ABSTRACT: This article attempts to address the lack of terminology concerning the long-standing but often overlooked relationship between religion and entertainment in Japan, arguing that these two seemingly discrete and opposing fields are often conflated. Examining the underlying thought behind the animation films of director Miyazaki Hayao, and investigating audience responses to those works, the article suggests that this conflation—religious entertainment or playful religion—can best be described by the neologism shûkyô asobi. Composed of the words "religion" and "play" in Japanese, shûkyô asobi jettisons the artificial distinction between popular entertainment and religion in favor of describing the common space between them, as well as describing the utilization of that space by various interest groups. This deployment of simultaneously religious and playful media or action can result in the creation of entirely new religious doctrines, interpretations, rituals, and beliefs.

We lack terminology for describing intersections between religion and media in Japan where, although 70 percent of the population claims to lack religious belief, there is a trend to fulfill religious impulses in a variety of ways often only tenuously connected to traditional religious institutions. The extant writing on religion and anime (animation) in Japan deals largely with tracing themes from popular film back to traditional religions, while some writers dealing with film and religion outside of Japan have suggested that the act of viewing film might fulfill a religious function. With some rare exceptions, these analyses largely suggest surprise or satisfaction that religion persists in a seemingly secular environment, overlooking the more subtle aspects of the forms that religion is taking and the effects
that the conflation of religion and entertainment are having on generations of people in a society where religion has not been secularized so much as diversified and outsourced. This essay takes a different approach by making a case study of the films of director Miyazaki Hayao, exploring the attitudes towards religion, entertainment, and spirituality that underlie their production and consumption.

DEFINITIONS

Shûkyô Asobi

The artificial distinction between religion and entertainment upon which these earlier analyses are based neglects the historical tendency within Japan for the conflation of, or oscillations between, the two. In many instances, and particularly in the contemporary context, this combined religion-entertainment has been a prevalent part of Japanese culture, and can be seen in a number of products and activities, some of which include manga and anime and their production. Here, using the words shûkyô (religion) and asobi (play/entertainment), I propose the term shûkyô asobi to describe this area of Japanese religious culture. Shûkyô asobi is a conflation of religion and entertainment which: (1) can be viewed as religious in its production or consumption; (2) can also be said to be one of the many alternative strategies for negotiating spiritual needs in post-war and postmodern social circumstances; (3) draws upon, but also modifies, existing religious themes; (4) can have a moral or spiritual effect on the audience, including an effect on how people view or practice religion, not necessarily limited to sect or a specific doctrine; (5) allows for oscillations between religion and entertainment while nevertheless referring to the space where the two overlap; and (6) therefore isolates those moments where entertainment experiences provide the impetus or environment for religious learning or behavior, or where religious doctrine, ritual and pedagogy act as modes of entertainment.

Shûkyô (Religion) and Shûkyôshin (Spirituality)

There is extensive documentation of the definitional pitfalls inherent in the word “religion.” The word shûkyô, the closest Japanese equivalent, is problematic because, like religion, it points to a limited field that highlights allegiance, sect, and doctrine. Accordingly, scholars have come to recognize that Japanese claims to belief and actual religious practice often differ remarkably. An article in the 5 September 2005 issue of the magazine AERA investigated Japanese attitudes towards religion and the supernatural, concluding that many people do something religious even if they do not subscribe to a
religion. As some examples, the article mentioned the following practices: (1) a daily view of Mount Fuji from a commuter train; (2) regular visits to large trees in a shrine grounds; (3) visits to Jizó (the bodhisattva associated with watching over children and travelers) statues on the way to and from work; and (4) listening to particular music. As Shimazono Susumu has suggested, contemporary Japanese religiosity is diversifying and people are outsourcing religion to other areas.

This outsourcing suggests a movement away from traditional structures, where religious affiliation and practice were determined by family and community, and towards what a number of scholars have identified as individualized religion or spirituality. Many Japanese have maintained religiosity while jettisoning what they perceive as a relatively restrictive religion. There is a general trend to replace the noun “religion” with the adjective “religious,” removing the emphasis from possessive allegiance and refocusing it upon individual perception and practice, dismissing strict piety in favor of a personalized and often informal belief. Yumiyama Tatsuya points out that while only around thirty percent of Japanese people claim to have religious belief, roughly seventy percent claim that spirituality (shûkyôshin, literally, a religious mind/heart) is important. This spirituality manifests itself in practices centered primarily on the acquisition of worldly benefits (genze nyaku), in fascination with the occult and the supernatural, and in various divination practices. While practitioners use all of these things precisely because they do not require allegiance or even clearly articulated faith, scholars of religion recognize that they comprise an important part of contemporary Japanese religious practice.

However, the fact that people involved in “new spirituality movements and culture” (shinreisei undo/bunka) resist connections to formal religion cannot be overlooked. Shimazono Susumu writes:

The word “spirituality” is used because many people in these movements consider that they belong to a new age of “spirituality” that is to follow the age of “religion” as it comes to an end. “Spirituality” in a broad sense implies religiousness, but it does not mean organized religion or doctrine. Rather, it is used to mean the religious nature expressed by an individual’s thoughts and actions. Another common element for many of these movements is a sense of a revival of something religious in a broad sense for the individual in the present times.

These movements allow individuals to be both religious and nonreligious simultaneously, and scholars of religion thus have a responsibility to treat spirituality as a worthy subject of study within their field while also respecting the resistance to formal religion that spirituality movements tend to display. Both formal religions and spirituality help people to determine how to live a good and moral life in the face of the inevitability of death and the difficulties presented by
human relationships. Both offer narratives that can refer to transcence or to immanence, and sometimes affirm or re-enact these narratives through ritualized behavior including (but not limited to) the acquisition of worldly benefits, healing practices, pilgrimages, divination and ludic activities. While spirituality movements often use modes of transmission and social organization other than those used by formal religions, this can be seen largely as reflecting the relatively recent changes brought about by decentralization, rapid communication through diverse media, and internationalization.  

