

Which Doctrine? Whose “Religion”? — A Rejoinder —

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I am grateful to the editor of *JJRS* for inviting me “to respond briefly” to the preceding comments by Jamie Hubbard regarding my essay “Historical and historiographical issues in the study of pre-modern Japanese religion” (henceforth *HH*), which appeared in an earlier issue of *JJRS* (16/1, pp. 3–40). Time and space constraints make it impossible for me to deal with all of the issues touched upon by Hubbard, especially the very broad ones (cognition, ideology, objectivity, etc.). I shall try to address what I take to be the main, specific points that he raises, but even they cannot be given adequate treatment here (despite my betrayal of the editor’s “briefly” proviso).

Definitions of Doctrine

Hubbard considers the main difference between our views to lie in our assessments of the importance of doctrine (p. 5). I think not; the main difference is that he and I use different definitions of doctrine (his broad and mine narrow), from which arises the main problem with his essay, which is that he mistakenly assigns certain implications to the narrow definition. By religious doctrine, which I neglected to define in the *HH* essay, I mean something like a body or system of principles or tenets—frequently of a philosophical or theological character, and usually stated in scriptures and commentaries on them—produced by a religious tradition. The producers and systematizers of those tenets were, in my understanding, more often than not—not *only* (pp. 4 and 6)—“elites,” i.e., literate clerics. To my knowledge, few doctrinal systems, if any, were produced by the peasants.

In his laudable desire to have scholars pay due heed to the “religion” of the masses, Hubbard opposes the identification of doctrine as the exclusive domain of the elite (p. 6). He seems to think that for one not to use a broad definition of doctrine is to fail to recognize the masses as

doctrine-makers and thereby to dismiss them as mindless brutes. Consider the following parallel: the fact that etymologically the word philosophy means the love of exercising one's curiosity and intelligence does not require that every human being who has ever engaged in those exercises be deemed a philosopher. If so, everyone is a philosopher and the word loses its specificity. Obviously, in this context, to assert that person "X" is not a philosopher is not to say that s/he is an unthinking dolt. This is a false dichotomy. There is really no matter of substance at issue here between Hubbard and me; I agree wholeheartedly that the beliefs, views, superstitions, attitudes, etc., of the masses are of great importance—it is just that I, unlike Hubbard, do not subsume all those things under the word doctrine. Perhaps popular beliefs would be a suitable term. Hubbard himself acknowledges that not everyone formulates doctrine (p. 13), and that the vast majority of people "have no knowledge of the often complex explicatory apparatus that develops around them" (p. 11). I agree—and I use the word doctrine to identify that "apparatus," which, as Hubbard himself implies, was not produced by the peasants, but whose formulators he fails to identify. In any case, it makes no sense to ask what doctrine *really* means (p. 7), for the word contains no inherent singular meaning.

The reason why the *HH* essay does not discuss popular beliefs is not because I consider them nonexistent or unimportant, but because the purpose of that essay was to critique the state of the field of the history of Japanese religions. One of the problems with this field is a preoccupation with doctrine narrowly defined, not an imbalance in favor of doctrine as defined broadly by Hubbard. Had I thought that the latter were the case, I would probably have suggested that that weighting too reflects a (Western?) bias in favor of ideas and subjectivity at the expense of rituals and institutions (the "vanities," as they have been called) in the study of "religion."

Thus, while wholeheartedly sharing Hubbard's concern for the "religion" of the masses, I believe there are two problems with his handling of the doctrine topic, one definitional and the other political. The former problem is demonstrated by the trouble Hubbard has in trying to produce a satisfactorily broad definition of doctrine. For instance, in one passage he defines doctrine as "simply something taught," as "the world-view and practices taught within a tradition" (p. 7); elsewhere he defines it as "the content of religious notions" (p. 8). If the word doctrine is thus made to include a tradition's world-view, teachings, and even its practices, it becomes a meaningless term that allows no distinction between doctrine and rituals, beliefs, and mentation across the board. Hubbard appears to recognize the need to maintain *some* distinctions in this regard. For example, he says, in contradiction to his assertion that doctrine *is* the world-view, that world-views are doctrinally *based* (p. 6, note

4), and, contradicting his statement that doctrine is anything taught, he speaks of the doctrinal positions that *underlie* certain teachings (p. 9, note 8). On the principle that that which is the basis of "X" or underlies "X" is not identical with "X," Hubbard is in fact acknowledging, evidently unknowingly, that doctrine, world-views, and teachings are somehow different.

