At 2:46 p.m. on March 11, 2011, the Tōhoku region of Japan was struck by what is now known officially in English as the Great East Japan Earthquake. Measuring 9.0 on the Rector scale, the catastrophic quake just off the coast of Miyagi Prefecture produced a massive tsunami that damaged or wiped out dozens of communities in eighteen prefectures along the northeast coastline of Honshū, the largest of the Japanese islands. It also triggered nuclear meltdown at the Fukushima No. 1 power plant, located approximately 240 km (150 miles) north of Tokyo. The official death toll of the Great East Japan Earthquake exceeds 15,000; more than 8,000 remain missing; hundreds of thousands were rendered homeless or displaced; and more will inevitably die in the years to come from injury and radiation sickness.

Scenes of destruction and human suffering in the wake of the quake and tsunami elicited worldwide support, both material and spiritual. But amid global calls for prayer and other religious responses, the most widely publicized religious response to the nation’s worst disaster since the Second World War came from within Japan itself—a series of comments made by 78-year-old Tokyo Governor, Shintarō Ishihara.

Ishihara, a prize-winning novelist, stage and screen actor, and a populist hero of the Japanese right, has gained notoriety for his willingness to court controversy, but his take on the tragedy in northeastern Japan

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inspired more than the level of shock and outrage his comments ordi-
narily produce. On March 14, just three days into the crisis, Ishihara told
reporters that he saw the tsunami as “divine punishment,” or tenbatsu, a
term usually employed in Japanese to describe a righteous and inevitable
punishment of the wicked. For Ishihara, the tsunami produced by
Japan’s largest-ever recorded earthquake was a means of washing away
the “egoism” (gayoku in Japanese) afflicting the Japanese people.

While the Tokyo Governor said that he felt sorry for the victims, he
concluded that “We need a tsunami to wipe out egoism, which has
rusted onto the mentality of Japanese over a long period of time.” Ishi-
hara, who was beginning a bid for a fourth term as Tokyo Governor at
the time, was compelled to apologize publicly the next day, following
comments by Miyagi Prefecture Governor Yoshihiro Murai, leader of the
prefecture closest to the quake epicenter.1 Murai condemned Ishihara
and urged sympathy for the hundreds of thousands of victims suffering
in northern Japan. Despite Ishihara’s expression of regret, his “divine
punishment” comment lingers as the most widely known religious senti-
ment expressed by a high-profile Japanese public figure in reaction to
the current crisis. It resonates with similar remarks made in the United
States following disasters, such as those by Pat Robertson in 2005, who
described Hurricane Katrina as divine retribution for Supreme Court
Chief Justice John Roberts upholding Roe vs. Wade, or the televised con-
versation between Robertson and Jerry Falwell on September 13, 2001,
in which they characterized the attack on the Twin Towers as God’s pun-
ishment for American tolerance of “abortionists,” gays, feminists, and
the ACLU.2

It is worth noting that Ishihara made his pronouncement while
employees of the Tokyo power utility TEPCO and soldiers from Japan’s
Self-Defense Forces willingly risked death battling to contain the worst
nuclear disaster since Chernobyl at the damaged Fukushima reactors. He
made his comments as hundreds of thousands of victims who lost their
homes and loved ones lined up patiently in freezing refugee camps to
receive meager supplies of food and water. In the days following the earth-
quake and in the weeks of rolling power outages that followed, there were
no reported cases of looting anywhere in the country, even as thousands
of Tokyo blocks were left darkened and bereft of security. When the hun-
gry refugees received food, they shared it with their neighbors. Cold,
injured, bereaved, suffering from the onset of post-traumatic stress disorder, and facing the bleakest imaginable future, victims in northeastern Japan seemed only to embody the spirit of *gaman*, or “sticktoitiveness” that exemplifies the Japanese character.

Ishihara’s comments struck many as an ideological rant, and one that seemed destined to haunt him in the election. Nonetheless, on April 10, 2011, Tokyoites handed Governor Ishihara a fourth consecutive victory; he won the election by a margin of nearly one million votes. At least some of these voters must have agreed with Ishihara’s unguarded sentiments regarding the quake and tsunami—that the Japanese people, in some sense, deserved the disaster that befell them.

Here’s what mass religious mobilization looks like

Ironically, Japanese religious organizations themselves did not use the catastrophe as a chance to condemn Japanese moral failings with grim satisfaction in the manner expressed by Ishihara. While it appears as if Japan, like America, has its share of vocal public figures eager to equate disaster with apocalypse and to use mass human suffering as an excuse to propagandize, Japanese religious groups joined together—largely under the media radar—to help in the relief effort.

