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Deconstructing “Japanese Religion”

A Historical Survey

The term “Japanese religion” was first coined by Anesaki Masaharu in 1907 for readers of English, and then introduced into Japanese society. Originally, this term has a dual meaning: one refers to a unified religion *particular to* Japan, the other refers to the diverse religions *in* Japan. The former is exclusive, the latter is inclusive. Most Japanese scholars have deliberately avoided the term in the former, exclusive, sense. In their research they have, at times, understood Japanese religion in the latter sense. The discourse on “Japanese religion” becomes a dialogical and hybrid space between diverse religions that have existed in Japan as a result of the dynamic movement of exchange and conflict between Westernization and indigenization within religious traditions—Christianity, Buddhism, Shinto, new religions, and folk religions. Through such an attempt to deconstruct “Japanese Religion,” the exclusive sense can be clarified in contrast to the inclusive, heterogeneous sense.

KEYWORDS: “Japanese religion” – Westernization – indigenization – transcendence – Emperor system

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THE PHRASE “Japanese religion” first appeared as an academic term in 1907 in an English-language leaflet entitled *The Religious History of Japan, an Outline*, written by ANESAKI Masaharu 姉崎正治, a professor of The University of Tokyo and the founder of religious studies in modern Japan. Like NITOBE Inazō’s 新渡戸稻造 *Bushidō: The Soul of Japan* (1907) and OKAKURA Tenshin’s 岡倉天心 *The Book of Tea* (1906), this book was originally written for readers of English and was not even translated into Japanese until 1912 (ANESAKI 1912). Although analysis of “the West” and its influence on “Japanese religion” can be quite problematic, it seems clear that the very concept of “Japanese religion” has only recently appeared under the gaze of the Western world. It could be said that this concept emerged in reaction to Western religious concepts in order to present clear distinctions between them, and to form its own identity and boundaries in relation to them.

While the two juxtaposed concepts “Japanese” and “religion” combine to form “Japanese religion,” the link between the two is neither obvious nor natural. In fact, the phrase “Japanese religion” did not appear until the end of the Meiji period (1868–1912), considerably later than the emergence of either “Japanese” or “religion,” which had already appeared separately at the beginning of Meiji and are Western in origin. The word “Japanese” (namely, “of Japan”) denotes things related to the nation-state. “Religion” originated within Christianity but for those following Anesaki’s ideas, it has come to mean a *psychological towardness to unlimited beings*, so it now encompasses non-Christian beliefs found in Buddhism, Islam, and Shinto. Since some of these religions are not confined to the boundaries of the one nation-state of Japan, it became necessary to connect the terms “Japanese” and “religion” as a means to distinguish “Japanese religion” from all other religions. (Hence, the combined term “Japanese religion” emerged much later than its component terms.)

The tension of concepts within the term “Japanese religion” gives the phrase a dualistic meaning: Both religions *particular to* Japan as well as religion *in* Japan. The idea of religion *particular to* Japan emphasizes the uniqueness of “Japanese religion” as an ahistorical, unified facet of “Japaneseness.” In this sense, the non-national character of “religion” is assimilated into the boundaries of the nation-state. On the other hand, the idea of religions *in* Japan stresses the co-existence of different religious beliefs, making Japan a hybrid space where religions have both emerged and been introduced, and have then influenced one another.

Although both sides of this dualistic meaning can be felt in Anesaki’s writings, he tends to describe “Japanese religion” as the “religion particular to Japan.”

In 1930 ANESAKI published a book entitled *History of Japanese Religion*, his complete vision initially presented in *The Religious History of Japan, an Outline*, which was again written for English-language readers and based upon his lectures at Harvard University. In fact, this book has never been translated into Japanese, and Japanese scholars as a whole have not shown a strong interest in either Anesaki's work or his understanding of “Japanese religion.”

In 1954 KISHIMOTO Hideo 岸本英夫, Anesaki's successor at The University of Tokyo, edited *Meiji bunkashi: Shūkyō hen* 明治文化史—宗教編 [A cultural history of Meiji: Religion]. Unlike his predecessor, Kishimoto's general treatment of “Japanese religion” lacks the unified theme of religion particular to Japan, but rather is a collection of five independent chapters written by different authors about religions in the early modern era, including Shinto, Buddhism, Christianity, and new religions. Like Kishimoto, almost all Japanese scholars have avoided describing the indigenous nature of “Japanese religion,” since for them the term carries a nationalistic connotation of religion particular to Japan that emphasizes its uniqueness, as in Anesaki's work. They prefer to limit their use of the term to contemplation on religions in Japan and to make arguments about different religions. Avoiding the indigenous nature of “Japanese religion” seems to be a common tendency, especially after the publication of Kishimoto's book. It seems that although Japanese scholars have suspected the tensions inherent within the term “Japanese religion,” most have limited its usage, even if unconsciously.

