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The “Invisible” Impact of Phenomenology?: The Reception of Luckmann’s The Invisible Religion in Japanese Sociology of Religion

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The "Invisible" Impact of Phenomenology?: The Reception of Luckmann's *The Invisible Religion* in Japanese Sociology of Religion

Abstract

This paper examines the interpretation and use of *The Invisible Religion* in Japanese sociology of religion, its impact, and the background to that impact. Luckmann's work was introduced in discussions of "secularization" through the reception in Japan of sociological theories developed in Europe and the United States. It was later cited as a theoretical framework for "privatization," especially in analyses of the emergence of spirituality. During the initial stage of its reception, attention was paid to Luckmann's functional conception of religion as an anthropological condition. Subsequently, however, his work came to be treated primarily as one perspective among others on secularization or privatization. Moreover, although his functional definition derives from phenomenology and his work was later placed under the rubric of "phenomenological sociology," the question of what made this perspective phenomenological, or what significance it derived from phenomenology, was not raised. Despite limited examination of the distinctiveness of his theory, Luckmann's argument continued to be cited because theories of secularization and privatization had become familiar and widely shared. As a result, the radical significance of this definition became invisible—namely, its potential to identify the religious function of phenomena that appear nonreligious and thereby call into question the distinction between religion and nonreligion. This paper proposes two hypotheses regarding this process. First, privatization became commonplace, leaving little occasion to question either the concept of religion or the boundaries of what counts as religion in modern Japanese society. Second, the term "phenomenological sociology" became sufficiently established to be taken for granted.

Keywords: Thomas Luckmann, *The Invisible Religion*, sociology of religion, phenomenology, phenomenological sociology, Japanese sociology of religion

Introduction: *The Invisible Religion* and Luckmann as a "Phenomenological Sociologist"?

While the author's broader research interest concerns the influence of Schützian phenomenology on sociology, particularly in Japan, from the perspective of the history of sociology, this article focuses on the impact of *The Invisible Religion* on Japanese sociology of religion as a step toward future research on the broader impact of Luckmann's sociology.

In the Japanese sociological community, Luckmann is widely known as the author of *The Social Construction of Reality* (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) and *The Invisible Religion* (Luckmann, 1967) and is often classified as one of the sociologists associated with "phenomenological sociology,"

although he himself might have rejected this categorization (cf. Luckmann, 1993). For example, the most recent comprehensive Japanese encyclopedia of sociology states that Luckmann is known "as one of the seminal phenomenological sociologists, together with P. Berger, although he is better understood as a scholar who bridged phenomenological philosophy and sociology," and that "*The Invisible Religion*, which established a functional definition of religion as an objective and moral pattern of meaning, is as well known as *The Social Construction of Reality*" (Haga, 2012: 1332). Nearly sixty years have passed since *The Invisible Religion* was published, and fifty years have passed since it was translated into Japanese in 1976. Over the intervening decades, the book has become widely known in the Japanese sociological community.

This paper aims to clarify the reception of Luckmann's *The Invisible Religion* and how that reception shifted over time, with particular attention to the Japanese label "genshōgakuteki shakaigaku," which may be translated literally as "phenomenological sociology." In the international history of sociology, the term is often discussed as a perspective developed by George Psathas (cf. Eberle, 2012). In Japan, however, it may be said to have developed in a form distinctive to the Japanese context, acquiring a broad meaning centered on Alfred Schutz while extending beyond his intellectual lineage to encompass interactionist perspectives, such as those of E. Goffman and G. H. Mead, at least in the initial period in which the term came into use as a technical term (cf. Author, 2024). Although Luckmann himself rejected this label, his work, which is grounded in and oriented toward phenomenology, has been regarded as one of its representative examples.

This paper focuses theoretically on the potential of this phenomenological conception of religion and the functional definition it entails. Luckmann's position differed from accounts of "secularization" that tended to equate the decline of institutional religion with the decline of religion as such. On the basis of his functional definition, which addresses what enables human beings to transcend the limitations of their existence as biological organisms—that is, what makes human existence specifically human—he argued that religion could persist outside established religious institutions. In this account, the decline of institutional religion is associated with secularization at the societal level, while the relocation of religion from the public to the private sphere is described as privatization at the individual level. The concept of "invisible religion" therefore describes not the simple disappearance of religion, but a transformation in its social form and visibility—a description made possible by Luckmann's functional definition and underlying anthropological conception of religion. This anthropological argument in *The Invisible Religion* likewise draws on the phenomenological perspective that Luckmann developed with Berger in *The Social Construction of Reality*. By treating religion as an anthropological condition, this conception makes it possible to compare existing religious phenomena, including those conventionally categorized as Western and non-Western, and even to analyze phenomena not currently regarded as religious. In doing so, it calls into question the distinction between religion and nonreligion. It is in this sense that Luckmann's functional definition can be regarded as "radical." The paper therefore begins by asking how this radical phenomenological conception of religion has been interpreted and used in works on the sociology of religion in Japan.

