

# Religion, Culture, and Popular Culture in Japan

## - A Historical Study of their Interaction

Martin Repp

*(Coordinator of the "Interreligious Studies in Japan Program" at the NCC  
Center for the Study of Japanese Religions, Kyoto)*

Thank you very much for the invitation to present the key note address at this Inter-Religio symposium on "Popular Culture and Religion." I do not consider myself to be an expert in this field, but since the organizers could not find a suitable specialist, and since this theme was suggested by myself, I could not avoid taking up responsibility.

The task of an introductory presentation is to formulate some basic problems which the theme poses, and to provide an outline of the framework within which our topic should be discussed. Most presentations of this symposium will treat concrete and country-specific themes. For this reason, I would like to provide some general and basic considerations in the beginning, and I hope that these deliberations may serve as an orientation in the discussions during the symposium. In this outline I have to limit myself to the Japanese situation because I am not sufficiently acquainted with the history of Asian religions and cultures. A portrait of the situation in Japan, however, allows to a certain degree for some generalizations and comparisons with the situation in other Asian countries.

I propose to discuss the topic of the symposium in four steps. In the introduction I will treat the word "culture." I do not dare to suggest a precise or comprehensive definition of the term "culture", but I will present some characteristics which may provide an idea of the nature and meaning of culture. Next I will treat the relationship between religion and culture from a historical perspective and within the Japanese context. In the third part I will discuss the relationship between culture in general and "popular culture." Here I shall provide also two definitions of "popular culture." Both understandings appear also in the subsequent presentations of the

symposium. Finally, in the last part I will discuss the relationship between “popular culture and religion.”

### 1. THE WORD “CULTURE”

In general, the word “culture” is used in distinction to the word “nature.” Culture is something which appears in close connection with human beings, and not with animals, for example. Culture is something that human beings create, something they add to nature. For example, when I give my cat or dog a tasty morsel of meat, they grab it quickly and devour it immediately. In contrast, members of a tribe in the rain forest will serve food first on a leaf before eating it, while members of “more advanced” societies will serve food on a dish and then consume it. Thus, in distinction to animals, human beings create certain forms of behavior and material things which transcend pure natural behavior or objects. Or, to give another example: rice culture consists of the human effort to cultivate rice for effective production and consumption. Agriculture, thus, is essentially quite different from simply gathering plants or hunting animals. However, culture cannot be grasped only in utilitarian or functional terms. While agriculture serves certain goals, such as providing people with sufficient food, it is more than a mere function for achieving this purpose. Its accompanying cultural forms such as singing songs during work in the fields, or the lavish harvest festivals in fall, cannot be explained sufficiently in functional or utilitarian terms. Culture is realized in playing, dancing, singing, and creating joy. In their cultural activities, human beings not only create useful things, but at the same time beautiful ones. They produce clothes not only as protection against cold, but embellish them with ornaments. They not only construct houses as shelters, but decorate them as well. All these forms of cultural expression transcend the mere practical function of immediately satisfying vital needs such as eating, clothing and housing. Such a “playful surplus” of cultural expressions apparently responds directly to certain emotional, mental and spiritual needs of human beings. Thus we may conclude here with the assumption that “culture” is that which makes a human being really “human.” In other words, culture distinguishes human beings from animals. When creating culture human beings manifest that they are more than just an *animal rationalis*. Now, when this symposium deals with the topic of culture, we treat something that characterizes human beings not just accidentally, but essentially.

In this respect, culture and religion seem to have much in common. Religion, like culture, does not only correspond with immediate vital and physical needs, but at the same time with a certain spiritual constitution of human beings. Therefore, religion is

also something essentially human. Now, when the theme of this symposium connects culture and religion, it treats of two fundamental aspects or ingredients of human life. However, in our present time the combination of religion and culture is not so obvious anymore because on one hand it seems that culture is secular while on the other hand religion seems to exist separated from the various forms of culture in modern society. In ancient and premodern societies, however, we discover quite an intimate relationship between the two, and their separation was the exception rather than the rule. This is difficult for us to imagine today, accustomed as we are to the separation of modern culture and religion. Later I shall return to this modern phenomenon of separation between religion and culture.<sup>1</sup> Before turning to the present situation, we thus have to treat the relation between religion and culture in history. This I shall discuss in the following sections.

## 2. RELIGION AND CULTURE

In the history of humankind we discover an intimate connection between culture and religion. In this section I would like to treat this relationship in more detail from four different angles: 1. from the perspective of myths; 2. from the perspective of the history of religion; 3. from the perspective of geographically transplanting religions from one culture to another; and 4. from the perspective of the initial separation between religion and culture. These four approaches reveal different aspects of the intrinsic and multifaceted relationship between religion and culture.

