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## “Spiritual Apostasy” in Contemporary Japan: Religion, Taboos and The Ethics of Capitalism<sup>1</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

In the last decades, *supirichuariti*, the katakana word that refers to the concept of “spirituality,” which is generally understood as a post-1970s phenomenon in Japan, has been used to argue for the return of religiosity in domains outside “traditional religions.” The first decade of the twenty first century even saw what was termed a “spiritual boom” which was mostly fuelled by an increased visibility on television and popular magazines of alternative therapies and self-development theories, resembling the spiritual-but-not-religious (SBNR) interests in other parts of the world, but basing themselves on an explicit boundary work with established religious practice. The spiritual, however, has, like the so-called “cults” since the Aum affair, been the target of attacks by media and scholarly discourse for its allegedly “dangerous” religiosity and fraudulent money transactions. The religion vs spirituality debate seems therefore to hide another debate, good spirituality vs bad spirituality, where taboo-discourse in relation to religion thrives. This paper introduces a recent phenomenon that adds yet another layer of attacks on spirituality in Japan. In the last 5 years, criticism against *supirichuariti* (sometimes termed *datsu-supi*, “ditching spirituality”) seems to have risen from among the ranks of the spiritual’s most fervent followers, to attack an ideology that has become “too self-centred” as its critics argue. This type of rhetoric seems, at first glance, to reiterate the anti-cult, pseudo-nostalgic narrative that considers money transactions to be “taboo” in the case of “proper religion.” Yet, I argue, that the taboo-ization of spirituality as object of business transactions by those whom I call “spiritual apostates”, reveals a more subtle critique, which is centred on capitalism rather than on religion. Spiritual apostasy, contrary to the anti-cult rhetoric, is, first and foremost, about what “good” capitalism is; not what “good” spirituality is.

**KEYWORDS:** spiritual apostasy, taboo, capitalist ethics, consumer fraud

In this paper, I look into secularist meta-narratives of taboo that are associated with the “pitfalls” of alternative and holistic spiritualities and

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produced by people who used to embrace such practices, but who have since turned against them. More specifically, I introduce the concept of *spiritual apostasy* to make sense of an emergent set of norms surrounding religion, spirituality, and capitalist consumption. Whereas scholarly critics of spirituality have sometimes exhibited nostalgia for an authentic religious past that was purportedly not characterized by crass consumerism, recent advocates of “ditching spirituality” (*datsu-supi* 脱スピ) have instead argued within the frame of market logic, critiquing predatory marketing while assuming that spiritual striving and self-transformation will take place in a capitalist frame. Building on the notion of “anxious secularity” (in which stakeholders are uncertain about how to draw the line between religion and non-religion), I argue that these critics mobilize a set of taboos concerning the ethics of spiritual capitalist consumption in a secular society. Consider the following example: M is one of the few people who has tweeted regularly using the tag *datsu-supi* from early 2015 to mid-2017. He also has consistently blogged using the same keyword from late 2014 to late 2018. M is perhaps a typical example of someone presenting himself as a “survivor” of the spiritual market. His Twitter profile stresses the importance of having failed entirely in life but having managed to get back on his feet. Single and broke at 40, M says to have managed to spin things around by changing his personality *on his own*. From then it was the road to success with money, a marriage and lots of advice to share with others who have tried (but have failed) to change themselves by seeking the advice of spiritual therapists, self-development workshops and life-advising books. M’s argument is that one can achieve the same results, with more “realistic” (*genjitsuteki*, 現実的) means, in a more personalized way that is more “normal,” “ethical” and “true.” His criticism of the “spiritual” is in fact rather fierce: “the spiritual makes people dependent, like a drug [...] I was one of them, spending money to become a better person, but it did not work [...] the spiritual is a necessary evil [...] it is there for us to realize that that is what we do not need.”

M and others produce highly personalized accounts that appeal to a privatized sense of self-authority, which is common among the “spiritual, but not religious” populace. However, such discourse reveals also a highly developed secularist argumentation based on what is the proper way to spend money to maximize benefits, and to achieve what M would call “realistic” everyday life goals. Some even propose that if one is to continue this type of business one should give one fourth of their income to charities, or one should adopt a proper refund policy for unsatisfied clients. Some even claim that spiritual therapies should be free. At first glance, all this

often sounds like the warnings of a consumer protection body, which, does not necessarily criticize the product, but the way the product is being advertised, and how this may lead to customer dissatisfaction.

