"Modernization" and "Secularization" in Japan : A Polemical Essay

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"Modernization" is a concept created in an effort to cope intellectually with a diffuse bundle of sociocultural phenomena by systematizing them vaguely under a single heading. It would be the height of naïveté to suppose that this fuzzy concept corresponds to an extra-conceptual, objective reality. Yet this is precisely what has happened.

The struggles of a host of eminent scholars dealing with "Changing concepts of the modernization of Japan," summarized by J. W. Hall (Jansen 1965, esp. pp. 8-11), may serve to illustrate how taken-for-granted it has become even in the academic world to put the cart of concepts before the real, live horse. By doing so in this case, social scientists pay tribute to unscientific, everyday use of language. People have been talking about the "modernization of Japan" for years. The concept conveys an air of solidity. It seems to deal with something real. But does it?

The concept of "secularization" confronts us with a similar difficulty. Here too repeated uses of the term, even when these uses are mutually contradictory, almost lead us to believe that it has as its referent something "out there." But does it?

In order to explore this problem, I propose to begin by investigating the origins of these concepts.

Environment of origin. The historicity of "modernization" and "secularization" is twofold. First, both terms are conceptual products of a definite historical period within a definite cultural sphere, namely, the European. They are applied worldwide today primarily as a result of the broaden-

ing of the European sphere of influence. That some Japanese scholars use these decidedly Western concepts does not prove them superior means of cognition. It merely illustrates the fact that Japanese social science follows the European model.

Second, both terms are connected with a changing understanding of "history" in Christian European thought after the Renaissance. Prior to the Renaissance the dominant notion of history was that of the Catholic Church. On this view history was interpreted as an eschatologically oriented divine "plan of salvation." During and after the Renaissance, however, there developed within the church and increasingly extra ecclesiam the idea of "progress" as bound up with the ratio which theologians linked to faith in various ways but which became increasingly autonomous. This development is part of the process later referred to as "secularization," a term that came to mean "development away from the church."

The French term *progrès*, since the mid-eighteenth century translated into English as "progress" and into German as "Fortschritt," originally bore a revolutionary connotation. It signaled emancipation from hierarchical tutelage. The term "revolution," by the same token, "seems to have taken on its meaning... by way of the secularization of Heilsgeschichte" (Mader 1978, p. 163). When we recognize that the idea of progress fathered, as it were, the idea of modernization, we are in a position to attend to the close reciprocal relationship in the development of these concepts.

"Progress/modernization" and "secularization" in their present-day meanings can be fully understood only when we take this reciprocal relationship into account. In this connection it is instructive to note that what the rationalists of the Age of Enlightenment saw as the progress of reason was precisely what the church regarded as secularization. Thus "progress" (later "modernization"), on the one hand, and "secularization," on the other, were originally different

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designations for the *same* historical development. What, then, was – and is – the major difference between these two concepts?

Evaluation and emotional commitment. The main difference between "modernization" and "secularization" seems to derive, in harmony with the original environments of their usage, from the opposing, emotion-laden judgments they express to this very day. "Modernization," to those who believe in rational progress, is an indicator of something positive. "Secularization," even for those outside the church, generally leaves a negative aftertaste (cf. Morel 1975, pp. 237-254). That something is "modernized" signifies that it has "changed for the better," "secularization" a "change for the worse." In both cases the terms denote a historical change and connote a positive or negative attitude toward this change on the part of the persons who use them.¹

The concepts of modernization and secularization reflect a tendency firmly rooted in European thought, the tendency to make emotion-committing judgments that correspond to a received structure of thought and value. In respect of this tendency, the two streams that originated these concepts show a marked resemblance. This similarity permits us to perceive even more clearly the extent to which these two concepts are historically and culturally conditioned.

^{1.} The attempts of social scientists to rule such emotion-involving assessments out of the scientific enterprise are self-deceptive. It has become increasingly popular to avoid facing the fact that the human sciences prefer to deal with human problems, which are always qualitative, by resorting to quantification. But the quantities deemed significant, such as railroad mileage or church attendance, invariably boil down to emotion-engaging evaluations: "lots of railroads are good"; "few people in church is bad." To dish up nondescript statistics while ignoring their qualitative implications is what Adorno calls "mere reproduction of fact as perversion of fact into ideology" (1978, p.101). Who would even *care* about quantities if it were not for their qualitative implications?