New spirituality movements can thus be perceived as some of the most recent developments in world religion, just as some formal religions can be seen as having arisen from the equivalent of spirituality movements.

In a way, because they present religious material in an environment where participants see themselves as audience members and consumers more than as believers or adherents, spirituality movements themselves can be seen as playing with the stuff of religion. My usage of shûkyô in shûkyô asobi views contemporary Japanese religion as inclusive of spirituality movements and culture while acknowledging that the resistance to formal religion sometimes found within these movements is often an integral part of their composition. This resistance to formal religion is leveled particularly at religions in their current forms. Spirituality movements frequently point to an “original” or idealized future state of religion that they try to recover or create, respectively. They often create a network of like-minded individuals through the use of various media, just as media frequently become the sites where the conflation of entertainment and religion occurs.

Playfulness: Asobu (To Play) and Asobi (Play)

The verb asobu in Japanese carries connotations of play, diversion, pleasure, and enjoyment, but is perhaps most succinctly described by the English word “entertainment.” While frequently translated into English as “to play,” and accordingly associated with the activities of children or with games, the word asobu is more diverse in usage, covering a wider variety of activities associated with entertainment. Some examples include playing music and dancing (including kagura sacred dance), diversion, entertainment, outdoor activities, hunting, strolling, gambling (as in that of children or animals), travel, loitering, being let loose or set free (as in land lying fallow, money accumulating interest, or a tool left unused or free to move), gambling, teasing, or being teased.

Etymologically, asobu refers to “the will to be liberated in mind and body from daily life, and to entrust one’s self to another reality [utopia] (nichijō sekatsu kara shinshin wo kaihō shi, bettenchi ni mi wo yudaneru i).”

In other words, asobi (play) changes the form or shape of something commonplace in order to amuse and to delight us. While at times
educational or edifying, the activity of play suggests a relaxing or escapist flight from mundane concerns. Yet the experience of play often reflects those concerns by challenging and critiquing them through the artifices of pretense, humor, transformation, and manipulation. This mercurial activity therefore offers both respite from and reconciliation with the serious elements of daily life. Within this broad scope of playful liberation and critique, I would like to highlight especially the elements of entertainment and diversion, transformation and manipulation (e.g., word play [kotoba asobi], to play with, to play upon).  

With the caveat that “experience” is a term that strongly reflects linguistic and cultural backgrounds and is not always the best descriptor of religious activity, I suggest that a certain segment of Japanese religious experience can be characterized by the verb asobu, in that it is related directly to the things people do nominally or superficially for entertainment, not necessarily for religious purposes, but which nevertheless have a clearly discernible religious element or nature. The phrase shûkyô asobi can be used to describe the aforementioned conflation, referring to the particular concept of “religious entertainment,” and “playful religion,” pointing to the important area where modifications of religious behavior, outlook, and/or knowledge occur within spaces equally devoted to entertainment or, alternatively, where religious practice and pedagogy simultaneously behave as entertainment experiences.

Playful Religious Expressions in Popular Culture

This relationship between popular culture entertainment media and understandings of religion in Japan has been documented to a certain degree. Inoue Nobutaka suggests that manga, Japanese comics, are already affecting children’s notions of traditional religious taboos, and Mark Wheeler MacWilliams describes the effects of Tezuka Osamu’s modification of the Buddha’s story on his young readership in his manga hagiography. Yamanaka Hiroshi divides what he calls “religious manga” (shûkyô manga) into the categories “religious community manga,” “psychic and occult manga,” “religious vocabulary manga” and “manga that acts as religious text,” describing the content of the genre and the potential effects it has on its audience, the successes and failures of each subgenre, and the liberties producers take in utilizing religious themes. There is also precedent abroad for popular culture profoundly affecting doctrine and belief. Meir Shahar suggests that the Chinese vernacular xiaoshuo (plays enacted by wandering performers) were intended primarily as entertainment, but they nevertheless came to influence formal religion, changing popular conceptions of deities, and at times even creating deities. Shahar succinctly states: “[E]ntertainment and religious education are not incompatible, profit and merit not
mutually exclusive." The same trend exists in the *anime* of filmmaker Miyazaki Hayao, which I examine as a case study below.

### MOVIE WATCHING AS RELIGIOUS BEHAVIOR

Although these connections between popular culture and religion have been traced to a certain degree, I would argue that the connections between movie watching and religious behavior deserve closer analysis. As a point of departure, John C. Lyden's book, *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals*, argues that many activities not apparently religious can fulfill a religious function. Lyden states:

> Films offer a vision of the way the world should be (in the view of the film) as well as statements about the way it really is; the ritual of filmgoing unites the two when we become a part of the world projected on screen . . . Films offer an entry into an ideally constructed world.

Although I hesitate to say that all movie watching is religious, the concept that movie watching can assume a religious function in a society is compelling. Lyden suggests that religion is a cultural construct, the definition of which often obscures the function of other cultural activities that are equally religious. He takes issue with analyses that solely focus on theological or ideological views on religion and film, which have dominated the writing on Miyazaki Hayao and religion thus far. Lyden emphasizes the action of viewing film religiously, as both a ritual practice and as a conveyor of moral and mythic scriptural content. His work helps us to find religious *practice* in film, not merely imagery or doctrine.