Of course, most of these debates happen online, often anonymously, on internet blogs and SNS platforms; and the word taboo is almost never explicitly used. Taboo, in this paper, is rather used as a descriptive for a meta-narrative linking “religion/spirituality” and “money” negatively. I employ “taboo” as a way to understand how a fierce critique of a practice associated with religion (=consumption) serves at the same time to claim for a “pure” religion *and* as an attack on contemporary social ethics, not necessarily confined to religious practice. In fact, in his critique of the concept of “taboo,” Talal Asad often refers to the work of Franz Steiner (1950) who famously claimed: “we can thus call Polynesian taboo customs a Protestant discovery [...] a Victorian invention” (Steiner 2004: 50). As Steiner explains, the emergence of the concept of “taboo” was the result of a rationalist approach to religion: socio-religious thoughts and behaviour that could be not absorbed into theories of rational ethics were put under the headings of “magic” and “taboo”: the odd ‘do’s’ and the odder ‘don’t’s’ that were favoured by those calling themselves “scientists” (Steiner 1950: 51). In a similar way, the critique by people like M stems from not knowing where (rational, legal and “normal”) religion stops, and where commerce and money transactions ruled by capitalist ethics start. In this, they express secularity in the way Jolyon Baraka Thomas has recently described it in his analysis of the secularist Meiji constitutional regime, which tried to distinguish between religion/non-religion and then, sometimes quite arbitrarily, acted on such distinction to dictate social, legal and political life.

Secularity is therefore not the mere absence of religion, nor is it the progressive diminution of religion in public life (“secularization”), nor it is simply a state of affairs characterized by the assumption that mundane concerns supersede transcendent ones. Secularity is, rather, the state of being uncertain about what counts as religion and what does not. Secularity is anxious (Thomas 2019: 26).

According to Thomas, it is precisely this situation where the question of how to define religion remains always unresolved that made the Meiji regime repressive towards marginal movements labelled “heresies”, but

supportive, for example, of shrine rites described as nonreligious civic duties (Thomas 2019: 28).

To put it in a contemporary context, is paying a spiritual counsellor to read my aura (see Gaitanidis 2019), the same as paying a Shinto priest to bless me? Both transactions, even if not officially regulated, respond to some sort of market price. One, in fact, has only to look on the web to find numerous pages dedicated to the proper amount of money that should be given in either of those occasions. Both the spiritual counsellor and the Shinto priest make a living, at least partly, from these transactions. Yet, contrary to the Shinto priest who acts within the framework of the public benefit corporation (*kōeki hōjin* 公益法人) that a religious corporation (*shūkyō hōjin* 宗教法人) such as a shrine is (see Horii 2018: 201), the “reading” of halos of different colours that allegedly surround every living being (i.e. auras), would be classified, like the practice of divination, as “entertainment business” rather than “religion” (Horii 2018: 229). Religion is the superstition that secular scientism could not expel (Josephson 2012: 260) is perhaps here the most apt observation to make.

And, here lies also what I see as the most significant difference between the anti-cult movement and the recent *datsu-supi* movement: while the first has, since its beginnings in 1970s North America (see Shupe and Darnell 2006), been concerned with attacking New Religious Movements, New Age and holistic spiritualities and therapies, self-development seminars and the like, because they do not offer “proper” religious alternatives, the second, more recent movement, is rather attacking these same organisations and services for what I can simply summarize as “consumer fraud.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed, for the most fervent “ditchers of spirituality,” anything related with the *supirichuaru* should be consumed with care, because there is nothing/no one that can help an individual grow more spiritually than themselves. In this paper, I show that in doing this, they join critiques of neo-liberalism that have recently paid attention to “[t]he economization of everything and every sphere, including political life, [which] desensitizes us to the bold contradiction between an allegedly free-market and a state now wholly in service to and controlled by it” (Brown 2015: 40).

From Byung-Chul Han’s “psycho-politics” (2017) to Shoshanna Zuboff’s “surveillance capitalism” (2019), social critique has, indeed, recently stepped up its warnings against a capitalist regime that harnesses the

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<sup>2</sup> The negative and popular use of the word “cult” to designate religious groups entered Japanese media discourse in 1991 and was later strongly associated with the NRM Aum Shinrikyō (Sakurai 2014: 102).

psyche as a productive force, and that prospers on behaviour modification based on the large-scale gathering of private information.

Surveillance capitalism’s products and services are not the objects of a value exchange. They do not establish constructive producer-consumer reciprocities. Instead, they are the “hooks” that lure users into their extractive operations in which our personal experiences are scraped and packaged as the means to others’ ends. We are not surveillance capitalism’s “customers.” [...] We are the sources of surveillance capitalism’s crucial surplus: the objects of a technologically advanced and increasingly inescapable raw-material-extraction operation (Zuboff 2019: 10).

In this paper, I argue therefore that people like M seem to try to counter the degree to which self-searching could escape individual control and become not a commercial product (as some may imagine this critique to be leading to), but a source of patterned information that allows some spiritual therapists to strengthen their techniques of attracting more clients and continue living off people’s anxieties.