Similarly, Hubbard contradicts himself by in effect espousing a distinction that the *HH* essay assumes but that he calls "problematic" – that between doctrine and belief (p. 8), the former term having a less inclusive meaning than the latter. In one passage he describes doctrine as the *object* of belief (p. 8), and elsewhere he speaks of the power of doctrine *in* belief structures (p. 9). On the principle that that which is the object of "X" or is contained in "X" is not identical with "X," Hubbard must accept the doctrine–belief distinction, which is not a problematic one at all. Elsewhere, as seen above, Hubbard defines doctrine as the "content" of "religious notions" (an infelicitous expression used in the *HH* essay). As I see it, some such notions are properly called doctrines, others are not; that Gautama was enlightened would be part of Buddhist doctrine, but Buddhist views on lovemaking positions (p. 7) would not. By attempting to make doctrine cover far too much, Hubbard ends up with these *sic-et-non* definitions. Moreover, the notion of belief is so broad that it pervades the other "dimensions" of religious traditions discussed in the *HH* essay, namely rituals and institutions (beliefs regarding the efficacy of ritual "X," the sacred origins of institution "Y," etc.), as well as just about every other dimension of human experience. Thus, belief is not a manageable category (one might wish to make the same argument about ritual and institution, two other notoriously difficult notions to confine).

Hubbard interpreted the *HH* essay to hold that interest in doctrine is *ipso facto* interest in the "other-worldly" (p. 10), and that the populace had only "worldly concerns" (pp. 8–9, note 8). The real problem, according to my essay, is that doctrine is more often than not treated *as though* it were a treatise on the other-worldly that had little or nothing to do with this world, whereas in fact even the most esoteric of doctrines often, if not invariably, have "worldly" (political, ideological, etc.) dimensions and implications, at least in certain situations. Doctrines, no matter how other-worldly they might appear to be, are often complicit with the fabric of power and privilege in the societies in which they thrive if only by saying nothing about those matters. Thus, the problem is not the other-worldliness of Buddhist doctrine, but the "other-worldly'ization" of it at the hands of some scholars. Moreover, the view that as a rule doctrinal systems are not the product of the populace does not imply that the masses had only mundane concerns. It would be absurd to deny that the masses were concerned about the activities of gods, bodhisattvas, spirits

of all sorts, etc. The problem, once again, is that word “doctrine.” In addition, people who work on the history of Buddhist doctrine are not *necessarily* elitist (p. 6), any more than those who assert that the fiscal policy of the U.S. is produced largely by the banking elites are necessarily apologists for capitalism (though of course they may well be).

The *HH* essay does not, contrary to Hubbard’s repeated assertion, “dismiss” doctrine (as narrowly defined), for it consistently speaks of its relative or comparative importance. To consider a toothache, for instance, to be of relatively minor importance to one’s health – in comparison to, say, being hit by a truck – is not to dismiss the agony that a bad tooth can inflict. There is no “stigma” (p. 8) attached to the study of doctrine, just to the disproportionate, dehistoricized, depoliticized and deideologized study of it. I am not suggesting that the ideas of the “great men” are unimportant (p. 11), but that in terms of their impact on the “religion” of the vast majority of the pre-modern Japanese population, they were less important than certain scholars (including myself) have taken them to be, and that they were less influential than other aspects of “religion” (notably rituals and institutions). The importance of doctrine, in the narrow definition, has been overrated by many scholars, and doctrine in the broad definition (popular beliefs, etc.) has been all too often disregarded. In the same way that one can say that the installment of the Queen of England is the most important lineage succession ritual in England, one can say (as the *HH* essay does) that the most important rituals celebrated in pre-modern Japan were those performed for the well-being of the imperial house (*HH*, p. 11), for it was those rituals that received the most state support, figure most in the literature, contributed most to the maintenance of the regnant order, etc. This does not, however, make one who says this a royalist or an imperialist.

