

MODERN JAPAN AND THE SCIENCE OF RELIGIONS

MICHAEL PYE

The history of the study of religions in Japan is presented in this article as an important counter-example to a commonly held assumption, namely that the academic study of religion is a Western cultural project which has only been adopted derivatively in non-Western contexts.

Introduction

There is a widespread assumption that the academic study of religion(s) is a Western cultural project which, in some cases, has been adopted elsewhere in a derivative fashion. While there is some truth in this, it is not the whole story. Japan is a significant counter-example. The academic study of religion(s) in Japan has an extremely significant history with a complex relationship to its own intellectual traditions and to modernity. It is therefore of interest to discuss the Japanese situation as an important example in the wider pattern of the relations between “modernity” and the “science of religion”. What is needed, for this wider discussion, is a broad perspective in which some of the various strands in the Japanese tradition of *shūkyōgaku*, “study of religion(s)”, can be located. The Japanese term *shūkyōgaku* does not distinguish between the singular and the plural. In English, the name for the discipline under consideration here occurs in several variations: science of religion, academic study of religion(s), study of religion(s). No particular importance is attached to these variations here.

The presentation given here will lead to a very specific conclusion, which is as follows. The modern study of religion(s) in Japan is influenced not only by reaction to Western models but also by underlying ideas available in the Japanese intellectual tradition itself. However in the Japanese literature reflecting on the development of the study of religion, its relation to developments in the Western world is usually emphasized to the neglect of its roots in the Japanese intellectual tradition. The distinctive East Asian setting is not always clearly noticed or set out by Japanese scholars who, in general, are more con-

cerned to locate their work by reference to Western scholarship. Indeed, it is sometimes said by Japanese scholars that there simply is no indigenous tradition of scholarship relating to religion and that, as far as they are concerned, it is an entirely Western import. However, the views of individual Japanese scholars who adopt such extreme positions cannot be taken as normative simply because they are Japanese. Account has to be taken of the roles and stances which they are adopting in a complex cultural situation. Such positions are usually struck in order to set up an opposition between “Japanese” and “Western” which is not necessarily justified. The aim of this article is to correct this perspective at least in the main outline.

At the same time there are of course very important, informative, and reliable sources emanating from Japanese scholars, especially in relation to the more recent history of the subject. To give but one leading example, there is the “Fifty years’ history of the Japanese Association for the Study of Religions” (*Nihon Shūkyōgakkai Gōjūnenishi*, 1980), which contains contributions by various participants in the field and an important introductory survey by Gotō Kōichirō and Tamaru Yoshinori. (All names will be given here in the Japanese order, family name first.)¹ The fifty years referred to here run from Shōwa 5 (1930) to Shōwa 55 (1980). The association was founded in 1930, its first president being Anesaki Masaharu, to whom further reference will be made below. At the same time however, as will be seen, the academic study of religions had been in a process of formation in Japan for quite some time before that.

To some extent the definition of the very term “religion”, with particular reference to the Japanese context, is relevant to the analysis. Considerable care is needed over this, however. It has already been argued under the title “What is ‘religion’ in East Asia?” (Pye 1994) that this is all more complex than is sometimes supposed, and that the Japanese term *shūkyō* has a relevant, if limited pedigree prior to the strong intrusion of Western influence from the middle of the nineteenth century. It is desirable, therefore, to avoid the widespread oversimplification that this term merely reflects a certain Western notion of “religion”, though such a meaning admittedly has been

¹ This order is now once again widely used in international situations, and it is of course absolutely normal in Japan itself. Some years ago there was a stronger tendency to put transcribed Japanese names into the Western order. Readers not familiar with Japanese names should therefore be alert to the confusions which have been engendered.

widely current since the early part of the Meiji Period (from 1868). The term “religion” should by no means be written off as a misleading Western import, and *shūkyō* is a reasonable equivalent.

Another fundamental problem is that there are competing views about what the study of religions should be understood to be. Who are the Japanese specialists in the study of religion? Who they are, specifically, depends, as in other countries, on the very definition of “science of religions” or “academic study of religions”. The problem may be illustrated simply by referring to the influential department for the study of religion at Tokyo University, which has a tradition of textual studies and of empirical social research into religions, and comparing with it the very “philosophically” oriented “Kyōto School”, which looks back to Nishida Kitarō and continues to display a strong affinity with Zen Buddhist thought (see the overview in Dumoulin 1993: 31-82). It is debatable whether this latter tradition of religious philosophy can really be counted as “science of religions”, for its intentions are different, though some of its representatives such as Ueda Shizuteru have carried out well-received studies comparing Western mysticism with Zen (Ueda 1965). This diversity of approach is reflected quite strongly in the relatively large membership of the Japanese Association for the Study of Religions, many of whose more than 1000 members undoubtedly have a religious motivation and a religious focus in their studies of religion. The specialisms and affiliations of these members were assessed on a statistical basis by the present writer many years ago.² It would be possible to test some of the leading points of that analysis statistically against more recent documentation, but overall impressions of the current situation do not lead one to anticipate any major shifts in the balance. In this article attention is restricted specifically to the development of the religiously neutral study of religions with its historical, textual, comparative, and social-scientific ramifications. This differentiation is not at all unique to Japan, and it is not particularly difficult to identify the orientation of individual scholars or research programs in the Japanese case.

The institutional frameworks are also important. Among the relatively large number of persons engaged in academic contexts today with the study of religion, it is clear that a high proportion of them

² This was an analytical survey for a special issue of the journal *Religion* published on the occasion of the 13th Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions (Pye 1975).

have some kind of personal orientation within one of the available religions and that this colors their studies to a recognizable extent. At the same time, in the case of Japan we do not have a situation in which this religious background is itself largely dominated by one specific religion, as in North America, where there is a constant danger that “science of religions” will be swamped by “theology” under the flag of “religious studies”. From a methodological point of view the same problems arise in various quarters in Japan, but the multiplicity of different religious traditions which run their own universities, often housing pertinent departments for research and teaching, means overall that a slightly more relaxed attitude can be taken over this recalcitrant problem. As the years go by, it is becoming increasingly clear that “the study of religion” is an enterprise in its own right in Japan.