### **Spirituality and *Supirichuariti***

In a general sense, M’s critique concerns the market surrounding “21<sup>st</sup> century spiritualities”: “[a]s new generations of believers are taught to question the tenets of religious authorities, more and more people are attempting to establish their own personal beliefs rather than affiliate themselves with an established dogma. This has led to the emergence and growth of subjectivized forms of religion in the non-institutional field” (Possamai 2019). Research on these 21<sup>st</sup> century spiritualities was originally strongly associated with studies of the New Age Movement (Heelas 1996; Hanegraaff 1996), which later came to be used as an alternative referent to talk about the active and fervent core of a larger section of the (mostly) American, Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian populace that called itself “spiritual, but not religious” (Fueller 2001).

It is clear today, however, that definitions of the New Age, contemporary spiritualities, holistic spiritualities and similar concepts often suffer from trying to essentialize very complex phenomena that are by no means distinct from “mainstream” religious groups or from the otherwise “secular” society (see, for example, Bender 2010). Yet, a fundamental characteristic of these subjectivized forms of religion seems to be a

generalized focus on “techniques” that can be learned out of books or by attending workshops, and which are supposed to lead the individual towards the discovery and cultivation of an inner self (Pike 2004: 23).

Indeed, when I started my fieldwork in the Japanese spiritual business in 2009, I used an online inventory listing approximately 1,000 practitioners and offering more than 150 “spiritual therapies” (Gaitanidis 2011): past-life therapy, rose healing, DNA activation, spiritual counselling, and the like. The word therapy here is perhaps misleading, since these “techniques” frequently claim to go beyond a simple recovery from trauma (more often psychological than physical); they are rather presented as hints, tools towards self-awareness and a better, worry-free life. They foster therefore “emotional management” and seem, at least in the short term, to empower the self (Riis and Woodhead 2010: 163).

In Japan, *supirichuariti* is often discussed as a religiosity that is an alternative to what organized religion and especially the so-called “cults” have to offer. The two, in fact, cults and the spiritual, have been visually pitted one against the other, like these two magazines in Figure 1, both published in February 2013.



Figure1. Covers of two magazines published in February 2013.

The magazine on the left explicitly titled “Darkside report on Religion” deals with allegedly “dangerous groups and how people get drawn into them.” While the magazine on the right, with a more “pop”-styled cover, shows a shrine gate and tells us how we can feel better by visiting “power spots.” Simply put, journalists present “religion” as bad, but they present

power spots and the like, summarized under the term “spirituality,” as good. This sort of taboo-ization of “religion” has been a convenient way to explain the rise of spirituality in Japan in the 21st century. Scholars, such as Horie (2009), have often advanced the Aum affair and subsequent rise of the anti-cult rhetoric (see Watanabe 1997) as the reason for which the word *supirichuariti*<sup>3</sup> came to be used as an alternative to express religious activity outside religious organizations.

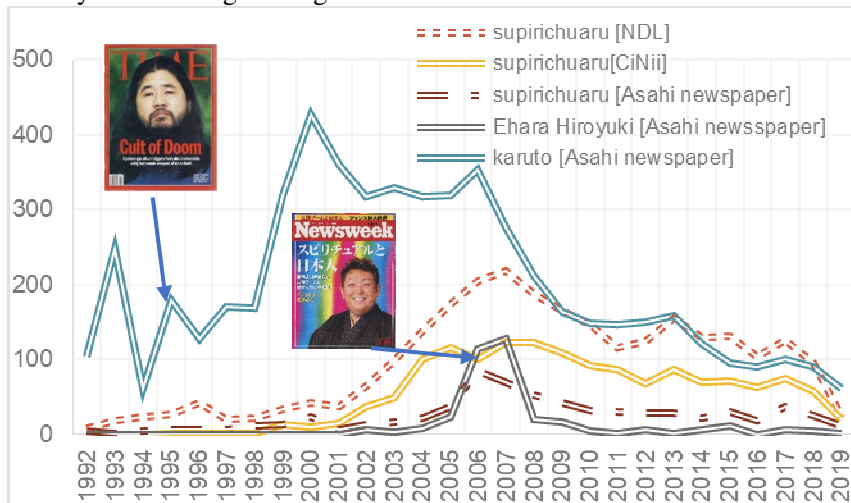


Figure 2. Number of hits of “supirichuaru”, “karuto” and “Ehara Hiroyuki” in several databases.

Indeed, in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the term *supirichuaru* or *supirichuariti* caused something of a media (and by extension scholarly) boom, as can be seen in Figure 2, which summarizes the number of hits for these terms on the databases of the Asahi newspaper, the National Library Catalogue (NDL) and the bibliographic database of academic libraries (CiNii). The term has undoubtedly been associated with Ehara Hiroyuki (pictured on the cover of Newsweek), a self-proclaimed spiritual counsellor, whose televised presence reached a peak of audience rates around 2006-2007. The associated market of alternative therapy sessions, products and the like was estimated to be approximately 1 trillion yen, which is the size of the pet market or half the size of the cosmetics market in Japan (Arimoto 2011: 52).