The Ideological Character of Doctrine

The second problem with Hubbard’s discussion of doctrine is political. For Hubbard to deny that it was mainly elites who produced doctrines, and who thus dictated the shape of a major portion of the intellectual discourse, is not thereby to elevate the masses to the rank of doctrine-makers, which he wants to do; rather, in a “liberal” sleight-of-hand, it is to fuzz the lines between elites and non-elites and thus to reduce the contradictions of pre-modern Japanese societies to an individualist basis. To employ the broad definition of doctrine is to obscure the privileged position of the doctrine-makers and the ideological character of most doctrine, which are disclosed by use of the narrow definition of the term.

A major concern of the *HH* essay is to underscore the ideological character of doctrine. However, this is not to imply that doctrine is always ideological. Take, for example, the doctrine (assuming that it is one) that

the feet of a Buddha have certain telltale marks: in some contexts (e.g., a chat about which mark is found on which toe) this doctrine is more-or-less ideologically neuter (disregarding here the possible sexual connotations of feet); in others (e.g., a discussion of the special powers symbolized by those marks and just who may possess them) it is clearly ideological; and in still others it might be overwhelmingly ideological (for instance, if it were claimed that one of the marks is \$, another the "Stars and Stripes," etc.).

There is some confusion in Hubbard's discussion of this topic in that whereas on the one hand he cautions against the "overly simplistic assumption that . . . doctrine is always ideological" (p. 19), on the other hand he considers the distinction between doctrine and ideology to be "problematic" (p. 8). Contradicting the latter point, Hubbard speaks of the doctrinal *base* of a certain ideology (p. 9), and of "the doctrinal" *becoming* ideological (p. 10). On the principle that that which is the base of "X" is not identical with "X," and that that which becomes "X" is not "X" to begin with, then, by his own words, Hubbard shows that he accepts (again, evidently unknowingly) the so-called problematic distinction.

The *HH* essay wants to do more than merely reiterate what Hubbard calls "the caution widely held in the academy," namely that it is incumbent upon the observer to understand his/her "mediating process" (p. 4). Let us imagine, for example, that a "grand dragon" discovers and fully appreciates that his "mediating process" is ardently KKK-ish. For the dragon to have that understanding is not thereby for him to reject his position or to cease believing that he can interpret the world faithfully through a KKK lens. The *HH* essay does not espouse a type of salvific gnosticism according to which it is sufficient simply for one to *know* that his/her "mediating process" serves certain dispositions of power and privilege.

In raising the complex question of the relation between thought and action, Hubbard takes issue with what he considers to be the *HH* essay's "subsequentialist" position. He considers it to hold that doctrine is subsequent to action, and that concepts are subsequent to experiences (pp. 10–11). Actually, my essay, in questioning an assumption held by some people, asserts that thought and belief are not *prior* to practice (*HH*, p. 29). This is an important distinction. Briefly stated, my view on this complex matter, which cannot be addressed adequately here but which is assumed by the *HH* essay although not stated explicitly in it, is that what people think and believe is rooted in practice, that ideas do not fall from the sky but arise and are appropriated in lived conditions. It is not that thought and belief arise in "mind" apart from the lived experience (practice) of people, for the relation between the two is symbiotic. Thoughts and beliefs are not mind-only events, just as practices are not body-only events. Thoughts are formed in and shaped by ritual activity

and institutional involvement, just as rituals and institutions are shaped by thought. It is not that people mindlessly do things and then sit around later over drinks trying to formulate a theory of their actions. Hubbard is right to criticize that view. There are two extreme and reductionist versions of the relation between thought/belief and practice: one (the one addressed in the *HH* essay) in the direction of a naive philosophical idealism and the other in the direction of crass materialism. The *HH* essay's criticism of the "thought/belief prior" position is directed against a type of idealist, anti-materialist view that would have ideas arrive first, a view that, as I see it, characterizes much of the field of religious studies. To reject that position is not thereby to espouse the "thought/belief subsequent" position, as Hubbard infers; to accept either position is to maintain the mind-body gap. I agree that experience is influenced by "prior cognitive structures" (p. 11), but, again, these are formed and reformed in ritual and institutional contexts and exercised in historical contexts. It is, I suggest, in this light that the difficult question of the "possibility of religious structures influencing economic and political change" (pp. 17–18) is to be analyzed.

