The Invention of Japanese Religions

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Abstract

In recent years, the academic study of religion has begun to challenge the usefulness of the concept of 'religion' itself. This article examines the extension of this critical turn to the issue of Japanese religion. It traces the history of the invention of Japanese religions as conceptual categories and discusses debates about the continuities and discontinuities of 'religion' (*shūkyō*) in Japan. Finally, it surveys the Japanese invention of 'religion' as a legal and political category.

Introduction

In 1703 London was abuzz with news that a native of Japanese-occupied Taiwan (Formosa) had arrived on England's shores. A popular dinner guest, this exotic foreigner regaled the Royal Society—Britain's premiere scientific organization—with accounts of his far-flung homeland (Keevak, pp. 4–5). His celebrity status culminated in the publication of a widely read book that contained one of the first accounts of Japanese religions in the English language, *An Historical and Geographical Description of Formosa, an Island subject to the Emperor of Japan* (1704).[1] Unlike the comparatively monolithic religious landscape of 18th century Europe, the Japanese were said to have three distinct indigenous religions (Psalmanazar, pp. 167–9). One of these religions was idolatrous, another focused on the worship of God in nature, and a third was essentially atheistic and philosophical. While a contemporary reader would surely reject the expression 'idolatrous' as pejorative and inaccurate, she would be forgiven for seeing in this tripartite schema an early reference to a way of describing Japanese religions that is still popular today. One does not have to engage in strenuous research to find the religions of Japan described as Buddhism, Shinto, and Confucianism (with Christianity appearing in the modern era).

The problem with applauding the 1704 book as the distant progenitor of the disciplinary study of Japanese religions is threefold: firstly, Japan would not actually colonize Taiwan until 1895; the author George Psalmanazar (1679?–1763) turned out not to be from Taiwan at all, but was instead a European imposter; and finally, the tripartite schema he helped to popularize was likely produced by lifting from descriptions of China rather than Japan. Fortunately for us, this embarrassing source was not the only authority from which the tripartite schema emerged.

The ultimate origin for this schema is likely the Chinese three teachings (Ch. *sanjiao*, Jp. *sankyō*). This division of the Chinese cultural landscape into Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism was originally formulated in the Tang Dynasty (618–907) and then exported to Japan, where it was much later transformed into a reference to Japanese Buddhism, Confucianism, and, later still, Shinto. To his credit, the Chinese category that Psalmanazar was cavalierly applying to Japan was one that some Japanese were beginning to use domestically. There was, however, a crucial difference. In 18th century Japan, the three teachings did not refer to three religions, or three forms of idolatry for that mater, but

rather represented the claim that different modes of discourse could describe a unitary reality.[2]

Recent scholarship has repudiated more than Psalmanazar. The so-called three religions have presented conceptual problems from the beginning.[3] Confucianism has always seemed to straddle European conceptions of philosophy, religion, and statecraft. The same could be said for Buddhism or Shinto. More recently scholars have demonstrated that in the pre-modern period Buddhism and Shinto did not represent autonomous 'religions' or alternate philosophies but rather functioned as overlapping cultural systems. Combined with the existence of Shinto-Buddhists, the historical presence of Shinto-Confucians and Confucian-Buddhists has provided further evidence that they did not have separate religions in the conventional European sense. Meanwhile, scholars of Shinto have pushed back against the assumption that contemporary Shinto sects have much in common with each other. As if this were not enough, a certain cross-section of Japanese 'folk religion' does not seem to fit in any of the three 'religions'. Where once scholars of Japanese religions seemed to be blessed with a profusion of different religions, since the 1960s there have been periodic calls to focus on some kind of culturally unitary 'Japanese religion' (e.g., Earhart 1967; Kitagawa 1987). The argument is that most Japanese lay people do not identify strictly with any particular religion but instead borrow from a host of religious and 'folk' traditions. This common realm of experience and symbolism would then be referred to as 'Japanese religion' in the abstract.

Just when we might think that the matter was resolved, a further shift in the discipline of religious studies has called even this tentative resolution into question. Since the 17th century, religion has generally been supposed to be a universal aspect of human experience and culture. Several centuries later, religion is now thought by many scholars to be less an anthropological universal than a quirk of Christian history. If this is the case, then religion was not waiting in Japan for Europeans to discover it, but instead it had to be assembled, admittedly from local elements, after their arrival.