<sup>3</sup>The word first entered the Japanese publishing market through the Japanese translations of works belonging to the Human Potential Movement and its psychological theoretical wing of “Transpersonal Psychology” (Horie 2003: 15-17).

According to Itō, “the spirituality that was experienced inside religious systems, has “spilled out” of those frames and is now practiced, narrated and sought after by individuals in various settings” (Itō 2003: iii). Shimazono Susumu, the foremost scholar of spirituality in Japan, argued that

“healing, self-transformation, reincarnation, near-death experience, qiqong, yoga, meditation, shamanism, animism, consciousness development, mystical experiences, holistic medicine, new science etc. (...) People reading such books gain some kind of consolation by being on a path of spiritual search, and are conscious of being members of a contemporary cultural space called *seishinsekai* 精神世界 [the spiritual world] (Shimazono 2013: 20).

Mirroring Euro-American scholarly debates on the so-called spiritual revolution (Heelas and Woodhead 2005), some researchers in Japan seemed therefore to have “discovered” that lived religion (Hall 1997; McGuire 2008) has always been more varied, complex and eclectic than the formal religion that they had been used to study until then. *Supirichuariti* was conceived as a new phenomenon, a new site where religious innovation could be observed and studied, and where, spirituality became conceived as social capital (see, for example, Itō, Kashio, Yumiyama 2004) or the characteristic expression of new social movements surrounding notions of a “weak self” (see Koike 2007). This, however, does not mean that the anti-cult rhetoric only focused on organized religion, as scholarly interpretations of what *supirichuariti* refers to may seem to suggest. The public image of bad religion versus good spirituality describes only one part of the discourse surrounding the spiritual in Japan today. In other words, “bad spirituality” exists too.

### **“Bad” Spirituality and The Anti-Cult Rhetoric**

Spiritual narratives surrounding the labelling of certain locations as “power spots,” for example, have been attacked both by official religious organizations, such as the Association for Shinto Shrines, who are driven by orthodoxy and orthopraxy of religious belief and practices (see Carter 2018: 163), and by local stakeholders who fear the loss or misinterpretations of local tradition and community life (see Rots 2019: 173). On the other hand, some intellectuals and scholars have also tended to attack the behaviour of the clients of the spiritual business, often linking



it to a discourse about the decline of rationalism, of the quality of education and/or social welfare, and also the rise of materialism and the consumer culture.

Psychologist and popular author Kayama Rika, for example, has accused clients of spiritual therapy salons to suffer from that same emptiness (*munashisa-byō* むなしさ病) that led well-educated youth to join Aum (Kayama 2006: 134). Sociologist of religion Sakurai Yoshihide concludes his analysis of the “spiritual business” by blaming the popularity of holistic spiritualities on the lack of socio-economic stability and vision for a future, which are coupled with the loosening of human relationships. He argues that this situation drives young individuals to seek solutions to their problems and to their crisis of identity in new forms of community, such as healing networks and “cults” whose value they judge based on their feelings, rather on rational knowledge (Sakurai 2009: 241-242). In a more recent study of colour therapy in Japan, Yukiko Katō groups all kinds of self-development, spirituality and New Age activities under a single term: “kitsch culture of a hyper-consumer society” (Katō 2016: 20).

This criticism mirrors earlier attacks by scholars writing in English. Carrette and King, for example, argue that “‘spirituality’ has [...] become the brand name for the act of selling off the assets of ‘old time’ religion. Religious artefacts and language have ‘cachet value’ for a society of isolated individuals, hungry for packaged meaning” (Carrette and King, 2005: 125). Steve Bruce claims that the New Age fits well with a society which is short on authority and long on consumer rights, and in which individualistic epistemology, consumerist ethos and therapeutic focus resonate with the rest of our modern capitalist culture (2000: 231, 234). Both English and Japanese counter-spiritual rhetoric seem to espouse a (pseudo-)nostalgic perspective according to which “the break with traditional forms of religion, culture and community amounts to a loss of social and moral substance” (Gauthier, Martikainen and Woodhead 2013: 5). “Money corrupts religion” is the fundamental element of this secularist meta-narrative that I discuss in this paper. But the majority of the authors, including lawyers and activists who are at the forefront of the so-called “cult issue” (*karuto mondai* カルト問), are not really (neo-)Marxists blaming capitalism for the social alienation of consumers of the spiritual. Their arguments stop earlier, and their emphasis is rather on the ethics of religion in public life.

