

Public Intellectuals, Neonationalism, and the Politics of Yasukuni Shrine

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Introduction

Yasukuni Shrine remains a controversial site in contemporary Japan. In spite of its name, “peaceful country,” it has been associated with war, militarism, and social conflict throughout much of its history. Established initially to memorialize those soldiers who gave their lives in the battles fought for the restoration of imperial rule, it became the site to enshrine all of those who perished in Japan’s wars of imperial expansion from the late nineteenth century until 1945. During this period, the shrine was under the administrative control of the Ministries of Army and Navy, and financially supported by the government. Shinto priests were employed to conduct the services, but it is worth noting that the chief priest was often a military man. Although the rituals conducted at the shrine followed Shinto protocol, the government regarded them as “non-religious” ceremonies that were necessary to provide official recognition for those who sacrificed their life for the nation and Emperor. The annual events held at the shrine were used to inspire and mobilize the Japanese for war, celebrate military victories, and memorialize the war dead.

Following Japan’s surrender in August 1945, the Allied Occupation rapidly transformed the status of the shrine. In response to the Shinto Directive (15 December 1945) issued by the Supreme Commander of Allied Powers, all shrines were “disestablished” and separated from government support and control. In order to survive in the new legal-political environment, Shinto shrines were forced to embrace a “religious” identity and required to register as religious corporations (*shūkyō hōjin*). Yasukuni Shrine priests completed this process in September 1946. This new legal status as voluntary religious organization is what constitutes the source of the multiple conflicts that have surrounded the shrine throughout the postwar period. The strict separation of religion and state required by the Shinto Directive was incorporated into the postwar Constitution (1947) in Articles 20 and 89, and these have provided the legal framework for the debates surrounding Yasukuni Shrine for some seventy years.

Since the end of the Occupation, public debate and legal battles have erupted around a number of issues related to the shrine. One of these is related to the efforts of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) to pass legislation (*Yasukuni Jinja hōan* 靖国神社法案) to restore government support of the shrine. Although LDP leaders presented six bills to the Diet between 1969 and 1974, these were all defeated. A second issue surrounds the constitutionality of official visits to the shrine (*kōshiki sanpai* 公式参拜) by prime ministers and cabinet members, and whether participation in ceremonies at Yasukuni Shrine in an official capacity violates the principle of religion-state separation. A third issue is related to the continued enshrinement of the war dead by Yasukuni Shrine priests in the postwar period. These enshrinements were facilitated by information provided by the government’s Ministry of Health and Welfare and without the permission of the bereaved families concerned. In recent decades, Japanese Buddhists and Christians, as well as some foreigners (citizens of Taiwan and South Korea), have launched lawsuits against both Yasukuni Shrine and the Japanese government for alleged violation of Articles 20 and 89, and appealed to have the names of their family dead removed from

the shrine register (*gōshi torikeshi* 合祀取り消し). All three issues highlighted here are interrelated and draw our attention to the conflict over how religious freedom and religion-state separation should be interpreted and practiced in contemporary Japan.

In this essay, I focus on the second issue in connection with Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro's "official visit" on 15 August 1985, a highly symbolic act, and examine the response of two public intellectuals, Umehara Takeshi (1925–) and Sono Ayako (1931–). Although these two prominent figures are often regarded as "conservative" or "nationalistic," they both critically engaged the pro-Yasukuni Shrine position advanced by Prime Minister Nakasone's administration in the mid-1980s.¹ The positions of Umehara and Sono represented "minority opinions" at the time, but the concerns they raised have become a part of the public discourse in the debates surrounding Yasukuni Shrine over the past several decades.

Umehara, a graduate of Kyoto University, is a well-known Buddhist philosopher who has had a distinguished academic career, which has included faculty appointments at Ritsumeikan University and Kyoto City University of Arts, where he also served as president in the mid-1970s. He was the founding Director of the International Research Center for Japanese Studies, a position he held from 1987 to 1995. His collected works were published by Shōgakusan (2002–2003) in a series of twenty volumes. His influence extends beyond the academic world. Many of his books are popular volumes aimed at a wider audience, and his public role is also evident from his numerous essays and editorials published in newspapers and magazines, and through his involvement as a leader in the Article 9 Association (Kyū Jō no Kai 九条の会), which he and some other prominent intellectuals organized in 2004.

The second figure, Sono Ayako, is a Roman Catholic and graduate of Sacred Heart University in Tokyo. She is widely known as the author of best-selling novels and volumes of essay collections, and as a regular columnist for conservative magazines and newspapers (such as *Sankei shinbun*). From 1996–2005 she served as chairperson of the Nippon Foundation, a philanthropic organization established by Sasakawa Ryōichi in 1962 to support a range of domestic and international humanitarian activities. She has had a close association with the Liberal Democratic Party as an advisor for many years and served on the Ad Hoc Educational Committee of the Japanese Ministry of Education, and most recently on the education reform panel organized by Prime Minister Abe's administration in 2013.²

Background to Nakasone's "Official Visit" to Yasukuni

Prime Ministerial visits to Yasukuni Shrine resumed shortly after the Treaty of Peace with Japan was signed in San Francisco (8 September 1951). Yoshida Shigeru, in fact, visited on 19 October 1951,

¹ Carol Gluck (1993, p. 72), for example, observes the close relationship between Umehara and former Prime Minister Nakasone, whose vision for "internationalization" was linked to "the revival of a cultural nationalism unencumbered by remembrance of the wartime past." Similarly, Margaret Sleeboon's treatment of the founding of Nichibunken in *Academic Nations in China and Japan* (2004, p.114), includes a quotation from the co-authored work by Nakasone and Umehara (1996, p. 80), in which Umehara acknowledges that his critics on the left viewed him to be an "ultranationalist" like Nakasone and regarded Nichibunken as "an organ of nationalist propaganda."

