

Religious Responses to Secularization in Meiji Japan: The Case of Inoue Enryō

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Introduction

Most scholars writing about secularization in Japan agree that Japan is a secularized society, but in what sense and since when are matters of debate.¹ First of all, what is a secularized society? As José Casanova (2006: 7) has pointed out, the term “secularization” indicates a historical process and is used to denote (1) “the *decline of religious beliefs and practices* in modern societies”, (2) “the *privatization of religion*”, or (3) “the *differentiation of the secular spheres* (state, economy, science), usually understood as ‘emancipation’ from religious institutions and norms”. “Secularity” is used here in the sense defined by Burchardt, Wohlrab-Sahr, and Middell (2015: 9) as “an analytical term for the culturally, symbolically, and institutionally anchored forms of distinction between religious and non-religious spheres and material spaces”. That is, whereas secularization describes the process of differentiation, secularity denotes the various forms in which the resulting distinction between the religious and the non-religious are made manifest. Both are further distinguished from the term “secularism” as depicting ideologies and political practices intended to separate religion from the secular sphere (*ibid.*).

The following reflections refer to secularization in the third meaning. However, rather than tracing historical processes of secularization in Japan, I will turn attention to the religious discourse about secularity, that is the separation of the religious and secular spheres, in Meiji Japan (1868–1912).

Whether modernizing Japan actually experienced a differentiation of the religious and secular spheres, especially with regard to the relationship between religion and politics, is an issue in academic discourse. The close relationship between Shintō and the state, in particular the establishment of State Shintō as a non-religion in Meiji Japan, is assessed in opposing ways. Jason A. Josephson (2012: 132–164) interprets State Shintō itself as the secularizing force, or “the Shinto secular”, based on the rhetoric and tools of “Shinto National Science”. In a similar vein, Trent Maxey (2014) argues

¹ See, for example, the two journal special issues “Religion and the Secular in Japan” (*Journal of Religion in Japan* 1: 1, 2012) and “Formations of the Secular in Japan” (*Japan Review* 30, 2017).

that the Meiji government's policy towards Shintō was a purely political affair, and emphasizes the non-religious character of State Shintō.

In contrast, Mark Mullins (2012: 61) sees the role of Shintō in modern Japan's nation-building period as a counter-example to the prevailing conviction that modernization is necessarily linked to secularization: "While it has been widely assumed that modernization inevitably brings with it a decline in religion, this first phase of the process was accompanied by the creation of a powerful new form of religion – State Shintō". Klaus Antoni (2016b) has recently explained his own critical stance against interpreting State Shintō as purely secular by pointing out the relevance of its religious dimensions for the nation builders of Meiji Japan.

In contrast to these debates, the focus in this paper is the Buddhist discourse about the differentiation of religion and science. It is inspired by Charles Taylor's notion of conditions of belief in the secular age of modern Europe. Taylor (2007: 539–593) captures this kind of secularity in the concept of the "immanent frame" as a naturalized perception of the world in which the moral, social, and cosmic orders are understood without reference to transcendent forces. This immanent frame may be open or closed to transcendence: that is, there is the option to choose either belief and religion, or unbelief, or to create a position between these two. Despite this freedom of choice, believing is no longer the "natural" option but requires justification (*ibid.*: 555). Compared to pre-modern, non-secular societies, religion has not simply been replaced by secular theories, the "status accorded to the inclination to believe" (*ibid.*: 563) has been changed.

The conditions resulting in this changed attitude towards belief include the alleged impact of the natural sciences and a new view of human identity and agency. They are reflected in the modern narrative according to which the emancipation of the human mind in the Enlightenment, as well as the progress of the natural sciences, have contributed to overcoming belief in God because logic and natural laws refute Christian explanations of the universe, nature, society, and man. This development is accompanied by a new ethics in which man, not God, is the ultimate source of the highest good. Taylor thus claims for Europe a progressive development from a premodern naïve faith in the existence of God and in societies as the objects of divine providence towards a modern scientific rationality according to which societies exist for the benefit of their members as individual agents committed to secular ethics (*ibid.*: 580).

In this narrative, the natural sciences play an important role as the force that made belief in God impossible and that dismissed the religious as those

who give in to “‘childish’ comforts of meaning and beatitude” (ibid.: 565). This prompts the question of how the relationship of religion and science is seen from a religious perspective in a society where religion is characterized by customary religious practice rather than by commitment to a creed or a personal relationship with a transcendent being, and “where there is a fluidity to religious practice in Japan in which no prior commitment or affiliation is required” (Reader/Tanabe 1998: 31). Going back to Meiji Japan, I therefore ask how Japanese Buddhists conceptualized religion and defined its social position in relation to the establishment of a separate sphere of science as having the authority over knowledge and truth. And how did they view the relationship between religion and the sciences in a context where religious knowledge about men and the world was superseded by physical, psychological, geological, or biological knowledge?