The number of Japanese researchers occupied in some sense with the field of “religion” today is very large, and many are internationally active and known. It is quite impossible to attempt here a comprehensive survey of the relevant academic institutions and personalities, though some illustrative details will be found below. Rather, attention will be drawn in outline to the main steps with which this academic study of religions, or “science of religions”, has come to develop in modern Japan. By this means, the idea that it is no more than a recent Western import can be corrected. This is probably the most important point which needs to be emphasized in the present cultural situation.³

1. *Wider considerations*

An understanding of the development of the science of religion in Japan cannot be locked entirely into the Japanese context itself. There are wider considerations about the way in which the history of the discipline is written, and these affect the way in which the development in any one country is understood. It is indeed becoming increasingly widely recognized that the history of the “science of

³ This paper was first presented at a conference in Leiden in 1997, since when it has become even more urgent to correct widespread misconceptions. However, the proceedings were not published until 2002, by which time publication in MTSR had already been agreed. Although a few misprints have been corrected here, no attempt has been made to restate the issue yet again against intervening publications.

religions”, referred to in much English discourse as “the academic study of religion(s)”, is more complex than has sometimes been realized. Attention will be drawn here to four aspects of this complexity, and implications drawn out for the Japanese case.

First, at the most general level, the various intellectual threads which have been woven into the coherent strand which we now designate as “science of religions”, or similar, are perceived to be more diverse and more subtly related to each other than some presentations have suggested. In the European context, for example, it is no longer adequate to see the science of religion as predominantly the product of nineteenth-century comparativism or evolutionism, as in Eric Sharpe’s influential account in *Comparative Religion: A History* (1975). The Enlightenment should also be given full weight, although its importance is nowadays often underestimated and indeed misconceived. So too, however, must the impact of Romanticism, falling approximately between these two, be given its due. The emergence of the modern academic study of religions is inconceivable without reference to these significant intellectual movements, even though at the time the thinkers concerned with religion did not themselves specify that they were developing a “science of religions”. By analogy, there arises the question as to where relevant ideas in Japan can be identified, prior to the formal establishment of the discipline. This means that the intellectual traditions of the Tokugawa Period, *prior* to the frenetic interaction with Western thought which has taken place since the mid-nineteenth century, must be considered from this point of view.

The matter can be taken even further back, for these particularly relevant intellectual movements are themselves partly to be explained by significant shifts in standpoint made possible by, in Europe, the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the subsequent recognition of confessional pluralism. Somewhat similarly, in East Asia, we find, on the one hand, an increasingly clear focus on the natural and social world and human ability to analyze it in Neo-Confucianism and, on the other hand, the unfolding and consolidation of various Buddhist denominations whose diversity only served to illustrate, to impartial outsiders, the relativity rather than the absolute significance of their claims.⁴

⁴ An attempt to identify the prerequisites for the emergence of the reflective study of religions more systematically, for comparative purposes, are found in the introduction to my translations of the writings of Tominaga Nakamoto (Pye 1990).

Second, the social and political context must be taken more fully into account. The explorer, colonialist, imperialist, and missionary periods were, in general, of immense importance for the development, in the Western world, of the study of religions. The researches, translations, and writings of diplomats and missionaries often amounted to informal contributions to the study of religions in various parts of the world, and thereby to the development of that study as a science.

A classic, if relatively late example is the story of what for Europeans was the discovery of Tibetan religion, which is framed in the story of the prizing open of Tibet as a land. Journalist Edmund Candler tellingly entitled his account of the Younghusband expedition of 1904 *The Unveiling of Lhasa* (1905) (although this was not the first European contact). In other words, for the British public “discovery” was still in the air, even while Candler asserted that “we” (i.e., the British) “were drawn into the vortex of war by the folly and obstinacy of the Tibetans” (Candler 1905: 2). Perceval Landon’s more substantial account of the same events, also published in 1905, contains much interesting detail about aspects of religion. Admittedly, Younghusband’s own later discussions about reincarnation and related matters with Tibetan lamas, in *India and Tibet* (1910), though somewhat detailed, do not really amount to “science of religions”. Nevertheless, he had with him in the “expedition” Colonel L. A. Waddell, whose extremely detailed work *The Buddhism of Tibet or Lamaism* had already appeared in 1894.⁵ This too had been written, outside the closed country of Tibet itself, but in Darjeeling under the protection of the British Empire, which he served in the Indian Medical Service. Waddell not only observed the practices of the Tibetan Buddhist temple on the spot in Darjeeling (or Dorje Ling, “the place of the thunderbolt”), but also spoke with numerous Tibetan merchants and lamas, employed his own Tibetan assistants, and even acquired and installed in his own residence the complete fittings of a Tibetan temple. It is easy today to scorn “colonialist” views of the religions of the colonized, and yet the detailed studies undertaken by Waddell with exemplary persistence remain even now a most important secondary source for the period. In fact Darjeeling was also a training post for British spies, of whom the Tibetans not surprisingly

⁵ In the second edition (1939), Waddell himself refers to his work having been first published in 1895.

were extremely suspicious. This is well documented in the most readable account of Tibetan life including many aspects of Tibetan religion by the Japanese monk Kawaguchi Ekai in his work *Three Years in Tibet*, published in English in 1909, but based on his diaries from the years 1900 to 1903, during which he managed to enter the country from India under the guise of being a Chinese monk. Interestingly, it was the Theosophist Annie Besant who persuaded Kawaguchi to publish his work in English (it had previously appeared in installments in the Japanese press), even though he himself thought that it might be outdated by the British accounts from the time of the “expedition” and the expected publication of a work by Sven Hedin. While Japan was not politically involved in the Anglo-Russian tug-of-war in Tibet, the contrast between Kawaguchi’s mentality and that of the Tibetans which he presents displays some features of the sense of superiority characteristic of colonialist powers. At the same time he also demonstrates not only fervent Buddhist devotion and single-mindedness in the wish to collect more versions of Buddhist scriptures, but also the humility of the persistent observer who undergoes personal hardships and dangers to be right there, in the field. In effect, the Buddhist monk Kawaguchi discovered “Tibetan religion” for a readership in Japan and beyond.