² Sono's close association with the government and ruling Liberal Democratic Party is apparent from the personal information provided on the government site: <http://www.kantei.go.jp/jp/m-magazine/backnumber/2002/sono.html>.

almost six months before the Occupation officially ended. While many prime ministers visited over the following decades, they usually explained that their visits were conducted in a “private” capacity (*shijin no shikaku* 私人の資格) or avoided clearly indicating whether the visits had been personal or official. Conservative leaders within the Liberal Democratic Party, however, were adamant that official visits be resumed and fully recognized as such. This issue was finally addressed head on during the period Nakasone served as the Prime Minister (1982–1987). Prime Minister Nakasone visited the shrine on 15 August 1983 and the following year, but whether these visits were made as a “private citizen” or as a “public official” remained ambiguous (although he did sign the shrine’s registry as Prime Minister).

It was in this context that in August 1984, Chief Cabinet Secretary Fujinami Takao convened a private Advisory Committee (“Kakuryō no Yasukuni Jinja sanpai mondai ni kannsuru kondankai” 閣僚の靖国神社公式参拝に関する懇談会) to gather information from a range of experts on how Japanese people viewed the shrine and to address the lingering problem of whether or not official shrine visits by the Prime Minister and Cabinet members constituted a violation of the Constitution.³ The composition of the fifteen-member advisory committee was diverse and included public intellectuals, a company president, lawyers, a former Supreme Court judge, professors of constitutional law and philosophy, a literary critic, and a novelist.

The committee met some twenty-one times over the course of a year to deliberate these issues. Given the make-up of the committee, it is not surprising that a consensus was never reached. While some firmly argued that “official visits” by the prime minister would be a violation of religion-state separation and offered other reasons why they were inadvisable, the majority opinion submitted to Fujinami in the final report endorsed the view that these visits constituted legitimate behavior on the part of government representatives.⁴ On 14 August 1985, Fujinami issued a public statement that presented the majority opinion—and the government’s preferred view—that paying homage at the shrine would not constitute a violation of the constitutional separation of religion and state if Prime Ministers and Cabinet members made it clear that their actions were simply expressions of respect toward the war dead and without religious significance. This could be achieved, he explained, by avoiding the Shinto rituals usually performed on such occasions.⁵

The majority position and final recommendation of Fujinami’s committee was based in part on a consideration of the 1977 Supreme Court Decision (13 July) on whether the use of municipal funds for the Tsu City *Jichinsai* (grounds purification rite) in 1965 constituted a violation of Article 20 of the Constitution. The Supreme Court ruled that if the purpose of the activity (*kōi no mokuteki*

³ The record of these meetings and the materials reviewed by the advisory committee in 1984–1985 are available online, and a part of the larger collection of Yasukuni Shrine-related documents in the National Diet Library (第四期 昭和五〇(一九七五)年から平成一二(二〇〇〇)年まで (三)「閣僚の靖国神社参拝に関する懇談会」関係資料); see: http://dl.ndl.go.jp/view/download/digidepo_999337_po_1027-1126.pdf?contentNo=34.

⁴ On the divided opinions of the committee, see Hardacre (1989, p. 151), and Reid (1991, p. 50, n. 31).

⁵ In this statement, Fujinami recognized the concerns of some critics who claimed that shrine visits by officials will lead to a “revival of prewar State Shintō and militarism” (*senzen no Kokka Shintō oyobi gunkoku shugi no fukkatsu* 戦前の国家神道及び軍国主義の復活). He indicated that care would be taken so that does not happen, but made no reference to the recommendation that a religiously “neutral” memorial site be created as an alternative to Yasukuni Shrine. His statement is available online: http://www.kantei.go.jp/jp/singi/tuitou/dai2/siryō1_7.html (last accessed 2 October 2015).

行為の目的) was not religious, and the action did not aim to support or promote one particular religion (*shūkyō ni taisuru enjo, jochō, sokushin* 宗教に対する援助、助長、促進) or involve coercion or interference (*appaku, kanshō nado* 圧迫、干渉等) in the free practice of another religion, then the activity would not constitute a violation of Article 20. In short, the majority opinion and recommendation to Fujinami was based on the expansion of this judicial interpretation from *jichinsai* to include *kōshiki sanpai*.⁶

On 15 August, Prime Minister Nakasone visited Yasukuni Shrine and closely followed the approach recommended by Fujinami. He went directly to the main hall, bowed once (本殿において一礼する方式), but did not observe the traditional Shintō protocol, which normally includes a purification ritual, an offering a sprig of the sakaki 榊 tree, and the usual ritual process of two bows, clapping of the hands twice, and a final bow (*nirei, nihakushu, ichirei* 二礼二拍手一礼). Rather than making a direct financial donation, Nakasone simply used public funds to purchase the flowers that were offered on the occasion of his visit. The general public may have been oblivious to these fine distinctions between “religious” and “non-religious” observances and simply regarded Nakasone as a “pro-Yasukuni” nationalist when he made the visit accompanied by most of his Cabinet members. The head priest, Matsudaira Nagayoshi, however, was incensed that the traditional rites had been abandoned and regarded Nakasone’s visit as a sign of disrespect to the kami enshrined there.⁷