### 2.1 MYTHICAL ORIGINS OF CULTURE: THE “CULTURE HERO”

Historians of religion distinguish between different types of myths. One type is the creation myth which narrates how a certain land and people initially came into being. Another type of myth, based on the first one, explains how culture comes into being. This form of myth presents the so-called culture hero, or the “Kulturbringer,” a divine being who introduces food, clothing, and tools to humankind. (Cf. Jerome Long 1987: 175–178) Quite often, the culture hero risks his or her own life when conveying these cultural goods. The most famous of these culture hero myths among historians of religion is that of Hainuwele from Indonesia (Ceram). A beautiful girl, Hainuwele is killed in mythical times. As punishment, the murderers are forced to consume her body. However, her body is transformed into root crops. This is regarded the beginning of the cultivation of root crops. Myths of many countries narrate the stories of culture

1 Paul Tillich was one of the few theologians in the 20<sup>th</sup> century who treated this gap between culture and religion in modern society and attempted to bridge it.

heroes. These beings introduce speech and manners; establish social differences between male and female; institute the law of society; make economic life possible for humans; instruct about hunting, building canoes and fishing; teach cultivation of food; bring the first seed from heaven; and teach the art of blacksmithing and pottery. In short, a culture hero makes the world inhabitable and safe for mankind, introduces cultural goods and instructs in the “arts of civilization.” (Jerome Long 1987: 175)

In Japan we also find this culture hero – the food deity *Uke-mochi no Kami*. Her story is told in the *Nihongi*, the oldest official collection of myths, legends and historical records. (8<sup>th</sup> century) Here we find the following story: The main deity of the Japanese pantheon, the sun goddess *Amaterasu no Ohomikami*, sent the Moon deity *Tsuki-yomi no Mikoto* to visit the food deity *Uke-mochi no Kami*.<sup>2</sup> When the latter produced food such as boiled rice from her mouth, the Moon deity became disgusted with this kind of food production and, being short tempered, quickly killed her with his sword. Thereupon *Amaterasu* became very angry with the Moon deity and banned him from her sight. As a consequence, we read: “So they were separated by one day and one night, and dwelt apart.”<sup>3</sup> *Amaterasu* then sent another deity to confirm the death of *Uke-mochi no Kami*. This deity found the dead body in the following form: “on the crown of her head there had been produced the ox and the horse; on the top of her forehead there had been produced millet; over her eyebrows had been produced the silkworm; within her eyes there had been produced panic[grass]; in her belly there had been produced rice; in her genitals there had been produced wheat, large beans and small beans.” (Aston 1982: 32 f) The deity carried these products to *Amaterasu*, who rejoiced and said: “These are the things which the race of visible men will eat and live [from].” She made from it the seed and sowed it for the first time. And we learn: “From this [event] began the art of silkworm rearing.” (Aston 1982: 33)

Such myths of the cultural hero teach that primitive religions view the inner core and ultimate origin of culture as being religious. In other words, according to these myths, culture has no natural origin and character, it is of divine origin and bears an innate religious character. It is religion that “creates” or “produces” culture. Moreover, the creation of culture comes at a high cost — the life of a deity has to be sacrificed so that human beings can live in a cultured

2 *Uke* or *uka* means food.

3 Aston 1982: 32. This is also an etiological myth treating the origin of the division of day and night.

way!<sup>4</sup> The mythical view of the connection between religion and culture leads us to the historical view of this relationship: How do historical religions and cultural forms relate to each other? Again, I would like to demonstrate this with some Japanese examples.

## 2.2 RELIGION AS HISTORICAL CARRIER OF CULTURE

What can be said of the mythical world is valid for the historical world as well: Here also we observe that cultural forms originate in religion. This is true for the two main religious traditions of Japan, as we distinguish them today, Shintō and Buddhism. Modern scholarship has established the fact that because they were intertwined with each other for most of Japan's religious history, we cannot simply divide them easily into two separate entities. For the sake of convenience, however, I will treat them separately here.

To begin with theater, the two most famous forms of Japanese theater today, Noh and Kabuki, derive from Shinto rituals. (KEJ 4: 90; 6: 23-24; 7: 131) Since ancient times, dances and songs performed at shrines served as means to evoke deities and pacify them. This is called *kagura*, "divine music," or "music of the deities."<sup>5</sup> *Kagura* developed on one hand into official court music (*mikagura*), while on the other hand it developed into Noh theater by including narratives – spoken dialogues and Buddhist chanting or *shōmyō*. (KEJ 6: 23-24) The second form of well known Japanese theater, Kabuki, developed from *dengaku* (field music), a popular performance which derived from ancient religious rice-planting and harvest rituals. Kabuki was first performed in the capital Kyoto in 1603 by a female dance troupe from Izumo shrine, one of the most important old centers of *kami* (deity) worship in Japan.