A similar relationship between explorer, colonialist, imperialist, and missionary can be documented for most of the world, certainly all over Africa and Asia. The perception is therefore becoming increasingly widespread that it is now possible, and indeed necessary, to give “post-colonialist” accounts of the study of religions.⁶ Related to this need for retelling the history of the subject from new vantage points are the well-known contextual discussion of “orientalism”, the now popular recognition of “exoticism” as a long-running literary theme (for an introductory overview see Mathé 1972), and the corresponding self-reflection on the part of social anthropologists treated by Karl-Heinz Kohl in *Exotik als Beruf* (1979) and *Entzauberter Blick* (1981). A balanced view is required concerning all this. As far as the observation and discussion of religion is concerned or, in other words, the incipient development of the science of religions, the following state of affairs should be noted. There simply has not been a time when foreigners were writing about Japanese religions, while

⁶ An interesting recent example is David Chidester’s study relating to South Africa (Chidester 1997).

Japanese writers themselves were not! In this, Japan appears to differ significantly from Tibet.

Less obvious, and yet particularly important in the case of Japan, is the obverse of the coin. While Japan was being “discovered”, Japanese for their own part were discovering the Western world, having already been aware of most of Asia for a long time.⁷ Thus it is possible to see in Japanese culture a tradition of “occidentalism”. This may be considered to have got fully into swing in the eighteenth century with the rather secretive studies of the *rangakusha* (specialists in Dutch studies). Significantly, however, although the *rangakusha* have been much studied, Japanese occidentalism as a cultural phenomenon has rarely become a subject of reflection. Rather, European orientalism itself has been seized on as interesting by the heirs of those who, in their day, were the objects of the European fascination. Thus it became the subject of a substantial study published in 1987 by Iyanaga Nobumi of which the Japanese title might be translated as *The East as Reverie* and the subtitle as *The Lineage of Orientalism*. Here orientalism becomes an aspect of Japanese occidentalism.

Third, the attention given to colonialism should not be allowed to distract us from the problems of neo-colonialism. The above mentioned styles of reflection were themselves dependent on colonialist and imperialist privilege, which is now largely regarded as having dissipated itself. But what has taken their place? The effects of neo-colonialism on the study of religions have as yet been largely ignored. It could be argued that this is relevant to Japan in the form of its own economic dominance, which creates a context for the promotion of research. Also practically unrecognized, and even less well understood except by a very small minority, is the impact on intellectual life and, hence, on the academic study of religions of the “Cold War”, which covered several recent decades. This led to a maladjusted view both of religion and of the supposed absence of religion, on both sides of the Cold War. Correspondingly, there has been a maladjustment in the study of religion, which was itself widely assumed to be either ideologically positive or ideologically negative.⁸ It

⁷ It was probably Donald Keene who first used the phrase “the Japanese discovery of Europe” (Keene 1952; 1969).

⁸ Four years after this paper was first written (1997) an IAHR conference was held on the subject in Brno, Czech Republic (August 1999), of which the proceedings were published under the title *The Academic Study of Religion during the Cold War: East and West* (Dolezalova, Martin, and Papoušek 2001). The present writer’s contribution,

would be possible to reflect on this maladjustment in the Japanese context as elsewhere, but the research has not yet been done. Overlapping with the Cold War period, and continuing today, is what might be called the "oil age". This too has had a certain impact on the way in which at least one of the major religions of the world, namely Islam, is viewed. These features of international life have provided the context for most of the half century since the end of the Pacific war, so that it would be theoretically desirable to study the recent history of the subject in Japan against this background. The main point to be noted here is that during this period, as enshrined in the post-war constitution, there has been a strong emphasis both on religious freedom and on the separation of religion and the state. While the latter is intended to avoid a totalitarian concentration of ideological forces at the center of society, the encouragement of religious freedom, not only for the individual but also for religious associations by means of freedom from tax liability, without doubt has been intended to provide a pluralist bulwark against the possible influence of communism. Studies of religion in Japan have acquired some aspects of their character in this context.

Fourth, the social basis for the study of religion is increasingly perceived to be, nowadays, not merely global but, within this global perspective, intercultural. It is arguable that the intercultural *diversity* of reflection concerning religion is more significant than the integral global perspective which currently seems to be so influential. Even within the Western world, which is often regarded from outside, e.g., from Japan, as being more or less an intellectual unity, there have been major variations in the way in which the study of religion has been developed in different countries. These variations have been related to the changing cultural and political fortunes of religion in the various countries, though insufficient attention has been paid to them in discussions of the history of the subject. When the development of the study of religion is regarded globally, such variations become even more apparent. Hence a global view of the development of the study of religion must take this diversity into account.

This is of interest, and indeed of great importance, in that the

under the title "Political correctness in the study of religions: Is the Cold War really over?" attempts to cross the frontiers of the Cold War, rather than discussing it from within one side or the other. For earlier intimations of this important subject see also Pye 1991.

underlying perceptions of “religion”, which inform the development of theoretical models in diverse situations, are not the same in various regions of the world. The overall religious “situation” in Africa, in India, in Latin America, and elsewhere, is diverse. On the situation in Africa and its implications for the study of religions, to take but one of these continents as an example, see especially works by Westerlund (1985) and Platvoet, Olupona, and Cox (1996).⁹ It can be seen from such accounts that major themes carry a special weight in various parts of the world and influence the academic study of religions accordingly. In East Asia, for example, the twin ideas of the reality of religious pluralism and the responsibility of the state for maintaining order in religious affairs are quite widely current. No specialist in the study of religion in China, Korea, or Japan can avoid them. This complexity in the range of available models for the study of religion is itself interesting, and valuable for the future development of the discipline.