In spite of the efforts by Fujinami and Nakasone to redefine “official visits” as civic and non-religious and therefore constitutional, critics were hardly persuaded given the fact that the ritual respect accorded the war dead occurred in an institution registered with the government as a religious corporation (*shūkyō hōjin*). Within Japan many intellectuals and religious leaders expressed their strong opposition to the Prime Minister’s initiative, and domestic lawsuits were launched against Nakasone and the government for violating the constitutional separation of religion and state.⁸ International criticism also appeared in newspapers and media reports in China, North Korea, South Korea, Singapore, and the Soviet Union.⁹ The negative press and reaction was such that Nakasone canceled his planned visit to the shrine the following year. As a result, “official” prime ministerial visits to the shrine were avoided for over a decade and the debate subsided.

⁶ This explanation is found on p. 98 of the final report: <http://www.ndl.go.jp/jp/diet/publication/document/2007/200704/1027-1126.pdf>.

⁷ More details about this incident and Matsudaira’s response may be found in *Yasukuni Jinja sengo hishi: A-kyū senpan o gōshi shita otoko* 靖国神社戦後秘史: A級戦犯を合祀した男, Tokyo: Mainichi Shinbunsha, 2007, pp. 76–78. NHK News coverage of the 15 August 1989 visit is available at the following site, which includes Nakasone’s clear explanation to reporters that he was engaging in an “official” (*kōshiki sanpai*) visit as Prime Minister and it was an appropriate action for Cabinet members: http://cgi2.nhk.or.jp/archives/tv60bin/detail/index.cgi?das_id=D0009030198_00000.

⁸ As it turns out, the two courts adjudicating these cases followed the reasoning of the justices in the 1977 Supreme Court Decision regarding the Tsu City *jichinsai* case mentioned above and ruled against the plaintiffs. In the decisions of both the Osaka District Court (November 1989) and the Fukuoka Court (December 1989) it was determined that Nakasone’s actions had not violated Article 20 since the religious freedom of the plaintiffs had not be infringed upon in any way. As David Reid has noted, these rulings indicate “that ‘separation issues’ have been reduced to ‘religious freedom’ issues. Unless coercion can be proved, there is no religious freedom issue, and if there is no religious freedom issue, there is no separation issue” (see David Reid 1991, p. 51).

⁹ See Breen (2010, pp. 284–86) for more detailed discussion of the negative international reaction to Nakasone’s visit.

Critical Perspectives on “Official Visits”

Several months after Prime Minister Nakasone’s controversial visit, the “minority” perspectives of some advisory committee members were published in the November 1985 issue of *Jurist*, which was devoted to the problem of “official visits to Yasukuni Shrine.” While their alternative views had been referred to in the report submitted to Chief Cabinet Secretary Fujinami, this publication provided a fuller treatment of their arguments against the “majority” recommendation that official visits to Yasukuni be resumed. This special issue contained articles by both Umehara and Sono, which explained their concerns about Yasukuni Shrine and government support for “official visits.”¹⁰ Here I provide a brief synopsis of their positions.

Umehara Takeshi’s Perspective

In his article entitled “The Merits and Demerits of Official Visits to Yasukuni Shrine,” Umehara offered a pragmatic approach to the issue and identified some key problems associated with shrine visits by government representatives.¹¹ His essay begins with the acknowledgement that he and some of the other members of the Advisory Committee—along with most constitutional scholars—regarded “official visits” to Yasukuni Shrine as a clear violation of the separation of religion and state. One member of the committee, however, opposed the strong focus on the current Constitution—seen as a foreign imposition by General MacArthur—and argued that it should not be regarded as the basis for final arbitration of the issue; rather, in his view, the Constitution needed to be revised as soon as possible.¹² Umehara, however, expressed appreciation for the postwar Constitution—regardless of its “foreign” connections—since it brought about significant democratic reforms and helped to liberate Japan from a misguided nationalism. After expressing his opposition to any hasty revision of the Constitution, he focuses his attention on other reasons why official visits should either be “promoted” or “avoided,” and argues that the “merits” and “demerits” for such visits should be reviewed and a decision made after the sum total is calculated. Although this was the approach he proposed to the Advisory Committee, the majority were not persuaded and the Committee’s final recommendation, he explains, was based on the “mood” among the members after a rather “heated discussion.”¹³

Umehara highlights two potential “merits” of prime ministerial visits to Yasukuni. Firstly, if such visits were resumed it would satisfy the longing of many bereaved families (*Nihon izokukai*) for proper recognition of their deceased family members by the government. While Yasukuni has memorialized

¹⁰ This special issue also contained essays by some of the others who served on the advisory committee as well as Murakami Shigeyoshi, a well-known historian and critic of Yasukuni Shrine and the system of State Shinto.

¹¹ “Kōshiki sanpai no meritto to demeritto” 公式参拝のメリットとデメリット. *Jurist* ジュリスト 848 (1985), pp. 10–16.