The following pages will discuss ongoing debates about the continuities and discontinuities of 'religion' in Japan. Was there a native Japanese concept of religion or was its appearance an imposition? Are there clearly defined separate Japanese religions? If so, what is their proper taxonomy? At stake in these issues is not only the discipline of scholarship focused on Japanese religions, but more fundamentally the universality of the term 'religion'.

Intersecting Genealogies: Revisiting Japanese 'Religion'

At first glance, the similarity of the words for 'religion' in contemporary European languages is striking (Ger. *Religion*, Dut. *religie*, Fr. *religion*, It. *religione,* Sp. *religion,* Pg. *religião*, Rm. *religia*, Pl. *religia,* Rs. pe, *ryeligiya*). This resemblance betrays their common origin in the Latin *religio*. In pre-Christian Roman usage, however, 'religio' generally referred to a prohibition or an obligation, not to anything we would today recognize as a religion.[4] On even a cursory analysis, the term 'religion' shows all the signs of being a fairly recent invention, burdened with the marks of a particular cultural moment.

It should be no surprise, therefore, that attempts to historicize 'religion' have been going on for some time. Over 40 years ago, Wilfred Cantwell Smith in *The Meaning and End of Religion* (1962) criticized essentialist approaches to religious studies, arguing that the term 'religion' was of dubious usefulness. Although it took a while for these criticisms to gain traction, beginning particularly in the last 20 years, the academic study of religion has turned inward, engaging in genealogical reflections. Tracing out the twists and turns

of 'religio' and its descendants, a diverse array of scholars from Talal Asad and Jacques Derrida to Daniel Dubuisson, Jonathan Z. Smith, and Tomoko Masuzawa have all repeatedly demonstrated that 'religion' is not a universal entity but a culturally specific category that took shape among Christian-influenced Euro-American intellectuals and missionaries.[5] In so doing, they have called into question the very field of religious studies by showing that 'religion' masks the globalization of particular Euro-American concerns, which have been presented as universal aspects of human experience.

Although these genealogies of religion have been valuable for the discipline; they have focused almost exclusively on the writing of Europeans and Americans. Taken together, they have tended to foster the conception that 'religion' attained international hegemony unilaterally and without resistance. Additionally, they have tended to ignore the other part of the equation—the other terms that were overwritten or produced in response to the globalization of the Euro-American 'religion'. In a sense, they have been preoccupied with a single etymology without tracing the other terms with which it has intersected.

In East Asia, the virtual neologism 宗教 (Jp. *shūkyō*, Ch. *zongjiao*, Ko. *chonggyo*) was coined in Japan in the 1870s as a translation for the Euro-American 'religion' and was then popularized throughout the region. *Shūkyō* is a compound of two characters, *shū* 宗 and *kyō* 教. The character *shū* (Ch. *zong*) had long been used to mean 'sect', 'lineage' or 'principle', while the character *kyō (Ch. jiao)* referred to 'teaching' or 'teachings'. Thus, *shūkyō* could mean the 'teachings of a sect' or 'the principles of the teachings'. These characters had occurred together in the pre-modern period, particularly in reference to textualized Buddhist traditions; much of the current debate concerns the connection between modern and early usages of this term.

Pioneering efforts to understand the Japanese formation of '*shūkyō*' began with Suzuki Norihisa's 1979 *An Investigation into the Intellectual Trends of Meiji Religion (Meiji shūkyō shichō no kenkyū)*. Suzuki primarily focused on locating the birth of the Japanese academic study of religion in the late 19th century, and in so doing he provided the first major analysis of the history of '*shūkyō*'. Suzuki's narrative emphasized the role of liberal Japanese Christian thinkers in producing a discourse around 'religion', as an ecumenical category. Yet Suzuki did not critically analyze either 'religion' or '*shūkyō*' because he largely assumed their equivalence. Less an argument for the universality of 'religion' in as much as it takes for granted an essentialist (and basically Christocentric) definition of religion, it was nevertheless an important landmark in the field.