Other Issues

Hubbard considers the *HH* essay to espouse a "functionalist" position that renders "virtually all aspects of religious tradition merely a functional response to other causative . . . phenomena" (p. 4). "Merely" here is misleading, as is, elsewhere in this regard, "solely" (p. 19). "Primarily" (p. 5) is appropriate. The *HH* essay explicitly states that it does not claim that "religious structures are merely reflections of the economic and political structures of a society" (*HH*, p. 27, which Hubbard refers to, p. 18). The essay argues against the causal prioritization of belief over ritual, a view that reflects a (Western?) understanding of "religion" and what is central and what peripheral to it; the essay also argues against the causal prioritization of "religion" in the workings of human society. Hubbard himself says that doctrinal systems "make explicit the embedded social and institutional value systems" (p. 16). To state my position by way of a simple (simplistic?) example: the transformation of gatherer society "X" to an agrarian society did not result from the development in that society of cults devoted to agrarian deities; rather, the economic, social, etc., transformation from a gatherer society to an agrarian one brought about the rise of such cults. Here the nature of the "religion"–"other phenomena" causal relation is quite clear.

A major difference between Hubbard's views and mine is found, I suggest, in his statement that "at the meta-level of historiography the question is not so much whether or not Gyōnen's overview was accurate in a positivist historical sense, but rather how it forms a part of the cultural

discourse of its time" (p. 16). This is a rather precious position. One need not subscribe to a form of naive positivism in order to be able to make accurate statements about the past. Indeed, as I understand it, that is what the doing of history is about. If historians could not make such statements, they would be limited to generating anemic, subjective sets of commentaries on the past. If the question of the accuracy of Gyōnen's views "in a positivist historical sense" is not legitimate, in what sense if any would/could Hubbard allow the accuracy of those views to be questioned? It seems that he might be willing to give over to relativism and to abandon such questions. The *HH* essay does not place Gyōnen outside Japanese "religiosity" (p. 15); one set of questions has to do with the implications, etc., of what person "X" said, and another set has to do with whether or not what that person said is true or false. I disagree with the view that the latter set does not rise to the "meta-level" (without knowing exactly what this is or who determines it); I would put the latter set at the "transmeta-level." By substituting for the words "Gyōnen's overview" (p. 16) the words "the Nazis' view of Jews," the vacuousness of the philosophy on which Hubbard's statement is based is apparent.

I applaud Hubbard's plea that we move beyond what he calls "the pastiche of the postmodern" in order once again to "engage in the task of social criticism" (p. 23). I, perhaps like Hubbard, believe that much of "the post-modern" leads to solipsism and despair and that we should get on with more serious things, but, at least as I read him, Hubbard espouses a position from which he could not generate the social criticism that he calls for. He appears to be of the view that we are not to criticize, we are simply to see how various views influenced Japanese history (see his remarks on Gyōnen, mentioned above).

Hubbard advises us to drop "facile models of domination and privilege," and he asserts "that in assuming any individual person to fit into a cultural matrix in a singular mode the contingent and multiple structures of the individual are violated . . ." (p. 13). As I read him, Hubbard wants to drop *all* models of domination and privilege, facile and otherwise. It is true, of course, that now and then a person will escape the strictures placed upon him/her as a member of an oppressed group, but surely this does not dispose of the reality of oppression. Hubbard's view implies that to talk about structures that oppress women is to "violate" individual women by failing to recognize the infinite possibilities open to each and every woman. This is bourgeoisie individualism. Women's colleges were founded precisely for the education of an oppressed segment of society; no feminist that I know of has condemned those colleges for oppressing the individual *woman* in and by the very act of trying to address the oppression of *women*. To whitewash the experience of *burakumin*, or umpteenth-generation Koreans in Japan, etc., by piously celebrating the individual *burakumin's*, the individual emigré Korean's,

etc., “contingent and multiple structures” is a mockery of those peoples’ common lived experience. No doubt there were mutually influencing relations between/among the classes, but gratuitously to dismiss class-structural analyses (p. 13) is to fail to recognize the adversarial and disjunctive character of those relations. Incidentally, a “dualist” model of power and conflict does not “contrast” with Kuroda’s *kenmon* thesis (p. 12, note 13): there were those who wielded *ken* over large numbers of people, and those (the majority) who were mainly “wieldees.”