Let us look, for example, at how the “cult issue” is described in a 2-page section of an introductory textbook targeting student of religious studies (Sakurai 2015: 168-169)<sup>4</sup>. The author starts by noting that the boundary between the use of the concept of “cult” to designate illegal behaviour and its employment to point the finger at behaviour that goes against the status quo and common sense is not clear, so the concept expresses sometimes no more than an act of labelling by a powerful majority onto minority religions, or a tool to criticize society in general. But, his relativization of the “problem” (“the Japanese public has become more sensitive to the publicness of acts of religious organisations that it used to overlook” [ibid. 169]) does not deny its existence: he rather emphasizes the fact that there are indeed religious groups who, through various manipulative methods, defraud, abuse and sometimes commit violence against their members. Although, therefore, there may be social and consumerist circumstances that lead individuals to join such groups or use spiritual therapies, ultimately the blame is put on the religious practitioners/organisations, not on society. It is *they* who drag people into re-structuring their self-narratives so as to only accept as solutions to their problems what they are suggested to do by religious practitioners (Sakurai 2008: 156) and it is *they* who commit the unethical act of making people lose trust in their communities (Sakurai 2014: 93).

Sakurai’s explanation seems to point to a development in the “cult” narrative that is similar to what occurred in the United States much earlier (see Shupe and Darnell 2006: 34-39), namely the secularization of the anti-cult rhetoric. Indeed, it can be said, that since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the distinction between orthodoxy and heresy was turned into a distinction between “bad religion” and “good religion” based on the normative assumption pointed out by Horii (2018: 204-205) that religious corporations ought to contribute to “public benefit.” This has, in return, allowed public authorities and the general populace to counter arguments of infringement of religious freedom advanced by the “cults” themselves, by simply labelling them as “bad” religion. Like in the United States, therefore, and partly as a result of this secularization, the use of the word “cult” in Japan expanded to cover other activities, including spiritual therapy salons and multi-level marketing businesses offering self-development seminars and workshops. These are attacked because they are, *a priori*, associated with “bad” religion, not because they are “religious” per se. We are not very far, therefore, from what Thomas describes in the

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<sup>4</sup> The author, Sakurai Yoshihide, has also written the same section for a sociology of religion textbook in the same series (Sakurai 2007: 120-121).

case of the Meiji state’s anxious separation of “religion” and “non-religion”.

### **The Rhetoric of Spiritual Apostates**

Previous research on the anti-cult movement, and, in general, on those who leave religious groups has singled out the particularities of those who leave groups that are active in an already socially inhospitable context, such as NRMs (Wright 2014: 708). As I have shown in this paper, 21<sup>st</sup> century spiritualities remain situated in a socially inhospitable context too, although perhaps with much less distinctive boundaries. In the case of those who leave “the spiritual,” narratives of change, like that of M described above, are expressed in the form of role exiting/passage and embrace “a posture of confrontation through public claims making activities” (Wright 2014: 710), which qualifies them in scholarly terms as *apostates*. However, in this paper, I use the term *apostasy* not in its normative sense of accusation by religious authorities against those who have strayed. I call M a “spiritual apostate” because of his rhetorical positioning as someone who used to be part of what he claims to be an authoritative “community” of consumers but has now turned against it. I argue, in fact, that this kind of tactic, an act of “exclusive similarity” (see Josephson 2012: 29-38), allows spiritual apostates to claim for a distinction between “real” spirituality (one could call it the “orthodox spiritual”) and “consumer fraud”-spirituality (the “heretical spiritual”). I am aware, of course, of the methodological issues associated with the analysis of such narratives, which are not only limited to text found on SNS and internet blogs, but are also in majority retrospective, temporally variable and, most of all, very difficult to assess, especially considering the lack of specific targets and anonymity of the content. Nevertheless, I argue that there are certain common characteristics that can unite these disparate testimonies centred around the keyword *datsu-supi* (lit. “ditching the spiritual”).

This movement of highly expressive spiritual apostates appeared sometime in late 2011-early 2012, when a series of blogs and other SNS conversations started criticizing someone offering meditation sessions for a price that was “too high”.

One conversation led to another, and criticism arose towards the “commodification” of the spiritual and the people who are “in it for the money”. An analysis of 504 blog entries with the tag *datsu-supi* published on the ameba blog platform (one of the most popular blogging platforms in Japan), revealed that the second most used word (after the word

“spiritual”) is “commerce/business” (*shōbai* 商売)<sup>5</sup>. In the interviews of owners of spiritual therapy salons offering all sorts of sessions that I have conducted in the last decade (see Gaitanidis 2011), money has always been expressed as a sort of no-brainer. Prices depend on how much the regular price of similar sessions is, how much the expenses of the salon’s owner are, and of course how famous they are in the business. There did not seem to be any surprise as to why people would spend money for a service that is meant to make them feel better, although the majority of these practitioners say that they warn clients against over-priced sessions by people who cash on their visibility in mind-body-spirit fairs and on the internet. This observation confirms earlier studies, in which, for example, American channelers of the early 1990s show similarly pragmatic attitudes towards money (Brown 1997: 144-152).



Figure 3. The very first tweets with the hashtag *datsu-supi*

So, what are the spiritual apostates complaining about? At first glance: profit-driven practices. Nori, a blogger, claims for example that “the *datsu-*

<sup>5</sup> On 7 July 2019, I used the software EKWords (a software developed by and freely accessible on the website of DJ SOFT) to copy in the text of blog entries listed on the *ameba* server with the hashtag *datsu-supi* and extract the list of words by frequency of appearance.