Like theater, Japanese literature derives mainly from Shinto and Buddhist sources. (Cf. KEJ 1: 180-182) On the one hand, ancient prayers (*norito*) to the *kami*, and oracles (*takusen*) were both cast in formal language and as such anticipated the Japanese poems. On the

- 4 This is true also for another divine gift which considerably contributes to creation of culture, the fire. As we read in the *Nihongi*: "When Izanami no Mikoto gave birth to the Fire-God, she was burnt and died." (Aston 1982: 21) Henceforth, the inhabitants worshipped her spirit with drums, flutes, flags, singing and dancing, and by offering flowers. (Aston 1982: 21 f)
- 5 KEJ 4: 106-107; 5: 283. Frequently, a story of the *Kojiki* (Record of ancient matters, 8. ce.) is portrayed as the legendary origin of *kagura* (KEJ 2: 73; etc.), according to which the sun goddess Amaterasu, hidden in a rock cave, is lured out by the laughter of the assembled deities caused by an obscene dance of Ame no Uzume. (Philippi 1968: 81-86) Even if in later times this story may have been interpreted as the mythical beginning of *kagura*, it has to be maintained, that the myth itself deals with the problem of the eclipse of the sun during solstice (Naumann 1996: 80), and not with the religious origin of dance. The dance, just as in other myths, is presupposed as already existing.

other hand, poems inherited the magical character of these prayers. As a courtier stated in the first half of the 10<sup>th</sup> century: “It is poetry which, without exertion, moves heaven and earth, stirs the feelings of gods and spirits invisible to the eye ...” (Varley 1984: 56) In the Buddhist context, poems were similarly perceived as *dharani*, magic formulas which cause certain things to happen. Collections of edifying Buddhist tales (*setsuwa*) and hagiographies (*denki*) helped to get Japanese prose literature started. Most of all, Buddhist ideas, such as karma, transmigration, impermanence (*mujo*), and simplicity were extremely influential in forming the contents and aesthetic ideals of Japanese poetry and art in general. Buddhist art, paintings and sculpture, as well as its architecture, decisively helped shape Japanese arts and architecture in general.<sup>6</sup>

It can be said that until the 19<sup>th</sup> century the religious centers in Japan—Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples—had been at the same time the cultural centers of Japan. This is true for both the elite culture and the culture of commoners, or the popular culture.<sup>7</sup> Further, the flourishing of Buddhist schools and Shinto shrines always resulted in cultural blooming, if we only think of the Heian period,<sup>8</sup> the classical period of imperial court rule and culture. Also, new religious movements, such as those Buddhist new schools emerging during the Kamakura period, always brought forth creative cultural developments in art, music, architecture, literature and so on. In European history, too, we observe similar cultural innovations resulting from religious renewal movements.

### 2.3 TRANSPLANTED RELIGION AS CARRIER OF IMPORTED CULTURE

Up to this point we have treated the connection between religion and culture from the historical perspective. Now, shifting from historical developments to geographical movements, we shall investigate the impact on, and role of, religion when it moves from one culturally defined geographical area to another. What does such a shift tell about the relationship between religion and culture? Certain forms of religion, commonly called world religions, proselytize, and because of their missionary impulse they transcend geographical, national, and cultural borders. By contrast, so-called primitive or nature religions remain more or less identical with the traditional culture,

6 Varley (1984: 85) observes that Buddhist sculpture and painting “steadily gave ground to secular art in medieval times.”

7 For one of the famous popular religious centers during the Tokugawa period, the Sensō-ji in Edo (Tokyo), see the interesting case study by Nam-lin Hur (2000).

8 Periods in the history of Japan are divided as follows: 710–784 Nara period, 794–1185 Heian period, 1185–1333 Kamakura period, 1338–1573 Muromachi (Ashikaga) period, 1568–1600 Azuchi-Momoyama period, 1600–1867 Tokugawa (Edo) period, 1867–1912 Meiji period.

and vice versa. Further, these religions are normally confined to a specific geographical area, and they undergo almost no historical development; if they change, then they are extremely slow in doing so. In contrast, proselytizing religions are transplanting themselves from one country and culture to another. This triggers a twofold process. First, due to the symbiosis of religion and culture in the country of origin, religion carries this form of culture into the host country. Thus, one of the most important functions of a religion being transplanted from one country to another is initially to serve as vehicle for imported culture. The import of foreign culture and religion naturally may lead to a rejection by, and clash with, representatives of the indigenous religion and culture.

One such case of transplanted religion and culture is Buddhism. Buddhism was first introduced to Japan by Korean saddlers (*kurabe*) in the beginning of the 6. ce. The saddlers were skilled in wood carving, metal work and leather treatment, all of them being very important crafts. Moreover, these Koreans provided their Japanese hosts, the Soga clan, with superior weapons and warfare techniques, which enabled them to subdue rival clans. Due to the superior cultural achievements of the *kurabe*, the Soga clan took over their religion. Subsequently, the Soga gained also considerable influence at the imperial court. Eventually, in its effort to modernize the country according to continental standards, the imperial court also adopted Buddhism as an official religion.<sup>9</sup>

A similar development occurred when Christianity was introduced to Japan during the 16<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. In both periods, Christianity served as carrier of European or Western culture and civilization. Examples are education, sciences, medical treatment, food, art (painting), literature, music, and also advanced weapons such as fire arms and canons.

After having first served as a carrier of foreign culture for some time, a transplanted religion gradually sheds its old cultural shape and adapts to the new environment. This is the second step of development which an imported religion has to undergo. This process is called acculturation or enculturation. This can be seen in the case of the Japanisation of Buddhism, especially in the development of its peculiar style of architecture, art, hymns, literature, sectarian form of organisation, etc. which all distinguish it from Korean or Chinese Buddhism.