Research Design and Corpus

This paper provides a systematic review of selected publications issued between 1967, the year in which Luckmann's *The Invisible Religion* was published, and 2024. It traces overall trends in the reception and discussion of Luckmann's work, with particular attention to this book. Specifically, the study examines (1) journal articles and (2) introductory works (including textbooks for undergraduate students) on the sociology of religion in Japan. These materials were selected for the following reasons. Journal articles make it possible to identify the major research concerns and findings of each period, as well as their accumulation and broader development over time. Introductory works were selected because they represent an available "stock of knowledge" through relatively established interpretations among the accumulated findings of previous research.

The materials examined in this study are as follows. First, the study focuses on *Shūkyō Kenkyū* (*Journal of Religious Studies*), the official journal of the Nihon shūkyō gakkai (Japanese Association for Religious Studies), one of the largest and most inclusive academic associations for the study of religion in Japan. Among the articles published in the journal, the study identified those that directly cited Luckmann's *The Invisible Religion*—that is, articles that included the book in their reference lists—and examined how the work was cited within them. An examination of the target period found that, among the 1,021 items classified as "articles" in *Shūkyō Kenkyū*, including those categorized as "tenbō" [Perspectives], 14 cited *The Invisible Religion* in their reference lists. After excluding one article that reported on an international academic conference, the remaining 13 articles were selected for analysis.

Second, the analysis also included introductory works on the sociology of religion. Specifically, works were selected if they were readily accessible to undergraduate students and beginners while providing a broad overview of the discipline. The study first checked whether Luckmann's name or *The Invisible Religion* appeared in the indexes of these works and then verified whether the book was listed in the endnotes, footnotes, or reference lists for the volume as a whole or for individual chapters. The book corpus was narrowed down as follows. A title search in CiNii Books, a union catalog database of university libraries operated by the National Institute of Informatics (NII), using the term "shūkyō shakaigaku" [sociology of religion] yielded 132 results. Translations of works, specialized monographs, and scholarly works offering specialized analyses of sociological theories of religion were then excluded, leaving 18 introductory works accessible to undergraduate students and beginners. The study examined the reference lists and indexes of these books—or all pages when no index was available—to identify works that referred to Luckmann's *The Invisible Religion*. As a result, seven works met this criterion.

In the next section, the author synthesizes what these materials say about Luckmann's *The Invisible Religion* and how they discuss it, interpreting the findings as a history of changing reception within the context of Japanese sociology of religion. Drawing on the foregoing discussion of the history of the sociology of religion in Japan, the subsequent section then examines in detail the arguments of the principal authors representing each phase—F. Ikado for the introductory phase and

S. Shimazono for the application phase—and contrasts the perspectives characteristic of these two periods. Finally, through these steps, the author clarifies how the reception of Luckmann's *The Invisible Religion* shifted over time, outlines the extent and limitations of the book's impact on Japanese sociology of religion, and proposes hypotheses to account for the factors underlying this trajectory.

The Reception History of The Invisible Religion: An Analysis of Journal Articles and Introductory Works

References to *The Invisible Religion* in *Shūkyō Kenkyū*

The relevant articles were written by Swyngedouw (1971), M. Kobayashi (1972), Takagi (1980), Takezawa (1983), Abe (2001), Watanabe (2005), Utsunomiya (2006), Okamoto (2007), Shimazono (2010), Morooka (2011), Kubotera (2014), Hatakama (2018), and Delakorda Kawashima (2019). These 13 articles are listed in Table 1. Their chronological distribution is as follows: two were published in the 1970s, two in the 1980s, none in the 1990s, four in the 2000s, and five from the 2010s onward. Moreover, among the 1,021 articles examined, Swyngedouw's (1971) was the only one whose title or subtitle included either "Luckmann" or *The Invisible Religion*.

Table 1. Articles Referring to *The Invisible Religion* in *Shūkyō Kenkyū*

Year	Author	Title
1971	J. Swyngedouw	The Contemporary Secularization Debate
1972	M. Kobayashi	Development in Robert Bellah's Theory on Religion
1980	K. Takagi	Japanese Religious Consciousness Reflected in Waka of Shin Kokin Shū
1983	S. Takezawa	Symbol and Symbolization
2001	Y. Abe	Globalization and Religion
2005	M. Watanabe	Salvation and Violence
2006	T. Utsunomiya	The Function of Religion in the Social Formation of Bioethics
2007	R. Okamoto	Rethinking Privatization Theory
2010	S. Shimazono	From Salvation to Spirituality
2011	R. Morooka	The Motif of Criticizing the Concept of Religion in Secularization Theories
2014	T. Kubotera	A Functional Analysis of the Religiosity of Kaneko Misuzu
2018	K. Hatakama	Modernizing Society and Popular Religions
2019	T. Delakorda	Contemporary Aspects of Popular Religiosity as Seen in

	Kawashima	Pilgrimage to Medjugorje

Swyngedouw (1971) was the first article in *Shūkyō Kenkyū* to provide a substantial introduction to Luckmann's *The Invisible Religion* and appears also to have been the first such article published in Japan[1]. It was also the first article to examine Luckmann's contribution to the sociology of religion in detail, and it positively evaluated his broadening of the definition of religion. At the same time, Swyngedouw identified three problems in Luckmann's argument. First, regarding the definition of religion, he discussed criticisms advanced from the standpoint of a substantive definition—including Berger's criticism—against the functionalist definition that identifies religion with "human nature" (Swyngedouw, 1971: 105). Second, as a methodological problem, he raised the question of whether it was appropriate to begin with "philosophical anthropology" in relation to "the objectivity and value-freedom of the scientific study of religion" (Swyngedouw, 1971: 105–106). Third, regarding Luckmann's account of secularization, he argued that it remained at a theoretical level and lacked sufficient empirical grounding (Swyngedouw, 1971: 106). A consistent theme throughout Swyngedouw's discussion was his claim that Luckmann's theory "should not simply be applied to the Japanese context" (Swyngedouw, 1971: 109). In other words, while tracing Luckmann's conception of religion back to its methodological foundations, including the fundamental definition of religion, Swyngedouw argued that its applicability to Japanese society required critical examination.

