Religious Influences on Japan’s Modernization

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MODERNIZATION AND RELIGION

The Weberian view and popular thought. Max Weber’s *The Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism* remains an important starting point in considerations of the relationship between religion and modernization in any society. This is primarily because of the following two points he makes:

1. In the background of Western modernization, especially in capitalistic industrialization, there rushes a torrid current of popular ethical reform that supported that modernization.

2. This popular ethical reform movement is linked to Western religious tradition and to the modernistic reform movements within that tradition, and was given direction by both.

In other words, Weber’s essay is an attempt to interpret the Western “human fundamentals of modernization” (Ōtsuka 1948) from the background of religious history, and we cannot ignore its perspectives even when we are studying the modernization of non-Western societies.

When one attempts to apply the ideas in Weber’s essay to non-Western geographical areas, however, several problems arise, and we can easily see that it is necessary to make several adjustments in Weber’s theoretical framework. In this sense Japan should prove a particularly interesting case in point. Weber thought that the “human fundamentals of modernization” developed only with the concurrent evolution of Western religion, and he attempted to

explain this evolution in terms of the peculiarities of the history of Western spiritual development. He believed that other geographical areas did not experience similar evolutions in religious tradition.

There is certainly no room to doubt that we will find no evolution of broad religious traditions similar to ascetic Protestantism in the Japanese modernization process. At the same time, however, it is clear that Japanese society did somehow manage to modernize and that in the background of this process we can find religious concepts exerting influence. This means, in my view, that we cannot content ourselves with calling Japan’s modernization “distorted,” but we must also point to the problems in the theoretical framework of Weber’s essay.

For example, Weber gives particular weight to ascetic Protestantism, especially the Calvinistic dogma, as having exemplary significance. This is because he thought of Calvinism as being the most appropriate religious thought for bringing forth the “human fundamentals of modernization.” At the core of Calvinism is the idea that salvation depends not so much on a person’s inner qualities as it does on the will of a basically unfathomable God, and Weber explicates the significance of this predestination theory from the perspective of cultural history:

That great historic process in the development of religions, the elimination of magic from the world which had begun with the old Hebrew prophets and, in conjunction with Hellenistic scientific thought, had repudiated all magical means to salvation as superstition and sin, came here to its logical conclusion. The genuine Puritan even rejected all signs of religious ceremony at the grave and buried his nearest and dearest without song or ritual in order that no superstition, no trust in the effects of magical and sacramental forces on salvation, should creep in.

There was not only no magical means of attaining the grace of God for those to whom God had decided to deny it, but no means whatever. Combined with the harsh doctrines of the absolute transcendentality of God and the corruption of everything pertaining
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to the flesh, this inner isolation of the individual contains, on the one hand, the reason for the entirely negative attitude of Puritanism to all the sensuous and *emotional* elements in culture and religion . . . . Thus it provides a basis for a fundamental antagonism to sensuous culture of all kinds. On the other hand, it forms one of the roots of that disillusioned and pessimistically inclined individualism which can even today be identified in the national characters and institutions of the peoples with a Puritan past . . . (Weber 1958, p. 105, emphasis added).

I would like to point out that with these words Weber shows he thought “elimination of magic” and “inner isolation” were at the base of the modern popular ethical reformation movement.

I believe that even though the relationship between religion and ethics noted here might represent one pattern of a reform movement in popular ethics which has been given motivation by religion during the modernization process, it is not the only gauge for judging the position of other examples. One must, insofar as one is looking at the Japanese modernization process, recognize that there are other patterns of relationships between religion and ethics, and religion and modernization, than those Weber noted.

Most of the scholars who have attempted to analyze Japan’s modernization from a Weberian perspective have failed to think in these terms. The main reason for this is that they have clung to a view that emphasizes the pre-modern and unprogressive nature of Japanese society and have advocated a modernism bent on conquering this through use of the Western model. They have failed to appreciate the fact that there was a current of popular ethical reform in Japan and that this played an important role in the formation of the ethics of modern Japanese because they believe that most of the Japanese people were wandering lost in an “enchanted garden.”