However, limiting the analysis to social or ritual function alone overlooks the influence that the incorporation of conventional or traditional religious themes has on movie watching itself; it also avoids the more difficult subject of the effect entertainment has upon people's religious knowledge and practice. The very inclusion of traditional religious imagery will no doubt affect to what extent people watch films religiously—that is, in a religious frame of mind—and people's religious practice (including and beyond that of watching film) may be altered by film, not simply supplanted or supplemented by it. S. Brent Plate writes: "Films do not merely appear on a screen; rather, they only exist in any real sense as far as they are watched, becoming part of the fabric of our lives. Film viewing is thus a social activity that alters our interactions in the world." Films convey messages and serve as sites for ritualized action, and the dynamics between producers and consumers of films reflect these functions. Who participates in the ritual of viewing film (or in rituals based upon film content) and how, who makes the film and why, is fundamental to apprehending the conflation of film and religion.
Ronald L. Grimes helps to put these issues in context by classifying the connections between ritual and media and presenting eleven modes of intersection between the two. Of these, five categories particularly apply to ritual and film in light of Lyden’s claims about watching film as a religious practice: (1) subjunctive (or ludic) ritualizing (as in rituals performed in online games); (2) magical rites with a media device as fetish or icon (healing power from an evangelist through the television); (3) ritual use of a media device (worship services built around CD-ROMs); (4) mediated ritual fantasy (vicarious ritual); and (5) media as a model for ritual activity (Hollywood gestures imitated in liturgical space). Keeping these categories in mind, and recognizing that ritual and narrative are often interlinked, we can determine more precisely how the ritual of film watching and the rituals that arise from the content of film work.

Films can teach religious content, reflecting the ideology of the filmmaker in the process. They can also provide sites and models for ritual activity, reflecting both preexisting ritual traditions and modifications and innovations of ritual based upon film. As Plate writes: “[R] eligions and cultures do not merely use media, but instead are used by media, and created by them.” Philip Lutgendorf’s analysis of the movie *Jai Santoshi Maa* explores these connections, examining the religiosity of the movie content as well as the influence on its audience in light of mythological and ritual elements that inform Hindu devotional worship. The movie both draws upon and modifies existing mythology and ritual: “The [movie] incorporated both a modified enactment of the *vrat katha* [simply, a ritual story] narrative and a paradigmatic performance of the ritual.” In the process of watching the film, the audience is invited vicariously into a ritual *darshan* (visual communion) with the featured goddess. As a whole, “the film presents a well-crafted narrative abounding in references to folklore and mythology and offering a trenchant commentary on social convention; it also develops a ‘visual theology’ that is particularly relevant to female viewers.”

Aside from the vicarious or mediated ritual within the film, cinemas and other sites of viewing film can become ritual space; film can also create new followings for particular religious traditions or spirituality movements. Summarizing Lutgendorf’s essay on *Jai Santoshi Maa*, Plate states: “[D] evout viewers entered cinemas barefoot and performed *puja* [rituals] in front of the goddess Santoshi Maa [sic] . . . . As a result of the film, a massive following of this previously obscure goddess erupted across northern India.” Anita Guha, the actress who played the goddess Santoshi Ma in the film, said: “Audiences were showering coins, flower petals and rice at the screen in appreciation of the film. They entered the cinema barefoot and set up a small temple outside . . . . It was a miracle.” The act of watching the film came to serve a ritual function, and the explosion in Santoshi Ma worship shows that the film became a catalyst for religious behavior.
Lutgendorf’s explanation of the multiple connections between film, ritual, and mythology refuses to simplify them by making film merely a conveyor of religious doctrine or a ritual substitute for traditional religion. His analysis shows the reciprocal and recursive process between existing doctrine and mediated ritual, between new ritual and renewed doctrine. Viewers can become adherents to an existing religious tradition even as the tradition itself changes in response to the film. Films can thus serve both as gateways to and creators of religious cultures. In those situations where preexisting religions are viewed with doubt or suspicion, or where spirituality is highly valued, films can provide alternative narrative, mythological and ritual spaces that draw viewers into spirituality movements. As a descriptive term of these processes and relationships, shûkyô asobi combines narrative and ritual elements in an amalgamation of play, entertainment, and religion.

**CASE STUDY: MIYAZAKI HAYAO’S ANIME**

We can see a clear example of shûkyô asobi by examining the work of anime director Miyazaki Hayao in more detail. In what follows, I take up four of Miyazaki’s anime in light of what the director himself says about their production, and also in light of audience responses to them. These responses show that ritual reactions to, and interactions with, Miyazaki’s films show a sincere conception of the existence and/or efficacy of the gods, saviors and spirits therein as instructive and inspiring. The ritual of watching film, the rituals enacted vicariously through the film, and the rituals performed in reality but created through the influence of the film all resonate with elements of Grimes’ taxonomy of ritual and media. Miyazaki’s films serve as religious texts that inspire and exhort people to alterations in behavior; they are sometimes used ritually (repetitively, as liturgical texts, as scripture) for edification as well as entertainment. Furthermore, the cosmology and mythology of the films comes to be interpreted and applied to reality after the films end. At times this results in audience members recreating rituals in reality that they learned through the film narrative; audience members may also identify certain physical places as sacred because they were the alleged inspiration for sacred places found within the narrative realms of the films themselves.

In general, anime and the related comic-book genre manga often incorporate religious themes ranging from hagiography to criticism of the role of religion in society. Just as anime deploys religious motifs, religious institutions and individuals deploy anime as a method of affecting audience outlook and behavior. Although the intent of the producers of anime and manga ranges from proselytization to profit, their products frequently conflate religion and entertainment in ways that have the potential to affect their audience religiously, inviting and promoting faith, ritual action and moral edification.
Miyazaki’s work in many ways epitomizes the current state of Japanese popular anime. The 1984 film *Nausicaä*, based on a manga also written by Miyazaki, is the story of a young princess whose character includes elements of psychic, scientist and messiah. These elements help Nausicaä to reconcile humans and nature in a post-apocalyptic and polluted world. In the 1988 film *My Neighbor Totoro*, the protagonists Mei and Satsuki befriend a benign forest spirit who helps them through a difficult period of transition. The 1997 film *Princess Mononoke* revolves around the intertwined relationships of gods and humans and nature, emphasizing the necessity of strengthening humanity’s connections with both. The 2001 film *Spirited Away* shares this pedagogical approach, and takes place in a world populated with a diverse array of gods and spirits.

These films illustrate the fact that: (1) contemporary Japanese are making and watching films that draw upon and modify previously existing religious themes; (2) that moviemakers are creating movies with the intention of inculcating certain values that are at times religious; (3) that the films themselves have the ability to affect future interpretations of religious literature and content; and (4) that audiences can respond to the films in a spiritual fashion, if not a formally religious one. Looking at some of the previous treatments of Miyazaki and religion will help to put the case study into context.

