlier eras when, as with the case of Hokkeji, new pilgrimage sites were promoted on the basis of legends and tales of miracle, and the more recent *Juzu Junrei* focus on material goods as a core stimulus for pilgrims. Pilgrims have certainly always sought souvenirs, amulets and the like from the places they have visited,¹² yet with the souvenirs being offered to those who joined in the joint Saikoku temple and Japan Rail campaign, and in particular with the beads that are offered as an incentive to those who participate in the *Juzu Junrei* pilgrimage, we appear to be seeing a new dimension to this process: material goods being offered as incentives to entice people to visit temples and as the *focus* of a pilgrimage. In the case of the beads that can be made into rosaries and other attractive items, too, a traditional Buddhist item associated with prayer and worship, is being projected primarily as a material commodity to be sought not for its religious value but as a decorative artifact and consumer item. As the *Juzu Junrei* pilgrimage pamphlet and website (see note 2) inform us, the beads can be made not just into rosaries but into bracelets and whatever other forms one likes. This reflects a further emphasis on and intensification of commodification in pilgrimage terms, in which the souvenir becomes in effect the goal and focus of the pilgrimage, which in turn becomes a journey to acquire a commodity.

The Shikoku example – which as I have mentioned earlier is the one example of a pilgrimage whose contemporary dynamics are centred not around measures designed to rectify decline but to preserve an existing healthy position of support – is perhaps the most striking example of all, however, to exemplify the suggestion evident in this article that deep transformations are occurring to reorient Buddhist pilgrimages in ways that appear to be eroding their Buddhist dimensions. While as I have noted earlier, the pilgrimage has been widely publicised and projected as a

¹² In the book I am now completing I have an extensive discussion of souvenirs and their importance in the framework of pilgrimage; see Reader (2013: Chapter Six).

cultural phenomenon, in media broadcasts as well as in guidebooks produced by the temples themselves, the UNESCO application in December 2007 appears to extend this process of image projection even further into the secular sphere.

The application to the Japanese Ministry of Culture (文化庁, Bunkachō) was put together by a number of Shikoku regional authorities in cooperation with the pilgrimage temples and was submitted through the island's regional government offices. What is especially striking about the application is that, along with much of the rhetoric surrounding the campaign in general, it pays very little attention to concepts often associated with pilgrimage, such as religion, faith, practice, sacred icons, apparitions or miracles. The 44-page application document gives a very brief introductory history of the pilgrimage, mentioning its roots in a cult of faith around the Buddhist figure Kūkai 空海, known in folk faith terms as Kōbō Daishi 弘法大師, who was born in Shikoku in 775 and who in legend is said to have founded the pilgrimage. After this short introduction, the application avoids any mention of terms such as *shūkyō* (宗教, religion) and *shinkō* (信仰, faith). Terms such as miracles (靈驗, *reigen* or 奇蹟, *kiseki*) do not appear at all. Instead the application focuses on the natural surroundings of Shikoku (p. 14, p. 22), the old streets and traditional houses and buildings found along the route (p. 14), the cultural assets and artistic treasures found at the temples (pp. 10-13), and the fact that the route passes through a large number of towns and districts throughout the island, thereby providing a focus of unity and identity for it (p. 14). The pilgrimage is described as a living cultural property (生きた文化資産, *ikita bunkashisan*, p. 9), and references are made repeatedly to the 'pilgrimage culture' (遍路の文化, *henro no bunka*, 遍路文化, *henro bunka*) of Shikoku (e.g. p. 40) and of the need to conserve this cultural heritage for future generations (Ehime-ken et al. 2007).

Such terminology has pervaded the Shikoku heritage campaign; in numerous pamphlets I have seen related to it, and in interviews with interested parties, from government officials to the PR agency that has been coordinating the campaign, to the priests themselves, the constant phrase being used was that of the island's *henro bunka* – pilgrimage culture. This term was chosen, officials informed me, because it enabled them to avoid any mention of *shūkyō* (religion) (a term that because of the legal situation and the constitutional separation of state and religion, is problematic because public money is being used from the island's regional government offices to support the campaign and application) and because it enabled them to portray the pilgrimage as an aspect of regional culture, rather than as a manifestation of faith.¹³ Yet such a depiction goes against the reality of the pilgrimage's situation in Shikoku itself. While one can understand the reluctance of authorities to talk about religion and faith in an application for heritage status, one should also be aware that the pilgrimage has long been a central element in the religious structure of Shikoku – a point emphasised in local studies of the faith and religious lives of the island's

¹³ The regional government officials I interviewed in Shikoku in late March 2008 were all clear on this point. The temples, conscious of the need to work with such authorities (since their support is essential if heritage status is to be acquired) have gone along with this secularising focus, it would appear, because of their need to get the government agencies on board for the application to succeed.

residents (Kaneko 1991). In essence, then, the application has been framed around disregarding the *religious* heritage of the pilgrimage in Shikoku.