*Yasumaru’s contributions.* Some significant changes in this way of thinking have come about since the appearance of the work of R. Bellah (1957) and Yasumaru Yoshio (1974). Yasumaru in par-
ticular has made it clear through ample documentation that the Japanese modernization process was in fact supported by a powerful movement of popular ethical reform, and he has done much to rectify the errors in the "modernist" position.

According to Yasumaru, the Japanese people refined themselves ethically through the implementation of "conventional morality," exemplified by virtues such as diligence, thrift, humility and filial piety. These virtues themselves he holds to be traditional, but says that in the crises of daily life, which accompanied social differentiations that came to be established among the merchant and independent farmer classes, their actual practice was pushed to the limits, and this resulted in the formation of an ethical self that worked to destroy traditional attitudes. This trend to build up a self based on "conventional morality" began in the seventeenth century in the major urban areas of Japan. By the nineteenth century it had spread throughout the country, and by the end of that century had taken root at the very depths of popular culture. Yasumaru says its contents can be seen in the "popular thought" growing out of such phenomena as the shingaku, hōtoku and late Edo National Learning (kokugaku) movements; Ōhara Yūgaku; popular religions; the myōkōnin; the moralistic old farmers (rōnō); the leaders of the farmers uprisings in the nineteenth century, and the like.

Yasumaru searches for the core of such popular thought in what he terms "the philosophy of the heart" (kokoro no tetsugaku). This "philosophy of the heart" is a spiritualistic world view, holding that the human heart has unlimited potentiality: "All things spring from the heart" (Ishida Baigan), "Life and death, wealth and poverty, everything/all comes from the use of the heart" (Kurozumi Munetada). This is something born from the realization of the power of one's own spirit and comes as the result of wholehearted practice of the "conventional morality," and in addition to reflecting the powerful self-affirmation of the populace it has contributed to the formation of the ethical self because it is a wholly coherent world view. Yasumaru says that when viewed as social thought
this idea on the one hand underscores the abstract equality of all humans, for all possess a "heart"; on the other hand, however, it has the tendency to become a philosophy of resignation and forebearance, laying misfortune on the "heart."

I think that Yasumaru's research contains a corrective of the Weberian view of the nature of the popular ethical reform that supported modernization. Perhaps because he considered the ethical reform of the emerging bourgeoisie as typical, Weber treated the ethical reforms of the working classes as one part of this, but Yasumaru's research gives us another model, that of the populace (in which workers form an important element). When we attempt to understand the relationships between modernization and religion in these terms we need a different theoretical framework than that provided by Weber. Yasumaru himself, however, does not, in his writings, pay a great amount of attention to this point.

**Yasumaru's views of religion.** Yasumaru does not see religion in Japan—which lacks a transcendental deity in its religious traditions—as playing a very positive role in popular ethical reform. Indeed, the popular ethical reform brought about by the "philosophy of the heart" is closer to atheism, and he says there is a denial of magic due precisely to the tendency of the ideas to be human centered. For example, he says the true significance in the ideas of the reformer of the Mt. Fuji cult, Jikigyō Miroku (1671-1733), lies in the fact that he reformed the existing Fuji cult "from something ascetical and magical . . . to something which put the affirmation of conventional morality at its center" (Yasumaru 1974, p. 100), and that this was an attempt to supplant the authority of magic with the authority of the "heart." The authority of magic was an "unexplicable, all-powerful strength, existing apart from humans, which controls humans" (Yasumaru 1974, p. 32), and Yasumaru sees the central figure of worship of the Fuji cult, the Great Bodhisattva Sengen, as having been such a figure. Thus liberation from magic is tantamount to liberation from the worship of Shinto and Buddhist deities.
If we take such a viewpoint, how should we consider the new religions (popular religions), which worship deities who exist on a plane higher than that of humans and in which magical elements play such a crucial role? It can be said that all of the new religions contain elements such as magic and spells, charms, sacred rice and sacred water for the purpose of healing illness, in spite of the fact that there are new interpretations of these things as being anti-magical elements. In spite of this, it is true—as Yasumaru himself stresses—that these new religions contributed to the popular ethical reform movement. How, then, should we interpret the coexistence in the new religions of the promotion of an ethical self and of magic?