Studies of secularity in Japan

I will briefly examine recent studies of secularism or the secular in Japan. Historians of religion in Japan such as Christoph Kleine and Kiri Paramore emphasize that secularity in the sense of the existence of differentiated spheres of religion and politics is not a modern phenomenon. Paramore (2017: 24) points out that the question of how religion and politics were supposed to interact was already playing a crucial role in the earliest processes of state formation in ancient Japan, thus assuming “a conceptual differentiation between political and religious realms”. Kleine also argues that the differentiation between secular and religious was a common way of organizing the complex world of premodern Japan. As an example, he refers to the complementary concepts of the “law of the sovereign” (*ōbō*) and the “law of Buddha” (*buppō*), whose interrelationship was propagated as a necessary requirement of political government from the introduction of Buddhism to Japan in the sixth century (Kleine 2012: 74–77). With regard to contemporary Japan, authors such as Aike P. Rots (2017) and Thierry Guthmann (2017) point out tendencies to re-define contemporary Shintō as a non-religious tradition, whether by emphasizing its cultural significance or in the context of nationalist associations, respectively.

In contrast to these authors, Ian Reader, a scholar of contemporary Japanese religions, discusses secularization in Japan in the first sense. He argues against José Casanova’s and Rodney Stark’s thesis of a trend towards anti-secularization, which both of them reinforce by pointing to the example of Japan, whether because of the vitality of its “folk religion” (Stark, quoted in Reader 2012: 8) or as a

counter-example to the Enlightenment stance towards the future of religion (Casanova, quoted *ibid.*: 9). Reader argues that regular surveys of “religious beliefs, belongings, and practices” in Japan demonstrate “a striking decline of religious institutions and of much of the ‘folk’ religion, individual piety[,] and belief lauded by Stark” (*ibid.*: 10). He lists examples of declining support for and affiliation with religious institutions, claims that there was a transition from religious to secular funerary rituals, and describes a decreasing commitment to personal faith and a decline in individual religious practices performed at temples and shrines as well as at home (*ibid.*). Reader’s pessimistic view of religions in Japan is somehow countered by Mark Mullins’ (2012) claim that the decline of religious activities is accompanied by a reappearance of Shintō in the public sphere, supported, for example, by the activities of the Association of Shintō Shrines.²

As mentioned above, this paper focuses on the separation of religion from science in Meiji Japan. Naturally, the discourses surrounding this kind of differentiation were strongly preoccupied with defining “religion” (*shūkyō* 宗教) and “science” (*gaku* 学, *gakumon* 学問), since both terms referred to Western concepts that were differently adapted to Japan (see Isomae 2014; Josephson 2012; Krämer 2015, 2017). With regard to medicine, Jason A. Josephson (2013) has analyzed the discourses and practical measures involved in establishing a public health system and prohibiting Buddhist healing practices, and their effects on Buddhism. The case of astronomy is taken up by Josephson (2012: 102–117) in his chapter on Buddhist and *kokugaku* 国学 astronomical studies, as well as by Okada Masahiko (2010) in his study of Buddhist astronomy in late Tokugawa and early Meiji Japan.

As Josephson (2012: 136) has noted, the assumed dichotomy or “false opposition” between science and religion is an ideological effect of a “scientist age”, that is, an age in which the dominant discourse about knowledge establishes science as the only authority for truth. Referring to Foucault, he emphasizes the close relationship between science, ideology, and power: “For Foucault, truth is the active expression of a society’s system of ‘knowledge-power’ and therefore science-centric discourse is nevertheless deeply entangled with political and economic concerns” (*ibid.*). Josephson claims that “Shinto National Science”, or nativist thought and practice, is the system of knowledge that supported the official secular ideology in Meiji Japan. In addition, I argue, it is the “knowledge-

² A similar trend of religious engagement in political issues is illustrated in Helen Hardacre’s and Shimazono Susumu’s contributions on Nippon Kaigi and other groups in this volume.

power” assigned to Western sciences and philosophy³ that posed a threat to religious authority and caused Buddhist intellectuals to react to this discourse. In the following, I will focus on the Jōdo Shinshū Buddhist and philosopher Inoue Enryō 井上円了 (1858–1919) as representative of the Buddhist reaction.