To acknowledge the class-based (“vertical”) character of struggles is not to fail to recognize or to deny “*n*-dimensional arrays” (p. 13) of “horizontal” struggles among various groups within the different classes. No doubt there are struggles among, for example, tenured professors over who gets to sit next to the Chancellor at the next faculty bash, but at the least it would be facetious to hold that those struggles are of a piece with the relations between the university employer and the people (usually minorities, often women, and rarely tenured) who swab the classrooms at night.

In a similar vein, Hubbard asserts that “the matrix of cultural discourse is as fluid as the participants are complex” (p. 13). This is the liberal bourgeoisie horse-race view of history: all racers start at the same gate, all have equally fast horses, none have weighted saddles, etc. Cream rises to the top, and all that. So, people who don’t “make it” fail because of personal, individual, foibles (s/he is shiftless, flighty, etc.), not because of structural impediments. Some members of fluid cultural discourse “X” swim along in a clean section of that fluid, but others muck through sewage and guck.

I was sardonically amused to find myself thrown among the *nihonjinron-jin*, a gaggle whose thesis I find to be about as attractive as that of the Aryan Nation and other forms of fascism. I agree with Hubbard’s statement that the view that there is “a uniquely Japanese priority of experience or action is very close to that found in various strains of *Nihonjinron*” (p. 11); it eludes me how Hubbard could have interpreted the *HH* essay to hold such a view. That essay’s statement about what “may have characterized some religious traditions in the pre-modern world, but not the Japanese” (*HH*, p. 29) is not a nod in the direction of *nihonjinron*; it is simply a disclaimer to let the reader know that I was not trying to make a universal statement about all religious traditions. While we are on the *nihonjinron* topic, I suggest that it is those (Hubbard among them?) who subscribe to the view that beliefs, etc., are somehow “prior” (see above) who may be inclined to accept the notion of a de-historicized body of beliefs held by “the Japanese,” and who thus leave themselves open to the *nihonjinron* virus. Those who balk at applying non-Japanese scholars’ theories about culture, etc., to the Japanese case (pp. 15–16) also risk that infection.

From the *HH* essay's suggestion that the pre-modern Japanese religious landscape was not divided along sectarian (Buddhist this and Shinto that) lines to anywhere near the extent as has been widely thought, Hubbard draws the unwarranted conclusion that this implies the rejection of *all* doctrinal differentiation (p. 13), that there were no divisions at all in the fabric of Japanese "religiosity" (e.g., pp. 15–16)—a term he seems to like but that I avoid, like I avoid the words "politicosity," "economicosity," etc. Hubbard seems to agree with the *HH* essay's view that there are problems with the terms Buddhism and Shinto in that he acknowledges that those terms may be "inappropriate or misleading," that they might be seen to "fade in importance" or "to actually mask more important conflicts" (p. 16). He is correct—and yet he concludes that the *HH* essay's rejection of one exaggerated bifurcation (Buddhism and Shinto) of the Japanese religious world implies the rejection of all particularity in favor of a universal essence or a "universalist paradigm" (p. 17), as though by rejecting one "horizontal difference" (p. 15) there is no choice but to reject all such differences. The *HH* essay states explicitly that "the religious discourse of any age . . . was not a single, unified one at all" (*HH*, p. 24). To assert that Japanese "Buddhists" were in some ways at the same time "Shintoists" is not to espouse a metaphysical, "Smithian" (*pace* W.C.S.), *nihonjinron*'esque "oneness" (whatever that means) of the Japanese tradition, still less to espouse a singular Japanese psyche (p. 22), any more than for one to say that Irish Christians in the tenth century also preserved certain Celtic traditions is to imply the existence of an ephemerality called "Irishness." Rather, it is to say no more than that they were Irish.

The *HH* essay does not repudiate "doctrinally based sectarianism" (p. 5), and for a good reason: namely, I doubt that sectarianism is primarily or mainly "doctrinally based" (sects arise for a range of reasons), although more often than not sects do become defined and differentiated in doctrinal terms. The view that sects arise primarily as the result of doctrinal disagreement—e.g., that Saichō's and Toku'itsu's conflicting views on certain Buddhist precepts account for the Tendai-Hossō sectarianism, that the medieval Buddhist schools arose primarily as the result of a bunch of new religious ideas that Shinran, etc., had—is a type of idealism. Undoubtedly, what Saichō, for instance, thought, believed, etc., was causative with regard to what he and those who followed him did; the question that the *HH* essay raises, however, has to do with the range of things (political, economic, etc.) that were going on in times and places in which slates of new ideas were being produced and that were highly determinative of that process and of the commensurate production of new sects.