9 It may be mentioned here, however, that in the 1870s, even after a 1300 year long history in Japan, Buddhism was still criticized as foreign religion by political and religious ideologues in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

After Christianity was established in Japan during the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, this transformation process occurred in the subsequent time of persecution, i.e. with the formation of Kirishitan beliefs. Since the Kirishitan communities are rapidly decreasing due to modernisation, the issue of their enculturation remains today mainly of historical interest. In the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century mission of establishing churches, most foreign missionaries and Japanese Christians clung to the Western cultural forms of their faith and resisted this transformation process considerably. Fearful of losing its religious identity through shedding its Western forms, Christianity has not yet adopted Japanese or Asian forms consciously and on a broad scale, that is, it has not yet sufficiently pursued enculturation in a theologically reflected way. However, the situation is more complex, since, for example, the Japanese translation of the Bible or the creation of Japanese hymns were in fact the first active steps of enculturation. Moreover, beneath the surface we also observe an unconscious process of enculturation of Japanese Christianity. For example, social structures within congregations, such as the relationship between pastor and church members, reproduce the structure of Japanese society at large. Apparently, unconscious forms of enculturation inevitably occur in spite of, or rather because of, the lack of theologically reflected enculturation. Thus, the case of Japanese Christianity, split between two cultural loyalties, reveals much about a culture's power over religion. This becomes also clear when Japanese Buddhism and Christianity are compared with those of Korea and China. Both exhibit a sectarian tendency that to a large extent cannot be found on the continent.

We may conclude this section with the following deliberation. Religions reveal their real character in the transition from one country to another, or from one culture to another. Even though religions of this kind seem to possess a certain distance to, or liberty from, culture<sup>10</sup> they cannot exist without an intimate relationship with cultural forms whatsoever. We may even say that since any outer expression of religion, in one way or another, is a cultural form – such as posture of prayer<sup>11</sup> and meditation, iconography and hymns, etc. – religion itself cannot even exist without culture. There is no “pure religion” without any kind of cultural form. When we observed in 2.1 and 2.2 that religion creates culture, we may now state further that religion and culture mutually

10 This has to be seen in distinction to religions which do not proselytize and therefore do not leave the boundaries of their traditional culture.

11 The central European custom of folding hands while praying, for example, derives from the subordinate gesture of vassals towards chieftains in ancient Germany in order to prevent them from suddenly raising their sword against their superior.

condition each other. Such is the intimate nature of the relationship between religion and culture.

Finally, since the topic of this conference mentions the problem of globalisation, a brief comment may be allowed here. Normally, this problem is discussed as a purely modern phenomenon isolated from the rest of history. Instead, I would like to suggest here that the treatment of globalisation today should be freed from its perception as being only a modern and isolated phenomenon. It should be investigated in the context of its precursors, the transplantation of religions, cultures, and civilizations in former times. A historical approach could produce new and interesting perspectives for our contemporary problem.

#### 2.4 SEPARATION OF RELIGION AND CULTURE

The intimate relationship between religion and culture, as shown in the history of religion and culture as well as in the process of transplanting a religion, should not conceal the fact that at certain times conflicts develop between religion and culture. One of the best known cases in world history was the violent iconoclasm of the radical wing of the reformation in Germany and of the Swiss reformation as a whole. Criticism against culture appears also in the religious history of Japan. In the middle age a heated discussion occurred in Japan about the question of whether poetry was sinful or not. (Plutschow 1978) There were many Buddhist monks and nuns who were outstanding Japanese poets. However, because some Buddhist teachers considered composing poetry a sin against the commandment for proper speech, able religious poets struggled with their feeling of guilt. In other words, sometimes in Japan's history, particular cultural forms were criticized from a religious point of view. This tendency occurs also in the teachings of two "founders" of Japanese Buddhist sects, Shinran and Nichiren, since both advocated that the main object of worship should be represented in abstract form. Accordingly, they also rejected other cultural forms of Buddhist worship.

The opposite, however, also occurs frequently. At certain stages, culture begins to develop independently of religious institutional and ideological frameworks. This may be called the process of a secularisation of culture which can be observed in the history of Europe as well as in Asia and other continents. In Japan, we observe this development towards separation of culture from religion at various times. One such important development occurred during the Edo period when for the first time in Japanese history a broad mass culture flourished which was produced and consumed by urban

commoners (*chonin*, townspeople). One interesting indication for such an intentional separation of religion and culture can be found in the use of the word *ukiyo*. The Ukiyo-e woodblock pictures became famous worldwide in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, especially due to their appreciation by European impressionist artists. These Ukiyo-e woodblock prints of the Edo period depict the life and pleasures of the townspeople, especially the geisha and theater actors, both considered to be outcasts and treated by government officials accordingly. *Ukiyo* is translated as "floating world"; in the popular culture of the Edo period it denotes the pleasures of the floating world, that is, enjoying the pleasures of life as long as they are available in this transient world. Before *ukiyo* became to be perceived in such a hedonistic way, however, the same word originally had been formed by Buddhists designating the world of sorrows, the world full of suffering. This basic change of meaning of *ukiyo* was made by replacing the Chinese character for "painful," "sorrows" (*uki*) by a homophone for "floating" (*uki*) which had also the connotation of "contemporary," "up to date," and "fashionable."<sup>12</sup> Now, the Buddhist worldview—that life is suffering and the world is transient—had been considerably modified and thereby replaced by a hedonistic worldview. In their hedonistic views, the townspeople first acknowledged the impermanence of the world (as Buddhists do), and its pleasures. However, they then affirmed it – in contrast to Buddhism – as the ultimate goal to be enjoyed in this life.