6. Sanitising the pilgrimage and removing 'religion' from the agenda?

There are some signs that the Shikoku temples, as well as going along with the governmental need to remove allusions to religion in the application, have acted to downplay, or even eradicate, various religiously oriented elements from the contemporary pilgrimage. One relates to the collection of leg braces and other items that were on display at one of the temples famed for miraculous events and healing on the pilgrimage, Iyataniji 弥谷寺. This mountain temple has been the setting for numerous miracle tales in which infirm and physically disabled pilgrims, having managed to climb up its steep steps, experienced dramatic cures, after which they cast aside the crutches, leg braces and other supporting accoutrements that they had hitherto relied on. The physical reminders of such stories for many years adorned the approach to Iyataniji's main hall of worship, where a collection of crutches, leg braces, corsets and similar items had been left behind by apparently cured pilgrims. I first saw them in 1984 on my first visit to Shikoku, and on numerous subsequent visits to the temple I always noted how the items created a buzz of interest among pilgrims. The party of pilgrims I visited Iyataniji with in 1991, for example, became highly animated when told, by our guide, of the presence of these items, and were really excited to see them when they climbed the steep steps to the temple. A picture I took of them featured in my book on Shikoku (Reader 2005: 68).

Yet in April 2005, when I visited Iyataniji after some years of absence, I was surprised to see that they had disappeared, and that the wall and surrounding area where they had been displayed, had been repainted. I assumed they had been moved temporarily while redecorating was going on, but on asking an official, I was told that they had been taken away for good quite recently. The reason was that they were old, a sign of former more superstitious times that was out of kilter with the modern day and with modern pilgrimage culture. Various contacts in Shikoku later confirmed this, saying that their removal was part of a conscious effort to eradicate items that seemed overly associated with pre-modern superstitions.

Another casualty of this process has been the proscription of *takuhatsu* 托鉢, begging for alms by pilgrims, at or in front of the temples. *Takuhatsu* has been common among Shikoku pilgrims over the centuries. It is based in Buddhist monastic concepts, in which monks, as a mark of humility and in order to sustain themselves in an austere lifestyle, were expected to beg for alms as part of their Buddhist practice. Pilgrims in Shikoku in the past adopted the practice both because being on pilgrimage was seen as temporarily taking on a status of transience somewhat akin to that of a monk, but also because, for many, it was an economic necessity. The practice had been dying out in Shikoku as Japan's economy grew in the modern day, as pilgrims became increasingly better off, and as organised bus tours and comfortable facilities changed the tenor of the pilgrimage.

However in the past decade or so *takuhatsu* has become more prominent again because of Japan's economic recession, which threw lots of people out of work and led to an upsurge in unemployed men becoming pilgrims in order to deal with the emotional trauma of losing their jobs. Such pilgrims have often been in financial straits, and have turned to begging as a means of helping support their pilgrimages. Yet, although beggar-pilgrims had been an accepted part of pilgrimage in earlier times, they clearly did not fit in with the temples' vision of what modern pilgrimage ought to look like, for in 2007 the Shikoku Reijōkai decided to ban pilgrims from doing *takuhatsu* at or in front of the temples (Hamaya 2009). According to Hamaya Mariko (2009), the reason for doing this was because the priests (and others involved in the pilgrimage industry) were worried that such beggar-pilgrims would put off visitors and tarnish the image of the pilgrimage. Although the Shikoku Reijōkai might emphasise the importance and image of tradition as a key selling point in its promotional materials about the pilgrimage, it clearly wants to edit this image of tradition in ways that make the pilgrimage conform more neatly to orientations of modern well-off visitors.

Shikoku pilgrimage authorities have thus sought to make the pilgrimage fit more closely with the ethos of the modern day by eradicating discarded leg braces and crutches, beggar-pilgrims and such signs of the pilgrimage's wilder and more impoverished past. There is a sanitising process going on here – one closely associated with the 'heritage-isation' of pilgrimage, in which it is projected increasingly as a cultural product steeped in notions of heritage, and transformed from being primarily something that is faith-based and grounded in the miraculous, into a cultural tour that accords with the needs and moods of modern Japanese (and in the eyes of the UNESCO campaigners, hopefully international) tourists.¹⁴