¹² Umehara (1985, p.10). Although Umehara does not refer to this committee member by name, I suspect that it was Etō Jun (1932–1999), a “pro-Yasukuni” literary critic who until his death provided intellectual support for those in the government promoting Yasukuni Shrine and the particular “memory” of the war as represented by Yūshūkan. Ann Sherif (2007, p. 141) has noted Etō’s disappointment with what he felt was an over-emphasis on the legal and constitutional dimension of the Yasukuni issue and lack of attention to “cultural issues” in the Committee’s deliberations.

¹³ The Japanese here is: *Nihon de wa, sanseiba to hantaiha ga gekiron shita sue ni nantonaku mu-do ni yotte kimatte shimau koto ga ōi* 日本では、賛成派と反対派が激論した末に何となくムードによってきまってしまうことが多い (Umehara 1985, p. 11).

them as heroic spirits (*eirei* 英霊), the fact the prime ministers in the postwar period have often been willing to visit the shrine only in a “private capacity” is regarded as a slight by bereaved families who lost a family member in wars fought on behalf of the Emperor and nation. Umehara recalls that during the months the Committee was deliberating these issues, he received many thousands of cards from individuals and families expressing their hope that the meaning of their deaths and the deep loss they experienced would be fully understood and officially recognized. After the Committee’s recommendation that “official visits” be resumed was made public, he then received many cards expressing appreciation. In light of this kind of popular response, he concludes that by addressing the felt needs of the bereaved families is clearly one “merit” in favor of the majority position on official visits.

Umehara also acknowledged a second possible merit—emphasized by a number of those on the Committee—which is that national defense would be enhanced if official visits were resumed. If the government does not show proper respect, honor, and gratitude toward those who sacrificed their lives for the nation in the past, it would be unreasonable to expect citizens to willingly offer their lives for their country in a future time of national emergency. While Umehara suggests that there are probably counter arguments that could be made against this line of reasoning, he concedes that many would likely regard this as a “merit” and an additional reason to support official visits to Yasukuni.

In Umehara’s view, these “merits” are outnumbered by the “demerits,” which he gives more detailed treatment. The first problem is the potential impact of official shrine visits on Japan’s international relations. Writing at a time when Japan was in the midst of difficult trade negotiations and conflict with the United States and Europe, Umehara felt that maintaining friendly relations with Japan’s closest neighbors—Korea and China—would be vitally important for economic stability in the future. Although one or two members of the committee shared his concerns, most were “utterly indifferent” to the possibility that prime ministerial visits would damage Japan’s international relations. Given what Yasukuni Shrine represents to China and Korea, however, Umehara anticipated that official visits by prime ministers would lead to the negative reactions and diplomatic problems, which, in fact, did occur following Nakasone’s August visit.

The second problem or demerit has to do with the particular form of Shinto institutionalized by Yasukuni Shrine, which he regards as a distortion of authentic Japanese tradition. Umehara confesses that for several decades he struggled with the question of whether the ultranationalism of the wartime period was a natural and inevitable expression of Japan’s spiritual heritage or based upon a misunderstanding of that spiritual tradition by right-wing thinkers. If it does in fact represent authentic Japanese tradition, then he worries whether it is possible to derive spiritual principles from this tradition that can provide the foundation for Japan to maintain a peaceful existence in the international world today.¹⁴

Umehara explains that after three decades of research, he reached the conclusion that Yasukuni Shrine—its beliefs and practices—deviates from Japanese tradition in significant ways. For example, the exclusive memorialization of the war dead by Yasukuni Shrine—and only those who died on behalf of Japan—he views as a post-Meiji development that departs significantly from ancient Japanese tradition and practice. Prior to the formation of State Shinto under the influence of the

¹⁴ Umehara 1985, p. 12.

Hirata School of Shinto, he argues, traditional care of the dead included both Shinto and Buddhist rites, the latter closely associated with both the care of the ancestors (*shirei no chinkon* 死霊の鎮魂) and the pacification of dangerous spirits (*onryō shizume* 怨霊鎮め).¹⁵

While he acknowledges that Yasukuni Shrine provides some traditional Shinto rites for the care of the dead, its monopoly over the war dead—which eliminates Buddhist ritual care—constitutes an abandonment of authentic Japanese tradition. He goes on to explain that the development of State Shinto from the early Meiji period was due to the influence of the Hirata School and its concern to purify native traditions from foreign influences. This shaped the government policies that abolished the place of Buddhism and led to the disintegration of the natural co-existence and reverence for both kami and buddhas, which he claims characterized life in pre-modern Japan.

According to Umehara, the development of State Shinto from the Meiji period not only damaged Buddhism, but also had negative repercussions for the Shinto tradition. The authority and control over shrines by priestly families was replaced by government administration. Furthermore, many local traditions and practices were often eliminated as Shinto was reorganized around Ise Jingū and the ancestral deities of the Imperial household, Meiji Shrine and the kami of the Meiji Emperor, and Yasukuni Shrine, which enshrined the deified soldiers who gave their lives for the emperor and nation. Umehara argues that this *was not the structure of traditional Shinto*, but a new form reconstructed (*kaizō* 改造) in relation to nationalism. The key “demerit” of *kōshiki sanpai*, in short, is that it represents a tacit approval of a distorted version of Japanese tradition that will give people both inside and outside Japan the impression that the government is seeking to revive or resurrect the old wartime nationalism that was supported by State Shinto. The narrow nationalism supported by official visits to Yasukuni Shrine, he concludes, is misguided and inappropriate for Japan to function as a member of international society today.¹⁶