*supi* movement is basically a ditching-people-who-make-money-out-of-the-spiritual movement” (Nori 2018). “Same with the self-development seminars that have profited from Japan’s economic downturn, the spiritual took the wrong direction when it started promising money to those who did not have it” argues another blogger (Tomotoheaven 2019), while a third blogger is even more critical: “I want to raise the alarm against those who use the spiritual to make business” (Raku-hapi 2019).

As is the case of online trends in general, most of the 504 blog posts come out of only a dozen blogs by spiritual apostates whose criticism can be divided into three types of arguments: 1) a critique of the turning of “spirituality” into a fashionable and income-earning market (Raku-hapi 2019); 2) a critique against the conceptualization of the spiritual as “mysterious (*fushigi-na* 不思議な)”, “religious (*shūkyō-teki* 宗教的)”, rather than “ordinary(*nichijō-teki* 日常的)” (Takizawa 2017); and 3) a critique of those who do not decide on their lives by themselves but choose to rely on “gurus (*kyōso* 教祖)” and “spiritual leaders (*shidōsha* 指導者)” (Takehisa 2018). In sum, arguments found on *datsu-supi* blogs by former spirituality fans, do not call for the disappearance of this type of activities, but for a more “normal” interaction with them; more “ordinary,” more “responsible,” “less dependent.”

As an illustration of spiritual apostasy narratives, I will describe in the rest of this section the arguments of one of the most expressive (and sometimes extreme) *datsu-supi* blogs, which ran from November 2015 to April 2019 and has now moved to a new website, in which the previous four years-worth of blog entries have been turned into a sort of manual of why and how to get out of the spiritual. The blogger, whom I will call K, defines the spiritual as “a behaviour principle (*kōdō genri* 行動原理) that leads to the fulfilment of one’s wishes and to happiness [...] it is our life and energy, and like everyone else, to polish our spiritual [selves] based on our own feelings without being disturbed by others, is, I think, a wonderful thing.” The spiritual is here conceived as something essentially personal and private and that is why “it should not be turned into a business method (a networking business) by people to profit from those who are weak and end up being spiritual believers (*shinja* 信者).” The spiritual therefore is not something people ought to believe in; it is not an object of faith, for K, since it corresponds to a part of every human being: “the spiritual cannot become business, because the spiritual is something entirely individual.” And to convince his readers, K gives us an example: “imagine that we translate the spiritual as “soul” (*tamashii* 魂). In that case, it would mean that it is possible for the soul to become object of a transaction (*tamashii*

*ga shōbai ni naru* 魂が商売になる). Do you understand what this means? The soul cannot be sold. It is part of its owner. My soul is only mine. Your soul is only yours. It should not be handled by someone else.”

For K, the spiritual business has lived on the social anxieties experienced by the Japanese in the post-war period. Using a graph summarizing key events of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially related to the United States and Japan, such as the Vietnam War or the burst of the economic bubble in Japan, K argues that social changes shake up human values, and, as a result, people seeking a way out of these anxieties are attracted to various ideologies (*shisō* 思想). Echoing previously mentioned critiques of the spiritual, K argues, in fact, that “the spiritual boom is a symbol of the Heisei era,” but he also blames the media which “should have been more cautious” with leaving vague messages about the possible existence of an “invisible realm.” In the end, however, it is all a problem of the fact that such social changes and larger historical trends have prevented the fostering of self-esteem in the Japanese people: “when your self-esteem is low, you cannot bear responsibility for your ideas, decisions and lifestyle. So, you end up clinging to others.”

K follows up on this by explaining how this lack of self-esteem draws people who are not sure yet (*kakuritsu sarete inai* 確立されていない) of their identity and who experience harsh lives (precisely because of their lack of self-esteem) to a message that is common among people making a business out of the spiritual: “be the way you are (*ari no mama no jibun de* ありのままの自分で).” “But why would you pay money for such an obvious thing?” exclaims K. “It is only your low self-esteem that is praised through such messages [...] and, instead of touching your feet to the ground and get on with your life, you are sucked in the spiritual shopping of ‘self-searching’ [...] and like a wandering ghost, lose yourself. Then soon, you mistake your acts for doing something spiritually noble, and start craving for easy money. [...] you become addicted to spiritual goods [...] and travel around the country to acquire ‘licenses’ and, eventually, put up your own advertising sign: ‘how about healing yourself?’.”