Ecclesiastical aspects of the Enlightenment tradition. Because the Enlightenment tradition borrowed from the church its recipe for stifling opposition and used it with even greater success, its own self-contradictory arbitrariness, irrationality, and intolerance – the very things for which the Enlightenment had reproached the church – have gone largely unnoticed. With respect to thought and thought-repression, the Enlightenment tradition has been regarded as the converse of the ecclesiastical. In fact it is more like a sequel.

The recipe alluded to above might be put as follows: "Postulate an absolute beyond human reach to which you relate everything. Force everyone to abide by 'its' laws, which are of course your own, and by all means make sure that no one, not even yourself, dares to notice that the whole thing is your own construction." Though the name of the constructed absolute changed, under the Enlightenment, from "God" to "objective reality," the effect of the old method of coercion remained the same: mere human assertions were falsely equipped with more-than-human status.

In the ensuing repressive intellectual atmosphere where fundamental postulates and assumptions are no longer recognized as such, the Enlightenment tradition ignores or disputes its own conditionedness, thus becoming ideological. Like the church, it pretends to direct contact with "objective" (that is, "absolute") reality.

Such pretensions, however, cannot be justified. The lingering influence of the Enlightenment tradition's ecclesiastical predecessor is all too evident. This influence does not fail to manifest itself in the concepts with which this inquiry is concerned. Belief in "progress/modernization" can be traced to the idea of Heilsgeschichte, of which it is basically a "secularized" form. Even the orientation toward the future, commonly regarded as typical of the Enlightenment tradition and of the concept of modernization, was really inherited from Christianity.

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The links between the Enlightenment tradition and Christianity, though partly obscured, are still visible. Both in its thought-forms and in its repression of "heretics," the Enlightenment tradition mirrors its ecclesiastical forebear. This tradition lives on in the natural and human sciences today.

The desire to step outside history. The Enlightenment tradition's proximity to the church is equally evident in one of its basic motives.

Man has commonly felt that what is "true" cannot be touched by the vicissitudes of time. The true must belong to the realm of the absolute, must transcend the relative. When out of touch with their "individual" experiences of truth, people have resorted to intellectual constructions of such an absolute, of which "God" and "objective reality" have been given as examples. In this way they sought to step beyond history and touch "truth."

Both "God" and "objective reality," however, have histories. Though Christianity was originally and essentially the experience of God in Christ, the church developed into an association of people sharing a common set of concepts. "God," more spoken about than listened to, became abstract. The Enlightenment tradition has carried this abstraction to perfection. "Objective reality" is devoid of every human quality. As such, it is treated with even greater awe than that reserved for the ecclesiastical "God." Blasphemy is unthinkable. That way lies madness.

The dehumanization of the "absolute" has led to the dehumanization of history. History is treated as the playground of nonhuman forces, a realm where human decisions and actions are mere epiphenomena. Historical interpretations are bound to "reality," not consciousness. Historical science has thus tried to "explain" (a very human term!) reality in increasingly *non*human ways. Consider, for ex-

ample, the implications of devising a "unified and objective conception of modernization" (Hall, in Jansen 1965, p. 11). On the one hand, the word "devise" implies that such a conception would be a human construction, the outcome of an endeavor to fulfill a human purpose. On the other hand, if an "objective conception of modernization" is to make sense, "modernization" must be seen not as the activity of basically free human beings but as a process squeezed dry of humanity.

Attempts to explain away human freedom and the possibilities of human will and action are motivated by the desire to escape from freedom. If history "happens" anyway, there is no need, indeed no possibility, of *doing* anything about it. One can thus shirk the responsibility and burden of consciously involving oneself. Admittedly, I exaggerate. Still, I cannot escape the impression that this or a similar motive lurks behind many academic papers dealing with modernization and secularization. After all, if these things "simply happen" in Japan as they do everywhere else, this would go a long way toward proving that we have to do with an extra-human process, something for which we need take no personal responsibility.

Applicability of "modernization/secularization" to Japan. I think I have shown that the concepts of modernization and secularization, being intellectually and emotionally bound up with Western history, are by no means objective. Furthermore, their specific conditionedness casts doubt on the possibility of universalizing them. But let us consider their applicability to the Japanese situation.