**PREVIOUS EXAMINATIONS OF MIYAZAKI AND RELIGION**

A number of authors have discussed the existence of Shinto and Buddhist elements in Miyazaki’s work. Writers such as James W. Boyd and Nishimura Tetsuya, and Lucy Wright have focused on how the director has drawn upon and modified pre-existing religious themes, particularly those of Shinto. They take the framework of Japanese religion as a backdrop against which to place Miyazaki’s films, showing how they resonate with traditional religious culture despite what the analysts seem to perceive as the progressive secularization of the country.

Secularization theory as it applies to Japan is problematic, and yet it seems that the authors premise their assessments of Miyazaki’s work on the fact that it provides traditional religion with a requisite recovery, revival, or transformation. Wright, for example, writes: “Miyazaki is cinematically practicing the ancient form of Shinto, which emphasized an intuitive continuity with the natural world,” continuing: “[his] work transforms and reinvigorates the tenets of Shinto.” Similarly, Boyd and Nishimura state: “It is our interpretation that Miyazaki is reaffirming aspects of the Japanese tradition preserved in Shinto thought and practice that can serve as transformative sources of confidence and renewal for both the young and old.”
While tracing religious themes in popular film back to their traditional sources is helpful for determining the background from which religious symbols and content arise, stopping at that particular point is a mistake because it neglects the function of religious entertainment as an alternative spiritual practice that may at times disdain connections with traditional religious forms. For example, audiences may choose to watch the films precisely because the films are not directly connected with traditional religious institutions. This approach is also problematic because it neglects specifically how religious entertainment might affect the audience's religious understanding or interpretation. The authors refer to the transformative power of the films, but the form that transformation takes is left as a vague notion lacking a theoretical framework, and is not an indication of concrete changes in practice, action, or belief. As Plate writes: "Films are not religious simply because of their content but become religious due to their form and reception." Therefore it is imperative to analyze not only the religious doctrine that forms part of the cultural background of a film but also the motivation and intended message of the filmmaker; it is crucial to examine not only the ritual of watching film but also how film can give rise to changes in ritual behavior. Analyses that focus solely on older religious forms prevent us from seeing how the conflation of entertainment and religion might result in new religious thought or practice. The lack of audience voices gives no indication of how religion is being revitalized or, possibly, created.

**SHÛKYÔ ASOBI IN MIYAZAKI'S THOUGHT**

While Miyazaki says that "all he wants to do is to entertain," elsewhere the director's statements suggest that he is at least partially motivated by a type of spirituality largely infused with an environmentalist ethic. Miyazaki's spirituality is largely concerned with environmental issues, and seems to be predicated upon: (1) the existence of an immanent life-force that binds organisms together; and (2) the loss in present times of an idealized past where connections between organisms were both stronger and more respectful. He seems to promote this ethic through film. He states:

In my grandparents' time . . . it was believed that spirits [kami] existed everywhere—in trees, rivers, insects, wells, anything. My generation does not believe this, but I like the idea that we should all treasure everything because spirits might exist there, and we should treasure everything because there is a kind of life to everything.

Yet despite this spiritual nostalgia, Miyazaki wants to distance himself from formal religion. Wright states: "Essentially, his films attempt to re-enchant his audiences with a sense of spirituality that eschews the
dogmas and orthodoxies of organised religions and politics, instead reaching for the original, primal state of spiritualism in human history and how it can be lived today. In an interview for *The Village Voice*, Miyazaki says:

Dogma inevitably will find corruption, and I’ve certainly never made religion a basis for my films. My own religion, if you can call it that, has no practice, no Bible, no saints, only a desire to keep certain places and my own self as pure and holy as possible. That kind of spirituality is very important to me. Obviously it’s an essential value that cannot help but manifest itself in my films.

This manifestation, combined with the aforementioned underlying intent to entertain his audience, places Miyazaki squarely in the realm of *shūkyō asobi*. The act of moviemaking begins as an act of entertainment, but along the way it shades into an expression of spirituality, not only reflecting the director’s views, but also attempting to inculcate certain values in his intended audience. Considering that audience in light of this, it should also not go unnoticed that Miyazaki has publicly recognized the consumer demand for spiritual content in Japan, and continues to make movies with this in mind. Miyazaki’s moviemaking, therefore, not only reflects his personal spirituality but also the audience’s desire for spiritual themes; simultaneously, it reflects his basic desire to entertain and the audience’s desire to be entertained. These overlapping desires result in new modes of religious entertainment, or playful religion, shown in the following examples.

**SHŪKYŌ ASOBI IN AUDIENCE REACTIONS TO MIYAZAKI’S WORKS**

*My Neighbor Totoro*

Miyazaki clearly draws upon but also modifies preexisting religious themes in his films. The nature spirits in *My Neighbor Totoro,* for example, seem to be based upon traditional Japanese conceptions of kami. Yet Helen McCarthy reports that although Miyazaki referred to the *totoro* as “‘nature spirits’ of the same kind as those familiar in Japanese religion,” the movie has, according to Miyazaki, “nothing to do with that or any other religion.” As McCarthy notices, the film makes an active contrast between Miyazaki’s fantastic spirits and the cold, inert symbols of traditional religion. The *totoro* represent a simultaneously new-old type of nature spirit strategically set in contrast to the preexisting (institutional) notions of kami. Whether or not Miyazaki’s audiences believe in the existence of the *totoro* themselves, the film promotes an alternative perception of kami, tactically deploying traditional religious motifs as a foil for the magical, cuddly, and
sitionally fecund _totoro_. The movie’s pastoral narrative, combined with this refashioned kami, simultaneously offers a critique of traditional religious institutions and contemporary urban living.