Even as Ishihara ranted about “divine punishment” Japanese religious organizations carried out the largest mobilization of clerics and lay adherents since the Second World War, all in the interest of aid and support. A few days after the quake, my colleague Keishin Inaba, Associate Professor of the Sociology of Religion at Osaka University, started a Japanese-language Facebook group called Faith-Based Network for Earthquake Relief in Japan, a clearing-house of newspaper articles, blog posts, tweets, and other information on relief initiatives by all sorts of religious groups operating in Japan.

Here are a few examples of mass religious mobilization in the face of Japan’s most tragic event in generations:

Temples, shrines, and other religious facilities across the Tōhoku region, and elsewhere, transformed into refugee centers. An article from March 16 on Asahi.com reported that the priest at the Rinzai Zen temple Jionji in Rikuzentakata village housed sixty-nine refugees who were treated by doctors and nurses from the Japan Red Cross. Seventy to eighty percent of the town’s 8,000 households were wiped out by the tsunami.
The head temple of Jōdo Shinshū, Japan’s largest traditional Buddhist sect, canceled plans for the 750th memorial of sect founder Shinran (1173-1263) to be held at its Kyoto headquarters’ temple complex Higashi Honganji. Instead, the Shinshū priesthood transformed Higashi Honganji into a dispatch center for relief supplies. Temple staff members loaded water, food, and portable stoves into trucks to be sent to the afflicted region, and they turned their famous garden Shōseien into a center for fundraising; and this was at a time when the 115 Higashi Honganji Jōdo Shinshū temples in Iwate, Miyagi, and Fukushima Prefectures were damaged, clergy in Sendai were known to have been killed, and the sect was unable to make contact with seven temples.

Meanwhile, leaders of the Pure Land Buddhist sect Jōdoshū reported that they were unable to contact approximately twenty of the 300 sect temples in these prefectures; they also assigned their headquarter staff to gather funds and supplies. Rinzai Zen headquarters in Kyoto dedicated their staff to raising funds for emergency relief. The Sōtō Zen headquarters at Eiheiji reported that it mobilized clergy to accompany members of its volunteer organization Shanti International Association to travel to northeastern Japan to aid in relief efforts. Staff at the head temple of Nichirenshū, the largest sect of Nichiren Buddhism, canceled all other activities in favor of fundraising, and the central Tokyo Nichirenshū temple Jōenji offered its accommodations to students and families with young children from the disaster area needing a place to stay. It is likely that the leaders of every other traditional Buddhist denomination dedicated their staff to raising money and gathering materials for earthquake relief.

Shinto organizations also pitched in. Shinseikyō, or the National Association of Shinto Youth, immediately established a “Disaster Policy Committee” responsible for fundraising and contacting Shinto priests in the disaster area. The online Shinseikyō message board soon filled with inquiries seeking contact with Shinto clergy in shrines that could not be contacted and in some cases were later revealed to have been destroyed.6

Christians in Japan, who make up less than one percent of the country’s population, consistently initiate successful and high-profile social welfare activities, and they leapt into action to provide relief. On March 12, mere hours after the quake and tsunami hit the Tōhoku region, the
YMCA in Kobe began soliciting relief funds; as an organization that survived the January 17, 1995 earthquake in western Japan and provided relief to residents in Kobe, they were eager to help victims of this latest natural disaster.

World Vision Japan is still gathering relief funds and is working to aid victims; Caritas Japan, the Catholic charity, is gathering donations and working with dioceses to provide support in the afflicted region; the United Church of Christ housed refugees in its Sendai churches; and the Salvation Army in Tokyo gathered money and opened its doors to commuters in Tokyo stranded by power outages and unable to take trains home.

Japan’s tiny Jewish community also joined in relief efforts. The Rabbi and volunteers from Chabad Tokyo, the center for the Lubavitcher Jewish community in Japan, drove to Sendai with food and warm clothing that they distributed to refugees left without supplies or power in their homes.

“Let us hold a collective memorial”

All Japanese religious organizations also responded to the Great East Japan Earthquake with more expressly “religious” activities. Immediately following March 11 and into the weeks that followed, temples, shrines, and other facilities held prayer vigils and other services for the dead and to seek solace for victims and divine aid for a rapid recovery. Priests at the historic Shinto shrine Kasuga Taisha in Nara undertook the daunting task of chanting the norito (purifying prayers to the kami, or Japanese deities) ten thousand times to beseech Japan’s native deities for aid in renewing the nation. This ritual lasts several months, and its completion is marked by a special ceremony.