In the English-speaking world, the first significant salvo in the debate about the relationship between *shūkyō* and religion was actually an attempt to emphasize continuities. In 1990 at the Congress of the International Association of the History of Religions in Rome, Michael Pye argued for a proto-history of the concept of religion in Japan in a talk ultimately published as 'What is 'Religion' in East Asia?' (Pye 1994). He continued this project in a later essay 'Modern Japan and the Science of Religion' (2003). Both essays aim to demonstrate that not only did Japan have an indigenous concept of 'religion', but it also had independently developed its own *Religionswissenschaft* in the Early Modern period. Pye argues that the academic study of religion in Japan was initiated by an Osaka-based intellectual Tominaga Nakamoto (1715–1746). The lynchpin in Pye's argument is a single sentence in Tominaga's critical appraisal of Buddhism, *Discourse after Emerging from Meditation (Shutsujō kōgo)*, in which the characters '*nishūkyō*' (二宗教) make an appearance. Although provocative, Pye's translation of this as 'two religions' seems farfetched upon inspection of the sources, which clearly indicate that Tominaga is discussing Manichean dualism, hence a more likely translation would be 'the teachings of

two principles'.[6] Behind Pye's project is an assumption that anyone discussing the three teachings as independent objects must be discussing three religions. But as noted above, the indigenous category of teachings was not identical to the Euro-American religion. Instead, a closer reading of Tominaga demonstrates the differences between Euro-American assumptions of the period and Japanese ideas.

Although Pye's work was important, the debate about this issue gained more popular attention in Euro-American academy following the publication of *The Ideology of Religious Studies* by Timothy Fitzgerald (2000). Fitzgerald examined Euro-American writings on 'religion' in a range of countries, and argued that the comparative study of religion as performed in the West was less a science than a form of 'liberal ecumenical theology'. One chapter was devoted to a discussion of the construction of religion in Japan. This aspect of Fitzgerald's project has proved to be controversial in both Japanese and English language scholarship.

Fitzgerald's work was attacked by Shimada Katsumi in a review published in the Japanese journal *Religion Research* (*Shūkyō Kenkyū*) in 2001. Shimada notes that Fitzgerald relies exclusively on English language scholarship—a major oversight and one that radically undercuts his argument. Moreover, Shimada claims that there is significant conceptual overlap between Japanese and Euro-American conceptions of 'religion' and that therefore it is Fitzgerald who is engaged in essentialism by producing an artificial sense of the uniqueness of Western ideas. A second and more extended reply to Fitzgerald came from Ian Reader and will be discussed shortly.

In the midst of this debate, the implications of the Euro-American critical turn were extended to Japan. Significant in this regard is Isomae Jun'ichi's *Modern Japanese Discourse on Religion and its Genealogy* (*Kindai Nihon no shūkyō gensetsu to sono keifu*) (2003). Isomae traces the history of the term 'shūkyō' in Japan in both government discourse and in the formation of the discipline of religious studies (*shūkyōgaku*) in Japan. According to his account, the fulcrum of the modern construction of religion was a politically instigated bifurcation of a public morality (*dōtoku*) and a private religion (*shūkyō*), which functioned as a way for 19th century Shinto polemicists to assert their dominance over Japan. In another important Japanese monograph in this area, Shimazono Susumu and Tsuruoka Yoshio in *Rethinking 'Religion'* (*'Shūkyō' saikō*), (2004) called upon scholars to 'rethink' the utility of the concept 'religion' for the study of Japan, both by examining the historiography of the term and by questioning the degree to which it represents a category autonomous from such spheres as government, society, and economics. More a call for future scholarship than a completed project, the volume did much to popularize debates about the genealogy of religion in the Japanese academy.

The English scholar Ian Reader has replied to this debate in a number of publications. This includes a lively dispute with Fitzgerald in a series of essays published in the *Electronic Journal of Contemporary Japanese Studies* in 2004. In addition to some fair criticisms of Fitzgerald's lack of sources, Reader's thesis can be boiled down to the following assertions: building on Pye's work, Reader argues that there were some pre-19th century uses of the term *shūkyō* that tie organizations to a set of teachings and that this was equivalent to 19th century uses of the word 'religion' in the West. Hence, Reader argues that the Japanese already had something analogous to a concept of religion ready at hand in the early 19th century in the form of '*shūkyō*', and that it therefore was a natural translation for the Euro-American concept. In essence, Reader sees few discontinuities in the Japanese case.