This content alone suggests the power to affect at least a portion of Miyazaki’s audience profoundly, and significantly many people who have grown up with Miyazaki’s films have referred to _My Neighbor Totoro_ as a favorite or as an influential film in their lives. Casual conversations with many Japanese acquaintances have prompted more than one person to comment on the ability of this film to “soothe” or calm one spiritually (seishintekini). Looking at a Miyazaki-themed fan message board on the Japanese blog site, MIXI, one is quickly struck by the depth and number of audience reactions to the films, including reactions that seem to shade towards the religious. One person, writing on the influence of Miyazaki’s films, and about _Totoro_ in particular, states: “Often, with my older sister we would . . . hold an umbrella and try to pray for the sprouts to grow,” mimicking a scene in the movie in which the _totoro_ lead Mei and Satsuki in a prayer-dance to grow sprouts into a giant tree. The children’s imitation of the scene suggests the power of film to create ritual outside of movie watching itself.

_Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind_

Scholars and critics have identified the _manga_ that is the basis for Miyazaki’s 1984 production _Nausicaä_ as religious. Yamanaka Hiroshi places _Nausicaä_ in the category of “_manga_ that acts as a religious text” in his description of “religious _manga_.” He writes: “As a whole this _manga_ [and I would add the _anime_ based upon the _manga_] provides the same structure as a religious text like the Bible.” _Nausicaä_ is a drama about the salvation of the world and humanity; approaching social and environmental catastrophes become the stage for the actions of _Nausicaä_ the savior. Yamanaka concludes his section on _Nausicaä_ thus: “In the midst of this drama of death and rebirth, Nausicaä the protector of the Valley of the Wind is reborn as Nausicaä the guardian angel [divine protector] of humanity.” Similarly, Shimizu Masashi points to _Nausicaä_’s messianic status and to her supernatural abilities. To Shimizu, not only is _Nausicaä_ immortal and possessor of supernatural powers (chônoryokusha), she is also good, just, and the embodiment of love.

_Nausicaä_, with its vivid apocalyptic vision, reflects Miyazaki’s pedagogical impulse. He states:

When I started Nausica [sic], my theory was one of extinction; when it ended, my theory was one of coexistence . . . . There is no mighty intelligence that guides the world. We just keep repeating our mistakes . . . . If we want mankind [sic] to live for another thousand years, we have to create the environment for it now. That’s what we’re trying to do.
While denying the existence of a "mighty intelligence," Miyazaki uses preexisting religious motifs such as clairvoyance, apocalypse, and redemption, as well as the traditional religious concept of *musubi*, an immanent spiritual productive energy that binds organisms together, to influence future outlook and behavior.

The comments of *Nausicaä* fans on fan-based message boards suggest a long-lasting change in outlook based upon watching the film, and, at times, a ritualized way of watching the film, often referring to a sense of connection with other organisms that reflects belief in an immanent spiritual bond existing among all living things. Keeping in mind Grimes' taxonomy of ritual and media, the audience here affirms its connection with all of nature through repetitive viewings of the movie (ritual performed around a media device). The scene of Nausicaä's death and resurrection can be seen as a sort of mediated (vicarious) ritual as well. One person draws a direct connection between *Nausicaä* and Christian ideas of death and resurrection, and suggests that the Ômu (giant insects that protect the fungal forest that has covered the earth) are actually divine. Another person says, "Now Nausicaä seems far away from this reality in which we live, but really [she] is pointing to our current actions (like treating nature disrespectfully)." The act of being entertained is simultaneously hermeneutic; audience members interpret the films and apply their lessons to reality.

**Princess Mononoke**

Miyazaki said of *Princess Mononoke*: "I've come to the point where I just can't make a movie without addressing the problem of humanity as part of an ecosystem," and his spiritual beliefs come to the fore when Susan J. Napier states:

> It is Miyazaki's notion that he and presumably other Japanese are the spiritual descendants of the "glossy leafed forests" that... once covered Japan... and that these vanished forests still exert a spiritual pull on the average urban dweller, and it was this that he attempted to dramatize in his creation of the forest of the *shishigami*. He explains "If you opened a map of Japan and asked where is the forest of the *shishigami* that Ashitaka went to, I couldn't tell you, but I do believe that somehow traces of that kind of place still exist inside one's soul."

For part of the audience, the movie resonates with extant mythology or promotes ritual action, as the posts on a Miyazaki fan board attest. In response to a post entitled: "The Setting of Princess Mononoke" (*Mononoke Hime no butaichi*), one person wrote: "I really went to Yakushima [the alleged inspiration for the forest], and it seemed as if *shishigamisama* [the main deity in the film] would really appear!" Another respondent wrote: "There [in Yakushima] people really believe
in *Mononoke Hime* [Princess Mononoke] . . . [and the other animal gods] whereas [in Kumano, another potential setting] they believe in trees and waterfalls." A third person relates the story of how a friend traveled to Yakushima and had a *kodama* [a kind of small tree spirit that features in the film] appear in a photograph. The first person's comment suggests a kind of pilgrimage, a sort of ritual practice around a conception of sacred space created through the medium of film; the second person's comment shows connections (found or created) between existing mythology and the mythology of the film; the third person's story clearly crosses the boundary between the mythology of the film and reality—the *kodama* that appears in the photograph is an indication of its existence in reality. Many of the commentators express a desire to visit Yakushima in the future, presumably to experience it as a place of mystery, inspiration, or the sacred.

**Spirited Away**

Responses to a leading post, "*Sen to Chihiro...ni kakusareta meseeji*" [Hidden messages in *Spirited Away*] on a Miyazaki fan site suggest that some members of the audience have had a spiritual response to that movie as well: from the aforementioned environmental commitment based upon the idea that all organisms are spiritually connected, to a renewed respect for the distinction between divine and human (*kamisama no tabemono wo taberu* [eating the food of the gods/spirits]), to striving for a kind of spiritual love (*sūkō na aī*). Again, the message board posts are interpretive: fans use the films as a basis for determining moral action in their daily life. The other reality of film has come to profoundly affect the audience in this reality; the powerful images and the feelings that they promote persist. More than simply drawing on previous religious themes, Miyazaki has actively changed them by adding an environmental focus, and his fans have responded to the film in ways that can be interpreted as spiritual, if not formally religious.

