

Religion, Secularity, and the Articulation of the “Indigenous” in Modernizing Japan

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Recent debates about “religion” and “secularity” have focused increasingly on the principle of separating state and religion. Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo and Islam are among the most typical topics in question. Generally speaking, the so-called critical intellectuals in Japan have fundamentally diverging reactions to these topics. In the case of the homage paid by Japanese prime ministers to the war dead at Yasukuni Shrine, the separation of state and religion is almost inevitably put forward as the reason why they should refrain from doing so. On the other hand, Japanese intellectuals question the validity of the same principle in the case of Islam, since the separation of state and religion is seen as a product of Western enlightenment, which applies only to a specific historical and regional context. Here we encounter two opposing attitudes regarding the question how a non-Western society under Western influence should cope with its own social problems: in the first case, Western principles must be applied without fail, while in the second case these principles are regarded as not entirely appropriate for the realities of non-Western societies. This behavioral twist may be best described in the words of social anthropologist Talal Asad, who stated that even people outside the Western world live “in a world in which ‘the West’ is hegemonic” and where “the old opposition between modernity and tradition” no longer functions. Instead they find themselves in a convoluted state “at once modern and traditional, both authentic and creative at the same time.”¹ From this point of view, even the Islamist claim for the unity of state and religion and the revival of Islam are fundamentally new phenomena resulting from resistance against Western secularization,

1. Asad 1996.

and cannot be explained only by principles directly derived from premodern Islamic traditions.

As has been eloquently described in recent studies on the relationship of colonialism and religion, non-Western countries, in order to avoid colonization by Western superpowers, have no other option than to promote Westernization if they want to have their autonomy recognized. On the other hand, a country that opens its doors “defenselessly” towards the Western world may still end up in a state of colonization, culturally dominated and politically exploited by the West. If we consider the above-mentioned separation of state and religion under these suppositions, we realize that the problem lies in the fact that non-Western societies are drawn into the Western concept of religion and its related systems. Thus, rather than ask whether or not the separation of state and religion should be enforced in Japanese society, it is necessary to concretely investigate when and how this principle was introduced into modern Japan and which functions it performed.

In the Japanese postwar society, separation of state and religion has been seen as a universal principle of Western enlightenment introduced to prevent the instrumentalization of religion by nationalist ideologies. Yet in Western societies, separation of state and religion is rather the exception than the rule, and even among those that are generally believed to have achieved its realization, i.e., the United States and France, substantial differences still exist. Asad comments on these heterogeneous aspects within Western societies:

For even in modern secular countries the place of religion varies. Thus although in France both the highly centralized state and its citizens are secular, in Britain the state is linked to the Established Church and its inhabitants are largely nonreligious, and in America the population is largely religious but the federal state is secular.²

While elite intellectuals of the Meiji period, like Shimaji Mokurai 島地默雷 (1838–1911) or Inoue Kowashi 井上毅 (1844–1895),³ did not go as far as

2. Asad 2003, p. 5.

3. Shimaji Mokurai, was trained as a Shin Buddhist monk, joined the Iwakura Mission (1871–1873) for some time, and served as a religious adviser of the Meiji government (see also below, note 19). Inoue Kowashi was another Meiji government adviser and co-drafter of the Meiji Constitution.

theorizing about the discrepancies between political systems and social realities, they were well aware of this diversity at the time the Constitution of the Empire of Japan (promulgation in 1889) was drafted. They created labels like “state-religion system” for Great Britain, “supremacy of state over church” for Prussia, “system of publicly acknowledged religion” for France, or “separation of state and religion” for the USA, and finally opted for the Prussian model of “religious tolerance” as stated in Article 28 of the Constitution, which reads: “Japanese subjects shall, within limits not prejudicial to peace and order, and not antagonistic to their duties as subjects, enjoy freedom of religious belief (*shinkyō no jiyū* 信教ノ自由).”⁴ In contrast to the present constitution (adopted in 1947), which clearly provides that “the State and its organs shall refrain from religious education or any other religious activity” (Article 20.3),⁵ the Imperial Constitution consciously avoided issues pertaining directly to the separation of state and religion. Once the Constitution was promulgated, the system it established came to be taken as a given and the possibility of a perspective objectifying it was lost. After Japan’s defeat at the end of World War II, which meant the end of this system, religious policies were reorganized under the guidance of the United States. This time, the separation of state and religion according to American law came to be regarded as the universal model.

Starting from the above mentioned issues, this essay aims at a new look on how the separation of state and religion in modern Japanese history was related to State Shinto, and in which way the dichotomy of the “religious” and the “secular” articulated itself in modernizing Japan. I will conclude this discussion with some general thoughts on the tennō system in modern Japanese society.

4. National Diet Library. “The Constitution of the Empire of Japan.” Trans. by Itō Miyoji. URL: <http://www.ndl.go.jp/constitution/e/etc/co2.html> (2012/10/20).

5. Ibid.

THEORIES ON STATE SHINTO AND THE SEPARATION OF STATE AND RELIGION

A recent essay titled “Postwar State Shinto and Shrines as Religious Organizations”⁶ by the religion scholar Shimazono Susumu 島藺進, created somewhat of a stir in Japanese society. In this essay, which was meant as a comment on the general interest in the “Yasukuni question,” Shimazono argues that even in the postwar society “State Shinto has not vanished. What is more, it has never been abolished.” According to Shimazono, the word “State Shinto” has been used in two ways so far: in a narrow sense—used by Shinto scholars such as Sakamoto Koremaru 阪本是丸 or Ashizu Uzuhiko 葦津珍彦—“it refers to ‘Shrine Shinto’ that had been defined as nonreligious and was therefore excluded from the category of religion,” while in a broader sense—used for instance by the scholar of religion Murakami Shigeyoshi 村上重良—“it refers to a combination of Shrine Shinto, Imperial Shinto, and ideology of national essence (*kokutai* 国体).”⁷ In other words, State Shinto in the latter sense also includes the prewar tennō system and its ideology of “national morality” (*kokumin dōtoku* 国民道德) exemplified by veneration of the Imperial Rescript on Education and the imperial portrait (*goshin'ei* 御真影).⁸

Shimazono himself advocates a broader definition of “State Shinto” based on an understanding that also includes all the ritualistic aspects originally related to the notion of Shinto. This “imperial ritualism or Imperial Shinto [...] is the core of State Shinto as it exists within the present system of law.” Shimazono further explains the nature of this imperial State Shinto in the following way:

Imperial ritualism consists of rites performed by the tennō as a descendent of the Great Deity Amaterasu. By their reverence towards the tennō, who possesses the characteristics of a sacred king

6. “Sengo no kokka shintō to shūkyō shūdan to shite no jinja” 戦後の国家神道と宗教集団としての神社 (Shimazono 2006).