It seems that change of sponsorship is an important factor for the separation of religion and culture. Secularisation of culture is caused first by the shift of patronage from religious institutions to (secular) individuals and groups economically able to afford it. (Cf. Varley 1990: 463) During the Heian period these patrons were court nobility to begin with. Then during the Kamakura and Muromachi periods they were the warrior elite, and eventually during the Edo period the rich merchants. This process was intensified, sped up, and extended by the commercialisation of culture, one example is book production, which since the Edo period (cf. Shively 1991: 725–733), was increasingly financed by ordinary people.

In this 2<sup>nd</sup> section on "religion and culture" we observed first the emergence of a very intimate relationship between the two, a kind of symbiosis, which, however, after some time in history evolves into a divorce which can be seen as caused by either partner. The theme of a secularized culture and the relationship of religion to this form of culture will be taken up again in the final section of this presentation.

<sup>12</sup> KEJ 8: 144. Shively 1991: 730.

### 3. CULTURE AND POPULAR CULTURE

#### 3.1 THE MEANINGS OF THE WORD “POPULAR CULTURE”

The word “popular” of the expression “popular culture” derives from the Latin noun *populus*, meaning the “people,” the “general public,” and also the “common people of low birth.” (Webbster’s Third New International Dictionary 1981: 1766) Now, the term “popular culture” is used basically with the following two different meanings.

The first meaning comprises the culture of the country people in distinction to that of urban citizens. This is actually where the term “popular” originated. The “discovery of the people” (Peter Burke) occurred in the 18th. and 19th. centuries in Europe and was caused by persons such as Giovanni Battista Vico, Johann Gottfried Herder, and the Grimm brothers. (Charles Long 1987: 443-444, cf. 445-449) This original discovery of the people was based on the contrast between the popular and the urban; “popular” meaning a natural, archaic and original form of culture in the countryside, while “urban” meant an artificial civilization, including technology, industry, etc. This meaning of popular culture correlates with terms such as folk crafts and folk arts.<sup>13</sup> In such a context, “popular religion” and “folk religion” would be more or less identical.<sup>14</sup> In order to distinguish this meaning of popular culture clearly from the second one, I would like to call the first one “traditional popular culture.”

The second meaning of popular culture comprises “mass culture,” “contemporary culture,” “fashionable culture,” and “pop culture.” It is the mass culture of ordinary people as consumers who change their tastes quickly according to the times. Thus, in contrast to the first usage of the word, this second term includes also the meaning of being artificially produced for commercial reasons. However, both usages of the term popular culture have an opposite term in common – elite or high culture.

The themes submitted to this symposium employ both understandings of “popular culture”. In the subsequent deliberations I will limit myself to the second usage of the term because today it poses a great challenge to established religions in Japan as well as in Europe. However, this does not mean that I consider as secondary the first meaning of the term .

13 Japanese folk crafts were “discovered” by Yanagi Soetsu (1889-1961), who coined its Japanese term *mingei* and triggered the Japanese folk crafts movement since the 1920s. Cf. KEJ 2: 293-296 and Yanagi 1989.

14 The first well known scholar of Japanese folk religion (*minikan shinko* folk beliefs) was Yanagita Kunio (1875-1962). (Cf. KEJ 2:298-300 and Yanagita 1970)

It may be mentioned here that sometimes another term is introduced in this context, the term “common culture”. (Ruch 1990: 501; 507) The employment of this term is aimed at clarification of the common characteristics of high and low culture in certain periods of history. Certainly, common characteristics have to be elaborated, and in this limited capacity I consider the term “common culture” as useful. However, when used as an alternative concept to popular and elite culture, as it tends to be, this term prevents recognition of the peculiar dynamic between elite and popular culture. It is precisely this dynamic interaction between low and high culture that is most interesting and to which I would like to direct attention in the subsequent deliberation. Again, I select examples from the Japanese cultural history to illustrate the underlying problems which, in the end, are relevant also for established religions as well.