We can see from these examples and observations that it is most important to maintain a flexible attitude over the question as to *which* intellectual and socio-political strands deserve to be considered in reflecting on the development of the discipline. This applies in the Japanese case no less than elsewhere. In particular, it is misleading to take a one-sided view about the significance of the Western impact in the nineteenth century, as will be shown in more detail below.

2. *Modernity in Japan*

Since the term “modernity”, as implied in the phrase “modern society”, has itself become increasingly difficult to use, some attention has to be paid to the problem of the periodization of Japanese history in this regard. The periodization of Japanese history after the so-called Middle Ages (*chūsei*) is usually presented as: (1) *kinsei* (early modern), (2) *kindai* (modern), and (3) *gendai* (present). “Early modern” refers to the Tokugawa Period (1600-1867). “Modern” refers to the

⁹ The latter includes my own introduction to the conference held in Zimbabwe in 1992 (the first IAHR conference ever held in Africa) entitled ‘Intercultural strategies and the International Association for the History of Religions’. This work was not published until 1996, and it should be noted that the introduction by Jan Platvoet and Jacob Olupona was written from a perspective some time later than the conference itself.

Meiji Period (1868-1912), the Taishō Period (1912-1926), the Shōwa Period (1926-1988), and the Heisei Period (1989-). What the “present” refers to depends on the history book and when it was written. One outline, for example, starts the present with the Potsdam Declaration of 1945 (which fell in the Shōwa Period). In general it may be observed that the beginning of the “present” shifts forwards as time passes. Thus nowadays it is often regarded as starting with the beginning of the present Emperor’s reign, i.e., the Heisei Period.

What is the relation here between *kinsei*, *kindai* and *gendai*? All of these terms suggest modernity in some sense. But what is “modernity”? From when does “modernity” occur, and does it occur at different speeds in different fields? Is contemporary Japanese culture “modern”, or “post-modern”, or perhaps still, in some respects, “pre-modern”? The analysis of religious culture is important in this connection, but it is only part of a wider historical question. A perception of the location of Japanese scholarship on religion can only occur within an informed view of these matters.

The view taken here is that “modernity” in Japan did not begin only with the “opening” of Japan to the direct and sustained influence of the Western world in the later part of the nineteenth century. On the contrary, modernity began in important respects during the “closed” Tokugawa Period. This period is therefore quite appropriately referred to as “early modern”, the phrase usually adopted to correspond to the Japanese *kinsei*. During this time there were important intellectual movements which, in a very broad sense, correspond to those that were so important in the development of “modernity” in Europe. There was a new interest in the systematic exploration of the empirical world (cf. the European natural sciences), there was a critical analysis of economics, politics and history (cf. the European Enlightenment), and there was a re-examination of cultural origins from a sophisticated standpoint which implied distance from those same origins (cf. the European Romantic movement). In the “real” world of commerce and industry, rampant mercantilism led to features of capitalism, such as the ability to trade in futures, while technological advances hinting at the industrial revolution to come were also made. Without any reference to Western thought on the subject, Japanese reflection on the subject of religion also took new turns during this period which could comfortably be described as modern or at least as early modern.

As far as Japanese history is concerned, the external pressure of imperialist Western powers during the nineteenth century certainly led to a quickening of the pace of development. The political revolution of 1868, usually known as the Meiji Restoration, set the scene for an overt interaction with Western society and culture in all fields, with a view to adopting that which might be profitable in Japan's own interests. This was indeed not a mere "restoration" (of imperial power over against that of the shoguns), but rather a dramatic revolution which catapulted Japan visibly into the league of modern states. Within a very short time, as is well known, Japan was competing with the imperialist powers which had threatened it and forced it "open". The speed with which new ideas were adopted, but also adapted, was only possible, however, because of the preceding history. There was a class of successful merchants, on the one hand, and well-informed ex-samurai, on the other hand, who together provided the intellectual and managerial base for rapid change. New, intellectually, was the sense of a need to measure ideas against the ideas of the Western world. There are many examples of Japanese thinkers who were able to do this, and thought it necessary, in their various fields. As a result of their very success, the value of the heritage which enabled them to do it has often been obscured. Hence the story is sometimes distorted.

3. Three phases in the development of Japanese "science of religions"

Returning specifically to the "science of religions", it was mentioned near the beginning that the Japanese Association for the Study of Religions was founded in 1930. In comparative terms this is quite a long time ago. The first International Congress for the History of Religions had been held in Paris in 1900, while the International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR), related to the series of congresses inaugurated in Paris, was not itself founded as an organization until 1950. It was not long until, in 1958, an international congress in this series was hosted in Japan.¹⁰ Anesaki Masaharu, the founding president of the Japanese association, had himself been ap-

¹⁰ For details of the series of congresses and the relevant proceedings, including the one held in Tokyo and in Kyoto in 1958, see my compilation in the archive section of the IAHR website.

pointed to the first professorship in this field, at Tokyo Imperial University, now Tokyo University, twenty-five years earlier, in Meiji 38 (1905). But this was itself by no means an absolute beginning. Such institutional decisions of course have a prehistory. From a historical point of view therefore we also have to ask what took place before then which made these particular developments possible. That takes us back earlier in the Meiji Period. The second half of the nineteenth century saw the rapid modernization of Japan under the “hands-on” leadership of the Emperor Meiji and his governments. This involved energetic intellectual interaction with the Western world, which included thinking about various aspects of religion, partly for cultural and partly for political reasons. But, as we have already seen, the dramatic events which had led to the “Restoration” of Imperial power in 1868 were themselves more than an opportunistic reaction to the pressure of the Western imperial powers. They too had their domestic background in the Tokugawa Period. The major changes relating to what is commonly called “modernization”, already referred to above, were also accompanied, admittedly in the minds of only a few, by changes in the way in which religions were reflected on and indeed studied. We can therefore speak, altogether, of three broadly definable phases in the development of the “science of religions” in Japan, and these will now be briefly reviewed.