7. Shimazono 2001, pp. 324–26.

8. In the prewar period, every school had to have a copy of the Imperial Rescript on Education (*Kyōiku chokugo*, drafted in 1890) together with an imperial portrait. Both were the objects of special ceremonies at important school events.

(*saishiō* 祭祀王), the Japanese people are connected to a system of state deities.⁹

According to this interpretation, even postwar imperial rituals are obviously Shinto-like activities. Since any form of Shinto is now regarded as a form of religion, and since the tennō is regarded as a symbol of the Japanese people, his ritual performing of rites for the native deities (*kami*) must be interpreted as a breach of the postwar constitution’s provision of separating state and religion.

On the other hand, constitutional jurist Hirano Takeshi 平野武 points out that “the word ‘State Shinto’ (*kokka shintō*) was not in common use before the war, but became widely known only after the so-called Shinto Directive.”¹⁰ Before that time, i.e., from the Meiji period to 1945, which according to postwar scholars was the period of State Shinto, the term was virtually nonexistent in official or academic contexts. Postwar scholars therefore have not been able to find the term in prewar society, even if they have claimed its existence. Therefore, State Shinto must not be regarded as a precondition that influenced all sorts of political decisions before the war, but as an analytical term for a political process that took shape in an erratic succession of legal provisions.

Since State Shinto is a terminus ex post, conclusions as to when it came into existence, or whether or not it indeed existed, depend largely on its respective definition.¹¹ In other words, we cannot expect univocal agreement if we pose the question in the traditional substantialist way: “What is State Shinto?” Yet this does not mean that we should discard the term altogether. Instead, we should compare the meanings individual scholars have given to “State Shinto” in order to come up with the most plausible interpretation of reality. We should therefore put the question on the terminological efficiency of the different concepts.

9. Shimazono 2006, p. 484.

10. Hirano 1995, pp. 163–64.

11. Isomae 2007a.

To this end, it seems necessary to recall the definition of State Shinto in the *locus classicus* of the term, the Shinto Directive¹² issued by the GHQ.¹³ The following relevant statements can be extracted from this legal document:

2.a. The purpose of this directive is to separate religion from the state [...].

2.c. The term State Shintō within the meaning of this directive will refer to that branch of Shintō (*Kokka Shintō* or *Jinja Shintō*) which by official acts of the Japanese Government has been differentiated from the religion of Sect Shintō (*Shūha Shintō*)¹⁴ [...].

2.e.(2) Shrine Shintō, after having been divorced from the state and divested of its militaristic and ultranationalistic elements, will be recognized as a religion if its adherents so desire [...].¹⁵

By using the term “State Shinto,” the Shinto Directive introduced two new points of view regarding the relation between Shrine Shinto and the state, namely the principle of a firm institutional separation of state and religion and the definition of Shrine Shinto as a religion.

As already mentioned, in prewar Japanese society it was little questioned whether or not the system of State Shinto was in conflict with the separation of state and religion as opposed to “freedom of belief.”¹⁶ The latter was interpreted in the sense that “the state should not intervene in personal matters of religious activity,”¹⁷ which is, according to a widely accepted juridical interpretation, also possible under a system that does not provide separation of state and religion. Within these preconditions, the Japanese government did not opt for the religious system of any particular contemporary Western

12. Issued on 15 December 1945, by the full title: “Matters relating to the abolition of government protection, support, supervision and proliferation of State Shinto or Shrine Shinto.” For the complete English version, c.f. Hardacre 1989, pp. 167–70.

13. General Headquarters of the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers; the occupation government headed by General Douglas MacArthur.

14. “Shūha shintō 宗派神道 aruiwa kyōha shintō 教派神道” in the Japanese version.

15. Quoted from Hardacre 1989, p. 169.

16. For criticism from Christian and also some Buddhist factions, see Kate Wildman Nakai’s chapter in this volume. [Editor’s note.]

17. Ōishi 1996, p. 236.

nation, but applied a specific form of religious tolerance that abstained from enforcing a single belief in a state religion. Certainly, the tennō system, with Shrine Shinto as its main supporter, played the role of a state religion. Yet in order not to be drawn into an ideological contest with religions like Christianity or Buddhism, or to avoid criticism from Western countries for adopting an anti-Christian state religion, the government assigned Shrine Shinto to the realm of “morality” (*dōtoku* 道德) that defined the civic duties of “Japanese subjects.” The distinction between “morality” and “religion,” however, always remained ambiguous, since morality, which was inseparably related to the power of the state, actually interfered in the realm of individual religion. The result of this policy was that any religious organization could gain official recognition as long as it did not object to the tennō-centered nationalism spelled out in the form of “national morality” (*kokumin dōtoku*). General opinion holds that Shrine Shinto actively became a device of state ideology after the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905). In principle, however, the system had already taken shape between the abolition of the “national evangelists” (*kyōdōshoku* 教導職)¹⁸ in 1884 and the proclamation of the Imperial Constitution in 1889.