7. Of secularisation and religious decline

The examples I have cited in this article all revolve around one crucial issue: the decline in pilgrim numbers experienced by several formerly vibrant pilgrimage routes in Japan. This has not just affected the pilgrimages concerned but has worried the most successful route currently in Japan, Shikoku, and been a major factor in the linkages developed by its pilgrimage temples with secular government agencies and with the application for recognition as a world heritage site. These events need to be viewed in a wider context than simply the erosion of pilgrim numbers on some Japanese routes. As I have discussed elsewhere, there is a widespread sense of crisis in temple Buddhism in Japan, resulting from a huge erosion of confidence in the institution – an erosion that has seen large numbers of temples close, and an escalating public turn away from engagement with what has been Buddhism's main support structure in terms of practice and economics, namely Buddhist funerals and the memorialisation of the dead (Reader 2011; Nelson 2012)

¹⁴ One should note that similar issues and concerns are present among religious authorities in Santiago de Compostela where there is (according to comments made to me by colleagues there) concern that the heritage and culture process has denuded the pilgrimage of its religious content. I discuss such issues further in Reader (2013: Chapter Seven).

This concern and sense of crisis is not just one related to Buddhist temples or to their involvement in the funerary process. Much evidence indicates that – especially in the period since the 1995 attack on the Tokyo subway by the religious movement Aum Shinrikyō – support for religious groups is in decline, along with a continuing decline in many religious practices (Reader 2012). Coupled with this is a widespread hostility to religion in general, which (in the aftermath of Aum) is often perceived, according to surveys, as dangerous and in need of state control (Baffelli and Reader 2012: 7-15). This erosion of support for religious institutions has affected many if not all organisations in Japan at some level. My discussions with representatives of a number of new religious movements indicates that they also are struggling to retain followers and are finding it hard to gain new recruits. This point has been emphasised by Levi McLaughlin (2012) in his recent examination of Sōka Gakkai – Japan’s largest religious organisation – in the period since the Aum attack of 1995. McLaughlin indicates that Sōka Gakkai, too, has seen its support decline and shows that as a result of public hostility and as part of its strategy for the long-term, it has drawn back from its earlier orientation as a mass proselytising movement. Now, instead, it is devoting its energies to strategies designed to retain the support of its current members.

The wider indications and implications are that religious institutions such as Buddhist temples are facing severe problems in Japan at present. This is impacting on pilgrimage in many ways, notably with the evident decline in pilgrim numbers affecting several of the routes cited here and with the worries that even those associated with a currently successful pilgrimage (Shikoku) have about their future. It is unsurprising that in a time of such concern, many of those involved with Buddhist temples have turned to such activities as pilgrimage promotion and the display of normally hidden icons as a strategy for survival. As I have noted, these have been recurrent Buddhist temple strategies for growth and revival in Japan. Yet at the same time, such activities appear also to indicate that the very acts of strategic development utilised to bring about the longer-term future of temples and pilgrimages, themselves involve embracing the dynamics of secularity and consumerism. Consumerism, entertainment and commodification have certainly been repeated elements in the dynamics of pilgrimage in Japan and elsewhere (e.g. Thal 2005; Kanzaki 1990). Yet the invention of the *Juzu Junrei* pilgrimage, with its emphasis on the acquisition of material goods and decorative items as the primary focus and motivation for pilgrimage (coupled with an evident lack of any talk of faith in the publicity materials for the pilgrimage), appears to be extending this orientation in ways not previously seen. Pilgrimage now appears to be made into a consumerist and acquisition-oriented enterprise stripped of any notion of faith. Similarly the UNESCO-focused Shikoku heritage campaign, along with the removal of elements that alluded to the pilgrimage’s associations with faith, miracle and Buddhist practice, appear to be transforming the pilgrimage increasingly into a tourist affair tied to culture, heritage and regional regeneration. While the uses of public display evident in the *kaichō* events of Saikoku and Chichibu may also be common Buddhist strategies for increasing support, they also fit into this pattern of transforming pilgrimage into a spectacle and a form of public exhibition while equally, as I have suggested above, running the risk of weakening the very power of the icons that are

displayed.

In other words, while the various events outlined in this article can all be seen as actions taken by temples in order to deal with a crisis and as means of regeneration for the sake of longer-term survival, they all revolve around potentially weakening the structures of pilgrimage as a religious activity. In Japan, I would suggest, this process is another sign of Buddhism's problems, and of secularisation. The cultural transformations of pilgrimage evident in the events, exhibitions and heritage campaigns mentioned here, suggest that strategies for reviving and popularising Buddhism are simultaneously processes potentially liable to weaken the tradition, detach it further from its bases in faith and religious engagement, and make it more and more into a form of heritage and cultural history exhibit. In seeking to shore up its declining fortunes via promoting pilgrimages in an age of secularisation and religious decline, temples are further commoditising pilgrimage, making it more and more into a heritage tour, and instead of reviving, may well be instead further eroding their own tradition.

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