If Reader's thesis were correct, it would represent a radical reversal in the main argument in religious studies, because it would show that 'religion' was not fundamentally a

Euro-American Christian category, but instead a natural kind. Nonetheless, I believe that Reader is fundamentally wrong, as a quick look at Japanese sources from the mid-19th century will show.

Untangling Genealogies

In 1853, American warships appeared off the coast of Japan. Ultimately, the Americans forced the Japanese government to sign a series of treaties intended not only to regulate commerce but also to protect a number of 'basic rights', including the freedom of religion. Japanese translators on first encountering the English word 'religion' in these international treatises were struck with a particularly intractable problem. There was at that time no word in the Japanese language equivalent to the English term or covering the same range of meanings. Over the next 30 years, the problem of defining 'religion' gained national prominence, giving rise to a broad debate at several levels of society. Even a superficial survey of these debates allows us to see through the impasses surrounding the current controversy about the relationship between 'religion' and '*shūkyō*'.[7]

Although Japan's isolation in the preceding period has been exaggerated, it is fair to say that the opening of the country following the treaties of the 1850s led to radical shifts as Japan was increasingly linked into the global system of commerce and ideas. By the early 1870s, the first generation of Japanese scholars educated abroad returned to Japan. As elite cultural interpreters, this first group of foreign students had a lasting impact on the formation of public attitudes and state policy. One of the major sites for this debate was a short-lived but influential journal, *The Journal of the Sixth [Year] of Meiji (Meiroku Zasshi,* February 1874 and November 1875). Contributors included famous scholars and influential officials who were directly involved in setting future government agendas. Indeed, many of the contributors went on to hold high offices in the Meiji governmental or educational circles. The journal existed in the interstices between an abstract academic arena and the pragmatics of nation building. While *Meiroku Zasshi* authors discussed a wide range of issues, from the role of elected assemblies to trade reform, they repeatedly returned to the issue of 'religion'.

Although there is no space here to go into details, for our purposes this controversy is particularly telling. Japanese intellectuals and policymakers proposed over half a dozen possible translations for 'religion'. When faced with the European term, even Japanese scholars educated abroad had to go searching for equivalents, and they proposed several different contenders and tried to hang different understandings of religion upon them (Yamamuro 1999–2009). It seemed that 'religion' could be a type of education, something fundamentally un-teachable, a set of practices, a description of foreign customs, a subtype of Shinto, a near synonym for Christianity, a basic human ethical impulse, or a form of politics (among other possibilities). This is clear evidence that it is glib to talk of Japanese religion projected back through the centuries.

What is more, not only did Japanese intellectuals produce different terms for 'religion', they also debated which indigenous traditions and practices fit into the category.[8] It was not clear to them what religions there were in Japan. The sole 'religion' on which everyone could agree was Christianity. More than anything else, this clearly demonstrates the foreign nature of the category.

Even if Reader and Pye were right that Tominaga used *shūkyō* in a modern way, tracing the history of *shūkyō* turns out to be misleading for several reasons. First, that other terms were equally in play suggests that it was far from clear what analogs existed for the Western category. Hence the scholars who promoted *shūkyō* in that epoch are

unlikely to have based their use of the term on fairly obscure precedents (to which they made no reference).[9] One is forced to conclude that *shūkyō* was promoted as a neologism not because it had been previously used in an analogous manner to the Western 'religion'. Second, Reader's definition of religion as the combination of an organization and a set of teachings or doctrines was not the Western definition of religion in the 19th century, nor was it the definition promoted by the Meiroku scholars, nor is it the dominant definition of religion today.[10] Thus, even if used in that sense, *shūkyō* did not function as a pre-modern Japanese analog for the Euro-American category.