The three phases are therefore (1) antecedents in the Tokugawa Period, (2) the period of intensive interaction with the Western world during the second half of the nineteenth century and continuing into the twentieth century, and (3) the period of the formal establishment and consolidation of the discipline during the twentieth century. These phases of thought about religion in Japan are in a very broad sense parallel to but, it should be noted, not dependent on contemporary Western developments.

As to the *first phase*, I have sought to show in several previous publications that there are antecedents in the intellectual history of Japan during the Tokugawa Period (or Edo Period) which are very relevant to an understanding of the development of the “science of religions” (see Pye 1973; 1983; 1992; 1994). It was during the early eighteenth century that, for the first time in Japanese intellectual life, reflection about religion became significantly independent of religious thought itself, at least among a few. In particular the writings on religion by Tominaga Nakamoto (1715-1746), and their later reception, may be regarded as a kind of Japanese “Enlightenment” (in

the sense of *Aufklärung*).¹¹ The basic materials for becoming acquainted with Tominaga's approach may be found in the book of translations by the present writer entitled *Emerging from Meditation* (1990). The main characteristics of his writings on religions are as follows. First, he perceived them to be plural in number and regarded this plurality as interesting, referring to Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism, and Shinto. Second, his approach was based on principles of textual and historical criticism, polemically pursued. Third, he mounted a historical critique of Buddhist origins, in which he argued among other things that the sutras of Mahayana Buddhism did not stem from the Buddha himself. Note that this critical thrust did *not* occur in dependence on nineteenth-century Western scholarship, as has often been supposed. The point was already made within the Japanese intellectual tradition. Fourth, he provided an analysis of diversity and innovation within the overall stream of Buddhism and explained this with a psychological motivation.

Tominaga was not alone, however, in pre-Meiji times. Also relevant are the beginnings of folklore studies in the context of "national learning" (*kokugaku*) and Shinto studies. This phase can be regarded as being akin, though not closely similar, to the Romantic period in Europe. A dominant figure here was Motoori Norinaga who, unlike Tominaga, worked in favor of the "national learning" and thus as an apologist for the Shinto religion. At the same time, his approach was philological and displayed a consciousness of his own distance from the archaic past of Japan. He also quoted Tominaga approvingly, though only in connection with his historical critique of Buddhism.

It is of great importance to recognize the existence of this first phase, which is often completely ignored. During the subsequent Meiji Period it was commonplace to regard everything which had gone before as backward and negative and, above all, not modern and progressive. In all fields, models were sought in the Western world. The reverberations of this misleading view of Japan's own history have continued down to recent times (see further below) and, as a result, the Tokugawa Period has been underestimated, and is often completely ignored in Japanese presentations of the development of reflection about and the study of religion.

¹¹ For a comparison with the European Enlightenment based in particular on the writings of Lessing and Tominaga Nakamoto see Pye 1973, but note that it was written before I was able to prepare detailed translations of the latter's writings.

The *second main phase* is the period of direct interaction with Western studies of religion. This phase began during the nineteenth century, especially in the latter part of it, i.e., from the beginning of the Meiji Period. However, interaction with Western thought on religion was complicated by the pressure of Western powers to allow Christian missionary work to take place (after Christianity had been banned for over two hundred years), thereby leading to complicated questions about freedom of “religion” and the political status of religion.

This phase, being so important for the development of Japan in many respects, is sometimes erroneously regarded as the absolute beginning of Japanese scholarship on religion. This is suggested in the statesmanlike but misleading account provided by J. M. Kitagawa in his foreword to Hori Ichiro’s book *Folk Religion in Japan: Continuity and Change* (1968).¹² Kitagawa writes that

scholarly enquiry into Japanese religion and culture was pioneered in the latter part of the nineteenth century by a number of talented Western scholars. Some of them—for example Basil Hall Chamberlain, Karl Florenz, and Ernest Fenolosa—were academicians by profession, while others were what George B. Sansom called ‘scholarly amateurs’—for example William G. Aston, Ernest M. Satow, Charles Eliot, John Batchelor, and Sansom himself. (Hori 1968: vi-vii)

These writers contributed immensely, in their various ways, to Western knowledge about Japanese culture including religion. However, by the nature of the case, they did not add very much knowledge to that already available to Japanese people themselves.¹³

In a rather general sense the writings of various influential people may be regarded as belonging to this second phase. A typical example of the approach taken at the time is that of Inoue Enryō (1858-1919), who was born into the family of a temple priest belonging to the Jōdo Shinshū tradition of Buddhism (Higashi Honganji). He

¹² Hori’s book consists of “Haskell Lectures” given at Chicago, where Kitagawa was professor of history of religions as a colleague of Mircea Eliade and Joachim Wach.

¹³ Nor were they specialists in the study of religions, and while a writer such as Charles Eliot was very sympathetic to the various forms of Japanese Buddhism (Eliot 1935), it must be said that Aston’s judgements on Shinto (Aston 1905) were really quite wide of the mark and did not assist in getting this religion correctly understood in the wider context of the study of religions. For a survey of the checkered story of Western studies of Shinto, see Pye 1982.

learned English, studied philosophy at the (then) Tokyo Imperial University, and was widely active as a publisher and a writer. Reacting against the pressure to pay attention to Western thought, he emphasized a return to the philosophical roots of Buddhism and in 1887 he founded an institute for the study of philosophy, the Tetsugakkan, to promote his program. This institute was later transformed into the modern Tōyō University located in Tokyo. Inspired by Inoue Enryō, Tōyō University symbolizes its position in the intellectual universe by displaying plaques of four thinkers: the Buddha, Confucius, Socrates, and Kant. This choice displays the attempt to achieve a balance between East and West typical of the time. Inoue was particularly concerned to debate the nature of Buddhism in the modern world, but he did this with reference to wider issues in philosophy, education and religion, with titles such as (translated) *The Practical Study of Religion* (1890) and *The Ethical Study of Religion* (1891).