All the answers Yasumaru has given to these questions are fragmentary. He has said, for example; “Magic has played an important role in the cases of the various popular religions, sometimes even becoming a determining stage in their propagation. Even so, there are also cases such as that of Konkōkyō, which, in the process of strengthening their characters as monotheistic religions, rejected magic” (1974, p. 32). Here he suggests that magical elements were “a stage in propagation” having no connection with the original doctrine, and that there were new religions that clearly rejected magic. The place held by magical elements is, however, rather too large for it to be called a mere stage, and furthermore, even in the case of Konkōkyō (especially in that aspect of it which has generated so many new converts), elements such as belief in sacred rice and the worship of the head of the church clearly reveal a magical character.

Additionally, when discussing new religions such as Maruyama-kyō or Ōmotokyō, which have a strong tendency toward social reform, Yasumaru has said that magico-religious elements such as spirit possession or violent ecstasy are necessary in order that the “conventional morality” might extend itself to social criticism. These elements enabled such religions to identify themselves with an absolute authority and hence to deny the established secular authority, and thus provided them with a magico-religious foundation on which to base their social criticism. Here Yasumaru
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recognizes, however negatively, a meaning in the magical elements, but he limits it to the element of social criticism. A separate explanation is necessary for those magical elements that fall outside the realm of social criticism.

I believe it is necessary to reexamine the whole question of whether the denial of magic is indeed one of the most important trends in popular thought based on “conventional morality.” In that he sees popular ethical reform and magical elements at opposite ends of the spectrum, Yasumaru has taken a position similar to that of Weber. For this reason he has, I believe, overlooked the question of how his suggestive new views concerning the content of popular ethical reform have been brought to bear on the problem of the relationship between modernization and religion. In what follows I will deal positively with the meaning of magical elements in religion and explore how they are connected to popular ethical reform; this is basically an attempt to add the views of a specialist in religion to the picture of popular thought painted by Yasumaru.

POPULAR ETHICAL REFORM AND MAGICO-RELIGIOUS ELEMENTS IN NEW RELIGIONS

Akazawa Bunji and Konkōkyō. Weber and Yasumaru do not precisely fail to define magic as “an attempt, for whatever purpose, to utilize the assistance of a supernatural entity (deities, spirits and the like) or magical power in order to cause various phenomena, or the belief systems associated with such acts” (Yoshida 1973), but in their cases it is necessary to take “associated beliefs” in a rather broad sense. As expressed in the term “enchanted garden,” this does not differ significantly from animism or fundamental belief in their widest senses, and contains such elements as taboos, fortune telling and shamanism. I will refer to this as the “magico-religious factor.” In this section I would like to deal with the power of this magico-religious factor to bring about popular ethical reform through the use of two or three examples.

Let us look first at Akazawa Bunji (1814–1883), the founder of Konkōkyō, a new religion which Yasumaru uses as an example of
the tendency of the new religions to reject magic (see Konkōkyō Honbu Kyōchō 1953 and Shimazono 1980). When Bunji deepened his respect for the deities and grew resolute in his efforts to lead a life consistent with his beliefs the most important factor in this process was none other than the magico-religious one. From about the time he turned forty Bunji strengthened his ties with popular religion and it was through the divine words of a sendatsu ("leader") of the mountain cult Ishizuchikō and those of a practitioner who worshiped the popular deity Kanjin that he came to discover the religious reply to his several years of pain and doubt. During these years of religious questioning he had been sustained by a belief in the benevolence (okage) of the deities. He first received this deep belief in the benevolence of the deities when he was confined to bed with an illness and heard the promise of succor from a possessed sendatsu of the Ishizuchikō. One of the things that impressed Bunji at that time was when the sendatsu, acting for the deity, attached rice and beans to a sacred wand (gohei), then ordered Bunji to make them into a gruel and eat it. This act was at the same time a miracle that demonstrated the power of the deity, and also contained a magical significance concerning the living of a robust life. Later Bunji was to encourage the establishment of a personal belief among the populace with words such as "Ikigami ("living god") Konkō Daijin [the founding deity] and Tenchi Kane no Kami [the parent deity]: In singleheartedness offer your prayers to them. God's benevolence dwells in your heart; pray this very day" (Tenchi kakitsuki). Standing behind such a statement is, of course, a strong belief in the magical/religious nature of the deity's benevolence.