The shift of authority from religion to science was probably most acutely felt with regard to medicine. Since ancient times, Buddhist scriptures and “priest-doctors” (*sōi* 僧医) played an important role in providing medical care to the population. In Meiji Japan, from 1874 the new government started to install a system of public health care, including a standardized system of medical examination based on German medicine. The Ministry of Education regulated the training, licensing, and examination of physicians and pharmacists (Oberländer 1995: 61), and in 1874 the Ministry of Edification⁴ (Kyōbushō 教部省) prohibited religious healing practices: “Healing by means of magical rituals and the like are obstructing the government and are henceforth prohibited” (Josephson 2013: 131).

Positioning religion and science in Meiji Japan: Inoue Enryō (1858–1919)

When Japan was confronted with the political strength and claims of civilizational superiority of the US and European states in the second half of the eighteenth century, Japanese Buddhism experienced a double crisis. The new government’s politics of separating Buddhism and Shintō (*shinbutsu bunri* 神仏分離), the establishment of State Shintō as a non-religious tradition, the dissolution of the temple registration system, and the “laicization” of Buddhist clerics early in the Meiji era deprived Buddhist priests of political influence and their economic basis, as well as giving rise to anti-Buddhist sentiments in the general population (see Antoni 2016a; Hardacre 1989; Isomae 2014; Kashiwahara 1990; Ketelaar 1990; Maxey 2014).

In addition, Protestant Christian missionaries, especially from the US, engaged in spreading Christianity through the education system. Often, the goal of their religious mission was linked to a self-understanding as the proponents of a superior civilization.

In this context, Buddhist priests such as Inoue Enryō, founder of the Tetsugakkan 哲学館, which later became the university Tōyō Daigaku 東洋大学, made use of scientific critiques of Christianity to “prove” the superiority of

³ As exemplified on the institutional level by the foundation of Tōkyō University in 1877 and of Kyōto University in 1897.

⁴ I am following the translation by Hans Martin Krämer 2017: 67.

Buddhism. In his *Shinri kinshin* 真理金針 (“The Golden Needle of Truth”) of 1886, he strongly emphasizes the compatibility of Buddhist doctrines with Western philosophy and the natural sciences and argues that Buddhism rather than Christianity is the religion of an enlightened civilization (see Schrimpf 1999, 2000). He explains extensively why the creation story, the concept of an omniscient, omnipotent creator god as ultimate moral authority, and theological notions of human conscience and free will are irrational and unscientific (Inoue 1987: 22–123). For him, Buddhist philosophy is far superior to Christian theology, which can be subsumed under Buddhist concepts. One example is the Buddhist “mind only theory” (*yuishinron* 唯神論) of the Hossō school, which he claims can be applied to explain the emergence of the Christian concept of God from the human mind (ibid.: 101–103).

Besides contesting the philosophical inferiority of Christian theology, he also argues that the Christian idea of God’s creation of the world out of nothing is not compatible with the laws of the conservation of energy and matter, nor with the insights of evolutionary theories into the evolution of mankind. In contrast, the Mahāyāna Buddhist notions that behind all differentiated forms there is a condition of non-differentiation (*musabetsu no ikkyō* 無差別の一境, ibid.: 279) and that a timeless matter (*butsu* 物) takes on diverse forms and changes continuously due to the force of an equally timeless energy (*chikara* 力) explain all changes in the universe in accordance with these laws (ibid.: 276). The rules according to which things unfold are the natural laws (*rihō* 理法), such as the law of cause and effect or the law of the conservation of energy and matter (ibid.). He equates the law of cause and effect with the Buddhist concept of *inga* 因果 according to which any occurrence or phenomenon is simultaneously conditioned *and* a condition. In line with the Buddhist concept of dependent origination, he explains that “persistent matter (*busshitsu* 物質) and force (*seiryoku* 勢力) always co-exist, nor do they rise or disappear, increase or decrease. This is a law you can deduce from the experiments of physics and chemistry” (ibid.: 277).

Inoue’s main aim in *Shinri kinshin* is to counteract the reputation of Christianity as civilized religion and establish Buddhism as the appropriate religion of a modern society in its place. In order to do so, he not only emphasizes the theoretical complexity of Buddhist philosophy, but also tries to re-establish the social and political relevance of Buddhism by reconfiguring basic societal categories in a way that asserts the indispensable public role of religion. In these societal models, he simultaneously distinguishes his notion

of religion from that of the sciences while at the same time displaying their interrelatedness.