### 3.2 DYNAMIC INTERACTION BETWEEN ELITE AND POPULAR CULTURE

In the history of Japan, between 700 and 1800, we find two major revolutions or basic restructurings of Japanese society, all with significant social, economic, political and cultural implications or aspects.<sup>15</sup> The first one took place during the time of transition from Heian to Kamakura period, i.e. the 12<sup>th</sup> century. During this period, the warriors (*samurai*, *bushi*), who until then played only a serving role for the aristocracy, assumed (or usurped) political power from emperor and court and established the shogunate in Kamakura, the new military power center in Western Japan which was not much developed culturally at that time. However, the Japanese metropolitan culture acquired a broader base during the Kamakura period. “In music and dance the old aristocratic traditions of Nara and Kyōto were supplemented and eventually overtaken by more popular forms.” (KEJ 2: 74) These tendencies continued during the 14<sup>th</sup>–16<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>16</sup> During this long process, the samurai established their own culture as an elite culture, and did so by acquiring the skills of court culture, such as poetry, and fusing it

15 For the 16<sup>th</sup> century see Hall 1987. A third major social, political, and economic restructuring occurred in the Meiji restoration (1868) aiming at the modernisation of Japan (among others, also dissolving the samurai class); a fourth major revolution took place after Japan’s defeat at the end of WW II and the establishment of democracy; a fifth restructuring may occur concurrently with the IT revolution, the internet creating world wide connections on an equal level (i.e. without an authoritarian structure) and enabling free flow of information and transparency, thereby serving democratic tendencies. For this last aspect, see also Prof. Kim Seon-nae’s presentation “Korean Shamanic Practice in Cyberspace” at this Inter-Religio conference.

16 This is also true for the development of *renga* or linked verse (15<sup>th</sup> century), which is divided into an elegant and an inelegant style. It was the inelegant, comic type of *renga* which later contributed to the evolution of the famous *haikai* and *haiku* poems. (Varley 1990: 481)

with their own. In fact, this fusion of court and warrior culture flourished most splendidly during the Muromachi and Momoyama periods (cf. Varley 1997), when the shogunate moved from Kamakura back to the vicinity of the court in Kyoto. During this time, the leading samurai in the capital and in their castle towns acquired various forms of traditional elite culture in order to enhance their authority and manifest their wealth. (Varley 1990: 482) Their splendid castles, decorated inside with beautiful pictures, for example, served more to impress people than to defend against enemies. (Varley 1984: 131) This profound change of samurai mentality and culture becomes clear in comparison with previous times. Up to the 12. ce. the role of the samurai had been strictly defined as the arts of war (*bu*), while the role of the courtiers was that of culture, or peace, called *bun*.<sup>17</sup> After assuming political power, the samurai began to acquire (additionally to the the art of war) also the fine arts, the culture.<sup>18</sup> In other words, the *bushi*, who previously had belonged to the low class, serving the aristocracy as warriors,<sup>19</sup> now emerged as ruling elite.

The second basic restructuring of Japanese society occurred during the Tokugawa or Edo period when the shoguns were able to unite the war-torn country and establish lasting peace and stability in Japan. As an immediate result, production of food and other commodities increased and commerce thrived. In the biggest towns, Kyoto and Osaka especially, and later in Edo (Tokyo), the class of townspeople (*chonin*) became increasingly wealthy. In the end, successful merchants became richer than many samurai whose income was still based on the old economic system of annual rice allotments. As result of their newly acquired wealth, the townspeople, especially the merchants, created their own culture.<sup>20</sup> Most conspicuous was the afore mentioned *ukiyo*-attitude, to enjoy life in theaters and geisha quarters as long as wealth and age permitted. This new class of townspeople during the Edo period, by the way, pursued the hedonistic way of life in a very similar manner

17 According to Varley (1990: 458): "Until the end of the Heian period, culture and the arts had been monopolized by the courtiers."

18 Shively 1991: 716; Varley 1997: 206 f. Varley (1990: 458) states for the Muromachi period: "A truly national culture was taking shape for the first time in Japan, a culture that derived from both, elite and popular sources and was increasingly shared and enjoyed by all classes." (Ibid.)

19 The word *samurai* derives from the verb *saburau* which means to bow, kneel or serve.

20 See Donald Shively's (1991) study of the popular culture during the Edo period. Shively states: "In the Edo period, while the shogun and daimyo continued their patronage of the higher culture and learning, the most original and lively developments took place among the populace of the cities. For the first time, commoners, the nonelite, became cultural important." (706) And: "By the end of the Edo period, the urban popular culture became the popular culture of the country." (769)

as the samurai had done before in the Muromachi period when they gained economic wealth owing to their political power. It is characteristic that in both cases the government issued sumptuary laws in order to limit the excesses of the luxurious life. (Cf. Varley 1997: 194; Shively 1991: 764)

These two examples from the Muromachi and Edo periods show that the economic and social rise of a class resulted in the creation of new forms of culture. In the beginning, representatives of the traditional elite culture despised these new forms of popular culture as being of low aesthetic taste. For example, Ukiyo-e wood block prints were considered a cheap form of pictures, mainly used for advertisement. Only ink paintings were considered to have true cultural value. Similarly, the Noh theater initially developed from a low popular form of entertaining performance and from the late 14<sup>th</sup> century on, assumed recognition and patronage by shoguns. During the Tokugawa period, Noh came to be considered as elite theater, while the newly developed Kabuki theater at that time was viewed as vulgar and belonging to the low class of the townspeople. Due to the contributions of outstanding script writers and actors, however, Kabuki subsequently also developed into an art form eventually recognized by the elite.<sup>21</sup> Today, for example, famous actors of both Noh and Kabuki theater are recognized by the government as “living cultural treasures.” Such a development is extraordinary if we consider that some hundred years ago the artists were social outcasts, and that the origins of these theaters originally were gross street performances. (KEJ 4: 95) Such an interesting phenomenon occurs repeatedly in the history of culture all over the world.<sup>22</sup> It is obvious, however, that during such processes of recognition by representatives of the elite culture, coarse and wild elements have to be tamed into civilized forms acceptable to the tastes of the elite.