That the establishment of such a personal belief stood in intimate connection with ethical reform we can tell from the example of Saitō Jūemon (1823–1859), one of the early converts to the religion, who entered after his wife had been saved from post-natal hemorrhage (see Aoki 1955). One of the things that lodged in Jūemon's heart after he first visited the house of the founder were Bunji's words, "Belief, in all events, is a matter of having a pure heart—be
filial to your parents, respectful and honest to people, treat your family business as important, and do not treat the deities poorly. Even if it should be an unimportant deity, remember that calamities come from below and that one should never treat any deity poorly” (Aoki 1955, p. 43). Hearing these words Jūemon looked back on his own life: “Well then, well, what manner of a shallow human being I was! I was one who could not hear properly what people were saying to me, one who was, until today, causing all my own problems” (Aoki 1955, p. 43). His meeting with Bunji and his coming to know the power of the deities was tantamount to an ethical awakening for Jūemon.

The magico-religious factor in Tenrikyō. The magico-religious factor in Tenrikyō is even more obvious. Tenrikyō believers deepen their faith in their deity through tsutome ("service") and sazuke ("divine granting"), times of magical-emotional exchange with the deity. Tsutome is a ritual performed daily, and also monthly, for the “harmony between the deity and the people” (shinjin waraku), in which the “sacred songs” (mikagura uta) are combined with "hand dancing" (te-odori) and sacred dancing (kagura); sazuke, which is performed for those suffering from illness, is a magical ceremony:

First we clap the hands twice and call the deity down to us, then we report the name, age, sex and illness of the patient to the deity and pray for the success of the ritual, then, while reciting three times, ‘expel the evil, please help us, oh Lord of Tenri,’ and at the end of the third waving of the hands, we hold our palms as though we have received something from above, and are transferring it to the afflicted area of the patient. Then, while chanting three times, ‘Assist us, we pray, oh Lord of Tenri,’ we stroke the patient from top to bottom and at the third repetition we wave our hands and stroke. Then we (again) stroke the patient three times, then the arms three times, and repeat this all three times, bringing the ritual to an end. We once again pray for the success of the ritual, and clap the hands twice in order to send the deity back to above. Finally (or before
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this) we face the patient and explicate the doctrine, explaining the illness by using the doctrine, and encourage the practice of the doctrine (Ushio 1934, pp. 99-100).

The function of the deity who gives birth to, protects and loves human beings is brought to life through such magical rituals, and the ritual elicits the deep respect of the people.

Of course faith is also supported by doctrine, a more prosaic, less emotionally intense form, and for that very reason the doctrine is explicated during the *sazuke*. The central core of this doctrine is related, for example, in the following terms:

... all things in the world are the concern of the Lord, and there is not a single thing that can be accomplished by the power of the mortal alone. Hence there is not a single thing that could be called 'mortal.' All belongs to the Lord.

Thus all things, beginning with the corporeal and extending infinitely, all things except the heart are borrowed and used day by day. If we were to identify the reason for this borrowing, it would be the heart.

Thus, the heart alone belongs to us.

Therefore, because the corporeal is protected by the Lord in his benevolence, we may leave things corporeal to the Lord and pass the days without care, but because the heart belongs to each of us, we must hear the teaching and repent, hear and repent, day by day and day by day, gradually we must repent, and constantly perfect ourselves—this is how we must live (Moroi 1953, p. 154).

The idea of "perfecting" the heart is, naturally enough, something that is expressed in daily life in terms of suppression of desire and in taking care in our various dealings with others:

That which we call *makoto* or *shinjitsu* ("truth") is not a matter of merely being honest and looking out after oneself. If we do not practice the truth every day, if this practice is not there, then we cannot call it 'truth.' Most important is acting together and mutual cooperation, and hence to be even a little virtuous, even a little happy,
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even a little helpful, we must move our hearts. If we do, then the eight kinds of dust\(^1\) will not only not afflict our own hearts, but they will not be allowed to cling, even in small particles, to the hearts of those around us.