While the connotations of “Japanese religion” depend on each scholar's usage and interpretation, as in any case involving sets of words, “Japan” and “religion” have consistently functioned in binary opposition. “Religion” carries a notion of the transcendental, derived from Western Christianity, while “Japan” speaks of an indigenous and domestic society, although this indigenous character appeared through the framework of a Westernized epistemological process. The understanding of “Japanese religion” depends upon how each word is evaluated and connected by individual scholars or schools of thought. We shall explore this process below as we briefly trace the modern history and study of religion in Japan, noting perspectives on the Western and the indigenous in turn.

A Westernizing Moment

In modern Japan (after the Meiji Restoration), the transcendental aspect of Christian belief (and particularly Protestant belief) was adopted as a means through which citizens could develop a transcendental view of self. This transcendent self could then objectively criticize social values and especially the authority of the state. SAKO Junichirō's *Kindai Nihon shisōshi ni okeru jinkaku kannen no seiritsu* [Establishment of the notion of personality in modern Japanese intellectual history] (1995) describes the objective, transcendent self offered by Western Christianity. The so-called “Uchimura Incident” in 1900, when the

Japanese Christian Uchimura Kanzō refused to bow to the emperor's authority (OZAWA 1961), reveals the tension between newly emerging transcendent thought and the Japanese state. The confrontation between Christianity and state power is described in SUMIYA Mikio's *Kindai Nihon no keisei to Kirisutokyō* [The formation of modern Japan and Christianity] (1961). Sumiya's work reveals that the transcendental aspect of Christianity is central to the Western notion of religion. Isomae Jun'ichi's *Kindai Nihon no shūkyō-gensetsu to sono keifu* [Religious discourse and its genealogy in modern Japan] (ISOMAE 2003) explores the process of how Western notions of religion and transcendence have been disseminated into Japanese society.

The transcendental character of Protestant Christianity in modern Japan was seen as representative of the so-called West. In the Tokugawa period, however, Christianity was equated with Catholicism, which tended to be neglected by Japanese scholars in the modern era due to its ritualistic character. On this point, GONOI Takashi's *Nihon Kirisutokyō shi* [History of Japanese Christianity] (1990) is useful for surveying the entire history of Christianity in Japan, focusing mainly on Catholicism in the early modern period. Also, TAKAHASHI Masao's *Meiji no Kirisutokyō* [Christianity in Meiji] (2003) provides a wide perspective on Christianity in Japan and traces diverse streams of Protestant denominations, as well as Catholicism and Russian Orthodoxy.

While the Western notion of transcendence has been valued, it is difficult to discern a Western sense of guilt in the Japanese acceptance of Christianity. In fact, the sense of guilt has become a quite indigenized aspect of Christianity in Japan (YONEKURA 1983). Works such as ENDŌ Shūsaku's novel *Chinmoku* [Silence] (1966) and AKUTAGAWA Ryūnosuke's novel *Ogin* (1922) portray a Christian sense of guilt that has been transformed within the social context of Japan. This transformed sense of guilt caused Japanese Christians to shed their feelings of separateness from Japanese society, seen as the advent of so-called liberal theology around 1880. On the one hand, this new movement urged some Christians to become socially active and to seek concrete changes in Japanese society; on the other, some Christians became nationalistic and linked their religious identity with the nation-state. Religious studies in Japan also appeared in relation to this later movement (DŌSHISHA DAIGAKU JINBUNKAGAKU KENKYŪJO 1984). Consequently, after the "Uchimura Incident" in 1890, Japanese Christianity is said to have collapsed under the authority of the nation-state. In its place, Russian Marxism took on the role of the transcendental means for criticizing Japanese society, especially during the 1920's to mid-1930's (TSUDA 1997). After that period the question of identifying and distinguishing between the transcendental (or *Western*) and the indigenous (or *Japanese*) led scholars to rethink the epistemological problem of so-called "Japanese religion" (AMA 1996).