The fact that the religious policy of the Meiji government did not comply with the separation of state and religion can be gathered from the “Critical Petition Regarding the Three Reaching Principles”¹⁹ issued in 1872 by the already mentioned Shin Buddhist monk Shimaji Mokurai. This petition is

18. The translation “national evangelists” for *kyōdōshoku*, lit. “agents of the way of the teaching,” is borrowed from Hardacre 1989. National evangelists were appointed by the Great Teaching Institute (Taikyō-in), a body set up after the abolition of the Ministry of Shrine Deities (Jingishō) in 1872 to promote a set of religiously influenced moral teachings. They included Buddhist as well as shrine priests. [Translator’s note.]

19. *Sanjō kyōsoku hihan kenpaku sho* 三条教則批判建白書. The three teaching principles referred to here were set up by the government in 1872 as guidelines for the Great Teaching Institute (see note 18) and consisted of three simple phrases: “(1) respect for the gods and love for the country, (2) making clear the principles of Heaven and the Way of Man, (3) reverence for the emperor and obedience to the will of the court” (Hardacre 1989, p. 43). Shimaji, who was instrumental in the Ministry of Shrine Deities being replaced by the Ministry of Religion (Kyōbushō) in 1872, rightly sensed an attempt to oust Buddhists from the campaign for a national religion and thus opted for a more sophisticated model (see also Nitta 2000, pp. 254–56; Fujii 2002).

considered to be the first demand for the separation of state and religion ever put forward in Japan. Yet, while Shimaji maintains that “state and religion are different and should never be mixed since ancient times,” he holds, on the other hand, that “it was because of the interrelationship of state and religion that country became country and man became man for the first time.” Based on the dualism of absolute and mundane truth, he argues that religion must serve the government as soon as it has been separated from the state. For the sake of clarity, I would like to point out an inherent contradiction in Shimaji’s claim for the separation of state and religion. He writes that “institutional conspiracy of state and church (religious institutions) and institutional fusion of political and religious authority should be avoided, and their domains and respective fields of authority should be kept separate. Both should acknowledge the independence of their respective domains.”²⁰ This assertion, however, does not fit well with what he calls the “interrelationship of state and religion.”

From these facts we can detect, among other things, that prewar Japan did not comply with a model of society where “politics and religion” or “morality and religion” were clearly differentiated according to the principle of separating state and religion. Nevertheless, immediately after the war this principle was installed by the GHQ, taking the constitution of the United States as its model. It was a quite common phenomenon also on an international level: at this point in time, the *laïcité de l'État* became constitutional in France, and Germany also carried out the separation of state and religion that had been present to some degree already in the Weimar Constitution. Yet there were certainly different approaches to this separation, ranging from the Soviet Union’s hostility towards religion to the benevolent “nonconcern” of the United States. In the case of Japan, one might have easily expected a hostile stance, since the separation of state and religion was obviously motivated by the desire to abolish State Shinto. Yet, while the first paragraph of the Shinto Directive states that “militarism and ultranationalism perverted Shinto principles and beliefs,” Shrine Shinto itself was acknowledged as a religious belief just as Christianity or Buddhism are. As a result, shrines were regarded favorably even by the GHQ, but the ambivalence regarding their relationship to the tennō remained, leading to continuous discussions concerning their role in state ceremonies, discussions that continue to the

20. Ōnishi and Chiba 2006, pp. 10–11.

present day. This was only partly in accord with the intentions of the GHQ; to some extent it went against their expectations.

Regarding the intentions of the GHQ, the core principle of their occupation policies was to rule and reform Japan by means of the tennō system. To this end they denied the status of a living deity to the tennō but kept his relation to the people unchanged. Yet, while Shrine Shinto was to be “divested of its militaristic and ultranationalistic elements,” the GHQ did not question the intimate relations between the various shrines and the tennō system (as reflected in the fact that many shrines venerate *kami* related to the imperial family, or that the tennō serves the *kami* in various imperial rituals). If only on a symbolic level, the tennō system thus still kept its religious characteristics. Under the pretext of freedom of religion, the tennō’s performing of imperial rituals to his divine ancestors was seen as “the tennō’s personal matter,” notwithstanding the fact that he was publicly regarded as a symbol of the Japanese people. This is the reason the question of imperial ritualism has remained unsolved in the postwar period, as has been pointed out by Shimazono Susumu.

This limited perception of the tennō system reveals at the same time how the Japanese side regarded the problem: Scholars of religion, Shinto scholars, and bureaucrats welcomed the GHQ’s tolerance as a lucky turn of events. Even before the war, doubts had been raised time and again whether enforced reverence at shrines was in accord with the constitutional freedom of religious belief, but arguments that the tennō system itself might violate the constitution were virtually unheard of. This can be easily criticized from today’s point of view, but if we consider that the tennō monarchy was the very foundation of the modern Japanese nation state, this kind of perceptual limitation, namely the tacit approval of the tennō system as a kind of invisible entity beyond the law, was probably unavoidable.

The question we have to ask at this point is how this axiomatic approval of the tennō system became possible. We will have to reevaluate the genealogy of its “extralegal” status. This will lead us to the introduction of the concept of religion in Japan and to the question how the tennō system, under the pretext of an “indigenous tradition,” was seen as a blank space left out in the Western conception. In this respect, I would like to raise another point included in the Shinto Directive, namely its definition of Shrine Shinto as a form of “religion.” By addressing the concretizations of “religion” and “secularity” in prewar society, which included the tennō system, we should arrive

at a perspective different from the postwar discussions, which are based on the precondition of the separation of state and religion.