Around the same time, Kobayashi noted, in the context of discussing Bellah's account of the decline of religion, that "Luckmann's 'privatization of religion' may also be said to address the same conditions leading to contemporary religion" (Kobayashi, 1972: 55), thereby pointing to the similarity between their arguments. In the 1980s, Takagi drew on Luckmann's concept of religion in discussing Japanese religious consciousness. He distinguished among (1) established religions such as Buddhism, Shinto, and Christianity; (2) folk Shinto and folk beliefs; and (3) the "religion of the heart"—the religious element inhabiting people's hearts, corresponding to Luckmann's "invisible religion," or "that which underlies phenomena that do not appear religious at first glance and makes people religious" (Takagi, 1980: 50). Takagi thus employed Luckmann's concept of religion in an attempt to understand forms of religiosity distinctive to Japan. Takezawa, meanwhile, listed Luckmann's *sacred cosmos* alongside *réalité ultime* (Eliade), *totalité* (Ricoeur), *Archetypus* (Jung), and *communitas* (Turner) as concepts referring to that which is represented through symbols (Takezawa, 1983: 9). During the 1970s and 1980s, there were both attempts to understand Luckmann's argument through its similarities with other theories and efforts to apply his concepts as analytical tools.

From the 2000s onward, some studies also reassessed Luckmann's contribution from a broader, meta-level perspective. Abe identified Luckmann's *The Invisible Religion*, alongside B. Wilson's *Religion in Secular Society* and Berger's *The Sacred Canopy*, as one of the works that decisively shaped the sociological understanding of the relationship between modern society and religion (Abe, 2001: 20–21). Watanabe referred to *The Invisible Religion* in discussing the "privatization of religion"

[1] This claim is based on an article search conducted through CiNii Research, an academic information search platform operated by the National Institute of Informatics (NII), and is therefore limited to materials retrievable through that platform.

in a study of Aum Shinrikyō members (Watanabe, 2005: 164), while Utsunomiya referred to Luckmann's book in the context of "pluralization" in a discussion of the formation of bioethics (Utsunomiya, 2006: 24). Okamoto (2007), by contrast, began with Luckmann's privatization thesis but subjected it to critical examination. Rather than a model in which religion retreats into the private sphere of meaning, Okamoto argued that attention should also be paid to the processes through which individuals reinterpret and recontextualize religion within their social and cultural contexts.

The tendency to discuss Luckmann in the contexts of "secularization" and "privatization" continued into the 2010s. In response to the commercialization of methods for transmitting knowledge and skills related to spirituality, rather than their transmission through communities, Shimazono stated that "the systemic organization of religion supporting the new spirituality is created, maintained, and developed in less visible forms through the media rather than through communities." In a note attached to this passage, he referred to Luckmann's *The Invisible Religion* (Shimazono, 2010: 147, 152). Morooka, in discussing how secularization theory prompted a reconsideration of the concept of religion, identified "an interest in 'types of religion that had previously been overlooked'" (Morooka, 2011: 7) and a "functional definition" (Morooka, 2011: 10) as distinctive features of the argument developed in Luckmann's *The Invisible Religion*. In summarizing the characteristics of secularization theory, Morooka also observed that "Luckmann and Berger developed general reflections on 'what religion is' . . . while drawing on the methods of phenomenological sociology" (Morooka, 2011: 5). Delakorda Kawashima, meanwhile, drew on Luckmann in comparing the religious lives of people in Eastern and Western Europe, noting that people in Western Europe tend "to construct their own worldviews and search for meaning in life in their own ways" (Delakorda Kawashima, 2019: 126).

In addition, some studies focused on Luckmann's definition and conception of religion. Kubotera focused on the renewed questioning of religion following the catastrophic disaster of March 11, 2011, which included earthquakes, tsunami, and the Fukushima nuclear powerplant's meltdown. In discussing what he called the "function of individualizing religious consciousness"—that is, "deciding to internalize the interpretation of an everyday event as a religious phenomenon" (Kubotera, 2014: 8)—he referred to Luckmann's argument that religion "comes into being through the individualization of consciousness and conscience rooted in intersubjectivity" (Kubotera, 2014: 9). On the other hand, Hatakama sought to clarify the distinctive features of Y. Yasumaru's work on Japanese popular thought in modernization, and argued that "the substantial difference in the configuration of the sacred and the secular between Yasumaru's argument and the secularization theories of Berger and Luckmann, according to which religiosity remains strongly present in the state, the family, or the heart, is probably a matter concerning the definition of religion" (Hatakama, 2018: 160).