Finally, despite *shūkyō* becoming the standard translation for 'religion' in the late 1870s, when the Japanese government ultimately chose to guarantee freedom of religion in its constitution of 1889, it used not *shūkyō*, but the non-standard neologism '*shinkyō*'. This particular freedom was from the outset described as interior, private, bounded, and something distinct from most preexisting Japanese cultural systems.[11] In the implementation of this freedom, the three teachings were treated differently. Put briefly, Confucianism was not recognized as a religion, but was instead treated as a scholastic subject. Shinto was bifurcated into a national form of Shinto, which was not defined as religion, and various individual Shinto sects, which were. In the end, only Buddhism was legally described as a religion, but in order to be protected as such it had to be radically reconfigured (see Josephson 2006; Ketelaar 1990). Moreover, much of Japanese 'folk' practices were banned as dangerous superstitions. Thus, instead of a continuity in the three teachings, we see the marks of radical changes on many levels.

Conclusion

The process of articulating 'religion' presented the Japanese state with a valuable opportunity. While acceding to pressure from international Christendom to guarantee freedom of religion to the Japanese people, officials defined 'religion' in such a manner as to promote two other key goals. By excluding State Shinto from the category of 'religion', they enshrined it as a national ideology, a matter of pure fact rather than contested faith. Meanwhile, officials consigned the popular practices of indigenous shamans and female mediums, with their spirit-foxes and other supernatural entities, to the category of 'superstition', deserving no protection under the regime of religious freedom. In short, Japanese officials translated pressure from Western Christians into a concept of religion that carved out a private space for belief in Christianity and certain forms of Buddhism, but also embedded Shinto in the very structure of the state and exiled various 'superstitions' beyond the sphere of tolerance. The invention of religion in Japan was a politically charged boundary-drawing exercise that extensively reclassified the inherited materials of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Shinto.

These are not issues that can be ignored by someone with even a casual interest in Japanese religion, history, or culture. On the one hand, scholars working on Japanese Buddhism, Confucianism, and Shinto are now free to pursue their respective research without the confines of the Western category of religion. These traditions can be, and in my assessment should be, analyzed in the pre-modern period according to indigenous categories (like *oshie*). On the other hand, I would humbly suggest that instead of anachronistic readings of pre-modern Japanese cultural or intellectual history, scholars would benefit from reflecting on the shifts that occurred in the early Meiji invention of Japanese 'religions' (for my own humble efforts in this regard, see Josephson forthcoming).

Short Biography

Jason Ānanda Josephson, Assistant Professor of Religion, Williams College (2007–present). For 2011 he is also a visiting Researcher at Ruhr-Universität, Bochum, Germany. Josephson received a PhD in Religious Studies from Stanford University in 2006. In 2006–2007, he was a Postdoctoral Fellow at Princeton University's Center for Study of Religion. He was a visiting scholar at École français d'Extrême-Orient in Paris from 2004 to 2006 and a visiting student at Saint Antony's College, Oxford University from 2003 to 2004. He received a Masters in Theological Studies from Harvard University in 2001. Josephson's research explores the contested borderland between 'religion' and 'science'. He focuses on practices and beliefs often considered 'superstitions', and therefore frequently dismissed as worthy of consideration in the disciplinary formations of science and religion. By tracing themes such as the exclusion of spiritualism, the occult, ghosts, demons, faith healing and psychical research, he hopes to discover counter narratives and uncover occluded genealogies in the construction of modernity both in Japan and Europe. He is currently completing a monograph, *The Invention of Religion in Japan*, forthcoming 2012.

Notes

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[1] There were other precedents for a tripartite division in French and Spanish Jesuit materials. The largest single influence was probably Luis de Guzmán, *Historia de las Missiones que Han Hecho Los Religiosos de la Compañia de Iesus* (1601), in which Japanese religion is divided into the *Xenxus* sect who focus on meditation and worship idols called *Camis* (Guzmán, p. 398), the *Xodoxius* who worship an idol called Amida (Guzmán, p. 399) and the 'Foguexus' who worship Iaca (Guzmán, p. 399), and the breakaway *Icoxus* (Guzmán, p. 400). While the last three are probably references to Jodoshū, Hokkeshū and Ikkoshū, the first could be either a discussion of Zen or some form of Shinto.

[2] See Brook. According to the famous expression of Emperor Xiaozong 孝宗 (r. 1163–89), "Use Buddhism to rule the mind, Taoism to rule the body, and Confucianism to rule the world" (Brook, p. 17).