Japan's "modernization" resulted solely from its encounter with the West. Even before the Meiji Restoration, Japan had acquired some of the prerequisities for "modernization." Tokugawa Japan, however, was anything but future-oriented. During and after the Restoration period, the Japanese began quite suddenly to work toward a future – but from motives quite different from those associated with modernization in the West. On the one hand they wanted to "expel the barbarians," on the other, to catch up with them. So they "modernized." That is, they emulated Western material culture, particularly its science and technology, but largely retained their traditional social and value structures – as they do today.

I cannot see how one could call this Japanese development "modernization" in any sense familiar in the West unless the concept be limited to such external criteria as the nation-state, parliament, heavy industry, and a conscript army. Yet even these features were not indigenous in origin. They were functions of the desire to gain parity with the West. Consequently, what goes by the name "modernization". would find a more appropriate designation in the term "Westernization" — provided we remember that to the present day Japan has been Westernized only to a limited extent.

What concerns us here, however, is the relationship between Japan's "modernization" and the idea of "secularization." The dubious applicability of the former has a counterpart in the latter. As will be shown, the traditional Western distinction between sacred and secular, religious and profane, was differently treated in Japan, if indeed the distinction was drawn at all. As a result there is little scope for application of the term "secularization" to the Japanese situation.²

Shinto and "secularization." According to the Shinto tradition, every Japanese is, by birth, a Shintoist. The pre-Meiji scholar Hirata Atsutane said that Shinto is "the everyday way of the [Japanese] people." Some post-Meiji governments have maintained that Shinto is not a religion at all, but simply

^{2.} The questionability of applying the term shows up first of all in the language. "Secularization" has no traditional verbal equivalent in Japanese. The word used, *sezokuka*, is merely a coined, literal translation.

the "traditional Japanese way of life." In this context how could one even begin to distinguish between "religious" and "secular"? The answer is clear: by misappropriating a traditional Western distinction.

The Shinto tradition, it appears, has never perceived itself as standing in opposition to "the world." This impression is reinforced when one recalls the propagandistic use of Shinto as a cornerstone for the legitimacy of imperial rule and for the mythologically supported divine unity, uniqueness, or superiority of the Japanese people/state – a pattern evident even before there was a word for Shinto. Perhaps the Emperor's 1946 denial that he was an *akitsumikami* or "kami in human appearance" was the closest Shinto ever got to "secularization." But even this was a consequence of external pressures. It had no internal reasons whatever, and in any case had nothing to do with "modernization."

The "secularization" of Japanese Buddhism. In medieval Europe the Catholic Church claimed suzerainty over everything "worldly" from the Holy Roman Emperor down to the serf. In Japan, however, a Canossa was never possible. Despite the fact that Buddhism has at times exercised strong influence on the Japanese state and that certain Buddhist centers once attained considerable political and even military power, it never, except for Nichiren, pretended to universal authority. Moreover, Buddhism has never dominated the thought and behavior of the Japanese population in the way that the Catholic Church once dominated (at least nominally) the thought and behavior of Europeans. Secularization in the sense of "loss of ideological control" is, therefore, irrelevant to Japanese Buddhism.

Far from dominating "the world," the numerous schools of Japanese Buddhism were kept under tight rein by the political authorities almost from the day of their appearance (cf. Kitagawa 1966, pp. 34, 214). Even Zen, which in China

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had vowed "not to bow even to kings or princes," had to submit to the Ashikaga shogunate in questions of organization (Hall 1968, p. 119).

One might perhaps, with a loose use of language, speak of the phases of politicization Japanese Buddhism went through as phases of "secularization." Under this heading one might think of its Nara period function as a magical protector of the state, and again of its Tokugawa period function as an agent of social control – by which time the controlling agent had itself come finally and totally under the control of the state (Hall 1968, pp. 170, 181, 186).³

None of these examples of "secularization," however, has anything to do with modernization. The generally held idea that "secularization is an aspect of modernization," when seen in the mirror of the development of Buddhism in Japan, looks back with an image so distorted as to call in question not Japanese Buddhism but the adequacy of the idea.