The reception of Luckmann in journal articles can thus be broadly divided into two types. The first, found mainly in the 1970s, involved critically drawing on Luckmann's concept of religion in order to develop an understanding distinctive to Japanese society. The second—and by far the more prevalent—focused on Luckmann's theories of "secularization," understood as the declining social significance of traditional religious institutions in modern society, and "privatization," understood as the relocation of religion from the public sphere into the sphere of individual life and preference. Across these two strands, only the early article by Swyngedouw and the article by Okamoto critically

examined Luckmann's theory on its own terms, and of these, only Swyngedouw made clarifying the potential of Luckmann's theory a central objective. Moreover, most references to Luckmann's theory of secularization discussed him in terms of his similarities to other secularization theorists, particularly Berger. Even when studies focused on Luckmann's concept of religion, they generally did not explore the theoretical significance of his conception in depth but instead remained limited to citing passages from him that were useful for supporting their respective arguments.

References to *The Invisible Religion* in Introductory Works on the Sociology of Religion

The seven relevant introductory works were Inoue (1994), Otani et al. (2000), Inoue (2002), Sakurai and Miki (2007), Takahashi et al. (2012), Inoue (2016), and Okui (2021). These works are listed in Table 2. Chronologically, one was published in the 1990s, three in the 2000s, two in the 2010s, and one in 2021. In the case of edited volumes, the analysis focused on the discussions presented in the individual chapters included in each volume.

Table 2. Introductory Works Referring to *The Invisible Religion*

Year	Author or Editor	Title
1994	N. Inoue	*Sociology of Religion in Contemporary Japan*
2000	E. Otani et al.	*Constructing Belief*
2002	N. Inoue	*An Invitation to the Sociology of Religion*
2007	Y. Sakurai & H. Miki	*Understanding the Sociology of Religion*
2012	N. Takahashi et al.	*Frontiers of Religion and Society*
2016	N. Inoue	*For Students of the Sociology of Religion*
2021	T. Okui	*Sociology of Religion*

During the 1990s and 2000s, Luckmann's argument in *The Invisible Religion* was discussed primarily in terms of its similarities to other theories in the context of secularization. In particular, it was presented as corresponding to K. Dobbelaere's concept of "laicization," and similarities with the arguments of N. Luhmann and P. Berger were also noted (Nakano & Iwai, 1994: 79; Inoue, 2002: 126f.; Yumiyama, 1994: 94).

From the 2000s onward, Luckmann's *The Invisible Religion* was also discussed in the context of the "privatization" of religion as well as secularization. For example, according to Kawamata (2000), Luckmann characterized the process through which "religion functions in the private, invisible sphere rather than occupying a public position" as "privatization." In Sakurai and Miki's (2007) comprehensive introductory textbook on the sociology of religion, Luckmann's argument is summarized as follows.

> Thomas Luckmann argued that contemporary society has not so much become secularized as witnessed the retreat of such elements as religious organizations and rituals, while religion has

been internalized by individuals and continues to function in invisible forms—that is, it has become latent not as an institutional organization but as "invisible religion." This view does not regard religion solely in terms of its organizational aspects, but understands it as becoming something that individuals consume; this may also be described as the "privatization of religion." The argument may also be relevant to contemporary spirituality. (Kawamata, 2007: 4f.)

This passage succinctly presents an interpretation of Luckmann's argument in *The Invisible Religion*. It situates the argument in the contexts of secularization and privatization, while also suggesting, in relation to the latter, its potential application as a framework for understanding the phenomenon of spirituality. This perspective of privatization continued to appear in introductions published in the 2020s, where Luckmann's argument was described as suggesting that religion was "becoming merely a value system that gives meaning to individual identity" (Okui, 2021: 262). It is also noteworthy that, in addition to privatization, the perspective of spirituality is introduced in this period.

The two books published in the 2010s referred to Luckmann's argument by adding a perspective on the history of the sociology of religion to the discussions outlined above. In the global context, attention was drawn to the fact that Bellah, Berger, and Luckmann successively published important books in 1967, which constituted a turning point in the history of the sociology of religion (Iwai & Inoue, 2016: 71). A perspective on the history of the sociology of religion in Japan also emerged, including discussions focusing particularly on the achievements of F. Ikado. It was noted that, in developing his own distinctive sociology of religion, Ikado drew on Luckmann's argument in seeking to understand religion in Japan (Isooka et al., 2016: 98). In discussing how Japanese sociology of religion had addressed the phenomenon of spirituality, which attracted growing attention during the 1990s, Isooka et al. also observed that "personal and noninstitutional religious consciousness unconstrained by religious organizations or traditions" had been studied even before the term *spirituality* became established. They thus traced the origins of the perspective associated with spirituality to Ikado's argument and, further, to Luckmann's argument, which had influenced him (Isooka et al., 2016: 107). Other discussions pointed to similarities between the arguments of Ikado and Luckmann at the theoretical level. In introducing Ikado's theory of "functional differentiation of religion," which addresses the differentiation of religion in response to social differentiation, Okamoto explained "individual religion" among "individuals who resist the constraints of religious organizations" as follows: "In individual religion, each person's preferences and intentions are of the greatest importance, and faith remains within the individual's inner life. This form is identical to the situation Thomas Luckmann discussed as the privatization of religion" (Okamoto, 2012: 279). Okamoto then argued that "spirituality and the touristification of religion are precisely the results of individual choices brought about by this privatization of religion" (Okamoto, 2012: 280). From the perspective of the history of the sociology of religion in Japan, therefore, two points can be identified: Ikado's introduction and application of Luckmann's argument, and the application of that argument as a means of understanding the phenomenon of spirituality.