Given that Yasukuni Shrine represents a distortion of authentic Japanese spiritual tradition, Umehara proposed that a new memorial site (*matsuri no basho* 祭りの場所) be established to honor the war dead as an alternative to Yasukuni Shrine. This would be a site where people of any religious affiliation could conduct memorial services according to their own faith tradition, and it would *exclude the war criminals* that Yasukuni Shrine “arbitrarily enshrined” (*katte ni gōshi shita* 勝手に合祀した).¹⁷ He suggests that it could also serve as a memorial site for others who gave their lives in public service in the postwar period, including, for example, members of the Self-Defense Force (*Jieitai*).¹⁸ While some might suggest that reform of the current war memorial site are possible, Umehara quotes a well-known biblical text—“new wine is put into fresh wineskins” (Matthew 9:17)—to conclude his argument that only an entirely new site unencumbered by the problems associated with Yasukuni Shrine will ever be regarded as an acceptable and legitimate memorial institution by the larger Japanese public and Japan’s neighbors in Asia.

¹⁵ Umehara 1985, pp. 14–15.

¹⁶ Umehara 1985, p. 15.

¹⁷ It should be noted that Yasukuni conducted these enshrinements under pressure from the government and with a sense of responsibility to fulfill the promises made to the soldiers when they departed for war.

¹⁸ Umehara 1985, p. 16.

Sono Ayako's Perspective

Sono similarly argues that a new religiously neutral memorial site needs to be established as an alternative to Yasukuni, but for some other reasons not addressed by Umehara.¹⁹ At the outset, Sono makes it clear that she regards “official visits” by prime ministers and cabinet members to be a clear violation of the Constitution. Given that Yasukuni was registered as a religious corporation (*shūkyō hōjin*) in 1946, and conducts its rituals according to Shinto tradition, it is impossible to argue that it is a religiously neutral site that simply observes the ancient Japanese custom of spirit pacification (*irei* 慰霊). In her view, the notion that what goes on in the shrine precincts is either non-religious or religiously neutral is something that will never be accepted from the international commonsense point of view.²⁰

Sono notes the argument made by some—that the only reason Yasukuni became a *shūkyō hōjin* and was clearly identified as a Shinto institution—was simply as a strategy to survive the particular circumstances of the Occupation. Sono reasons that if that is, in fact, the case, the shrine administrators could end the Shinto monopoly and make arrangements so that all religions could conduct their own services within precincts. If arrangements for equal access were guaranteed, she would not be opposed to the preservation of the sanctuary (*shinden* 神殿), or Great Torii, as it stands nor to the continued management of the facility by Shinto priests. The fact that this kind of change would never be accepted is clear evidence that the shrine is biased toward one particular religion (*akirana ni tokutei shūkyō ni katayotteiru* 明らかに特定宗教に偏っている), which means that “official visits” to the shrine as it operates today would violate the Constitution by giving support or endorsement to one particular religious tradition.²¹

The normalization of such “official visits,” she also fears, could lead to restrictions on religious freedom or the freedom to oppose participation in rites of any kind. If “official visits” are defined as the duty of all those holding public office, it could lead to situations of coercion in which individuals with other religious convictions are required to participate in Shinto rites.²² While she believes that prime ministers and government officials should express their gratitude and remember those who gave their lives for the nation, Yasukuni Shrine remains a problematic site for this to be a duty of those holding public office.

¹⁹ Sono 1985, pp. 32–34. My analysis of Sono’s changing views of Yasukuni Shrine here overlaps with John Breen’s earlier treatment; see his “The Danger is Ever Present: Catholic Critiques of the Yasukuni Shrine in Postwar Japan,” *Japan Mission Journal* 63:2 (2009), pp. 111–22; “Popes, Bishops and War Criminals: Reflections on Catholics and Yasukuni in Postwar Japan,” *Asia-Pacific Journal* 9-3-10 (1 March 2010), online at: <http://www.japanfocus.org/~John-Breen/3312>; and “Voices of Rage: Six Paths to the Problem of Yasukuni,” in *Politics and Religion in Modern Japan: Red Sun, Shite Lotus*, ed. Roy Starrs (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011). Sono is, of course, just one well-known Catholic example. For consideration of the Yasukuni stances of other Catholics, including Fr. Bruno Bitter, former Prime Minister Asō Tarō, Fr. Nishiyama Toshihiko, and Kevin Doak, see Breen’s studies cited above and Mullins (2010, 2013).

²⁰ The Japanese here is “*kokusaiteki jōshiki kara ittemo fukanō to omowaremasu*” 国際的常識から言っても不可能と思われまます (Sono 1985, p. 32).

²¹ Sono 1985, p. 32.

²² The Japanese here is “*Shinkyō no jiyū no shingai ni naru ke-su o hikiokoshikanenai to omowaremasu*” 信教の自由の侵害になるケースを引き起こしかねないと思われまます (Sono 1985, p. 32); on this point, see also Breen (2010, p. 6).

To avoid these potential problems, Sono concludes that it is necessary to construct a new memorial site or *kinenbyō* (記念廟) for the war dead. This would need to be a religiously neutral space where people and religious organizations could freely conduct memorial services according to their own tradition. It is only in such a place that government officials will be able to participate in official visits without impediments or controversy.