[3] Léon de Rosny addressed this debate at the first *Congrès international des orientalistes* in 1876. *Congrès* 1, p. 142.

[4] Two examples will make this usage clear. In the play *Curculio* by Plautus (c.254–184 BCE) the protagonist states *vocat me ad cenam, **religio** fuit, denegare nolui* 'He invited me to dinner, it was an **obligation** (*religio*), and I could not refuse' (emphasis added). In another play *Andria* by Terentius (c.185–159 BCE) the character Chremes says *At mihi unus scrupulus etiam restat, qui me male habet* 'But I still have a scruple which restrains me.' To which Pamphilus replies *Dignus es Cum tua religione odium: nodum in scirpo quaeris*. "You with your obligation (*religione*) you deserve to be hated. You are creating unnecessary difficulties." (Lit. seeking a knot in a reed). Examples appear in Benveniste 1969, p. 520. I have retranslated the Latin into English using Benveniste's French translation as a reference.

[5] Asad 1993; Derrida and Vattimo 1996; Dubuisson 1998; Masuzawa 2005; McCutcheon 1995; Smith 1998.

[6] To articulate my objection to Pye's argument, hopefully the reader will forgive looking at one sentence in some detail. In this section Tominaga criticizes the importation of Manichaeism into China (Tominaga 1904, pp. 58–9). Tominaga goes on to state *fuduodan chuan erzongjiao zhe ci qi yuyu zhe* (拂多誕傳二宗教者此其臝宇者) (Tominaga, p. 59) which Pye translates as "Futtatan's transmission of two religions [at once] was a grandiloquent delusion…" (Pye 1994, p. 121).

This translation has several problems: First, Tominaga is likely referring to Zhipan, *Fozu Tongji* 佛祖統紀 (Taisho 49:235), which states "In the first year of Yanzai (694) a Persian bishop bearing the false teachings of the Scripture of the Two Principles came to the court (*Yanzai yuannian bosi guoren fuduodan chi erzongjing weijiao lai zhao*, 延載元年波斯國拂多誕持二宗 經僞教來朝." (Tominaga, p. 59) (even Pye acknowledges this reference, Pye, p. 121). Both context and scholarly consensus suggest that Zhipan is referring to the title of a now lost Manichean text (e.g., Tajadod, p. 63), not to two religions transmitted from Persia.

In Tominaga's discussion of this passage, he has substituted the title of the Manichean work (*Scripture of Two Principles*) Japanese pronunciation 'Nishūkyō' with the phonetically identical but written in different characters 'Nishūkyō', which now means 'teachings of the two principles'. Pye translates this as 'two religions'. But is very unlikely that

Tominaga's reading of the *Fozu Tongji* could have resulted in the mistaken belief that the Iranian bishop somehow transmitted two religions.

Finally, *Futtotan* is not a name, but a title for a Manichean Bishop, a transcript of the Middle Iranian *Aftadan* (Moriyasu, p. 435). Although to be fair Tominaga may have been mistaken in this regard himself.

Nevertheless, Tominaga's passage would be better translated "The Aftadan's transmission of the teachings of the two-principles was a clever deception…"

[7] For a monograph length treatment of these issues see Josephson, *The Invention of Religion in Japan*, forthcoming.

[8] An extensive discussion of the Meirokusha and their debates (as well as the controversies around the translation of 'religion' in Early Meiji) can be found in Josephson forthcoming. Some of the possibilities on offer were *hōkyō*, *shushi*, *Shintō*, *kyōmon*.

[9] Fukuzawa Yukichi and Mori Arinori were the main proponents of the term *shūkyō* and they did so without reference to prior uses of the term. For another discussion of the scholarly consensus on the status of shūkyō as a neologism see Krämer.

[10] The Euro-American concept of 'religion' has been far from stable. For example, throughout the 19th century the common use of the term was understood to be a system for the worship of God. The Christian (and in many cases explicitly Protestant) theological assumptions behind this usage are clear. However, more recently God has faded from the definition to be replaced by pseudo-secular terms such as 'the divine' or 'the sacred'. See Josephson forthcoming.

[11] See Itō Hirobumi's Commentaries on the Constitution of the Empire of Japan (Itō 1889).

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