Stereotyped expectations. It is generally taken for granted that one major consequence of "modernization" was the freeing of thought from the trammels of ecclesiastical authority for the sake of unimpeded reliance on and development of reason. "Secularization," as an aspect of "modernization," marks the "natural" liberation of intellectual potential from superstitious irrationality in favor of the "rationality" of "objective reality." That is the view of the Enlightenment tradition that still holds sway over modern thought. Studies of modernization and secularization usually include the expectation that this "natural" development away from "religion" is to be found all over the world, not excluding Japan.

^{3.} The confiscation of Buddhist land-holdings at the beginning of the Meiji era (Kitagawa 1966, p. 202) is reminiscent of the secularization, in a more classical use of the word, of church possessions by Emperor Joseph II.

Before considering whether Japan gives evidence of such a development, it is incumbent on us to take a look at the logically prior ideas of "naturalness" and "rationality."

The "natural," in Western usage, is defined in distinction from the "unnatural." The one is normal, beautiful, supportive of life; the other abnormal, monstrous, destructive in its effects. The idea of naturalness, however, rests not on the nature of the phenomena but on our socially conditioned preconceptions and interests – which to others may seem quite unnatural. The idea of naturalness can therefore be ruled out of scientific argument as ideological. Whatever the terms by which we characterize developments in Japan, we cannot speak of them as "natural."

Similarly, what we call "rational" is, in the last analysis, sociologically indistinguishable from the "irrational." Through relying on reason, a person standing in the Enlightenment tradition believes that he can come as close as possible to "objective reality," his absolute. Forgetting that this absolute is merely an intellectual construct, he arrives at "the rational" by way of circular reasoning and ideological definitions that have emotional, hence "irrational," motivations. Wherever we turn, we are confronted with phenomena that escape the nets of the "rational" intellect.

This does not mean that it is now desirable to throw intellect out the window and admit agnosticism and irrationality by the door. It does imply, however, that the myth of "rationality" must be demythologized and its "irrational" foundations brought to light. To do otherwise would be to remain imprisoned on the plane of ideology. Cross-cultural studies would then serve only to confirm cultural prejudices.

Japan's "negative attitude towards religion." At first glance, Japan appears to meet the expectation of a turn away from religion - at least when approached with the methods of positivistic social science. Take Basabe's studies (1967, 1968)

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of Japanese attitudes toward religion. Rooted as they are in the Enlightenment tradition on the one hand and the Christian on the other (an increasingly common juxtaposition), they reach results to a high degree predetermined.

In Basabe's work the distinction between "religious" and "profane" is as taken for granted as other Western clichés associated with the word "religion," for example, "God," "life after death," etc. — most of which were never problems, or at least important problems, for Japanese "religiosity." The Japanese respondents were confronted with these clichés and a highly suggestive form of questioning. Despite asseverations to the contrary, they were also supposed to know what "religion" is, and that in its Western sense. To all this one must add the impossibility of gaining a reliable picture of the experiential consciousness of human beings by analyzing their written answers to a stereotyped set of questions.

Small wonder, then, that Basabe's studies confirm the expectations he inherited from the Enlightenment tradition: the majority of the Japanese, especially young people, and most especially young men, have a "negative attitude towards religion." I do not dispute the fact that the average Japanese has not the slightest interest in what passes for religion in the West. But when this fact is presented as a finding in a sociological study, it falsely conveys the impression of being an inference – and a proof of the correctness of Enlightenment tradition expectations.

That most Japanese have a "negative attitude towards religion" is hardly surprising. It has been so for at least three hundred years. Buddhism fossilized under the Tokugawa regime, which favored Confucianism. For most people, then as now, Buddhism ran the funeral business. Beyond this, it was of little importance to them. It had no vitality to lose to "modernization." On the contrary, it was the encounter with the West and "modernization" that awakened Japanese Buddhists from their institutionalized slumber,

stimulating them, for example, to learn the historicalphilological approach to their own classical texts. It is also interesting to note en passant that Zen is far more popular in the "modernized" West than in Japan – a circumstance that might contribute to its revival in Japan. Also, Christianity was long considered an essential part of Western civilization, and at certain times it was thought "modern" to join a Christian church. Far more spectacular, though, are the still-recent mass affiliations with the "new" (but largely traditional) religious movements.