Parallel to the acceptance of Christianity in Japan, the transcendental nature of Buddhism was also thought to be compatible with Christianity. Under the

influence of William James and Henrie Bergson, NISHIDA Kitarō's *Zen no kenkyū* [A Study of Good] (1911) re-described the religious experience of Buddhism as pure consciousness of the transcendental. Here, the transcendental was understood as unlimitedness going beyond rationality. This concept of the transcendental was woven into a subtle relationship with the nation-state's authority. On the one hand, Buddhism offered a transcendental voice to confront the nation-state as seen in IENAGA Saburō's work (1940). On the other hand, the transcendental was defined as the nation-state itself, as seen in SUZUKI Daisetsu's work (1944). As is the case in Nichiren Buddhism, ŌTANI Ēichi (2001) explores how Buddhism has become affiliated with Japanese nationalism. While Ōtani focuses on the modern era, KURODA Toshio (1975) considers how modern nationalism can be linked to the medieval awareness of Japanese land as protected by goddesses of both Buddhism and Shinto.

Through an analogical process with the transcendental aspect of Western religion, the term “New Medieval Buddhism” (*Kamakura Shin Bukkyō* 鎌倉新仏教) was established, beginning with Hara Katsurō's epoch-making paper “Tōzai no shūkyō kaikaku” [The reformation in the West and the East] (HARA 1911). Hara offered New Medieval Buddhism as a competitor to Protestantism because of its similarities, such as the presence of founders, scriptures, church, and its ability to save people on a national scale. Hara's attempt was followed by NAITŌ Kanji (1941), who compared New Medieval Buddhism with Protestantism in an effort to evoke a spirit of modern Capitalism through Weberian “Entzauberung.” Based on this notion of New Medieval Buddhism, TSUJI Zennosuke published a massive collection, *Nihon Bukkyō shi* 日本仏教史 [The history of Japanese Buddhism] (1944–1955), the first attempt to write a complete history of Buddhism in Japan from ancient to modern times.

Tsuji criticized Japanese Buddhism in the early modern era as being corrupted because it only functioned as a social institution for funeral services and registration and lost the transcendental character that New Medieval Buddhism had regained. His criticisms reveal the binary contrast of belief and practice, that is, belief is linked to the transcendental West in Japan, while practice is connected with indigenous or even superstitious everyday life. As SERIKAWA Hiromichi (1989) shows, Buddhist studies in modern Japan have promoted the Westernization of Buddhism, making it compatible with Christianity, particularly Protestantism. But after the 1960's this type of view of New Medieval Buddhism has been criticized for its overly-simplified projection of Western religious notions. Critics like KURODA Toshio (1975), who describes the history of Buddhism from the ancient to the medieval era, and MORIOKA Kiyomi (1962), through an analysis of early modern Buddhism, reevaluate the practical and institutional aspects of this religious tradition.

As already mentioned, Christianity itself has been significantly transformed in the context of Japan, especially concerning the sense of guilt. It is interesting

to note that the sense of guilt has been understood through Buddhist concepts rather than Christian, and particularly New Medieval Buddhism has borne the Japanese understanding of guiltiness. Reconsideration of the nature of guilt was explored further around the end of World War Two by MIKI Kiyoshi (1999; originally published in 1946) and TANABE Hajime (1946), who sought to understand absolute salvation on the earthly plane where people struggle with each other or with themselves, yet without the Christian notion of a personal God. Their work inspired the love stories of contemporary novelist MURAKAMI Haruki (1987), whose novels never treat any specific religion directly but seem to reveal a common sense of guilt in modern Japan that has emerged through interaction between people on earth, rather than human encounters with an invisible and universal God. It has become the task for scholars of “Japanese religion” to discern how an understanding of both transcendence and guilt have been articulated into the Japanese context through the religious traditions of Christianity, Buddhism, Confucianism, and even atheism such as Marxism.¹

An Indigenizing Movement

Shinto has usually been thought of as an indigenous “Japanese religion” that existed ahistorically before the arrival of foreign religions like Buddhism and Christianity. As revealed in the works of KURODA (1975) and TAKATORI (1979), however, Shinto emerged as a native tradition in reaction to influences from abroad, such as sinification during the ancient and medieval eras and Westernization in the modern era. It is difficult to precisely define Shinto, as MURAKAMI Shigeyoshi (1970) has shown, by noting the existence of diverse elements within Shinto itself. Among the diversities of Shinto, State Shinto emerged as institutionalized Shinto belief and practice through connecting the goddess of shrines all over Japan with the mythology of the Japanese emperor (*tennō* 天皇) in an effort to absorb the native elite’s resistance to the Westernization of religious phenomena. State Shinto came to belong to the sphere of moralistic, national duty and was held to be superior to the personal sphere of religion (ISOMAE 2003, pp. 97–110). Simultaneously, the Japanese government tried to define State Shinto as a rational religious practice to be separated from new religions and folk religions, which were thought of as superstitious and were suppressed under the name of the emperor. Sakamoto Koremaru’s *Kokka Shinto keisei katei no kenkyū* [A study of the formation process of State Shinto] (SAKAMOTO 1994) traces the subtle and unstable process of the establishment of State Shinto by the Japanese government.