The ways in which *The Invisible Religion* was discussed in introductory works can be

summarized in two points. First, Luckmann's argument was presented as a theoretical perspective within discussions of secularization and privatization. The latter, in particular, was discussed as an analytical framework for examining the phenomenon of spirituality. Second, Luckmann's argument was situated within the history of sociology. In accounts of the history of the sociology of religion in Japan, it was introduced particularly in connection with F. Ikado's achievements and with the introduction of theories of secularization and privatization. Luckmann's argument was also presented alongside other theories in the sociology of religion, with attention to their similarities. In particular, Luckmann was introduced together with Berger under the term "phenomenological sociology," but the differences between their respective arguments were not explored. Moreover, although the term "phenomenological sociology" was used, the question of precisely what was phenomenological about Luckmann's argument was not examined. In sum, the distinctiveness of Luckmann's theory and his mode of conceptual construction was not explored in depth.

Taken together, the analyses of journal articles and introductory books above suggest that the findings can be organized as follows. From the 1970s through the 1990s, discussions focusing on Luckmann's theories of secularization and privatization and seeking to introduce their theoretical implications were prominent. However, the direction evident during the initial phase of reception—namely, examining the foundational theoretical potential of the concept of religion underlying his argument—did not become dominant. From the 1990s onward, meanwhile, Luckmann's early privatization thesis came to be employed as a theoretical framework for understanding the phenomenon of spirituality. As these lines of research and their findings were incorporated into the field, Luckmann's argument became a point of reference within the frameworks of secularization and privatization, particularly from the 2000s onward.

Interpretation of the Analyses from the Perspective of the History of Japanese Sociology of Religion

How, then, should these findings be interpreted? The following section examines them in light of the history of the sociology of religion in Japan. According to the Japanese sociologist of religion Y. Terada (2000), the development of the sociology of religion in Japan can be divided into five periods and characterized as follows. During the first period (1900–1935), which marked the emergence of the sociology of religion in Japan, Western sociological theories of religion, including those of Émile Durkheim and Max Weber, were actively imported. During the second period (1935–1960), empirical sociological research on religion in Japan began, drawing on the findings of rural sociology and theories of functionalist anthropology. During the third period (1960–1975), new Western theories, including secularization theory and structural functionalism, were imported and introduced against the background of the transformation of postwar Japanese society, while statistical methods using questionnaires were also adopted. During the fourth period (1975–1990), research in the sociology of religion became considerably more active. Scholarly interest shifted from the functions of religion to its meaning, and an increasingly strong tendency emerged to relativize Western theories through case studies that sought to understand their objects from within. Religious groups also became a major

focus of research in this period. During the fifth period (1990–2000), paradigms became increasingly pluralized, making it difficult to identify any single defining characteristic. In light of the preceding development of the field, however, two tendencies can be identified. One consisted of studies examining changes in the social forms of religion in view of its deinstitutionalization—that is, the process of transition "from institutions to organizations, from organizations to networks, and from networks to individuals" (cf. Nishiyama, 2000: 141). The other consisted of studies seeking to reconsider religious phenomena in terms of the processes through which actors attribute meaning and interpret their experiences, as well as through processes of interaction among multiple actors.

The foregoing analyses of journal articles and introductory works suggest that attention to Luckmann centered on two contexts—secularization theory and research on spirituality—as well as on discussions that introduced his work within these contexts. Following Terada's periodization, it may therefore be argued that the third and fifth phases were particularly influential in shaping the reception of Luckmann in Japan.

The next section accordingly examines F. Ikado and S. Shimazono, two important figures associated with the third and fifth phases, respectively, in order to clarify how each drew on Luckmann's work. As noted in the analysis above, Ikado was one of the scholars who contributed to introducing *The Invisible Religion* into the Japanese sociology of religion and establishing it within the field. Shimazono, meanwhile, was one of the central figures in Japanese religious studies who examined theoretically and empirically the new religious phenomena of his time, particularly spirituality. An examination of their arguments may reveal how the reception of Luckmann changed between the third and fifth phases.

The Transformation of the Reception of *The Invisible Religion* in Japanese Sociology of Religion: F. Ikado and S. Shimazono

During the period corresponding to the third phase, Luckmann's argument in *The Invisible Religion* was introduced into Japan as scholars sought to understand social change and "secularization" theoretically. At that time, Japanese sociology of religion aimed to satisfy two concerns: an interest in macro-level theories capable of capturing contemporary changes in modern society, and a comparative perspective seeking to identify the distinctive characteristics of religion in Japan. Sociological theories developed in Europe and the United States were thus introduced in search of a theoretical framework capable of fulfilling the ambition to grasp the process through which religion was changing from institutionalized forms to privatized ones, while also accounting for the religious situation in Japan, which might conform to—or perhaps extend beyond—that process.