THE CONCEPT OF RELIGION AND ITS FLUCTUATIONS

When Shrine Shinto, which had hitherto been regarded as “ritualism” (*saishi* 祭祀), was redefined as “religion” (*shūkyō* 宗教) by the Shinto Directive, this led to tremendous changes regarding the status of Shrine Shinto in Japanese society. Based on the doctrine of the nonreligious nature of shrines, religion and ritualism had belonged to different categories in prewar society or were at least officially regarded as different. The borderline between religion and ritualism at that time is plainly illustrated in the following citation from a newspaper essay published in 1890 by the *Tōkyō nichinichi shinbun*:

When we speak of ceremonies (*matsuri* 祭), we refer to ritualism (*saishi*) in the sense of paying homage to the graves of our ancestors or offering flowers and incense to their ancestor tablets at home [...]. Every act of commemoration can be called a ceremony. Teaching (*oshie* 教) on the other hand, bears the meaning of religion (*shūkyō*). It can refer to the tennō or to the Buddha or to any other object of veneration to which we turn in awesome piety as our place of spiritual peace and refuge.²¹

The categories established here reflect the official Shinto policies embodied in the prewar doctrine of the nonreligious nature of Shinto shrines. This doctrine regarded religion as a matter of *individual* faith that everyone could choose freely, in contrast to ritualism, which was a *public* activity and the duty of every loyal citizen. Reverence at shrines was defined as ritualism in order to extricate it from the competition for believers seen as characteristic of religions like Christianity or Buddhism.²² Many contemporary intellectuals saw this distinction as based on the “separation of official and private” (*kan-shi no betsu* 官私ノ別), that is, the political decision that “Shinto, be-

21. The article with the title “On the division of ritual and teaching” (*Saikyō bunri ron* 祭教分離論) by a certain Haanshi 破闇子 is quoted from Yasumaru and Miyachi 1988, p. 274.

22. See Isomae 2000.

ing the foundation of our national essence (*kokutai*), should be promulgated by official governmental institutions.”²³ Without this separation of official and private, ritualism and religion would immediately flow into one another, for as even the above-mentioned newspaper author observed: “Since rituals (*saishi*) are one part of any given religion, I would never say that religion has nothing to do with ritualism.”²⁴

Aside from political considerations of the above sort, Shrine Shinto might be seen as a kind of religion. For believers in other religions this meant that there was a constant danger that the veneration of shrines as a public duty might intrude on the right of religious freedom. The legal situation regarding the nonreligious status of shrines and the separation of religion and ritualism was indeed undecided, as pointed out by the Shin Buddhist scholar Hanada Ryōun 花田凌雲 (1873–1952) in 1926, when he mentioned “the widely known fact that there exists no juridical statement on the question whether [worship at] shrines is religion or not.”²⁵ The Constitution and other judicial documents merely clarified that freedom of faith was guaranteed “within limits not prejudicial to peace and order.” Questions such as whether worship at shrines was religious or ritual, or how such categories were to be defined, were discussed in pamphlets of the government such as the *Jinja hongi* 神社本義 (Fundamental Meaning of Shrines, published in 1944 by the Jingiin), but these statements remained on the level of individual opinions without juridical consequences. Under such extrajudicial conditions, or rather because the nature of Shinto shrines was never defined judicially, debates on this issue were left unresolved time and again. Freedom of belief, therefore, could be wider or narrower depending on the official attitude re-

23. “Shintō wa waga kokutai no kiso nareba tokubetsu kansei o motte senpu seshimubeki” 神道ハ我国体ノ基礎ナレバ特別官制ヲ以テ宣布セシムベキ. “Proposal for Separation of Shrine Staff from National Evangelists” (*Shinkan kyōdōshoku bunri ni tsuki ikensho* 神官教導職分離につき意見書, 1883), quoted from Yasumaru and Miyachi 1988, p. 67.

24. Yasumaru and Miyachi 1988, p. 274.

25. Quoted from the report by the Committee for the Study of Religious Administration (Shūkyō Seido Chōsa Inkai 宗教制度調査委員会, 1926 [vol. 1], p.5). See note 36.

garding shrines. For prewar Japanese society this meant in practice that the amount of religious freedom varied from period to period.²⁶

Under these conditions, the concept of “religion” became a matter of great concern for intellectuals of the time. Intimately related to ritualism, the respective definitions of religion determined not only the nature of shrines but also the extent of religious freedom.

The Japanese term *shūkyō* came into common use as the standard translation of the English word “religion” around 1877. At that time we also see the beginnings of a tacit tolerance of Christianity and the competition between various religions for adherents among the common populace. In the 1890s, when governmental shrine policies had to be brought into line with the professed freedom of religion, we observe an increasing demand for a “precise definition” of religion.

Academic discourse on religion appeared for the first time in Japan in the form of comparative religion introduced by Inoue Tetsujirō 井上哲次郎 (1855–1944) and others, or, somewhat later, with the introduction of the field of religious studies by scholars such as Anesaki Masaharu 姉崎正治 (1873–1949) and Katō Genchi 加藤玄智 (1873–1965).²⁷ Japanese definition of religion can be arranged into two groups: one centered on belief and the other centered on practice. The former is the dominant stream of religious studies in Japan pushed forward by Anesaki, who took Western Protestantism as the model for his image of religion. In his *Shūkyōgaku gairon* 宗教学概論 (General Introduction to the Science of Religion), published in 1900, which laid the foundation for the discipline of religious studies in Japan, Anesaki advances the following definition:

Religion is not simply the history of a single confession or sect, but a concept based on the understanding that all religions are realities of the history of human civilization, and are, as products of the human mind, part of the same process of production.²⁸

This definition is based on a psychological viewpoint that regards the relations between god(s) and humans as “products of the human mind.” Focus-

26. For a concrete example, see the “Yasukuni incident” as described by Kate Wildman Nakai in this volume. [Editor’s note.]