1. On this point, Confucianism has an interesting position in Japanese intellectual history. It is difficult to determine whether Confucianism belongs to the modern Western notion of “religion” or to “morality” (WATANABE 1978, pp. 48–180).

A mythology of the emperor, as propounded in *Kojiki* 古事記 (712 CE) and *Nihon shoki* 日本書紀 (720 CE), functioned to create a national memory for Japanese in modern era. Issues surrounding the authenticity and historical truth of *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki*, however, have long been the subject of scholarly debate (ISOMAE 1998). One such scholar of the early modern era, Motoori Norinaga, is considered the forerunner of a literal and fundamentalist interpretation of emperor mythology. This interpretation, developed by Motoori and his disciples of National Learning, prepared the way for ultra-nationalism in modern Japan (MARUYAMA 1952). Against Motoori's literal interpretation, TSUDA Sōkichi's *Nihon koten no kenkyū* [Study of Japanese Classics] (1948) is an epoch-making work which explores the structure of *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki*, remarking that they only reflect the memory of the sixth-century imperial court and not the historical origins of Japanese national memory as a whole. Appropriating Tsuda's argument, ISHIMODA Shō, who tried to extract from emperor mythology fragments of a national popular epic, distinguished this epic from imperial history and denied its historical authenticity (1948, pp. 1–96).

At the time of such struggles for national memory, YANAGITA Kunio in his *Tōno monogatari* [Legends of the Tono region] (1912) searched the memories of common folk in their everyday lives to gather an oral tradition that existed independent of written history. He attempted to give a voice to popular practices and beliefs as religion *particular to* Japan, as distinguished from the Western notion of religion from which, according to Yanagita's critique, State Shinto had borrowed heavily during its formative process. Yanagita's understanding of the people tended to be fixed in the binary schema of “indigenous religion/foreign religion,” or rather “original/superficial.” His disciple, HORI Ichirō (1971), advocated the term “folk religion” through a process of negotiation between the indigenous and the imported. This kind of negotiating process had originally been developed by TSUDA Sōkichi (1949) through his critical attitude to the very notion of the indigenous. Tsuda held that the indigenous could emerge and take shape only through a negotiating process with imported elements, and only thus develop its own literacy and form systematized doctrines. Tsuda's work offers a description of “Japanese religion” that avoids a fixed perception of the indigenous as mere “Japaneseness.” Tsuda's perspective on negotiation was followed by both KURODA Toshio's (1975) work on the relationship between Buddhism and Shinto and MIYAZAKI Kentarō's (1997) work describing “hidden Christians” (*kakure Kirishitan*), which considered the relationship between Catholicism and popular practice. These works reveal ways in which Japanese indigenous society has appropriated the belief and practice of systematized religions like Buddhism and Christianity.

Furthermore, in his focus on the relationship between new religion and folk religion, SHIMAZONO Susumu (1992) describes the acceptance of new religion as a process of subjectification by the people as they seek to detach from the

sphere of folk religion. Shimazono, along with most scholars of new and popular religion in Japan, aims to describe how people have established their own subjectivity, which is related to the transcendental yet has formed apart from either Christianity or Buddhism, in an effort to resist the state power. As YASUMARU Yoshio (1974) points out, however, their subjectivity is ambivalent in terms of their relationship with state power because in everyday life they tend to submit to the social authorities, and especially to the emperor. According to Yasumaru, this ambivalence is due to an underdeveloped sense of the Westernized transcendental critique. It is notable that the process of subjectification among people through acceptance of new or popular religion problematizes the stereotypical binary categories of indigenous and transcendental, Japanese and Western.