In a more specialized direction a number of Japanese Buddhist scholars took up, in a sustained way, the challenge of historico-critical research which, particularly with respect to Indian and Buddhist studies, was being developed strongly in the Western world. A well-known example is Nanjō Bunyū (1849-1927) (usually named Nanjio Bunyiu in Western contexts), who benefitted greatly from studying in association with Max Müller, with whom he published Sanskrit editions of two of the three most important sutras in Pure Land Buddhism. He became best known for his catalogue of the Chinese Buddhist Canon which appeared (in English) as early as 1883.¹⁴ Also associated with Max Müller was Takakusu Junjirō, who translated the “Meditation on Buddha Amitayus” for Volume XIV of the series *Sacred Books of the East*, published in 1894, and went on to be one of the chief editors of the *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō* (*The Tripitaka in Chinese*), published in one hundred volumes from 1924 to 1935 in Tokyo. Murakami Senshō (1851-1929) came from a Jōdo Shinshū family,

¹⁴ It should be noted that this has now been completely superseded by the catalogue published by the French-funded Hōbōgirin Institute in Kyōto (Demiéville, Durt and Seidel 1978). One of the difficulties with Nanjō’s catalogue is that, no doubt following the stimulus of European scholars, he provided numerous Sanskrit “restitutions” of titles for which there is no evidence in known Sanskrit literature. Looking at this positively, in terms of his own times, it demonstrated a renewed interest in the Indian origins of Buddhism, which has been maintained unabated down to the present day, combined with an awareness of the importance of philological studies for elucidating this background.

like Nanjō Bunyū, and took up modern Buddhist studies in a clearly critical intellectual manner. At one stage his priestly qualification was withdrawn by the head temple of the denomination, the Higashi Honganji, because of his published assertion that the Mahayana sutras did not stem from the Buddha but were later compositions.¹⁵ Maeda Eun (1857-1930) took the same line over this issue and his priestly qualification was withdrawn in 1904 by the head temple of the other main Shinshū denomination, the Nishi Honganji. It was restored in 1905. These were prominent cases. Maeda had been appointed head of the (then) Takanawa Buddhist University (now Ryūkyō University), and in 1906 was appointed to be president of the Tōyō University founded in the spirit of Inoue Enryō mentioned above. Another well-known scholar in this field was Inoue Tetsujirō of the (then) Tokyo Imperial University who applied the methods of historical criticism to the study of the life of the Buddha. These studies all led to a certain amount of stress in the Buddhist world, especially as it became clear to all who studied the question that the sutras lying at the basis of most Japanese Buddhism did not emanate from the Buddha himself, even though prefaced with the words “Thus I have heard” which traditionally implied that they did. It is striking that this recognition only became widespread among Buddhist scholars after the exposure of a number of them to Western scholarship. It is very significant, however, that the same point had already been argued long before with great irony, and indeed effectively proven, by Tominaga Nakamoto. This was long before any contact with Western scholars over such questions.

The steady importation of critical criteria into research into Buddhism meant that a certain closeness could be achieved between Buddhist-oriented scholarship and the more general study of religion. This closeness has been developed in academic quarters down to the present. It is symbolic that in the present-day Tokyo University the Department of Indian and Buddhist Studies is next door to the Department of Religion. At the same time this closeness was not unequivocal in the sense of leading to a restriction of research publications to historical and philological studies or to the “science of

¹⁵ His main academic activities were in Tokyo, including being professor of Indian philosophy there from 1917. In 1924 he was reconciled with the Higashi Honganji and in 1926 became president of the associated Ōtani University (Kashiwara and Sonoda 1994).

religion” approach. Inoue Tetsujirô, for example, sought to combine the spirit of historical criticism with a modernizing revitalization of Buddhism, attacking Christianity in the process. This position was adopted in a widely read article entitled “The conflict between religion and education” (1893), which Inoue wrote as a response to the Christian Uchimura Kanzô’s refusal to bow before the Imperial Rescript on Education during a ceremony (on this conflict, see Kishimoto 1956: 254-257). Although for Uchimura himself this was not the issue, the main Buddhist criticism of Christianity was, then, that it was internationalist rather than sufficiently patriotic. The wide spectrum of interests covering textual studies, the history of Indian religious thought, and studies in Japanese Buddhism continues to be reflected in the pages of the standard journal *Indogaku Bukkyôgaku (Indian and Buddhist Studies)* published from the base in Tokyo University.

A similar, partial rapprochement with “science of religion” on the part of Shinto-oriented scholars began much more hesitantly. Of considerable interest is the work by Katô Genchi entitled *A Study of Shinto: The Religion of the Japanese Nation* (1926). Katô sought to interpret Shinto in the context of a number of themes current in Western comparative religion, such as animism, polytheism versus monotheism, and mythology, while at the same time concluding that it had a unique quality and a special role to play in the protection of the Japanese nation. The dominance of nationalist ideology, which mobilized Shinto heavily for political purposes, inhibited this discussion. Only later, after the end of the Pacific War, was the process of intellectual rapprochement gradually brought to maturity, as for example in the writings of specialists such as Sonoda Minoru.¹⁶ This was made possible partly by the disestablishment of Shinto from a position of state privilege and partly as a result of the development of an independent study of religions, which had in the meantime begun to establish itself.