**The Production and Consumption of Shūkyō Asobi**

These four examples portray *shūkyō asobi* in two important ways. On the one hand, they show how Miyazaki the director is playing with the stuff of religion; he utilizes religious motifs in a calculated fashion to encourage a particular audience response, and modifies traditional religious concepts for his particular pedagogical ends. On the other hand, Miyazaki's films—presumably created solely as a means of entertainment—not only reflect Miyazaki's spiritual beliefs, but also seem to have the power to create responses such as ritualized behavior. In addition, the films appear to generate hermeneutic thinking and exegesis, that is, interpreting films and applying those lessons to daily life.
The director’s spirituality seems to elicit similar spiritual responses in at least part of his audience, and therefore the movies have the power to create new forms of thought and practice that contribute to and are part of the wider field of contemporary Japanese religiosity.

CONCLUSIONS

I would like to conclude with a few final points on shûkyô asobi. First, Miyazaki’s ambiguous statements make it difficult to associate him with any one particular religion, but they also indicate that the director seeks a simultaneously playful spirituality or a spiritual entertainment. Miyazaki’s repeated choice to incorporate religious themes is likely just as much his recognition that “spiritual sells” as it is a reflection of the director’s own spiritual views. This pragmatic attitude, apparent I think in Miyazaki and part of his audience, reflects the fact that Japanese religion is based upon a strong sense of responding to mundane needs. This can manifest itself in both fervent religious practice and in a seemingly more “irreverent” usage of religious stuff for mundane ends. Shûkyô asobi, broadly viewing religion as inclusive of spirituality, and resisting the artificial distinction between religion and entertainment, allows for and can describe Miyazaki’s work.

Second, entries on fan message boards suggest that some audience members respond to Miyazaki’s films in a spiritual fashion. While Lyden has suggested that the ritual of film watching can be a religious experience, certainly only some of these fans would actively identify their response to Miyazaki’s films as such. As members of the spirituality culture surrounding Miyazaki’s films, they “consider themselves part of the audience, information consumers, and have no sense of belonging to a particular organization, sect or church.” Yet fans recognize something religious in Miyazaki’s films even if they do not consider the films religion. Shûkyô asobi refers to that important element of Japanese religion where the mundane desire or need for the experience of entertainment shades into the mundane desire or need for the experience of religion.

A third important element of shûkyô asobi in Miyazaki’s films lies in the comparisons and contrasts that can be drawn regarding the manga and anime produced by formal religious institutions. Miyazaki’s films subtly underscore his skepticism of formal religion, but formal religions have clearly recognized the proselytizing potential presented by manga and anime, sometimes producing large numbers of these products aimed at wide audiences. Yet manga created by religious institutions are not necessarily always successful, at times being treated with something close to derision. Although the use of anime and manga as media for expressing and conveying religion is not going to disappear any time soon, it seems that films which serve as religious texts without
specific institutional affiliations (like Miyazaki's) are more likely to reach and capture a wide audience than the products created by religious institutions.

Ultimately, the artificial distinction between popular entertainment and religion needs to be replaced with an articulation of the utilization of the common space of religious entertainment—or playful religion—by various interest groups. This is particularly important as established religions utilize popular culture as a vehicle for religious instruction and proselytization; and as pop culture producers increasingly draw upon spiritual/religious themes that obviously attract audiences. The result may be the creation of entirely new religious doctrines, interpretations, rituals, and beliefs.\textsuperscript{102} Shûkyô asobi, fundamental to properly apprehending the seemingly discrete but conflated modes of religion and entertainment, can presumably be found in other sectors of Japanese religion,\textsuperscript{103} and outside of Japan as well.

Overall, in light of the diversification and proliferation of religion occurring at present, shûkyô asobi is an apt term for describing an element of religion that has been hitherto difficult to apprehend—the new forms of religious thought and practice arising at the junction between entertainment and religion.

I am indebted to the Center of Japanese Studies at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa for providing a travel grant to fly from Japan to attend the American Academy of Religion conference in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania to deliver this paper in November 2005, and to the Crown Prince Akhito Scholarship Foundation for getting me to Japan for two years of research (2005-2007) in the first place.

ENDNOTES


Thomas: Shûkyô Asobi and Miyazaki Hayao’s Anime

4 Philip Lutgendorf, “Jai Santoshi Maa Revisited: On Seeing a Hindu ‘Mythological’ Film,” in Representing Religion in World Cinema: Filmmaking, Mythmaking, Culture Making, ed. S. Brent Plate (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 19–42. Lutgendorf’s essay takes a more subtle approach to the overlapping elements of doctrine, ritual, belief, and innovation that can occur in religious film. Dr. Lutgendorf was kind enough to comment on ideas related to the present article and to give some advice regarding potential approaches. He also pointed to connections between asobi and the Sanskrit lila (divine play, cosmic play).


7 Manga are Japanese comics or graphic novels, a ubiquitous form of literature in Japan. Anime are animation films, often based upon manga. On religion in manga culture, see YAMANAKA Hiroshi, “Manga bunka no naka no shûkyô” [Religion in Manga Culture], in Sôhî sareru “shûkyô” [Consumed “Religion”], ed. SHIMAZONO Susumu and ISHII Kendo (Tokyo: Shunjusha, 1996), 158–84.

8 Thanks to Joel Cohn, Department of East Asian Languages and Literatures, University of Hawai’i at Manoa for helping to modify this term, and for suggesting that I reverse the word order which I had originally proposed as asobi shûkyô. Shûkyô asobi, as Dr. Cohn suggested, places more of an emphasis on the function of asobi, so that “play” modifies “religion.” It also falls into a common pattern of phrasing in Japanese, such as kotoba asobi (word play), that sounds more natural than the opposite, which is limited to a narrow set of noun compounds. Thanks go to Helen Baroni as well, who provided helpful comments on the earlier version of the term. Pennies also owed to my fellow graduate students at Hawai’i for their thoughts and suggestions.