Hubbard gets some of the more fundamental positions of the *HH* essay confused. He thinks, for instance, it claims that "our 'cognitive

limitations' are those imposed by the hagiography of the 'great man' thesis . . ." (p. 3). Hagiography is not the *imposer* of our "cognitive limitations," it *is* one of those limitations—it is part of the package of "cognitive limitations" that are endemic to modern, mainly "Western," societies. In idealist (in the philosophical sense) fashion, and tautologically, Hubbard considers a set of ideas (the "great man" thesis) to be the imposer of a set of ideas ("cognitive limitations"). Once again we must ask, whence and why *those* particular limitations?

Also, Hubbard consistently makes distinctions that the *HH* essay calls into question. For instance, he speaks of "strategic rather than religious purposes" (p. 9), as though purposes were *either* strategic *or* religious, but not both at the same time. The *HH* essay does not accept that "either-or." This matter raises the suspicion that "religion," to Hubbard, has to do essentially with things other-worldly, and that he aligns with those who believe that "religion" is a "thing out there," a self-evident phenomenon that is distinct from other dimensions of the human experience by natural "fault lines," and that human beings have—so to speak, and to borrow a friend's turn of phrase—a religious "organ" by which they appropriate things religious. Those "fault lines" are, to repeat a point made in the *HH* essay, not self-evident, they are not sitting there waiting to be discovered. Few, if any, human activities are *sui generis*'ly "religious." Hubbard appears to believe that if we do not accept the "natural" interpretation of religion we would have nowhere to go but still further into an essentialist camp, which, in my understanding, is where "religion" lives (p. 14). Those who have a box-of-blocks view of the human experience (Hubbard speaks of the "individual building blocks used in the construction of . . . cultural discourse" [p. 17]), according to which each block has its own autonomy and is separate *de natura* from the other blocks, find the organic view of society (it's more like an amoeba) unpalatable. There remains the question of why (by what sets of criteria) "X" behavior but not "Y" is considered to be religious.

When, in asserting (*contra* the view expressed in the *HH* essay) that the political contexts of Japanese "religions" have often been taken into account by scholars, Hubbard states that those contexts have "oft been adumbrated" (p. 21), he is more correct than he appears to realize. "Adumbrated" is from the Latin *adumbrare*, meaning "to shade." Precisely: those political contexts are more often than not kept in the shade—"disclose[d] partially and with a purposeful avoidance of precision," as Webster (*Third New International Dictionary*) puts it.

Hubbard makes a very interesting point when he says that "the homogeneity of Japanese religious experience" is a product of modern Japanese state ideology (p. 15). I am not sure what he means by a "self-created [even God couldn't do that, according to my theology] and epistemologically unique modernity" (p. 16), but I do suggest that there was

a sharper break in Japanese history with/around Meiji than Hubbard appears to recognize. Put simply, modern Japanese society is capitalist, medieval Japanese society was feudal. There is a big difference between the two.

This is not the place to do a run-down of the publications in the field of Japanese religious studies of the past number of decades in order to establish whether or not the *HH* essay has a "generation gap" problem (pp. 20–22), that it addresses a world of scholarship that no longer exists. Let me simply say that I find the regnant categories to be just as firmly in place now as they were several generations ago, and some or other form of idealism to continue to carry the day. Check out the AAR.

Finally, Hubbard fears that the *HH* essay, with its "ponderous closure" on the state of the field of Japanese religious studies, condemns itself to being "merely one of many ideologies contending for supremacy" (p. 23). With the exception, I would hope, of the word "merely," he is absolutely correct. Alas, as I understand it, the only option to contention is the vapid relativism that Hubbard properly decries but, methinks, he may at times espouse. Like it or not, all of us are engaged in a struggle. Whether or not the *HH* essay presents "a compelling argument for change" (p. 23) is up to the reader.