One of the most important figures in this process was F. Ikado (1924–2016), who recommended that Swyngedouw and his co-translator, N. Akaike, translate *The Invisible Religion* into Japanese (Swyngedouw & Akaike, 1976: 205). Ikado argued that religion had become functionally differentiated into four types in accordance with the functional differentiation of society: (1) "religion as culture," the expansion of meaning structures emerging from primordial human relations and the

worldview that underlies their basic framework, (2) "religion as an institutional system," religious communities or groups derived from ritual institutionalization, (3) "religion as organization," voluntary religious associations formed in urban society, and (4) "individual religion," religious practices developed among individuals who distance themselves from religious organizations while seeking meaning in life (Ikado, 1972: 30ff.; 1974: 154ff.; 1986: 257). He elaborated the first type by drawing on Luckmann's fundamental conception of religion, and especially the fourth with reference to Luckmann's argument about the privatization of religion. These two types constitute precisely the "invisible religion" that takes the form of inner moral standards for each individual (cf. Ikado, 1986: 257).

However, Ikado's interest in Luckmann's argument lay in drawing on the idea of "invisible religion" in constructing a typology of differentiated forms of religion; he did not focus on the way in which Luckmann constructed the concept of religion itself. After observing that "Luckmann appears to understand secularization as the disappearance of the social means capable of legitimately maintaining religious symbolic systems" (Ikado, 1986: 255), Ikado states that Luckmann argues that worldviews come to act directly and consciously upon the inner lives of individuals as members of society in rationalized modern society (Ikado, 1986: 255). He further characterizes Luckmann's argument as follows: "Because its principal aim is to explain religion in contemporary society, it does not expound the evolution of religion on the grand scale found in Bellah. Instead, while employing the theory outlined above, it brings to the fore the freedom—or agency—of individuals in contemporary society, which Bellah and Parsons were unable fully to address." Regarding the function of religion discussed by Luckmann, Ikado adds that it "appears to be exercised through the faith of individuals who resist the magic of rationalization … that aims solely at the 'achievement of purposes' within an ever-expanding society" (Ikado, 1986: 255). His primary concern was thus to understand religion in a secularized society, rather than to find significance in Luckmann's particular way of conceptualizing religion. When he turned to Luckmann's methodology, however, he adopted—interestingly—not a view of it as broadening the scope of sociological inquiry, but one that discerned within its methodological individualism practical implications for human emancipation. Nevertheless, he understood these implications not from a phenomenological perspective, but by linking them specifically to the idea of philosophical anthropology[2] (Ikado, 1974).

By the fifth phase of Japanese sociology of religion, Luckmann's theory had come to be invoked as a theoretical framework for interpreting spirituality in the context of privatization. In discussing what has been termed a "religious boom," that is, the emergence and diffusion of new forms of religiosity since the 1970s, S. Shimazono (1948–) argued that "new spirituality movements," existing not as organizations but as loose networks of autonomous individuals, resembled the form of "invisible religion" described by Luckmann and constituted one of the strongest religious streams in advanced societies undergoing increasing pluralization and informatization (Shimazono, 1992: 239). References during this period focused on the concept of "invisible religion," understood as a form of religion

[2] Swyngedouw likewise emphasized the influence of philosophical anthropology on Luckmann's argument and maintained that his methodological individualism implied a humanist commitment to human liberation (Swyngedouw, 1971; 1981: 76).

without a concrete traditional institution, rather than on the phenomenological foundation underlying it or on the human experiences that constitute religious phenomena.

Shimazono, however, did not accept Luckmann's argument in its entirety and expressed reservations about his privatization thesis. In an article included in his book *The Rise of Spirituality* (Shimazono, 2007), he cited *The Invisible Religion* as representative of the view that "the individualization of society" leads to the withdrawal of religion from the public sphere and its privatization, and criticized this understanding as one-sided. He argued that the reverse side of "the individualization of society" is "the religization of the individual," which involves the permeation of the public sphere by religion and spirituality; that countries and social strata in which fundamentalism is on the rise and those in which forms of spirituality that appear to resist collective integration are preferred share a common foundation; and that resacralization is occurring in parallel with the general individualization of society (Shimazono, 2007: 305f.). In this argument, he identified both loosely organized and individualized forms of spirituality found in hospice care and self-help groups and movements seeking strong religious communities, such as fundamentalism and religious revival movements. Taking Shimazono's discussion as indicative of the broader pattern, a defining characteristic of the fifth phase of the reception of *The Invisible Religion* was that it was cited primarily as a representative formulation of the privatization thesis.

The background to Shimazono's attempt to critically revise Luckmann's argument lay in contemporary changes in Japanese society, where religion was rapidly coming to the fore. In the afterword to *The Rise of Spirituality*, Shimazono notes that many of those who joined Aum Shinrikyo (now Aleph), which carried out the 1995 Tokyo subway sarin attack, had previously shown a strong interest in the "spiritual world." He further observes that sections devoted to books on the "spiritual world" began to appear alongside the "religion" sections of major bookstores around 1978, and that the period from the mid-1980s to the early 1990s appears to have marked the height of popular interest in such areas as yoga, qigong, meditation, healing, psychotherapy, near-death experiences, reincarnation, self-development seminars, mysticism, and alchemy (Shimazono, 2007: 307f.).