9 Shimazono, “Spirit Belief,” in From Salvation to Spirituality, 164, 166–67. Shimazono describes the transition from pre- to postmodernity in Japanese religion, where the rise of a modernistic rationality produced both a dismissal of earlier religious institutions and practices and a corresponding rise in interest in new religious forms, particularly spirit belief. Elsewhere, Shimazono describes the diversification of spiritual strategies that have taken place since the latter 1970s, noting particularly that the older “new religions” ceased to be new, prompting a further wave of religious development characterized by the “new new religions” of Japan. SHIMAZONO Susumu, Postmodan shinshûkyô: gendai nihon no seishin jôkyô no tetryû [Postmodern New Religions: The Undercurrents of the Spiritual Situation of Contemporary Japan] (Tokyo: Tôkyôdô Shuppan, 2001), 1–86. Shimazono has also identified the boom in interest in the seishin sekai (spirit world), roughly equivalent to “New Age,” as part of this overall trend. Shimazono, From Salvation to Spirituality, 293–305. On this point, see Jan Swyngedouw, “Religion in Contemporary Japanese Society,” in Religion and Society in Modern Japan, ed. Mark R. Mullins, Shimazono Susumu, and Paul L. Swanson (Fremont, Calif.: Asian Humanities Press [Jain Publishing Company], 1993), 67–70.
On the diversification and modification of existing religious themes, see Shimazono, *From Salvation to Spirituality*, 293–305.

For one example of entertainment affecting religious practice, see Lutgendorf, "Jai Santoshi Maa Revisited," 19–42.

See Ian Reader, *Religion in Contemporary Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1991), 13–15. Low levels of professed belief in Japan are likely related to this narrow definition, which has a convoluted history of usage both in contrast to and in conjunction with institutionalized religions.


The respondents interviewed for the article all utilized these activities in times of distress or as part of a regular daily practice or routine that kept them "spiritually balanced." Hamada, "Kamisama wa imasu ka?" 42–46.

See Shimazono, quoted in Hamada, "Kamisama wa imasu ka?" 45.

Yumiyama, "Gendai nihon no shûkyô," 110.

I am indebted to Paula Arai for emphasizing the difference between the nominal "religion" and the adjectival "religious" in response to the term *shûkyô* asobi at the 2005 AAR Annual Meeting.


Reader and Tanabe point out that anybody may utilize a temple for the acquisition of worldly benefits, regardless of affiliation (*Practically Religious*, 8). They also point to acquisition of worldly benefits as the underlying common religion of Japan (*Practically Religious*, 23–32). Elsewhere, Reader points to the influence of occult literature on the membership of Aum Shinrikyô. See Ian Reader, *Religious Violence in Contemporary Japan: The Case of Aum Shinrikyô* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2000), 96–104, especially 100. The recent boom in divination and supicon (an abbreviation of the English words "spirituality convention," large meetings focused largely on divination and
healing practices, apparently most often frequented by women but open to all) suggests that these are also major elements in the larger movement away from formal religion and to a less restrictive spirituality. On these trends, see Hamada, “Uranai nippon doko e iku?” 46–52.

24 The term is explained in Shimazono, From Salvation to Spirituality, 293–305. I would include among these supicon (spirituality conventions), divination, magic, healing and occult literature.

25 Shimazono, From Salvation to Spirituality, 297.

26 Shimazono, From Salvation to Spirituality, 305.

27 Shimazono, From Salvation to Spirituality, 299–305.

28 Shimazono, From Salvation to Spirituality, 302–3.

29 Shimazono, From Salvation to Spirituality, 303.

30 Shimazono, From Salvation to Spirituality, 303.


33 “Asobu,” Kōjien [Dictionary] etymological reference, ed. Niimura Izuru, 1998, digital version. Although “bettenchō” is often translated as “utopia,” I feel that “alternate reality” is better in the context of this passage. The fact that the word yūtopia [utopia] also exists in Japanese suggests that discrimination between the two in terms of their usage is necessary.

34 I am indebted to Kasai Kenta of the Center for Information on Religion for his question at the 2005 AAR Annual Meeting concerning the level of meaning of “asobu” used in shūkyō asobi, as well as to my instructors Otake Hiroko and Kushida Kiyomi at the Inter-University Center for Japanese Language Studies in Yokohama, Japan for helping to determine how to properly interpret and present the word here.


38 Yamanaka, “Manga bunka no naka no shūkyō,”158–84. Significantly, the prime example he uses for the latter is Miyazaki Hayao’s manga Nausicaā of the Valley of the Wind.


40 Lyden, Film as Religion, 2–3.
Lyden, *Film as Religion*, 4. Lyden's description is reminiscent of the root meaning of *asobu*, given above.

Lyden, *Film as Religion*, 3.


Plate, "Introduction," 4.

Lutgendorf, "Jai Santoshi Maa Revisited," 22.


Plate, "Introduction," 1.


Shimazono, *From Salvation to Spirituality*, 300–1.


Miyazaki Hayao, dir., *Kaze no Tani no Nausicaä* [Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind], 1984.


Miyazaki Hayao, dir., *Mononoke Hime* [Princess Mononoke], 1997.

Miyazaki Hayao, dir., *Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi* [Spirited Away], 2001.


Boyd and Nishimura, "Shinto Perspectives;" Wright, "The Nature Vision of Hayao Miyazaki."

Shimazono treats the issue of secularization well in his article "Spirit Belief" in *From Salvation to Spirituality*, 164–77. However much "secularization" progresses, there is a countervailing trend that maintains and reinvents spirituality. See also Swyngedouw, "Religion in Contemporary Japanese Society," 67–70.


Boyd and Nishimura, "Shinto Perspectives," 8 (my page numbering).

Plate, "Introduction," 1.

These attitudes are generally representative of the types of thought Shimazono describes in his chapter on “New Spirituality Movements and Culture.” Shimazono, From Salvation to Spirituality, 293–305.


Miyazaki, Tonari no Totoro


McCarthy, Master of Japanese Animation, 122.

Totoro are not just refashioned, but also fashionable kami, if the ubiquitous mass-marketed stuffed totoro are any indication.