The "new religions." The most prolific religious growth in centuries of Japanese history took place at the same time that postwar Japan was most busily engaged in "modernizing" - and accelerated at roughly the same pace. Japan's economy began to skyrocket during the late fifties and early sixties. This growth coincided with a phenomenal increase in the numbers of people who became members of the new religious movements.⁴ In other words Japan, traditionally the "least religious" of the developed countries, gave evidence of an unparalleled growth in its "religious population" at precisely the same time as its most recent "modernization." Even though the growth of the new religious movements has since tapered off, this coincidence of "modernization" and "religious growth" constitutes a remarkable confutation of the Western idea that modernization goes hand in hand with secularization.

This burst of affiliations with new religious movements is usually accounted for not by reference to "modernization" but by reference to a historical contingency: defeat in war. This blow, we are told, led to shock and aimlessness, from which people escaped through joining one or another new religious movement. An explanation of this kind, however,

^{4.} The figures cited as factual vary widely, but it appears that something like 15% of the population became affiliated.

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pays insufficient attention to the data. The greatest increase in membership in the new religious movements came some fifteen years after 1945, at a time of burgeoning prosperity. The fact that most members were recruited from the lower strata of society a decade and more after 1945 suggests that the influence of the defeat was marginal. More germane, one is inclined to suppose, was the lack of fulfillment felt by those tethered to the industrial system without sufficient compensation, whether in terms of material rewards or status. It would be characteristic for such a factor to become effective after the disappearance of wartime chauvinistic pressures when the Japanese had successfully coped with the problem of mere survival.

Whether these were indeed the main reasons for the explosive development of the new religious movements, the postwar "modernization" of Japan seems to have entailed not "secularization" but "sacralization." This means that the Enlightenment tradition conceptions have to be stood on their head — or at least that they can no longer be treated as universal.

Are the "new religions" religious? To all appearances the new religious movements of the postwar period were by no means socially revolutionary.⁵ It follows that the motives that led people to join them cannot have been of a revolutionary nature, or else this great number of people would have brought about some degree of social change. The attractiveness of these movements seems to have lain, rather, in their ability to provide members with a new sense of identity.

People with an inclination toward paramilitarism, for example, could find ample satisfaction in joining the largest of the new religious movements, Sōka Gakkai. Those pre-

^{5. &}quot;The new religions in Japan have played a conservative role, serving to help maintain the status quo and to prevent social revolution" (Hori 1968, p. 250; cf. Kitagawa 1966, p. 335).

ferring uniforms with a dash of the clerical à la Europe might find their rewards in PL Kyōdan, an organization that wants to contribute to Japan's "modernization" and has therefore appropriately chosen its "modern American name" (Thomsen 1963, p. 183). Most of the sizable new religious movements offer their members an opportunity to rise in the organizational hierarchy and achieve a status they probably would never have attained in their ordinary, workaday life. With this go flag-waving mass congregations and image-boosting gigantomaniac headquarters – all in all, a heady formula for giving one the feeling of being somebody important.

All this is not normally associated, in the West, with the term "religious." This discrepancy brings us up against a problem which is logically fundamental to these considerations but which, for reasons of space, cannot be treated here. In a forthcoming essay I hope to present an argument for the view that there is no essential sociological difference between phenomena traditionally labeled "religious" and those labeled "profane." For the time being this view, lacking support, can be put forward only as an allegation. But if it proves supportable, as I believe I can show, this will throw even more light on the myths of "modernization" and "secularization" and their cultural determinants.

Japanese secularization? It is indisputable that social changes often taken as aspects of modernization – urbanization, for example – have contributed to the gradual disappearance of some "religious" phenomena such as shamanism and *shugendo*. Even more, however, these changes were operative in the explosive growth of the new religious movements. To these antithetical consequences one may add that Japanese Buddhism in general seems little affected by "modernization," except for the decline in household altars. Together, these facts form a confusing picture.

One interpretation suggested to me by the head of Engakuji,

a Rinzai Zen temple in Kamakura, is that the Japanese have no need of the external trappings of religion so long as they have an inner sense of gratefulness. To him, outer changes in custom and behavior, often taken as signs of secularization in the West, did not touch the inner dimension.

His discounting of observable behavior as a sure key to correct interpretation is a point with which I fully agree. I venture to suggest, however, that the disappearance of certain religious customs and institutions is not so much a sign that they are no longer needed as that they had lost their inner meaning for most people anyway.