K’s message is clear: this is a personal problem of the clients of spiritual therapies, because as he writes in red letters in the prologue of his online manual: “there should not exist a business living off the *kokoro*.” In this way, K’s critique seems to support at least one argument that refutes the association of consumerism with superficial religion. Indeed, as Véronique Altglas aptly demonstrated in her study of participants of “spiritual” courses and workshops in Europe (Altglas 2014), the imperative of self-improvement (that K does not deny but criticizes only when people pay

others to do it for them), “pre-exists the act of consumption itself and is not defined by ‘consumers’ from their own self-authority, outside a framework of social norms about the self” (Altglas 2014: 268). Spiritual therapies are consumed because they bear meaning and have a certain value, even if K argues that the same can be basically achieved through one’s own efforts. However, the most significant aspect of K’s argument is the way that the “orthodox spiritual” is conceived as a part of the individual that cannot be subjected to money transactions. The taboo here is not the money (although K is an exception in claiming that ideally all spiritual seminars and sessions should be free). The taboo is here the fact that one entrusts their “spiritual” to someone else, who then makes a profit out of the dispositions that bring this client to their doorstep. Ultimately, it is that disposition (=low self-esteem) that K criticizes, not the self-searching or the fact that one perhaps could pay *temporarily* for spiritual products.

### **Capitalism, Religion and Ethics**

Since Mary Douglas’ seminal study, we know that the use of the concept of taboo signifies the otherwise prohibited crossing of certain classificatory boundaries, which in this case of the anxious secularity in contemporary Japan originally seemed to concern the boundaries between bad spirituality and good religion, or more precisely: a boundary between what is good or bad about money-spending for religious purposes. In other words, the original problematic surrounding “money corrupts religion,” is based on an implicit, religionist<sup>6</sup> ideal in which “good religiosity” is associated with money as donation or as a symbol of gratitude towards the time the other has spent listening and advising/treating the client; whereas in cases of “bad spirituality”, money becomes economic possession, personal fortune and assets that the client is hoaxed into giving away in exchange of false promises of cure and salvation.

Scholars who have tried to explicate what is “modern” about contemporary economics of religious organizations have tended to reify a pejorative image of the “sacred” being “commercialized.” Shimazono Susumu, for example, has argued that “oblation,” is (and, implicitly, ought to be) an essentially communal activity, which “continues to be further trampled by the stampede of mass media and efficiency-maximizing organizations”

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<sup>6</sup> Here I use the term “religionist” in the same way as Wouter J. Hanegraaff (2013: 11-12) uses it, namely to refer to a stance regarding religion that seems to care only about an experiential dimension that is considered as transcending history and as always remaining inaccessible to scholarly research.

(Shimazono 1998: 187). Shimazono, in fact, calls Japan “a ‘super-power’ when it comes to the ways of commercializing the sacred” (ibid.)

Now, since it becomes difficult to argue for “good donation” vs “bad donation” on religious grounds in a society where secularist ideals of religious freedom reign, the rhetoric has shifted into judging the above issue on capitalist ethical grounds. It is not whether the money is given to a good religion or to a bad religion. It is about whether that money is sought after by religions ethically or not, in capitalist terms. Yet, in these debates, the link between capitalist society and religion remains strongly influenced by early sociological theory which saw the rise of capitalism at the expense of religion. Indeed, the shadows of both Durkheim, who argued that religion had lost most of its power in the modern capitalist society ruled by unlimited desires (Durkheim 1955: 255), and Weber, who saw the gradual loss of the religious meaning that he had originally associated with the capitalist ethic (Weber 2002: 124), are still strongly felt.

However, criticizing today the commodification of spirituality by mindless youth consumers, as both popular and scholarly discourse sometimes claim, seems to miss the point because they reduce religion to economic activity. While, undoubtedly, the consumer capitalist society is inseparable of contemporary religiosity (Redden 2005), religion is also not *just* economic activity. Religion and consumption inform one another, feed one another, rationalize one another. This means that consumption is in these spiritual therapy settings a common experience, blending materialistic and spiritual elements, and often resembling other, albeit non-spiritual/religious, types of pro(duction-con)sumption. “Modern society is in toto a consumer culture, and not just in its specifically consuming activities (136) [...] the act of spiritual prosumption is only fully consummated by the self’s consumptive experience of itself as that which both produces and is produced through the transformative dynamics of the alternative religious repertoire” (Dawson 2013: 141).

Assuming that fraudulence in religious recruiting or donations is related to the capitalist commodification of religion is therefore as wrong as presuming that capital exchanges between members and religious leaders are solely regulated by “rational” capitalist behaviour. In fact, all aspects of our consumerist lives, including religion, are embedded in a liberal capitalist secularism that makes it difficult to argue for “pure” altruistic motives, even if scholars and the media have increasingly tended to talk about religious organisations’ “social contributions” (Inaba and Sakurai 2012). The secularist distinction between altruistic/non-profit work and for-profit work exacerbates the false assumption that religious corporations



are tax-exempt because they are supposed to provide public benefit (Horie 2018: 205), and creates the illusion that “religious fraud” is essentially different from other types of fraud. In other words, critics of unequal and *unproductive* capitalist exchanges occurring in religious settings act on an impossible wish that “religion/spirituality” is separated from “rational” mistakes/crimes perpetrated by either the providers of religious services (=anti-cult movement’s argument) or their client-members (=ditching spirituality-argument).