McCarthy, Master of Japanese Animation, 122.

MIXI (Online Blog Community) Miyazaki fan site, available by membership only. A person identifying herself as Soppi (post #13) wrote on a thread started by *Yuhi*: Miyazaki kantoku eiga no eikyō wa? [What is the influence of director Miyazaki’s movies?] Miyazaki Hayao kantoku eiga no nazo wo tsukyû/kaimei [Pursuing and elucidating the mysteries of director Miyazaki Hayao’s films], <http://mixi.jp/view_bbs.pl?id=3413393&comm_id=290365>, accessed 2 January 2006. This link is no longer active, and the entire thread has been removed from the community page. Presumably the discussion moderator found some of the content objectionable or outdated. Other threads, cited below, may also become inactive at a later date. The MIXI links cited are fully accessible once one has logged onto the MIXI site. Using MIXI requires the ability to read Japanese. Readers who have difficulty navigating the site should contact the author.

Miyazaki, Kaze no Tani no Nausicaä.

Yamanaka, “Manga bunka no naka no shūkyō,” 158–84, esp. 175–81. The anime is a simplified version of the manga, but retains the same religious tone.

Yamanaka, “Manga bunka no naka no shūkyō,” 176.

Yamanaka, “Manga bunka no naka no shūkyō,” 181.


Shimizu, Miyazaki Hayao wo yomu, 141–42.

Interview with Charles T. Whipple, “The Power of Positive Inking,” n.d., 8–9 (my page numbering), <http://www.charlest.whipple.net/mangamiyazaki.html>, initially accessed 15 January 2005. Attempts to contact the author for the date of writing have thus far been unsuccessful. Based on the content of the article, cross-referencing the movies it mentions with their dates of release, it seems to have been written in late 1994.

On musubi, see Swyngedouw, “Religion in Contemporary Japan,” 62–63. Written with the characters for “spirit” and “production,” musubi is one of the
fundamental elements of Japanese religious culture, being particularly important in the calendrical cycle of ritual events.


MIXI (Online Blog Community) Miyazaki fan site. Thread by Airinsachi (Kekaha), Naushika no saigo wa... [The end of Nausicaä ... ], Miyazaki no nazo wo tsukiýû/kaiimei, <http://mixi.jp/view_bbs.pl?page=1&comm_id=290365&id=1884432>, accessed 1 September 2005. See particularly the series of posts by Hajime (#6), Airinsachi (Kekaha) (#7, #10), Hibachi (#8), and Kenji (#9).


Miyazaki, Mononoke Hime.


Napier, Anime From Akira to Princess Mononoke, 186-87.


Shimazono points to the popularity of spiritually-infused environmentalism in modern Japan, in From Salvation to Spirituality, 175.

Thread by Sunchan, Sen to Chihiro kantoku no messeeji [The Director’s Messages in Spirited Away], Miyazaki Hayao no nazo wo tsukiýû/kaiimei, <http://mixi.jp/view_bbs.pl?page=3&comm_id=290365&id=2205445>, accessed 2 October 2006. See particularly the posts by Hatsubodaishin (#25) EYESEYESNOISE (#9) and Shinrabanshô (#23). The focus on human activity interfering with the ability of the gods to return to their natural homes (rivers, in particular) recurs in the film and is picked up by the message board commentators. Also note that names like Hatsubodaishin [starting on the path towards enlightenment/the prerequisite mindset for enlightenment] and Shinrabanshô [all things existing in the universe] both seem to reflect an interest in spirituality.

See McCarthy, Master of Japanese Animation, 89.

See Reader and Tanabe, Practically Religious, 15–16; and on how “spiritual sells,” see chapters 5 and 6 of their book.

These posts obviously represent only those fans motivated enough to participate in an online forum, and make up merely a fraction of the information available from and about Miyazaki fans.

Shimazono, From Salvation to Spirituality, 303.

Certainly, this has come to the fore in previous works on Japanese religion, such as Reader and Tanabe, Practically Religious, 206–55.

See Yamanaka, “Manga bunka no naka no shûkyô,” 161–63; Kitahara, Honya ni wa nai manga, 87. Kitahara picks up ten examples in his section on religious manga, two more in a section on Cosmomate—also known as Worldmate—and
touches upon the apologetic *Shyandaru!* [Scandal!] written about Sōka Gakkai leader Ikeda Daisaku's rape accusations.


100 Yamanaka, "Manga bunka no naka no shûkyô," 162. Aside from being relatively dogmatic, this type of manga sometimes reflects a lack of inspiration on the part of the authors (who are not necessarily adherents) who have been commissioned to create the work.

101 Kitahara, for example, treats religious manga as an oddity, in *Honya ni wa nai manga*, 87.

102 Shahar’s treatment of the Chinese *xiaoshuo* and their influence on popular religion is suggestive, in "Vernacular Fiction and the Transmission of Gods’ Cults in Late Imperial China," 193–94. Lutgendorf’s portrayal of *Jai Santoshi Maa* is also a good example, "Jai Santoshi Maa Revisited," 19–42.

103 Ian Reader pointed out to me the similarity between *shûkyô asobi* and the phrase *ibento shûkyô* (event religion), used to refer to large religious events that are equally focused on spectacle (e.g., festivals and parades), which he suggests has been widely used in Japanese academic circles, particularly *Shûkyô Shakaigaku no Kai* [The Society of the Sociology of Religion]. Personal email communication, 24 February 2005, and 14 April 2005.

On the subject of *ibento shûkyô*, see Ian Reader, "Recent Japanese Publications in Religion," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 16, no. 4 (December 1989): 299–315. See particularly the section on *Gendaijin no shûkyô* [The Religion of People Today], ed. ÔMURA Eishô and NISHIYAMA Shigeru (Tokyo: Yuhikaku, 1988), 308–12. I suspect that *ibento shûkyô* may be based a bit more on an opposition of the categories “religion” and “events” than *shûkyô asobi*, but certainly the parallel is striking and worthy of investigation.