Examples of this:

If you wish to keep the dust of greed from clinging to the hearts of people, divide up your own belongings and give them away; if you divide one thing in half, that will keep the dust of greed from clinging ... If we look at something with regret, then others will undoubtedly feel regret, so quickly return even those things that have been forgotten; again, if it is something we have received from Heaven and which Heaven has protected, even if it is but a bit of cloth or a single piece of grain, do not allow it to fall into disuse, but use all things, wasting nothing (both passages from Moroi 1953, pp. 157-158).

This, according to Tenrikyō, is how one should move one’s heart.

The passages quoted here were written at about the end of the nineteenth century. They provide us both with a clear impression of the formative period of the Tenri church and also indicate the general ethos of modern Japanese popular religionists. The “conventional morality” based on rules of personal conduct are here tied to a devout faith. Because it is underlaid with a layer of religious humility it escapes rigorism and utilitarianism and becomes something that incorporates a kind of warmth. This warmth is not unrelated to the feelings received through the magical/religious experiences in such events as, for example, the tsutome and the sazuke.

I believe that the above examples show that the magico-religious factor is inextricably interwoven with those elements which brought about the popular ethical reform. Of course, this does not mean that I believe that the religious consciousness that supported this

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1. These are greed, regret, partiality, hatred, animosity, anger, covetousness and arrogance.
popular ethical reform was completely unrelated to the dethroning of emotion and magic. There was, certainly, a dethroning of emotion and magic. This was not, however, accomplished through an expulsion of magic and emotion by rational elements; it was, rather, based on a drawing out of these magical and emotional elements, of giving them concrete shape and hence of sublimating them. The magical and emotional elements were perforce preserved (in a changed form) within the new religious consciousness and for this very reason the new religious consciousness provided an easy outlet for the non-rational feelings of the people.

THE MEANING OF VITALISM: ANOTHER MODERN DOCTRINE

*Vitalism in the new religions.* In this section I would like to back up and deal with what in the previous section I called the “magico-religious factor” in the new religions from the perspective of its structure as an element of popular thought based on “conventional morality.” It is easy enough, for example, to see that the Tenrikyō doctrine quoted above has a considerably different character from the “philosophy of the heart” espoused by Yasumaru. In the “philosophy of the heart,” the human heart is held to be omnipotent. While it is certainly true that the “heart” is given an important role in the Tenrikyō doctrine, that which is omnipotent (at least, that which is omnipotent from the idea of actual salvation) is the deity; the “heart” is said to be able to accomplish anything only insofar as it gives a “body” to the omnipotent deity. Even though we call the deity omnipotent, however, he is certainly not considered to have a completely supernatural existence or to be separated entirely from the mortal world. The bulk of his will he divides among humans and his is an existence which functions together with, or perhaps in the midst of, humans. This type of thinking can be seen as an expression of the idea of “vitalism,” common to many of the new religions (see Tsushima et al., 1979).

In vitalistic religious thought the Buddha, *kami* and other such religious objects of worship are portrayed as the source of life, and humans and other forms of life are thought to have been born from
this fundamental life power and caused to live through a sharing of their existences with it. Thus the true form of humanity is both to be completely merged in the natural internal life function and to be in a state of harmony with nature and other creatures, all of whom share the same life existence. Belief in kami or in the Buddha is to also believe in the connections between human beings and in the interconnected nature of the common life shared by human beings and all other things; such a belief is even a recovery of this state of interconnectedness. I think that one of the most important characteristics of the new religions is that their thought features a strong manifestation, in the purest possible form, of the connections between human and human, and those between humans and other things.