27. See Isomae 2003, chap. 1, and Hayashi Makoto’s chapter in this volume.

28. Anesaki 1982, p. 1.

ing on the religious consciousness of the individual believer, Anesaki maintains that in spite of their differences, the various religions or confessions can be understood as variants of the same phenomenon of “religion.” Religion is therefore not part of a sacred realm or a transcendental sphere. Since everyone possesses some religious inclinations, it belongs to the mundane world and, moreover, is secularized in the sense of “privatization.” No longer excluded from the secular, the sacred can be found within man himself, which in Japan paradoxically led to a new mysticist search for the essence of religious experience. Anesaki, for instance, recounts his own religious experiences in the following way:

Lying alone on the sand at the seashore I enter the realm of the unconscious (*mushin no sakai* 無心の境) [...]. Even if time passes and people change, there is always the unchanging tune of “now” in the flow of eons. Light, do you embrace me? Wave, do you invite me? Body, dissolve in the water, heart, melt away with the light! When I am in this way no longer myself, I cannot help being attracted by such reverberations inside my breast.²⁹

Anesaki’s emphasis on his individual experience clearly draws on the Christian stress on *belief*. From this point of view, religious folk traditions reflect nothing other than “ailments” of religion in the form of superstition. In contrast, Katō Genchi, who had studied together with Anesaki under Inoue Tetsujirō, somewhat belatedly (1938) came forward with another definition of religion, in which Shinto is emphasized as an indigenous religion:

The field of religious studies made a huge progress when it no longer understood “religion” exclusively as universal religions like Buddhism, Christianity and Islam, but also included tribal beliefs of primitive societies³⁰ or national creeds that prospered among

29. Anesaki 1970 [1903], p. 248.

30. Katō uses the term *shizen minzoku* here, which is obviously derived from the German *Naturvolk* (“people of nature”). “Primitive society” is probably the closest English equivalent in texts of the period, although it has slightly different connotations. [Translator’s note.]

common people since ancient times and regarded them with serious academic concern.³¹

Needless to say that this point of view led Katō to an affirmative recognition of Shrine Shinto as a form of religion:

I began to understand that a national religion, as for instance state Shinto (*kokkateki shintō* 国家の神道), even if it does not possess all aspects of a universal religion or a personal religion, is of foremost importance among all religions.³²

Nevertheless, Katō was in full accord with his colleague Anesaki and their common teacher Inoue Tetsujirō that religious belief consciously held by the individual devotee makes up the core of any concept of religion.

In an attempt to overcome this limitation, Yanagita Kunio 柳田国男 (1875–1962), the founder of Japanese folklore studies, put forward an interpretation of Shinto that initiated yet another array of definitions of religion. In his “Personal View of Shinto,” first published in 1918, he wrote: “Any conclusion that shrines serve no other purpose than to pay respect to our forefathers or to exceptional personalities is not based on firm ground, I believe.”³³ He thereby criticized the “national morality” ideology of the Bureau of Shrines³⁴ which tended to interpret all *kami* as men. On the other hand, he was equally dissatisfied with the contemporary interpretations of Shinto scholars and regarded “the thinking about the *kami* that we actually find in rural villages [...], which has neither a doctrine nor a founder” (p. 246) with utmost esteem. Yanagita’s emphasis on communal practice rather than on individual belief influenced a new generation of scholars, who from the 1930s onward began to revise the ideas of Anesaki and Katō. In the form of religious folklore studies introduced by Uno Enkū 宇野円空 (1885–1949) or

31. Katō 2004 [1938], pp. 294–95.

32. Ibid., p. 295. On Katō’s usage of the term “State Shinto”, see also the introduction, p. 6, note 5. [Editor’s note.]

33. Yanagita 2000, p. 245.

34. Founded in 1900 within the Home Ministry, the Bureau of Shrines (Jinja Kyoku 神社局) was solely responsible for the administration of shrines, while all other religious bodies including Sect Shinto were administered by the Bureau for Religions (Shūkyō Kyoku 宗教局). Both offices replaced the Bureau of Shrines and Temples (Shaji Kyoku 社寺局), which had been installed in 1877.

religious anthropology established by Furuno Kiyoto 古野清人 (1899–1979) and others, Yanagita’s views gradually developed into the most common approach to non-Western religions.

This practice-oriented view of religion also spread in the West, as contact with developing countries intensified through colonialism. While religious practices were initially placed at the lowest level of an evolutionary scale that was topped by Christian theology, they gradually came to be regarded as phenomena that deserve special consideration.³⁵ In present-day Japan, interpretations according to the Protestant model still prevail but practice-oriented understandings of religion have begun to erode the preeminent importance attached to religious belief. *Shūkyō* (religion) in the present sense of the word has therefore developed from multiple levels of meaning. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Anesaki and Katō, who were heavily influenced by a Protestant concept of religion, created the first standard interpretation. At the same time, the obvious differences between Christianity, with its fully developed theology, and Japanese Shinto aroused a feeling of discomfort that found its verbal expression in the writings of Yanagita Kunio and Uno Enkū. As the fierce debates within the Committee for the Study of Religious Administration³⁶ between 1926 and 1928 indicate, serious doubts were raised concerning the official doctrine of the nonreligious nature of

35. The above-mentioned social anthropologist Talal Asad, for instance, regards “the development of prescribed moral-religious capabilities, which involve the cultivation of certain bodily attitudes (including emotions), the disciplined cultivation of habits, aspirations, desires” as characteristics not only of Islam but also of medieval Catholicism (Asad 1996). Originally, this kind of religious practice must not be seen as “an autogenetic impulse but as a mutually constituting relationship between body sense and body learning.” It is a fatal error of modern Western interpretations centered on belief to downplay such practices as “obscure meanings” or as “symbols to be interpreted” (Asad 1993, pp. 77 and 62).

As Asad further states, “... in contemporary Protestant Christianity (and other religions now modeled on it), it is more important to have the right *belief* than to carry out specific prescribed practices. [... Belief] has now become a purely inner, private state of mind, a particular state of mind detached from everyday practices. [...] The system of statements about belief is now held to constitute the essence of ‘religion,’ a construction that makes it possible to compare and evaluate different ‘religions’” (Asad 1996).