The emperor system, with which people have such an ambivalent relationship, has been the subject of active critique, since this system is seen as the foundation of modern state power. YAMAGUCHI Masao (1989, pp. 159–232) interprets the structure of this system as a symbolic space that subverts the binary opposition of “profane/sacred” or “cosmos/chaos.” IWAI Tadakuma and OKADA Seiji (1989) provide a historical survey on the periodical change of the emperor’s image from the ancient to the modern era. Although the modern image of the emperor is one of purity, AMINO Yoshihiko (1986) suggests that the emperor system in the medieval era sought political hegemony through dealings with marginal characters and sexual misconduct. YASUMARU Yoshio (1992) analyzes the process of reinventing the emperor’s authority to absorb popular anxiety toward drastic social change at the end of the early modern era into the modern era. In the study of Japanese religion, the emperor system is significant because it has existed as the primary symbol of “Japanese purity” under the name of Shinto, and yet has had deep relationships with other religions (or moral codes) like Christianity, Buddhism, and Confucianism, whether through confrontation or assimilation.

The notion of “Japaneseness,” or the purity of the emperor system, has caused religions and academic studies of religions (like Shinto, Buddhism, new religion, folklore, and even Christianity) to develop exclusive attitudes in at least two dimensions. Firstly, social discrimination including the boundaries of women inevitably results from notions of purity (MONMA 1997). Secondly, the notion shored up colonialism, which forced non-Japanese people to worship the emperor and to subjugate under Japanese belief (KAN 2004, MURAI 1992). It is acknowledged that some religious people, especially Buddhists and Christians, resisted the imperialistic policy of the Japanese government (DŌSHISHA DAIGAKU JINBUNKAGAKU KENKYŪJO 1997). After defeat during World War Two, the Occupation Forces tried to change the imperialistic character of religions in Japan to adjust to the international context of the Cold War, an adjustment that has since affected the structure of religious policy of postwar Japan

(IKADO 1993). Above all, it is interesting to trace the political and social position of the Yasukuni Shrine connected to the emperor system from the standpoint of understanding how the separation of religion and state had been articulated in Japanese society (TOMURA et al., 1990), thus giving insight into current Japanese views on religion.

I have indicated some of the problems associated with the history of the term “Japanese religion.” As suggested above, it is rare that Japanese scholars will argue about “Japanese religion” as a whole or describe “Japanese religion” as a unified substance. For the most part, scholars have approached “Japanese religion” as religions in Japan and not religion particular to Japan. The latter is an explorative perspective of the negotiating process between Japan and the West that notices both indigenous and transcendental aspects within the specific context of each religious tradition, such as Christianity, Buddhism, Shinto, new religion, and folklore. Therefore, the term “Japanese religion” provides a communicative space between diverse religions and Japanese society as well as religions and academic discourses (ISOMAE 2005, pp. 36–44).

It can be said that discourse on “Japanese religion” emerged only as modern Japanese society was exposed to Western concepts of religion. As mentioned above, distinct elements are juxtaposed within the term “Japanese religion,” and a new communicative space has been opened. By opening this communicative space, the character of the phrase becomes ambivalent, containing aspects of both the homogenous and the heterogeneous, depending upon the circumstances. On the one hand, it functions positively: the transcendental urges people to become critical of implicit values within Japanese society, including their relationship to religious phenomena, while the indigenous urges them to appropriate Western hegemony, including the notion of “religion.” On the other hand, the term functions negatively: the transcendental gives people an ideology by which they can overcome historical limitations, while the indigenous causes them to become nationalistic and exclusive in their attitudes towards others. Therefore, discourse on “Japanese religion” can be either affirming or condemning. To gain a positive understanding of Japanese religion, it is necessary to confront transcendental and indigenous aspects with each other by enunciating the affect of each on religious phenomena, dissolving their fixed connotations in reconsideration of the true nature of the transcendental and the indigenous. Such an articulating process helps us to understand that there is no unified “Western” or “Japanese” substance. It reveals that neither the transcendental nor the indigenous could emerge until Japan was opened to the Western world, offering new ideas and new ways of understanding to be explored.

Finally, it is noteworthy that the study of “Japanese religion” has been promoted by the intersection of many diverse disciplines of study, including historiography, sociology, anthropology, Buddhist studies, Shinto studies, theology, folklore, and so on, whereas the science of religion (*shūkyōgaku* 宗教学), in its

narrow adherence to sui generis religion, has made no significant contribution, except in the case of scholars like Anesaki and Kishimoto (ISOMAE 2003, pp. 55–64). It is essentially impossible to fix the content of “Japanese religion” to any one academic definition, so its discursive nature urges diverse disciplines to participate in heterogeneous discussion and negotiation from a standpoint free of the Western notion of sui generis religion, which the science of religion has tried to transplant into Japanese society as an agent of the idealized West. Such a distinction of roles between the study of “Japanese religion” and the science of religion itself is in fact informative of how religious phenomena have developed in modern Japan.

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