Post-Nakasone Developments: Conciliatory Efforts and Resurgent Neonationalism

Given the domestic and international reaction to his 1985 Yasukuni Shrine visit, Nakasone avoided making another visit while in office. It would be eleven years before another Prime Minister would visit the shrine, and it was during this moratorium period that some political leaders made significant efforts to actually improve diplomatic relations through the public acknowledgment of Japan's imperial past. It was in the short three-year interlude (1993–1996) to the postwar domination by the Liberal Democratic Party that several leaders of the coalition government initiated “apology diplomacy.” Chief Cabinet Secretary Kōno Yōhei made a statement and apology in response to the study on the “comfort women” issue (4 August 1993), and both Prime Minister Hosokawa Morihiro (23 August 1993) and Prime Minister Murayama Tomiichi (15 August 1995) made apologies for the pain and suffering caused by Japan's military aggression and colonial rule.²³

This public recognition of responsibility of Japan as the aggressor (*kagaisha*) towards its neighbors in Asia represented a significant shift in orientation among some political leaders. This admission clearly challenged the revisionist narrative of Japan's imperial past celebrated at Yasukuni Shrine and promoted by Yūshūkan, the shrine's war museum, as a glorious effort to “liberate Asia” from Western imperialism. It is not surprising that these public admissions of guilt generated a critical response from the far right. Reflecting on these official apologies, for example, Ishihara Shintarō, the ardent nationalist and Governor of Tokyo, stated how appalled he was by Hosokawa's “ignorance of history that allowed him to declare that our war in the Pacific was a war of aggression,” and stated that “Murayama's sentimentalism about ‘painful repentance and heartfelt apologies,’ amounted to a desecration of our nation's history.”²⁴

Murayama's resignation and Prime Minister Hashimoto Ryūtarō's visit to Yasukuni Shrine on his birthday in late July 1996—some eleven years since Nakasone's controversial visit—clearly marked the end to this brief conciliatory period and the beginning of a new period of nationalism. Elsewhere I have analyzed in some detail the significant surge in a range of neonationalistic initiatives over the past two decades, which were facilitated by the widespread sense of social crisis that followed the 1995

²³ These statements are available on the official sites below: Chief Cabinet Secretary Kono Yohei's statement on the result of the study on the issue of “comfort women” (4 August 4 1993), <http://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/women/fund/state9308.html>; Prime Minister Hosokawa Morihiro's Policy Speech to the 127th Session of the National Diet (23 August 1993), <http://japan.kantei.go.jp/127.html>; and Prime Minister Murayama Tomiichi's Statement “On the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the war's end” (15 August 1995), <http://www.mofa.go.jp/announce/press/pm/murayama/9508.html>.

²⁴ Ishihara made this statement following a visit to Yasukuni Shrine in August 2001. Quoted in John Nathan, *Japan Unbound* (2004), p.170.

and 2011 disaster years.²⁵ These include the renewed efforts by LDP leadership to promote official Yasukuni Shrine visits, to restore and strengthen patriotic education, and their plans to revise the Constitution. These are all related to a larger “restorationist vision” embraced by the far right of the LDP and its affiliated groups, such as Shinto Seiji Renmei and Nippon Kaigi, and the movement to “recover” what was destroyed by the reforms enacted during the Allied Occupation of Japan (1945–52).

Official visits to Yasukuni Shrine by Prime Ministers, Cabinet members, and Diet members have increased markedly over the past two decades. This significant surge is closely related to the leadership of Prime Minister Koizumi Jun’ichirō, who visited a number of times between 2001 and 2006, and that of Prime Minister Abe Shinzō, who visited on 26 December 2013. There was considerable domestic opposition to these visits and court cases were launched against both Koizumi and Abe. In the cases brought against Koizumi, the Fukuoka District Court in April 2004 and the Osaka High Court in September 2005 ruled that the plaintiffs’ legal interests had not been infringed upon by the Prime Minister’s visits; however, the two judges involved in these cases did offer their opinions—*obiter dictum*—that the Prime Minister’s patronage of Yasukuni Shrine had violated Article 20 of the Constitution. Their additional statements were “non-binding,” as John Breen points out, but the media coverage of these rulings generated some misunderstanding among the public.²⁶ The two cases against Prime Minister Abe are still in process.

These prime ministerial visits—as in the case of Nakasone—have again been followed by strong condemnations from South Korea and China, and even a public expression of disappointment was made by the United States in response to Abe’s most recent visit. Although Prime Minister Abe has restrained himself from making another official visit, he continues to make offerings to the shrine—as recently as the fall festival in October 2016—and even though these offerings are made with “personal” funds (*shibi 私費*), Foreign Ministry officials from China and Korea have still responded critically and repeatedly to urge Japanese leaders to reflect deeply on the history Japan’s aggression and make a clear break from this militaristic past.

Resisting and Riding the Wave of Neonationalism: Some Concluding Comparative Observations

Japan appears to be stuck where it was three decades ago when Nakasone made his controversial visit to Yasukuni Shrine. History is now repeating itself and a resolution to the conflict over Yasukuni Shrine remains unlikely for the foreseeable future. The proposal by Umehara and Sono to build an alternative site to memorialize the war dead has never gained much public support. It did receive some serious attention from scholars,²⁷ and in 2009 Prime Minister Hatoyama Yukio indicated that he was in favor of restarting discussions about this possibility, but his time in office was too short

²⁵ Here I am referring to the “double disaster” of 1995—the Awaji-Hanshin earthquake in January and the Aum Shinrikyō subway sarin gas attack in March—and the 11 March 2011 “triple disaster” of the earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear meltdown at the Fukushima Daiichi plant. See Mullins (2012, 2015a, 2015b).