One tweet on the Faith-Based Initiative Facebook wall from a young, media-savvy Nichirenshū priest named Nichibon expresses a sentiment that was doubtless shared by many concerned with the fate of those swept away by the tsunami: “The victims of this disaster had no vigils over their bodies, nor did they have funerals. Let us hold a collective memorial. There are approximately 80,000 temples in Japan; let every temple hold a vigil and funeral for the victims. It doesn’t matter if the bodies have gone missing.”
The Faith-Based Network also provides reports from some of Japan’s many so-called new religions—groups founded in the last two centuries that have, in some cases, grown into the largest mass movements the country has ever seen. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the new religions were among the quickest organizations to mobilize their members. Unlike the “traditional” Japanese groups, they put their lay adherents to work in large numbers. Beginning March 12, Risshō Kōseikai members began assembling themselves into “Aid Brigades” to gather emergency supplies to transport into the Tōhoku region. The Shingon Buddhism-affiliated new religion, Shinnyo-en, mobilized teams from its youth volunteer organization SeRV to travel into Tōhoku to assess damage and offer relief support. In the weeks that followed, SeRV volunteers transported food and cooking supplies to small disaster-area communities not fully covered by government relief, and they even began supplying Miyagi Prefecture schools with musical instruments to replace those swept away by the tsunami. Tenrikyō, the large new religious movement based in Tenri City in western Japan, has been dispatching teams of adherents from all over Japan into the disaster zone to aid in cleanup and reconstruction. Tenrikyō maintains a practice called hinokishin wherein lay adherents demonstrate gratitude by taking part in public service. Since March 11, some of the most dedicated Tenrikyō adherents have practiced hinokishin by traveling to Tōhoku in order to dig out mud and debris and to build shelters. In addition, Tenrikyō headquarters transformed its enormous Tenri City dormitories, ordinarily used to house pilgrims traveling to its headquarters, into a refugee center for 3,000 people displaced by the disaster in the northeast.

Perhaps the largest-scale new religion disaster-response was coordinated by Sōka Gakkai, which claims 8.27 million households in Japan, including many thousands of adherents in the disaster-stricken region. The day after the earthquake, Sōka Gakkai shut down regular operations at its massive headquarters in Shinanomachi, central Tokyo, and set its thousands of employees and ordinary member volunteers to work on relief efforts.

Staff members who ordinarily run the administrative headquarters and publish the daily newspaper Seikyō shinbun were tasked with gathering food, blankets, portable toilets, and other supplies, which they
transported north to the disaster area. In the Tōhoku area, Sōka Gakkai opened its Culture Centers to refugees; a Gakkai employee I was in touch with over email informed me that members of its Young Men’s and Young Women’s Divisions worked “without rest and without sleep” to help refugees, regardless of their religious affiliation. More than 3,500 refugees were housed at Culture Centers and cared for by Gakkai volunteers—including some who had lost their own homes and family members.

Is Japan really “without religion”? The proactive responses by Japanese religious groups was not widely publicized in the Japanese media; in fact, these initiatives would surprise many in Japan who, when asked “do you have religious faith?” would respond by declaring themselves mushūkyō, or “without religion.”

People in Japan may turn to Buddhist temples for funerals or memorials, they may visit a Shinto shrine at New Year’s, and many favor Christian ceremonies for their weddings; yet, most are likely to look askance at explicit expressions of religious faith. The number of negative responses is particularly high among younger people in Japan; according to research by Kokugakuin University professor of religion Nobutaka Inoue, only ten percent of college students in Japan will affirm that they are religious.7

Given those numbers, one might conclude that Japan is not a religious country. But Governor Ishihara’s outburst and the rapid response by religions in Japan tell a different story. The resources available within Japanese religious traditions inform Ishihara’s pronouncement of the tsunami as “divine punishment,” and they inspire thousands of clergy and lay adherents to devote themselves to this-worldly and transcendent salvation of suffering people.

More generally, the spirit of community, resilience, and an obstinate refusal to give up in the face of adversity speaks to the country’s legacy of self-cultivation, communitarianism, and self-sacrifice in the interest of social improvement—all qualities that can be characterized as “religious.” It is this legacy that will underlie the commitment of people in Japan to the rebuilding effort in the years ahead; it is this ethos that religious organizations will rely on as they progress from reacting to the immediate needs of disaster victims to the potentially more challenging
task of caring for those suffering in the midst of Japan’s long-term recovery.

Notes
1. Ishihara’s remarks and Murai’s response were reported by Kyodo News, “Ishihara apologizes for ‘divine punishment’ remark,” Japan Times, March 15, 2011.
2. For a list of Robertson’s statements connecting natural disasters to divine wrath over perceived moral failings, see: http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1953778_1953776_1953771,00.html. For more on the conversation between Robertson and Falwell, see: http://www.actupny.org/YELL/falwell.html.
4. The Facebook group (in Japanese) is accessible here: http://www.facebook.com/FBNERJ. The information that follows is drawn from reports made available on this site.
6. Updates on Shinseikyō responses to the disaster are available here: http://www.shinseikyo.net/taicai/aska.cgi.
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