The *third phase* in the development of the science of religion was set in motion when, towards the end of the Meiji Period, the study of

¹⁶ A representative, if rather recent work is his *Matsuri no Genshōgaku* (i.e., *Phenomenology of Festivals*) published in 1990. Sonoda is well known as a sociologist of religion who at the same time takes the “phenomenology of religion” seriously. Religiously, he succeeded to the position of chief priest at Chichibu Shrine, known in particular for its lantern-hung “night festival” (*yomatsuri*), while academically he has taught at the Shintô-oriented Kokugakuin University in Tokyo and in the graduate school of the state and hence secular Kyôto University.

religion was formally set up as a university discipline and consequently became established on a non-confessional basis. At earliest, this development can be said to begin with lectures on “comparative religion” (*hikaku shūkyō*) given in 1890 (Meiji 23) by the aforementioned Inoue Tetsujirō at Tokyo Imperial University. In 1896 (Meiji 29) Kishimoto Nobuto and Anesaki Masaharu founded a “study association for comparative religion” (*hikaku shūkyō gakkai*). However, the subject was only really firmly established in 1905 with the installation of Anesaki Masaharu with a professorship in the discipline of “study of religion” (*shūkyōgaku*) at Tokyo Imperial University (now Tokyo University).¹⁷ This phase has a pre- and a post-war aspect in a more or less continuous development running up to the present day and including such well known names as Kishimoto Hideo, Tamaru Yoshinori, Wakimoto Tsuneya, Yanagiwa Keiichi, and their successors.

Anesaki himself became well known among Western readers for his work *History of Japanese Religion, With Special Reference to the Social and Moral Life of the Nation*. While this work was first published only in 1930, it was originally drafted for lectures given at Harvard University during 1913-1915. The preface makes interesting reading. We find here a typical sense of the presumed tension between Western science and eastern spirituality.

In putting this book before the Occidental public, the author, an Oriental, wishes to acknowledge his indebtedness to the modern science of the Occident. For it is modern science that has trained his mind in its methods and scope, and opened his eyes to many aspects of the present subject which otherwise would have remained unnoticed. At the same time gratitude is due to the sages and saints of the Orient whose souls and spirits have inspired and moulded the author's spiritual life, however meagre and unworthy it be.

Anesaki's work is also interesting because of his emphasis on the values of Prince Shōtoku (574-622), of whom a very positive appraisal was quite clear in the work just mentioned. It is interesting to see, however, that at a time when internationalism was unpopular and an extremely nationalist form of Shinto was in the ascendancy, he emphasized strongly the universalism of Shōtoku's civilizational and re-

¹⁷ These details are drawn from Tamaru's *Shūkyōgaku no rekishi to kadai* (1987), a work which itself is mainly concerned with introducing and discussing the Western history of the discipline for Japanese readers.

ligious values, which were derived from Confucianism and Buddhism.¹⁸ Another Buddhist figure about whom Anesaki wrote with some sympathy was the controversial Nichiren (1222-1282). As a title for this work in the English language he chose *Nichiren, The Buddhist Prophet*, thus drawing on a concept from the Western history of religions to characterize a Japanese Buddhist.

Currently the academic study of religion by Japanese scholars, which has some interesting specific characteristics, makes a lively contribution to public discourse, especially with reference to the new religions which are so numerous and influential in the country. There is an interesting spectrum to be considered here, as the question of the relative "religiousness" or "non-religiousness" of the population continues to be a fascinating theme in Japan itself. Leading contemporary specialists in the study of religion naturally highlight their particular interests. With apologies to them all, it is unfortunately not possible to develop a contemporary bibliography within the scope of this article. The following well-known names with their main specialities will illustrate the spectrum as it relates to the study of religions within Japan: Abe Yashiya (religion and political and legal questions; Araki Michio (new religions in Japan); Miyake Hitoshi (religious folklore and mountain religions); Shimazono Susumu (sociology of urban religion, and new religions); and the previously mentioned Sonoda Minoru (Shinto studies and phenomenology of festivals). Further impressions may be gathered from the Japanese language journal *Shūkyō Kenkyū*, published by the Japanese Association for the Study of Religions, or in English language journals such as *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* or *Japanese Religions*, which are edited by foreigners but often carry articles by Japanese colleagues. Yet these sources can only go a small way in reflecting the huge quantity of writing by large numbers of specialists, engaged as they are in various aspects of Buddhist studies and in the study of various religions of the world, including Christianity and Islam. The main religious bearings in the background consciousness of specialists in religion are provided by Buddhism and Shinto. A number of Buddhist and Shinto oriented universities provide a base for scholars whose work is partly carried out in the service of the religion in question and partly pertains to the more general academic study of religions. But minority religions also

¹⁸ See for example his article "The foundation of Buddhist culture in Japan: The Buddhist ideals as conceived and carried out by the Prince-Regent Shōtoku" (1943).

play a role. For example, there is a tradition of the scholarly study of religion (and a superb, well-balanced, and historically interesting library on the subject) at Tenri University, sponsored by the religion known as Tenrikyô (“Teaching of Heavenly Truth”). The well established *Tenri Journal of Religion* contains articles directly presenting Tenri traditions and theology and also articles which deal with various problems in the general study of religions.

It has not been possible to present here a full historical picture of any of these three phases. The necessary documentation would go far beyond the scope of this paper, and indeed the research time is not available to produce it in a manner which would be both detailed and balanced. Much more would need to be said about Japanese studies of religions outside the East Asian context which has been foregrounded above. Such studies, e.g., of Middle Eastern religions from ancient times up to and including Islam, or of Latin American religions, were not taken up until after the interaction with the Western world began to have its effect. The main thrust of this article, however, is to point out the deep roots of Japanese studies of religions, which, naturally, were directed in the first instance towards China, India, and Japan itself. Among the reference points indicated above, some are well known and others less well known. The purpose of this brief account has been to locate such reference points in the context of more general questions about the periodization of intellectual history and “modernity” which can so easily be distorted and misconstrued.

4. *The Japanese component in the science of religions*

In this concluding section, the question of how to view the development of the “science of religion” in Japan will be linked up with the key questions in the wider view of its history and problematics mentioned above under “wider considerations”.