²⁶ See Breen (2011, pp. 282–283) for a more detailed discussion of the *obiter dictum* following the Osaka and Fukuoka Court decisions.

²⁷ For example, see the collection of essays edited by the International Institute for the Study of Religion, *Atarashii tsuitō shisetsu wa hisuyō ka* 新しい追悼施設は必要か (2004).

to pursue it.²⁸ Preparing an alternative and religiously neutral memorial site might rationally solve the constitutional issues surrounding religion-state separation and the international foreign relations nightmare associated with “official visits” to a shrine that memorializes war criminals and maintains an affiliated war museum (Yūshūkan) that celebrates a revisionist history. Some have proposed that the nearby Chidorigafuchi National Cemetery, which memorializes over three hundred thousand unidentified war dead, be expanded as an alternative.²⁹ The fact remains, however, that the majority of Japanese expressing concern about the proper remembrance of the war dead are emotionally attached to Yasukuni Shrine and regard it as the only legitimate site for spiritual communion with deceased family members and fallen comrades.

Over the course of three decades, Umehara has maintained his critical stance and continued to express opposition to government support for Yasukuni Shrine. In 2004, for example, in response to Prime Minister Koizumi’s persistence in visiting Yasukuni Shrine, Umehara published an editorial in *Asahi shinbun* (20 April 2004), criticizing the Prime Minister for his refusal to “listen to the opinions of experts and to reflect seriously upon his own biases.” “It is deplorable,” he continued, “that Prime Minister Koizumi seems bent on repeating the example of Prime Minister Tōjō, a man devoid of reason, who with no small amount of bravado launched a reckless war and refused to end it even after defeat had become all but certain, bringing untold suffering upon the Japanese people.”³⁰

In *Kami goroshi no Nihon* (2006) and *Nihon no dentō to wa nani ka* (2010), Umehara provided a more detailed treatment of his criticism that Yasukuni Shrine represents a distortion of authentic Japanese tradition, an argument he expands to include the Imperial Rescript on Education (*Kyōiku chokugo*, 1890). In his view, misguided leaders have idealized this document as the basis for educational reform and the promotion of patriotism in contemporary Japan. Umehara rejects these attempts to revive key elements of what he refers to as *Tennōkyō*, which characterized wartime Japan. He argues that all of this was part of a manufactured system rooted in the narrow-minded and intolerant orientation of the Kokugaku movement that influenced the reshaping of Japanese tradition from the Meiji period.³¹ In developing his alternative moral vision, Umehara draws on Buddhist ethical teachings and the Shinto traditions that pre-dated *Tennōkyō* (i.e., State Shinto).

Umehara has been very critical of the more recent movement to revise the Fundamental Education Law (*Kyōiku kihon hō*) and signed a joint declaration to that effect on 18 July 2002. This statement asserted that the law in its current form, in fact, provided the ideals appropriate to nurture individuals for the twenty-first century.³² The revisions proposed by Abe’s government were seen to be a reversion to the wartime education system that diminished individual rights and involved various forms of coercion. Abe succeeded in passing the legislation to revise the Fundamental Education Law

²⁸ Reported in the *Asahi shinbun*, 11 August 2009.

²⁹ Since Chidorigafuchi has no official religious affiliation it would pass the test of “neutrality,” but Sono (1985, pp. 32–33) suggested in her earlier statement that it was too small to serve as an adequate alternative site.

³⁰ The English version of Umehara’s piece was published as “Official Visit to Yasukuni Shrine Invite the Revenge of Reason,” trans. Steven Platzer, *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* 2, issue 4, 2004.

³¹ Umehara 2006, pp. 33–34.

³² The declaration (*seimei* 声明), was entitled “Kyōiku to bunka o sekai ni hirakareta mono ni: Kyōiku kihonhō ‘kaiaku’ ni hantai suru yobikake” (教育と文化を世界に開かれたもの: 教育基本法「改悪」に反対する呼びかけ); available online: http://www.ne.jp/asahi/kyokasho/net21/gyoji_020718kihonhou.htm.

in 2006, and coercion has returned to public schools as a result. Today the use of the the Kimigayo (national anthem) and Hinomaru (national flag) are no longer voluntary, and teaching staff face disciplinary action if they fail to comply with the directives from the government and local school principals to lead students in singing the anthem for official school ceremonies.

Umehara was a founding member of the Article 9 Association—along with Ōe Kenzaburō and several other intellectuals—and he has opposed the current government’s “reinterpretation” of the “Peace” Constitution and its plans for revision. His editorial in the *Kyōto shinbun*, “Itsuka kita michi” (いつか来た道), revealed a broader concern that the orientation and direction of the Abe government will lead Japan to repeat the mistakes that took the nation on the path of militarism and war from the late nineteenth century until 1945.³³ It is his generation—those who actually experienced the war—who seem most concerned to preserve the postwar Constitution, and Umehara fears many younger Japanese lack the historical understanding needed to resist the agenda being advanced by the Abe government.