To summarize my argument: anti-cultists use a critique of capitalism to emphasize the essential purity of “good religion” and point the finger at the essentially rationally-structured (criminal and unethical) manipulation of innocent members by religious organisations. For spiritual apostates, the approach is, however, slightly different: spiritual apostates do not criticize the commodification of the spiritual to draw attention to some “traditional” (albeit, foregone) religiosity<sup>7</sup>; they are or have been after all part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century spiritualities which selectively reject established religions. Spiritual apostates rather point the finger at “irresponsible” consumerism and at those who employ people’s naïve spiritual seekership to enrich their bank accounts. Spiritual apostates’ main target of criticism are the consumers of the spiritual, who, in this case, are not blamed for being duped by “bad religion;” on the contrary, they are blamed for not understanding what this new spirituality is *really* about: which is not paying someone else to do it. It is doing it yourself.

Horie Norichika has recently argued that there has been a return to using the Chinese characters of *rei* (靈) to talk about spirituality (*reisei* 靈性) in Japan, especially after 2011, and that the *datsu-supi* trend is no more than the moving away from a trendy word to the next, but that it still expresses the counter-materialistic ethics of post-industrialized (post-1970s) societies (Horie 2018: 136). I agree that we are maybe witnessing only the disappearance of a trendy word, but I disagree with the interpretation that this is a counter-materialist expression of a highly privatized type of religiosity that has dominated the world since the second half of the 20th century. As illustrated in this paper, the implicit taboos of the spiritual apostates’ discourse reveal an argumentation about what is the proper way

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<sup>7</sup> Of course, there are alternative and holistic spirituality apostates who have returned (sometimes very publicly) to established religion. A recent case is that of Doreen Virtue, famous author of the New Age (with over 50 books published in the last 30 years) and producer of various sets of oracle cards often used by fortune tellers, spiritual counselors and other professional of the spiritual business. Nevertheless, in 2017, Doreen Virtue decided to stop everything and reject her previous ideas to convert, as she says, to Christianity. Her experience is described in the self-published text, *The Joy of Jesus* (2018).

to spend money to maximize benefits, and to achieve what M called “realistic” everyday life goals. They are not counter-materialist. They seek better ethics in the business of the spiritual, and it is precisely in this way that they best express the ethics of contemporary society.

In fact, one could claim that K’s rhetoric allows us to get a glimpse of what “orthodox spirituality” is alleged to be in practice: good spirituality seems to be related to good consuming practices, namely ethical, conscious, reasonable consumption that asks from the client to assess the claims of the services she buys. More importantly, spiritual apostates do not, like the anti-cult movement, offer any religious alternative: they only offer messages of restraint. If all the answers are in you, as K ironically points out, then why would you pay someone else to find them? Ultimately, you are the producer of the best product for you, and that should be free.

The right of choice that is assumed in every act of consumption is automatically also a moral act because individuals experience it as an exercise of their responsibility (Wuthnow 1989: 88). In that sense, “[n]eoliberalism represents a highly efficient, indeed an intelligent, system for exploiting freedom. Everything that belongs to practices and expressive forms of liberty – emotion, play and communication – comes to be exploited (Han 2017: 3). Under these circumstances, the ethics regarding what is a good or bad consumer behaviour take an insidious turn, and an *economy of moral judgement* arises.

When people are presumptively rational, behavioural failure comes primarily from the lack of sufficient information, from noise, poor signalling or limited information-processing abilities. But when information is plentiful, and the focus is on behaviour, all that is left are concrete, practical actions, often recast as good or bad ‘choices’ by the agentic perspective dominant in common sense and economic discourse. The vast amounts of concrete data about actual ‘decisions’ people make offer many possibilities of judgement, especially when the end product is an individual score or rating. Outcomes are thus likely to be experienced as morally deserved positions, based on one’s prior good actions and good taste. [...] [T]he principle by which people become economically qualified or disqualified appears to be located purely within them. Everyone seems to get what they deserve (Fourcade and Healy 2017: 24-25).

Spiritual apostates, in this sense, exhibit more comfort with the explicit linkages between religious/spiritual striving and capitalist consumption, than the anti-cult critics. They do not try to argue outside the capitalist consumerism with which all our daily actions remain associated. If anti-cult rhetoric is framed as a critique, albeit obsolete, of the commodification of religion, the spiritual apostates, in their critique of "the commodification of spirituality," seem to rather be positioned against this economy of moral judgement, as critics of how neoliberal capitalism is not empowering (anymore) its consumers as it should have. Although all spiritual apostates may not espouse such a message and may often stop at simply attacking exorbitant prices, their critique seems to be neither counter-materialist nor counter-religious; it is more about what they consider the "proper" way that the two, capitalism and religion, are and should be entangled.

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