Be that as it may, the point I wish to stress is that without fundamental research into the inner experience that accompanies people's observable behavior, studies of "secularization" will continue to remain superficial. If "secularization" is to have any significance, even in its broadest meaning as a turn from "religion" toward "reason," it cannot be limited to the disappearance of external forms. It must get at the experiential level. Inner experience is not necessarily altered by changes in social patterns. If the experience continues despite outer changes, the concept of secularization becomes of even more dubious validity. In any case "modernization" seems to have contributed less to Japanese "secularization" than to its opposite.

Japan, "modernization," and "reason." The fact that rational thinking dominates the natural sciences and technology has led to the strange idea that our age is more rational than others. Even if one disregards the world as a whole, where more people than ever before are living in abject misery, and considers only the "modern" countries that coexist in a balance of terror and hover on the brink of crises that could destroy all life, using the term "reason" to describe our age verges on sarcasm.

As for Japan, it would be foolhardy to claim that its "mod-Japanese Journal of Religious Studies 7/1 March 1980 21 ernization" has meant "progress toward reason" in anything but a technical sense. Meiji period "modernization" was followed by the "religiously" fanatical nationalism that led to 1945: a drastic counter-example. Like all societies. even the most "primitive," Japanese society has always had its own specific rationality. Life under the Tokugawa regime was in its own way rational. Life in postwar Japan is, in a different way, also rational. It is impossible, I submit, to defend the view that one is less or more rational than the For there is, in fact, no universal criterion for "raother. tionality." The term is culturally and historically informed. What is rational in New York is not necessarily rational in Tokyo, and what is rational in today's Tokyo may not have been rational in vesterday's Edo. Because of the inherent rationality of every social system, without which it could not exist, to attach priority to the branch of rationality particular to one's own culture and period of history would be a form of ideology.

This, however, is precisely what the Enlightenment tradition does. It presents its rationality as superior to all others, but has no way of proving its claim other than its indisputably superior technology — which is not being used in a rational manner even by Enlightenment tradition standards. Mere technological know-how is not to be confused with rationality.

Most contemporary societies are not "progressing toward reason" as the Enlightenment tradition understands it. They simply adopt its technology. Japan is a case in point. "Modernized" though it may be in respect of technology, the Japanese social structure is remote indeed from any concept of rationality that might be linked with the ongoing Enlightenment tradition. In politics, for example, family ties play an important role, and parliamentary seats are often almost inherited. In education "irrational" features abound. Japanese youths must spend amazing amounts of time and energy memorizing masses of useless data so as to reproduce them

at university entrance examinations.⁶ Once they have entered a university, they are free to forget the data, being assured of graduation even if they do little further work. Just before graduation, they study again for company-given examinations in order to be considered for employment – during which time their university responsibilities are cast into limbo. After graduation, most people work at jobs that have little or nothing to do with their studies.

A whole book could be written on such examples of Japanese "irrationality." But here it must suffice to draw two conclusions. First, just as Japanese "modernization" does not signify a move away from "religion," it also fails to signify a move toward "reason." Second, we are in no position to maintain that ideas about rationality dominant in Western societies as a result of the continuing influence of the Enlightenment tradition should serve as the standard against which other views of rationality are to be measured. Japanese politics and education, though "irrational" to some degree and by some measures, are on the whole entirely rational in the Japanese social context, providing roles and fitting people for them throughout the whole of the society the Japanese people have created.

In sum, the concepts of modernization and secularization, being ideological terms born of a specific historical environment, lack objectivity, are incapable of being universalized, and when applied to Japan are downright misleading. If we really want to grasp historical developments sociologically, we need to develop more adequate concepts.

It may be, however, that in order to comprehend historical developments in world perspective, we have to set aside our

^{6.} These entrance examinations are so bizarre that an English acquaintance, a university graduate in literature and linguistics, was unable to pass the English test. Despite such "rigor," few Japanese students speak English, and even professors of English who can actually use it are exceptional.

self-imposed limitation to the conceptual. Life is more than thought, and the scientist may need to enlarge his horizons in order to see what is there - a goal that may require him to seek and realize a higher consciousness. This is the positive direction in which this rather negative essay points, but its explication must await another opportunity.

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