It will be recalled that, first, the question was raised as to which intellectual threads should be considered to form a part of the modern history of the study of religions in the first place. In the case of Japan the story of the study of religions should certainly be widened to include those antecedents which were present in Japanese intellectual life itself. This applies in particular to the stunning contribution of Tominaga Nakamoto in the first half of the seventeenth century. Such contributions are important in understanding the history of

ideas, even if later persons have to learn the same lessons from elsewhere, as turned out to be the case in the nineteenth century. It was possible to suppress or forget Tominaga's ideas at the time in Japan, whereas later the power-laden confrontation with the Western world led Japanese Buddhist scholars, painfully, to recognize the same points all over again. Though Tominaga was regarded as a threat to pious religion, it is far from clear that his arguments and his understanding of history were or are necessarily contrary to Buddhist teaching in the long run. Rather, his researches put the study of Buddhism on to a modern critical-historical basis, within the not inconsiderable range of information then available to him. Although the data at his disposal did not extend to Indian languages and texts in Sanskrit or other Indian languages, it is remarkable that he was able to demonstrate effectively that the Mahayana Buddhist sutras did not stem from the Buddha himself but were the product of later schools. Not only this, he asked why it might be that a variety of schools and texts with varying teachings should appear, and gave his analysis of the matter without any recourse to normative religious judgements on his own part. The fact that such a breakthrough could be achieved should be honored as one of the main starting points in the modern development of the study of religion in Japan. Since this case is in principle clear, it then becomes of interest to ask what elements in the Japanese intellectual world made his work possible, and in what ways these elements were also present among other thinkers. Renewed study of the work of Motoori Norinaga could well be undertaken from this point of view. Though he was a Shinto apologist, he was also modern (and "romantic") in the sense that he had to look back across a long bridge of several centuries to the mythological roots which he valued. The "distancing" involved here is what made it possible for him to come to be regarded as one of the early figures in the development of Japanese folk-lore studies. Since folk-lore studies are close to the study of religion, the question of what antecedents are to count in the formation of the science of religion is raised again in another way.

Second, the political context must be considered. The impact of Western imperialist expansion on Japan was very dramatic, though it did not lead to colonization. On the one hand, Japan itself became a colonial power in Korea, northern Asia, and, during the Pacific War years, further afield. During the war the Ministry of Education published a book whose title may be translated as *The Religious Culture of*

Greater East Asia (Kiyohito 1943), which gave a survey, illustrated with a number of photographs, of the religions in the various occupied countries. It is interesting to see here how the subject matter is objectified from within an imperialist perspective.¹⁹ On the other hand, the dominant theme from the nineteenth century onwards was how to deal with, partly by learning from, the evidently very effective Western powers. Thus while many intellectuals sought to assert the independence and integrity of “Eastern” culture and thought, there was at the same time a psychologically complex reaction which tended to shut out a perception of those very intellectual bases which made sophisticated interaction with Western thought entirely possible. Even during the postwar period of the twentieth century the same reaction is often found, no doubt because of the shock and reorientation caused by total military defeat. Another motivation for playing down the Japanese intellectual roots of the study of religion lies in the wish to preserve cultural “difference”. That is, there is a tendency to blame Western scholarship for the emergence of dry subjects such as history and sociology, while imitating them assiduously, so that Japanese culture and thought itself can be presented in a more mysterious and attractive light. Suzuki Daisetsu was a great adept in this approach, which he learned at the World’s Parliament of Religions held in Chicago in 1893.²⁰ In sum, just as there is a need for a “postcolonial” history of the study of religions, there is also a need for a “post-reactions-to-the-West” or post-occidental history of the same subject.

The third question of interest is about the inter-culturality of the study of religion. On the one hand, it might be argued that the science of religion can be carried out in principle anywhere and by anybody, just like any other “science”. On the other hand, the formation within specific cultural areas of specialists engaging in it, and in many cases the focusing of research on those same areas, means that strong, culturally influential models come into play. It is important for us to notice that this is happening, partly so that they can be

¹⁹ Subjects dealt with range from Siberian shamanism to the Muslim tradition of Malaysia, as well as leading features of Chinese and Indian religions. Inside the cover the publication also advertises ideological works such as the influential *Kokutai no Hongi*, a normative statement of ideologized state Shintô (see Gauntlett and Hall 1974).

²⁰ This gathering, though culturally influential, should be regarded as being of no more than marginal significance in the development of the academic study of religions, in spite of the importance sometimes attached to it.

adjusted or even counteracted if necessary, but partly because they may be heuristically enriching when compared with each other or transposed from one culture to another. Japanese scholars such as Tamaru and Yanagawa have gone to some trouble, for example, to consider the possible relevance of the secularization model to Japan.²¹ Looking at it in the other direction two major themes have long been of importance, as mentioned in the introduction to this article. These are the recognition of (1) the reality of religious pluralism and (2) of the responsibility of the state in regulating religious affairs. In the case of Japan the recognition of the pluralism of religions occurred at an early date, and indeed had Chinese models. It was a major theme in the writings of Tominaga Nakamoto in the eighteenth century, and it is of no less importance today. It may be reliably stated that while many academics concerned with religion in some way or other are mainly concerned with the fortunes of one particular religious tradition, the “science of religion” in Japan certainly is fundamentally aware of this plurality of religions. The other deeply set assumption, which is often but not always related to it, is that in some way or other the various religions will stand in a relationship to society and the state, and that the question as to how this is so is a valid and recurring question. As political fortunes have changed, the prominence of the various religions has also changed, and in recent years quite particular problems have emerged, such as the legal border between “customs” and religion, or the range of activities permitted to small religious organizations. The continuing assumption in Japan, however, is that these are matters of public concern, and that specialists in religion are expected to be providers of relevant information in the formation of judgements about them. To notice this is not to say that similar models are not available elsewhere. However, in the case of Japan no “science of religion” is disposed to overlook them. Perhaps specialists elsewhere can learn from observing this.

Philipps-Universität Marburg
FG Religionswissenschaft
Landgraf-Philipp-Str. 4
D-35032 Marburg, Germany

²¹ These contributions are found in a special feature issue of *The Journal of Oriental Studies*, published in 1987 by The Institute of Oriental Philosophy, an institution sponsored by the Sōka Gakkai.

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