Vitalistic thought appears most typically in the new religions, but it is not limited to them. It is not especially difficult to read vitalistic elements in much of the thought that has developed in modern Japan, such as the concepts of heaven (ten), essence (ki) and nature (sei): or Buddha and Buddha-nature; or deity (kami) and spirit (rei). Vitalistic elements are particularly conspicuous in popular thought. For example, the idea of “knowing the heart” of Ishida Baigan can be understood more completely if it is seen as an idea that has uncovered the vitalistic elements in the human ego that bring the individual into harmony with others and with nature than it can be understood if it is thought of as an example of spiritualism (yuishinron). This is perhaps a somewhat hasty speculation, but it does seem to me that vitalistic thought has played the role of guide in bringing about the popular ethical reform of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

A weakness of vitalism, and a response. It has, incidentally, frequently been noted that the thought in the background of the formation of a self based on “conventional morality” contains a conspicuous weakness. This can also be said of what I am calling vitalistic thought. The difficulty of avoiding social struggle caused by power structures, for example, is overlooked by vitalism.
Yasumaru Yoshio touches on this point: "The empirical cognitive power of the various forms of popular thought, while it may have great validity within the narrow confines of inter-personal relationships, lacks objective analytical power when applied to society as a whole" (Yasumaru 1974, p. 45). In Weberian terms, vitalistic thought reaches strong limits when it attempts to rationalize the actual world. Maruyama Masao would probably call this "associative ideas" similar to "Neo-Confucian thought patterns," characterized by premodernistic elements and stagnation (Maruyama 1952). Even more people would probably worry about the dangers of religion being subordinated to political values.

There is something to all of these observations, but I would like to touch here on a point generally overlooked by those who make them. This is, namely, that even though it may be true that vitalistic thought is immature as a form of modern social thought, it is certain that it was able to play a positive role in helping people adapt to modern social relationships, and in that sense it presumably includes elements that were able to form the foundation for modern and post-modern social thought.

The modernization process dissolved the traditional communal social bonds. In the process, people began searching anew for a clear intellectual symbol of the ties between themselves and others, and between themselves and nature; these were ties that had been evident until that time. Such symbols became one type of support to people who were adapting to modern social relationships. This preceeds questions such as wholistic, rationalistic interpretations of the world, or of social order or ways of implementing social justice, and can be identified as an intellectual question existing at the most fundamental level of human life. Japanese vitalistic thought, of which the populace was the principal bearer, attempted to answer this most fundamental intellectual problem of the people who were in direct confrontation with modernization.

It is obviously not the case that this problem of finding a symbol of the ties between the self and others and between the self and nature was not dealt with by the thought of historical religions,
philosophy or the social sciences. These thought systems, on the contrary, gave precedence to traditional thought patterns and to the ideas of the intellectual classes, and hence treated such questions as wholistic rationalistic interpretations of the world, or of social order or ways of implementing social justice as their primary concerns, dealing but briefly with the problem of intellectual symbols of the relationships between mortals and others, or between mortals and nature, as questions that had already been resolved. Japanese popular thought, including that of the new religions, themselves born of a folk religion base, began from the perspective of a basic lack of concern over such problems as wholistic, rationalistic interpretations of the world, or of social order or ways of implementing social justice, and were thus able to concentrate all their attention on this most fundamental problem of daily life. In this sense vitalistic thought can be called a thought system that has been able to deal forcefully, if naively, with this one aspect of the modern social experience.

SUMMARY
I have attempted in this essay to present a rough outline of a thesis concerning the relationships between modernization and religion which differs from Weber's views. While Weber sees the meaning of Calvinism in the West as being an "inner isolation" and an "elimination of magic," and hence as an attempt to liberate people from the bonds which tied human to human, and human to the world and to nature, I have interpreted the significance of the vitalism centering primarily around the new religions of Japan as an attempt to recover these bonds tying human to human, and human to the world and to nature. These, I believe, might be called the two patterns of interconnection between modern popular ethical reform and religion.

It was, of course, the Western world that most powerfully ushered in modernization, and the significance of Calvinistic thought as a precursor of modernization greatly eclipses that of vitalism. One cannot say, however, that vitalism has therefore made no contribu-
tion to modernization, or that religion in this sense did not provide one of the supports for modernization. This, I believe, supports a call for a reexamination of post-Weberian socio-religious theories of modern religion.

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