36. The Committee for the Study of Religious Administration was an advisory board installed by the government between 1926 and 1928. Its purpose was to devise

Shinto shrines. The concept of religion, therefore, held conflicting implications that were never resolved one way or the other. These “fluctuations of the concept of religion” are still valid today, as Shimazono Susumu explains:

While *shūkyō* has been established as the Japanese equivalent of “religion,” the Japanese term does not carry the same connotations as the original. [...] In today’s Japanese society, there is much confusion as to what *shūkyō* actually means, especially when one asks what the main religion of Japan is [...]. In this sense, the Western concept of “religion” has not yet neatly settled in Japan. Rather, it is widely recognized that there is a certain perplexity regarding the concept of “religion.”³⁷

Similarly fluctuating meanings can be also observed in the case of “ritualism” (*saishi*), which served as the counterpart of religion in the nonreligious-shrine doctrine. In the wake of the Meiji Restoration, the slogan “unity of cult and government” (*saisei itchi* 祭政一致) was put forward as one of the major political tenets. This idea deteriorated quite rapidly, however, as can be gathered from the fact that state rituals were soon distributed to a number of quite different institutions: ordinary shrine rituals were overseen by the Bureau of Shrines of the Home Ministry, rites of the Imperial Palace by the Bureau of Ceremonial Matters (Shikibu-ryō 式部寮), and ceremonies at Yasukuni Shrine by the Army Ministry. State rituals, therefore, were not performed according to a consistent, well-coordinated plan of the government. Certainly, these rituals had some obscure characteristics in common, since they were all directed towards Japanese *kami* and did not belong to a “religion” such as Christianity or Sect Shinto, but neither the government nor the general populace had a clear picture of the pantheon in which all these *kami*—ranging from imperial ancestors to imperial loyalists and heroic citizens—existed and how they might be related to each other.

This lack of clarity, however, is a most natural consequence of the fact that apart from its reliance on the tennō system, Shinto does not possess an explicit theology. Rather than being a fundamental defect, this ambiguity took on an important meaning as a blank space for ritualism that is beyond

the legislative framework for a religious policy that would treat the three religions Christianity, Buddhism, and Sect Shinto as equal.

37. Shimazono 1998, p. 63.

logical criticism. The fact that only shrine ritualism and its relation to religion became an issue was probably due to its intimate connections with “national moral education” (*kokumin kyōka* 国民教化), which was always in latent conflict with the people’s freedom of faith. Especially at the time of the Russo-Japanese War, shrine ritualism became intertwined with the national morality discourse propagated by the Ministry of Education. In the words of Kōno Seizō,³⁸ “Shinto makes up our national morality, it is indeed the force behind the Imperial Way.”³⁹ In this way, shrines came to be regarded as the arena of national morality. Thus, the oppositions “ritualism/religion” and “morality/religion,” which had been regarded as being different up to that time, became synonymous within the nonreligious-shrine discourse. Through the equation of the nonverbal physical practice of rituals with “moral behavior,” the nonreligious-shrine doctrine was equally drawn into the secular realm of morality.

Morality, however, was yet another term endowed with a number of meanings. While scholars in the tradition of Western enlightenment, such as Inoue Tetsujirō and others, simply contrasted it with religion, adherents of Shinto, as for instance Kōno Seizō, used it more or less as a synonym for “national essence” (*kokutai* 国体) or the *tennō* system, which defied a precise definition. Especially from the 1920s onward, morality in the latter sense was emphasized by Shinto scholars and conservative circles. Morality embodied a public space that subsumed also the private realm. In the same way, the indigenous ritualism at shrines transcended the distinction between the “secular” and the “religious.” In both cases, the concepts of Western enlightenment were increasingly rejected. At the same time, Shrine Shinto was purged of folk religion elements that were rooted in everyday life. Ironically, this made the conservative plan to integrate Shinto shrines into the curriculum of nationalistic propaganda a fruitless effort.⁴⁰

Since Japanese society before the war did not separate religion from the state and did not draw a clear-cut juridical distinction between “religion and politics” or “religion and morality,” a definition of religion that allowed

38. Kōno Seizō (Shōzō) 河野省三 (1882–1963) was a professor at Tokyo’s Shinto university Kokugakuin Daigaku, which he headed from 1935 to 1946. A leading scholar of Shinto, he was also actively engaged in nationalist propaganda.

39. Kōno 1933, p. 12.

40. As Endō Jun shows in this volume, the facelessness of State Shinto was perceived as a problem even among bureaucrats.

the nonreligious nature of shrines and the possibility to alter the scope of religious freedom was probably the only possible strategy. As demonstrated above, both religion and morality were highly ambiguous terms that were related to each other: a change in the meaning of one term was likely to bring about changes in the other term's meaning as well. Based on this interrelatedness of religion and morality, even the borderline between public and private became fluid. New interpretations of where the one ended and the other began circulated one after the other. All in all, they pointed to the extremely difficult choice between a collectivist or an individualistic conception of human life, and further, between moral or religious norms of human behavior.⁴¹

After the war, the GHQ's policy of separating state and religion merely cemented the ambivalences found in the concept of religion and the non-religious-shrine doctrine in its background, by providing an institutional framework for them. Certainly, the principle to separate state and religion had learned a lesson from the long history of conflicts between religious and secular powers in Western societies, but it cannot be regarded as fitting for all societies, as Islamic societies demonstrate. Regarding present debates about Yasukuni Shrine, it is equally difficult to understand the relations of state and religion, or the role of ritualism, if one does not consider how religious discourses originating in the West were articulated under the above-mentioned peculiar circumstances of Japan.