Apart from this upward development from popular culture to elite culture, we observe also the opposite development that after some time, the culture of the privileged trickles down to commoners. (Cf. Hur 2000: 138 f) Such a popularization is an equally important process in the dynamic interaction between elite and popular culture. For example, in the countryside about 50km north of Kyoto, the

21 The same is true for *bunraku*, the famous Japanese puppet theater, which Chikamatsu Monzaemon transformed “from popular entertainment into artistic theater.” (KEJ 1: 214) For the religious origins of *bunraku*, see KEJ 1: 213 f. Also the *imayo* songs of the Heian period developed — thanks to the emperor Go-Shirakawa’s patronage — from popular entertainment to a refined art. (Kim 1994: 3)

22 For this phenomenon in 14. ce. Japan, see Varley 1997: 195 f. 204 f.. One modern and compact example can be seen in the case of the Beatles. Their beginnings lay in the subculture of the music scene, and they ended up a few decades later by being knighted by the Queen of England.

houses of ordinary farmers have beautiful gardens. Even though these gardens do not equal those of the temples and palaces in Kyoto, they certainly are of high quality compared with other parts of the country. The reason for these highly developed gardens in the countryside north of Kyoto is that in former times the farmers had to provide the court in the capital regularly with food, wood and other commodities. When farmers travelled to Kyoto to deliver their products, they saw the beautiful gardens and began to imitate them at home. Other examples of this popularization of elite culture can be seen in modern Japan: many ordinary citizens regularly visit schools of those arts which were formerly restricted to the ruling or rich classes: tea, flower arrangement, Noh and kabuki theater, singing, chanting, ink painting (*sumi-e*), composing poems (*haiku*), etc.

In the remainder of this section, I would like to direct attention from the formal aspect of the interaction between high and low culture to the aspect of its contents: which ideas, ideals or principles are guiding the elite and the popular culture? Here I will present a few general observations which have to be treated with caution, though, because “the devil lies in the detail”, as a German proverb says.

As an example I choose the tea ceremony in the phase of development during the second part of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Up to this time, tea was a luxurious drink, served mainly in the mansions of the court and warrior elite. Here it developed also into the costly form of tea tasting competitions (*tocha*) by rich daimyo, quite often combined with betting. (Cf. Varley 1990: 488) The tea ceremony, it must be kept in mind, was not only centered on drinking tea, but also on appreciation of the exquisite tea bowls and utensils, as well as of hanging scrolls with ink paintings, and so on. Most of these precious items came from China or Korea (*karamono*). During the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the rich merchant commoners from Osaka and Kyoto could afford to enjoy the luxury of tea. In their midst developed a new aesthetic ideal quite opposite to the traditional one of the ruling elite. The foremost tea master in this new development was Sen no Rikyu, who virtually turned the traditional value system of the tea world up-side down: He sold the hitherto expensive Chinese and Korean tea bowls very cheaply and purchased simple, rustic pottery from the Japanese countryside and traded them expensively. (Berry 1982: 224) Thus, with his “revolution in taste” (*ibid.*) Sen no Rikyu brought considerable confusion into the Japanese tea market which was of quite a considerable economic volume. Moreover, Sen no Rikyu brought the rustic tea room to perfection and reduced its size to the minimum possible. Before entering the tea room, the participants had to leave their swords outside. The entrance of the

room itself was reduced to a hole, therefore everybody had to kneel when entering. Social class differences were left outside the room and the idea of equality was realized inside. The tea ceremony itself was understood as a communion and communication among equals. The achievement of Sen no Rikyu's ideas becomes fully clear when contrasted with the tea room of the powerful Shogun Hideyoshi, the absolute ruler over Japan, whom Rikyu served officially as tea master. Hideyoshi's tea room was completely golden, including the tea vessels and tools, as well as the room's walls and beams.

Sen no Rikyu's example may serve to illustrate possible achievements of the culture of commoners in contrast to that of the ruling elite. The function of high culture is to express, manifest, and symbolize the power and authority of the ruling class. Thus, it is interested in maintaining the existing class differences also in form of (or by ways of) superb, exquisite, luxurious, sumptuous cultural forms. One example for this aspect is the prose literature of the court and later of the warrior elite, such as the *Gukansho* and the *Heike monogatari*. By idealizing and romanticizing previous times when courtiers, and later samurai, had exerted real power, this kind of literature demonstrates that elite culture tends to be conservative and to end up in nostalgia. (Cf. Varley 1984: 86; 1990: 452, 454) In contrast to these underlying principles of elite culture, cultural forms of commoners rather seem to pursue ideals of realism,<sup>23</sup> concern for the present time,<sup>24</sup> simplicity, and equality among human beings. Thereby, popular culture becomes innovative and creative over against elite culture. It even contains liberative elements. (Hur 2000: 175) Frequently, the elite perceives the cultural developments of commoners as revolutionary in the socio-political sense, as threat for the existing class system. In the 14. ce., after the warriors had usurped power from the court, the term coined for this tendency among the new rulers was *basara*, or "extravagance" in the sense of "going beyond what is proper for one's status" (Varley 1997: 194 f; cf. 1990: 451) Again, during the 16. ce. a more outspoken term for the social rise of commoners came into the use, *gekokujo*, meaning "those below overthrow those above," or the "inferior overthrows the superior."<sup>25</sup> The two most powerful men of the art of war (*bu*)