This was also a period in which people, irrespective of generation or social class, sought meaning and sources of support in life and needed assistance in confronting death, loss, and suffering (Shimazono, 2007: 309). According to Shimazono, the roles once fulfilled by what was called religion had come to be performed through a wider range of cultural resources and networks associated with "the religious" and "the spiritual." Musicians, therapists, writers of children's stories, and volunteer activists—as well as people suffering from disabilities or shaken by the loss of someone close to them—possessed narratives capable of stirring the soul more profoundly than those of people belonging to so-called "religions" (Shimazono, 2007: 309f.). Although the bearers of these forms had become increasingly popularized, it is evident that Shimazono was motivated to write the book by the changes in Japanese society from around 1970 to the mid-2000s, during which people increasingly sought what they regarded as religious.

A comparison of Ikado's discussion in the third phase with Shimazono's in the fifth phase, viewed as a change over time, suggests the following. The significance of Luckmann's way of conceptualizing religion, as well as the critical discussions surrounding it during the introductory third phase, ceased

to be an issue during the fifth phase of application when his work was invoked merely in the context of the privatization thesis. Ikado treated Luckmann's concept of religion as one form within his own typology of differentiation; thus, his reception of the potential inherent in Luckmann's way of conceptualizing religion remained limited. This reception may have significantly influenced later interpretations of Luckmann. At that point, however, the possibility remained of using Luckmann's argument as a basis for reconsidering the concept of religion itself. Ikado himself went no further than identifying its practical implications, but he nevertheless left this possibility open by discussing the transformation of religion into inner moral standards, a phenomenon in which the boundaries of religion become blurred. As Shimazono's discussion demonstrates, however, the reception of Luckmann did not in fact develop in the direction of reconsidering the concept of religion.

At the same time, a point of continuity between the two authors can also be identified. Both Ikado and Shimazono began their discussions with phenomena that could already be recognized as "religion" in their respective contemporary contexts. This may be regarded as entirely natural within the sociology of religion. In the next section, however, this point will be examined more closely in relation to Luckmann's functional definition and the more fundamental phenomenological perspective underlying it.

The Impact and Limitations of *The Invisible Religion* in Japanese Sociology of Religion

Although the distinctiveness of *The Invisible Religion* has received little sustained attention, the book has remained a point of reference to the present day. Why, then, did this occur? What impact did Luckmann's argument have, and what were its limitations? Why did this historical transformation described above take place? The following discussion considers the possible factors behind these developments and offers a hypothetical interpretation.

The Impact and Reception of The Invisible Religion in Japanese Sociology of Religion

In conclusion, the impact of Luckmann's argument on the history of Japanese sociology of religion can be summarized in three respects. First, *The Invisible Religion* became part of the field's shared intellectual heritage. Second, it came to be repeatedly invoked as an analytical framework for religious phenomena in contemporary society. Third, Luckmann's functional definition had the potential to exert a further impact by calling into question the boundary between religion and nonreligion, although this aspect received only limited attention.

First, Luckmann's work can be said to have exerted an impact by becoming part of the field's shared knowledge. As already observed in the journal articles and introductory works examined above, the argument of *The Invisible Religion* became a point of reference even in encyclopedias, which represent a particularly established form of shared disciplinary knowledge. How, then, should we interpret the fact that only 13 of the 1,021 articles published in *Shūkyō Kenkyū* cited Luckmann's *The Invisible Religion*? Two interpretations are possible. One would regard this low quantitative proportion

of approximately 1 percent as evidence that the work has been "ignored" or has had "little influence." In light of its repeated discussion in introductory works, however, another interpretation is possible: Luckmann's argument has become familiar and widely established. It is not merely an outdated classic. As noted above, it continued to be referenced in research articles published from the late 2010s onward.

Second, Luckmann's work can be said to have exerted an impact by providing an analytical framework. His theory of religion, particularly his theories of secularization and privatization, came to receive sustained attention. Especially after his work was taken up again during the fifth phase, it came to be used as a framework for understanding the emerging phenomenon of spirituality. However, when only the conclusion that religion had undergone privatization was extracted from his argument, its distinctiveness from other sociological theories largely disappeared.

Third, Luckmann's argument also had the potential to exert an impact through its radical character, although the reception of this aspect remained limited. The analytical framework of privatization was underpinned by phenomenological and anthropological assumptions, and the functional definition derived from them should have offered both a radical perspective and a basis for comparison. These aspects, however, were not examined sufficiently.

The Background to the Transformation of Reception

The foregoing suggests that Luckmann's impact on Japanese sociology of religion had certain limitations: namely, the radical character of his phenomenological perspective was not fully understood. Although the following discussion remains hypothetical, it considers several factors that may have contributed to this pattern.

First, one possible reason is that the sociology of religion increasingly came to take for granted the existence of entities that were already constituted and already recognized as religious. During the third phase, theories in the sociology of religion, including Luckmann's, were introduced in order to address the emerging decline of institutionalized religion. The framework of privatization was subsequently accepted and became widely established as a way of understanding religion. Alongside this development, during the fifth phase—particularly in Japan in the 1990s—spirituality and cults became conspicuous phenomena and objects of academic research as well as of public discourse. Luckmann's concept of religion was certainly useful in this context, but primarily because it provided the framework of privatization. At the same time, however, these social changes also led scholars to take for granted that discussions should begin with phenomena that clearly transcended everyday life—that is, with the "sacred." Luckmann's argument was thus employed not to reconsider the boundaries and concept of religion, but to reinforce the perspective of privatization. Consequently, the functional view according to which even *Playboy* could count as religion did not become widely accepted, and its significance was therefore not adequately examined. This may also explain why the difference between Luckmann's functional definition and Berger's substantive one received relatively little attention.