In stark contrast to Umehara’s critical stance, Sono has apparently had a conversion (*tenkō* 転向) of sorts and has fully embraced the neonationalistic agenda. Her new perspective was made public in her 2005 article, “I will visit Yasukuni Shrine” (Yasukuni ni mairimasu).³⁴ In this piece, there is no mention of her earlier proposal for an alternative site; rather, she emphasizes how important it is to remember those who sacrificed themselves for the nation at Yasukuni Shrine. She also expresses her view that foreign governments should not play role in deciding on whether or not one visits Yasukuni Shrine (i.e., Japan should not “be bullied by China’s interference in domestic affairs”). The proposal that Class A war criminals be removed from the Shrine is also rejected by Sono as this would be tantamount “to setting oneself up as a human to pass judgment just like God,” something she regards as a “frightening position.”³⁵

In this article and, again, in her book, *Kokka no toku*, Sono reports that she now visits Yasukuni annually with her husband, Miura Shumon, who felt compelled to return on account of the two classmates he lost during the war. The promise many soldiers made before departing to the frontlines of battle, “*Shindara Yasukuni de aou*” (死んだら靖国で会おう), is regarded by Miura and many other veterans as a binding covenant between the living and the dead. Sono’s empathy for these veterans feelings and experiences moved her to embrace a positive view of the shrine, which she now believes must be preserved (“*Yasukuni wa hitsuyō nano da*” 靖国は必要なのだ).³⁶

She also attributes her change in perspective to be based in part on the religious teaching she received in Catholic schools. As she explained in the earlier 2005 article: “On August 15 this year, my husband and I will visit Yasukuni Shrine. Some say that it is not right for me, as a Catholic, to do so. My reply is that one of the things I learned from the British and German nuns at the convent

³³ Umehara Takeshi 梅原猛, “Itsuka kita michi” いつか来た道, *Kyōto shinbun*, 5 January 2014.

³⁴ Sono Ayako, “I Will Visit Yasukuni,” *Japan Echo*, December 2005, pp. 51–54, translated and abridged from “Yasukuni ni mairimasu,” *Shokun!*, September 2005 (Bungei Shunjūsha), pp. 36–41. See Breen (2009, pp. 114–16) for another discussion of the shift in Sono’s perspective and the pro-Yasukuni views of her husband, Miura Shumon, another Catholic intellectual.

³⁵ Sono 2005b, p. 53.

³⁶ Sono 2012, pp. 228–30. Breen (2009, p. 115) has also noted the impact of this veteran’s personal story on the change in Sono’s position.

school I attended was, ‘If you can, fulfill other people’s wishes.’ The thinking behind this precept can be found in the epistles of Saint Paul.”³⁷ In this case, Sono has clearly prioritized the “wishes” of veterans and members of the Bereaved Families Association. But one can legitimately inquire why this empathetic approach is not extended to her neighbors in Korea and China, who find Yasukuni Shrine’s memorialization of Class A war criminals as offensive, or to those Buddhist and Christian Japanese who are deeply troubled by the enshrinement of their family members without permission.³⁸

Turning to the issue of patriotic education, Sono, along with her husband, Miura, are clearly among the LDP’s strongest supporters. Part 1 of her 2011 book—*Kyōiku wa kyōsei kara hajimaru*—that is, “education starts with coercion,” certainly reflects her strong support for the education policies and reforms that have accompanied the revision of the Fundamental Education Law in 2006.³⁹ In this section of *Tamashii o yashinau kyōiku, aku kara manabu kyōiku* 魂を養う教育 悪から学ぶ教育, Sono criticizes the postwar education system for over-emphasizing the cultivation of individuality and exercise of individual rights and freedoms. This perspective clearly draws on her husband’s views and his earlier book, *Nihonjin o dame ni shita kyōiku: Kodomo ni waga shinnen o kyōsei subeshi*, in which he argues that the postwar system imposed by the American Occupation was a form of brainwashing and based on a rejection of Japanese values.⁴⁰ Given the excessive individualism and loss of Japanese values apparent today, Sono and Miura provide strong support of the education reforms now being advanced by the LDP government—even if coercion is required and individual rights are diminished.

This brief review of the responses of Umehara and Sono to the Yasukuni Shrine issue and more recent initiatives aimed at reshaping public life and institutions indicates that our categories of “conservative” and “nationalistic” have been misleading and inadequate. More refined categories are clearly needed to make sense of how individuals, groups, and political parties actually line-up and, in some cases, change their positions on a range of controversial issues. Umehara and Sono are still both widely viewed as conservative public intellectuals, but on many key issues they are clearly poles apart and represent very different visions for the future of Japan.

³⁷ Sono 2005b, p. 54.

³⁸ The disregard for the feelings of these Asian neighbors appears to be related to a deeper disdain for things foreign and a concern to maintain the “purity” of the Japanese people. One of her more recent editorials in the conservative *Sankei shinbun* on “The Labor Shortage and Immigrants,” for example, advocated that Japan adopt an apartheid system of separate residential areas for foreign workers who come to Japan to meet the labor shortage. This was a lesson she thought could be learned from the experience of South Africa, a proposal that attracted widespread attention and criticism. See “Rōdōryoku fusoku to imin” 労働力不足と移民, *Sankei shinbun*, 11 February 2015.

³⁹ Sono 2011, p. 12.

⁴⁰ Miura 1998, pp. 82–98. It is worth noting that Sono is essentially repeating a line from this earlier book by her husband: “*Subete no kyōiku wa tsutaerubeki mono o oshieru kyōsei kara hajimaru* すべての教育は伝えるべきものを教える強制から始まる (p. 233).

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