23 For the sense of realism of the popular *imayo* songs in the Heian period, see Kim 1994: 62, 65, 68, 73, 115; for that of the literature of the Edo period, see Shively 1991: 731.

24 The *imayo*, for example, were the "present tunes," the pop songs of the later Heian period. (Cf. Kim 1994: 3) Or, as mentioned before, *ukiyo* had the connotation of contemporary, up to date, and fashionable. This tendency of popular culture to relate to contemporary fashionable manners continues throughout Japan's history until today — and occurs all over the world.

25 Kumakura 1994a: 40; 1994b: 135-137, 140; Ruch 1990: 541 f; cf. Varley 1991: 763-766. This term derives from Confucianism. However, the way modern authors use it, does not reveal whether this expression is a historical or a

and of the fine arts (*bun*) at the end of the 16. ce., Hideyoshi and Sen no Rikyu, rose from the bottom of the class system directly to the top.

As stated before, these generalizations and generalized comparisons have to be treated with caution, but I believe that they are correct when understood as characteristic tendencies of the respective cultures. With this in mind let us turn to the final topic, the relationship between Religion and popular culture.

#### 4. RELIGION AND POPULAR CULTURE

The reason I suggested the theme “Religion and Popular Culture” for this symposium was that all institutes belonging to *Inter-Religio* are institutes of established religions which normally tend to relate to established or elite culture. However, what we observe today at least in Europe and Japan, but I think elsewhere as well, is a broadening and deepening gap between established religion and the popular culture of young people. For example, there is not much communication between young people and members of Christianity or Buddhism in contemporary Japan. In spite of the undeniable fact of such a deep communication gap, most representatives of established religions do not even recognize the existence of this gap and the severe problems and challenges it poses.<sup>26</sup> Serious academic studies of popular culture, however, may help to understand the ways young people are thinking, feeling, behaving and acting today.<sup>27</sup>

In the past we can observe that religionists turned their attention consciously to popular culture. A few examples may be sufficient to demonstrate the case: Buddhism created the practice of *etoki*, explanation of the Buddhist teaching in form of pictures which were shown and explained publicly to crowds of illiterate people. Another example is the illustration of the Heart Sutra with sketches of ordinary items whose names are homophones of Sino-Japanese phrases of the sutra. Or, to give a Christian example: the images richly embellishing medieval cathedrals served the illiterate as illustration of the basic Christian teachings.

historiographical term, i.e., whether it was used by contemporary authors or whether it is a modern interpretation of historical facts.

26 To give an example: once I suggested to teach a class on “theology and manga” in a theological school in Japan which the majority of the faculty rejected in favor for a class on Martin Luther.

27 An equally urgent problem is that established Christianity and Buddhism today seem to lack the ability and vigor to create innovative and authentic forms of cultural expression – as they used to do in former times. This requires studies of their own.

A well known example from Christianity is the case of Martin Luther. He instructed preachers to “look at the mouths” of ordinary people in order to learn how to preach properly. It does not help much if a sermon is very learned and orthodox if it cannot be understood by ordinary people. In order to bridge this gap preachers have to pay attention to the manner and content of ordinary speech. Also, it may surprise you that a number of famous, solemn hymns of the Lutheran Church originated in German pubs. Luther took up the melodies of drinking songs, refined them and added new texts (verse). This is a creative, innovative cultural process, one which Christianity and Buddhism today seem to be lacking to a large degree. There are many more examples to illustrate the innovative and critical role of popular culture in its relationship to religion. The popular songs of ordinary people in the late Heian Period, the *imayo*, for example, anticipate and reveal much of the social, political, cultural and religious changes which took place during the transition to the Kamakura period.<sup>28</sup> Or today, for example, the *manga* and *anime*, can reveal much about the religious and spiritual or mental situation of young people today.<sup>29</sup> I hope that the two contributions on “manga and religion” later in the conference may clarify and demonstrate this issue. Thus I may conclude this general introduction into our theme “Popular Culture and Religion” in the hope that each of the following presentations may contribute to a better understanding of the basic problem, and to bridge the gap between religion and popular culture.

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28 For translations and a study of *imayo*, see Yung-Hee Kim 1994. For drawing a connection between their underlying worldview and Honen’s new ways of thinking during the transition from Heian to Kamakura periods, see Repp 2003.

29 For a treatment of this issue, see Repp 2000.

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