The second possible reason, which may be more specific to the Japanese context, is that the term

"phenomenological sociology" became familiar and widely used[3]. In addition to Schutz, Berger and Luckmann came to be grouped together under this term, which became highly familiar to Japanese sociologists without its meaning being closely examined. As a result, the question of precisely what was phenomenological about their arguments ceased to be asked, and the radical potential of phenomenology itself appears to have been overlooked. Instead, the significance of Luckmann's argument was absorbed into an understanding of Berger and Luckmann in terms of their common contribution to social theory, that is, into a relatively uncontroversial common ground between them. It may, of course, be possible to discern possibilities for human freedom and resistance in Luckmann's method of phenomenological anthropology, as Ikado attempted to do during the early phase of its introduction into Japan. Nevertheless, the methodological radicalism of this approach as a theory within empirical science has not been sufficiently examined.

The conclusion that can be drawn from the foregoing discussion is as follows. Precisely because "privatization" became a familiar concept that appeared highly applicable not only to the conditions of contemporary global society but also to the religious situation in Japan, attention to the radical character of the conceptual perspective underlying it declined. This decline is also relevant to theoretical efforts to reconsider secularization and privatization. As mentioned above, some studies have criticized Luckmann's theory of privatization in the context of repoliticization and the renewed public visibility of religion. In the author's view, however, these critiques are directed not at his underlying theoretical framework, but at his account of the social conditions of the time. Luckmann proposed a distinctive concept of religion in order to explain circumstances that could not be accounted for within the conventional framework that equated the decline of institutionalized religion with the decline of religion itself. His argument, however, did more than formulate those circumstances as a theoretical proposition. It also appears to have contained the potential to discuss religion beyond the phenomena currently before us that we can already recognize as religious. This potential, it may be argued, arose precisely from Luckmann's phenomenological perspective.

Concluding Remarks

The findings of this study can be summarized as follows. In Japan, the early reception of Luckmann's *The Invisible Religion* focused on the radical character of its functional definition of religion, which derived from Luckmann's phenomenological perspective, but this aspect gradually came to be neglected. Throughout its reception, however, even discussions that focused on Luckmann's definition of religion rarely noted that the definition was rooted in phenomenology. Moreover, even when his argument was examined under the label of "phenomenological sociology," insufficient attention was paid to what made it phenomenological.[4] Luckmann's influence is clearly

[3] For a historical account of changing understandings and uses of the term genshōgakuteki shakaigaku [phenomenological sociology] among Japanese sociologists, see Author (2024).
[4] Morooka (2003) is one of the few exceptions, as it explores the significance of the phenomenological conception of religion for the sociology of religion.

"visible." Yet his theory became so familiar as support for the thesis that privatization constituted a broader social trend that its distinctiveness became obscured. Consequently, the conceptual impact that should have followed from the theory's phenomenological origins also became "invisible." This is the conclusion reached in this study. Whether this declining attention to the significance of the phenomenological perspective is distinctive to Japan can, of course, be determined only through cross-cultural comparative research. A study of the Scandinavian context published earlier in this special issue (Karlsaune & Fuglseth, 2025) appears to have reached a similar conclusion regarding the reception of the phenomenological perspective.

Two issues remain for future research. First, beyond the present discussion of shifts in the history of the sociology of religion in Japan and their historical contexts, it will be necessary to clarify the reception of Luckmann's *The Invisible Religion* in relation to Japanese culture and traditional conceptions of religion. Given the traditional Japanese religious outlook, in which many people identify themselves as "nonreligious" while nevertheless expressing reverence for transcendent realities (cf. Nagai, 2007; T. Kobayashi, 2019), the concept of "invisible religion" may have had a particular affinity with the Japanese context[5]. This possible affinity does not, of course, mean that the concept can be applied without qualification. Its original association with the decline of traditional Christian institutions and practices in everyday life does not map directly onto the Japanese context, where some people observe customs incorporating both Buddhist and Shinto elements and where religious institutions have a different social significance.

Second, from the perspective of the history of sociology, further attention should be paid to the substantive internal differences among the perspectives subsumed under the term "phenomenological sociology" in Japan, particularly the differences between Luckmann and Berger. Berger himself stated that Luckmann's sociology of religion differed from his own position. For the reasons discussed above, however, these differences were not examined in Japan. This constitutes an important issue for historical research into the relationship between sociology and phenomenology. Comparative cross-cultural research is also needed to determine whether this neglect of the theoretical differences between them is specific to Japan.

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[5] As one example, Okamoto (2022), in an article whose title includes the phrase "invisible religion," discusses contemporary social issues in the context of religion in Japan, although the article neither cites nor otherwise refers to Luckmann's *The Invisible Religion*.

sociology of religion]. (pp. 113‐133). Harvest-sha.

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