At this point we should pay special attention to Shimazono's remark that by way of imperial ritualism, religion leaks into the public sphere and may thus endanger the freedom of religion. If we consider this only from a religious perspective as a continuation of State Shinto, however, we will encounter problems in grasping the actual state of affairs. It becomes difficult to understand the historical process by which religious and nonreligious discourses articulated themselves if we attribute all these phenomena a priori to the category of religion. As Talal Asad claims, "there cannot be a universal definition of religion." Rather, a "definition is itself the historical product of

41. The following statement by José Casanova, who criticizes the dualism of Western enlightenment, may help us to understand the problem in the Japanese case: "[...] modern walls of separation between church and state keep developing all kinds of cracks through which both are able to penetrate each other; [...] religion and politics keep forming all kinds of symbolic relations, to such an extent that is not easy to ascertain whether one is witnessing political movements which don religious garb or religious movements which assume political forms" (Casanova 1994, p. 41).

discursive processes.” This pertains also to the terminology of present scholars, which cannot be treated as a transhistorical commodity.⁴² Being the core of Japanese national identity, the tennō system assumed its multilayered character through various oppositions, such as “religion/morality,” “religion/Shinto,” and “Western/indigenous,” not only before but also after the war, and is therefore not simply a phenomenon of State Shinto or religion.

The tennō-centrism of the *kokutai* ideology can be found in the first article of the Imperial Constitution, which stipulated that “the empire of Great Japan will be governed at all times by the tennō.” On the other hand, Articles 4 and 55 provided that the tennō, as a constitutional monarch, should be controlled by the constitution, the parliament, and the government. In this regard, he was confined “within” the constitution as the highest organ of the state. [...] The first article, however, clearly defined him as an absolute power “beyond” the constitution. Moreover, his absoluteness of imperial power was not just founded on “divine right,” as in the case of Western absolutism, but rather on “sacred kingship by a *kami*.” The “contradictions” in these imperial conceptions could only be solved by presenting the tennō as a “living *kami*” (*arahitogami* 現人神).⁴³

As the above quote from Kan Sanjun indicates, the tennō in the modern tennō system was at the same time a sacred king clad in the traditional aura of holiness and a constitutional monarch who embodied Western civilization and enlightenment. This status beyond the law, which can be neither described as religious nor as secular, is the core of imperial authority in the tennō system. We therefore have to ask how the tennō system acquired such an extralegal status and why it continues to hold it even now.

THE TENNŌ SYSTEM AS AN ENTITY BEYOND THE LAW

As we have seen above, the nonreligious shrine doctrine was not shared univocally by the entire population in prewar Japan. Rather, Shrine Shinto was open to different interpretations depending on the respective definition

42. Asad 1993, p. 29.

43. Kan 2001, pp. 58–59.

of religion. In a judicial gray zone, which prescribed neither a state religion nor the separation of state and religion, several opinions, including those of the government, existed side by side. As soon as these opinions went beyond shrine ritualism and questioned the imperial authority residing in its background, however, they were countered by immediate repression, even in times of comparative religious tolerance, as we can see from the scandal in 1890 caused by the Christian teacher Uchimura Kanzō refusing to bow to the portrait of the emperor,⁴⁴ or Kume Kunitake's critical writings on Shinto from 1892.⁴⁵ Neither Uchimura nor Kume intended to reject the tennō system as such, but since they expressed an objection against its authority in their speech and conduct, public punishment was the only answer to be expected. Moreover, this punishment was not executed directly by organs of the government, but was initiated in the name of the entire society by conservative scholars or right-wing political organizations. It was therefore not a judicial matter, but a kind of self-censorship arising from within society, demonstrating how deeply rooted respect towards the tennō system was at that time. In this sense, we should regard the tennō system not as being held up forcefully by state power, but rather as an entity beyond the law that in the eyes of the people could never become the object of criticism. Katō Genchi, for instance, who insisted on the religious nature of Shrine Shinto, did not point out the conflict with the freedom of faith inherent in such a conception, but while pushing Shinto up to the status of a state religion tried to squeeze in religious freedom:

Founded on the belief in the rule of our divine emperor, state Shinto (*kokkateki shintō*), the national religion of Japan, has existed in the mind of the Japanese people since times immemorial, long before Article 28 of the Constitution was drafted. Ranking even higher than the Constitution, it has formed the essence of the Constitution. According to my understanding, the idea of Article 28 is to allow

44. Uchimura Kanzō 内村鑑三 (1861–1930) was forced to resign from his post at the First Higher School after he failed to bow before the newly promulgated Imperial Rescript on Education during a public ceremony.

45. Kume Kunitake 久米邦武 (1839–1931) was forced to resign as a professor at Tokyo Imperial University after he published an article with the title “Shinto Derives from an Ancient Custom of Worship of Heaven” (*Shintō wa saiten no kozoku* 神道ハ祭天ノ古俗).

missionary religions from abroad, such as Buddhism or Christianity, as long as they accept state Shinto as Japan’s national religion and do not get into conflict with it.⁴⁶

Such interpretations of Shrine Shinto as the state religion were not only held by Shinto scholars like Katō, but also by opinion leaders like Minobe Tatsukichi 美濃部達吉 (1873–1948), a representative of democratic liberalism in the Taishō era. Whether they belonged to the conservative or the liberal camp, they all took the position that shrines related to the tennō system should be exempted from the scope of religious freedom, since this would expose them to competition with other religions. Even critical interpretations of Shrine Shinto stopped short of asking questions that might put them into conflict with the tennō system, drawing the line of their criticism here. Therefore, scholars who opted for a different concept of religion than that of Katō eventually arrived at similar conclusions. Anesaki, for instance, who wrote about his own mystical experiences, argued that “the ‘self’ is the center of everything; it is the focal point reflecting the macrocosm.” Still, “one of the centers that unites microcosm and macrocosm in vivid and harmonious communication [...] is the basis of all activities we call ‘state.’ The center of every individual microcosm exists in harmony with the macrocosmic center of the state (or race).”⁴⁷ Thus, Anesaki regarded the state as a fusion of individual consciousnesses in a kind of superego.⁴⁸ In a similar way, Uno and Furuno, who applied a practice-oriented concept of religion, voiced sympathy for the idea of the “Great East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere” and came forward with studies on the new Japanese colonies.⁴⁹ No matter what concept of religion they opted for, they all found themselves united in their support of the tennō system, which they regarded as the essence of ancient Japanese cultural traditions. They imagined the tennō system in the form of the unchangeable “national essence” (*kokutai*), an unfathomable outer sphere that was metareligious, metahistorical, and beyond any definite verbalization. Matsuura Hisateru 松浦寿輝 has aptly explained *kokutai* in the following way:

46. Katō 2004 [1938], pp. 300–301.

47. Anesaki 1904, p. 29.

48. See Isomae 2002.

49. See Hayashi Makoto’s chapter in this volume, esp. pp. 64–67.

In contrast to the pompous ostentation of *kokutai* as an oversensitive *signifiant*, the *signifié* related to it is extremely feeble, almost inexistent. It seems as if *kokutai* did not possess a concrete, explicit meaning but was just a pretext to trigger all kinds of statements concerning it. The noise produced by all these statements seems to have served no other purpose than to enhance the symbolic value of *kokutai*. [...] In this case, if somebody asked what *kokutai* was, such “problematization” would have been regarded as an unconceivable topic that ought to be suppressed. What was protected by the taboo of any questions of this type was probably the tennō system, which means that the tennō system can be identified with *kokutai* itself.⁵⁰

As Yasumaru Yoshio explained somewhat earlier, within Japanese society there was a movement searching for the nation's original traditions, which originated in resistance to Japan's integration into the Western world after the country was opened to the West in the late days of the Tokugawa shogunate. At the same time, there was a call for a historical authority within the country that could replace the shogun. According to Yasumaru, these are the reasons why the tennō system was regarded as Japan's existential foundation in modern Japan.⁵¹ Yet its supreme authority was not regarded solely as the fundament of the Japanese nation-state. It was not merely a single cultural element articulated within the sphere of historical contingency. Like the Christian god in the eyes of his believers, it had to be imagined as the shining unfathomable “beyond” that was unaffected by historical change. In Japanese society, which lacked the idea of a transcendental origin as in monotheistic Christianity, a transcendent entity in the form of an unbroken line of living deities seemed suitable for replacing the Christian god as the founding principle for the nation-state. Moreover, the tennō was both a constitutional monarch based on a Western concept that claimed universal validity, and a sacred king embodying the particularities of Japanese culture, as pointed out by Kan Sanjun. He therefore transcended the opposition of “Japan” and the “West,” or rather, he was perceived as the invisible foundation from which the “secular/religious” dichotomy arose and as such, identical with the empty signifier *kokutai*, an extraliminal existence and therefore beyond the scope of any rational critique.

50. Matsuura 2000, pp. 316–17.

51. Yasumaru 1992, chap. 7.

Only Protestants and Marxists, who were rooted in Western thought, possessed a means of objectifying the tennō system and resisting it. Both relied on a specific worldview that required utmost commitment and which therefore could provide a basis for their adherents to confront the tennō system. Yet in the end, monotheistic transcendence as preached by Protestantism could not take root in the world of critical Japanese intellectuals, and did not result in the rejection of the tennō system as such. While differing from the official mainstream, most believers did not think that their convictions were entirely incompatible with it. The situation finally changed when true Marxism entered the intellectual world of Japan from the 1920s onward, after a secular form of Christianity had prepared the ground in the form of Liberal Theology.

People who believe in the doctrines of a specific religious group have always been few in Japan. Therefore, questions of religious freedom arising from the “religion/shrine” opposition never gained serious footing in the broad strata of society. However, when the exploitation of the people through state powers represented by the tennō was raised as a major topic—as for instance in a statement by the Communist Party in 1932—this secular problem, which pertained to the common people, aroused interest among large numbers of intellectuals, regardless of whether they were devotees of a particular religion or agnostics. Marxism in Japan began with the analysis of the capitalist economy and as an antireligious ideological movement. When Marxists were confronted with the massive enforcement of tennōism from 1933 onward, however, in their opposition they had to address the historical origins of the *kokutai* ideology as well.⁵² According to my examination of academic texts from this period, this was the first time that modern Japanese intellectuals repudiated the existence of the tennō system directly. The Marxist critique interpreted the tennō system as a secular phenomenon and unmasked the limitations of the allegedly unbroken existence of the tennō dynasty. It claimed that the origins of Japanese people reached back to much earlier times. By doing so, however, it based the national identity on the same logic of historical essentialism as did the tennō system.

In the end, Marxism was not able to pinpoint the extralegal status of the tennō system within the realm of the secular, since the tennō system belongs not only to the sphere of secularity but to that of religion as well. As we have

52. Isomae 2007b, pp. 110–62.

seen in the case of national morality, it transcended the “secular/religious” dichotomy in a way that has not yet been acknowledged within the discourse of historical studies. Rather, academic disciplines such as history or religious studies helped establish such oppositions as “secularity vs. religion” or “morality vs. religion,” and these oppositions established the tennō system as an unfathomable entity. Thus, it was extremely difficult for these disciplines to question the tennō system, of which they themselves were part. In this perspective, the appropriate strategy for dealing with the extralegal nature of the tennō system today is not to just repeat the criticism based on historical essentialism or on the principle of the separation of state and religion. Rather we should ask how phenomena like the tennō system—which seem to tower above historical contingency that belongs to the secular and the religious, and that at the same time transcends them—manifested themselves within the historical context. We should objectify the process of this manifestation in terms of a genealogy of nonhistoricism. It seems necessary not to be content with the respective discourses of history or religious studies, but to create new forms of expression in order to characterize the extralegal nature of the tennō system within society. The established discourses of religious studies and history presume universal validity for both the religious and historical conceptions of the tennō system, although these conceptions are only one expression of it in their respective fields. In order to objectify what has been projected as beyond history, we must first deconstruct these presumptions. Above all, we should not forget that the extralegal status of the tennō system is not a transhistorical fact, but a historical product resulting from the confrontation of modernizing Japan with the Western world. It appears in the guise of an extraliminal entity precisely because it occurred within the framework of Westernization.

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