What are his notions of religion (*shūkyō*) and sciences and their mutual relationship? In *Shinri kinshin*, Inoue (ibid.: 163) divides “learning and scholarship” (*gakumon*) or “the world of scholarship” (*gakkai* 学会) into the two fields of philosophy (*tetsugaku* 哲学) and the natural sciences (*rigaku* 理学). For him, the natural sciences formulate natural laws, based on empirical observation and experiments, whereas philosophy as “the science of thought” reflects upon these laws in order to investigate the ultimate principles behind all phenomena. Both can be subdivided into a theoretical and a practical branch: “Both, natural sciences and philosophy, have their specific theoretical and practical aspects, i. e., pure natural sciences such as physics, chemistry, and mathematics are the theory of natural sciences, whereas manufacturing sciences (*seizōgaku* 製造学), mechanics, etc. are the praxis of natural sciences. In philosophy, psychology is the theoretical science, whereas aesthetics, ethics, logic, etc. are its practical studies” (ibid.: 163). This model, however, is complemented by the notion of “pure philosophy” (*junsei tetsugaku* 純正哲学), which investigates the ultimate nature of the mind, the universe, and of all phenomena. It is the theoretical expression of “metaphysical philosophy” (*keijijō tetsugaku* 形而上哲学) and thus goes beyond the “physical philosophy” (*keijika tetsugaku* 形而下哲学) of ethics, logic, and psychology as described above. The practical manifestation of pure philosophy is (philosophical) religion (ibid.: 164).

The main differences between pure philosophy and (philosophical) religion are their goals and their *modi operandi*. The goal of philosophy is to discover truth by means of logic and reason, and its driving principle is doubt. Although philosophical religions such as Buddhism also explain the nature of the human mind or the universe based on logic and reason, the ultimate goal of religion is peace of mind (*anshin ritsumei* 安心立命). “Their most essential difference is that one is based on doubt and does not maintain the words of the people of ancient times; it does not cling to what people believe and is entirely committed to discover new knowledge and new perspectives, to reveal the real and pure truth. The other is based on faith and maintains the words of the people of ancient times; it respects what people believe and is committed to overcoming doubt and calming the mind” (ibid.: 168). Once a reasonable (theoretical) truth has been established in a religion, it is accepted and creates peace of mind. In comparing the two, Inoue refers to the metaphors of war and peace: “One is like a day spent in battle, the other is like a world in peace; one can be compared

to a time of labor, the other to a time of rest. Seriously engaging in thought and then resting is religion; continuing the intellectual labor is philosophy” (ibid.: 170). In these models, Inoue refers primarily to the doctrinal side of religion, which cannot be separated from sciences and philosophy. Like those, religious doctrines need to prove their claims to truth by means of logical reasoning, that is, in a theoretically plausible way, in order to be accepted as such (ibid.: 21).

However, Inoue also emphasizes the fundamental importance of the practical side of religion: in order to survive and prosper, religion needs to be of practical use to the state and the people (ibid.: 174). This is why he calls for Buddhist reforms and criticizes the Buddhist priests of his time for their “blindness” (ibid.: 175). For him, religion belongs to both realms, to the “world of learning and scholarship” (*gakkai*) and to the “secular world” (*zokkai* 俗界). In the world of learning, religion represents the practical aspect, and in the secular world it must prove its usefulness by applying its theoretical insights in a practically beneficial way (ibid.: 176).

The actual benefits of religion for the state are the topic of Inoue’s *Kyōiku shūkyō kankeiron* 教育宗教関係論 (“Treatise on the Relationship between Education and Religion”), based on a lecture he gave at Tetsugakkan and published in 1893 during the discourses following the implementation of the Imperial Rescript on Education (*Kyōiku ni kansuru chokugo* 教育に関する勅語, 1890) in school ceremonies. His main intention is to argue why both education and religion serve the state, why the Rescript on Education should be the basis of education, and why Buddhism is the appropriate religion for Japan (Inoue 1893: 1–2). In this treatise, he positions religion alongside education, morality, and laws as one of those factors that shape the “formless” (*mukeiteki* 無形的, ibid.: 22), i. e., immaterial civilization.

Knowledge (*chishiki* 知識), virtue (*tokugi* 徳義), human rights (*kenri* 権利), and faith (*shinkō* 信仰) are the four aspects of the immaterial [civilization]; these four share the quality of existing and operating in the human mind. Education (*kyōiku* 教育), morality (*dōtoku* 道徳), politics and laws (*seihō* 政法), and religion (*shūkyō*) investigate them, i. e., education cultivates people’s knowledge, morality develops virtue – if education is understood in a wide sense, it includes morality – politics and law improve the rights of the people, and religion determines faith. (ibid.: 23–24)

Like Shimaji Mokurai 島地黙雷 (see Krämer 2017), Inoue separates religion from morality and defines its realm as that of “faith” (*shinkō*), a term indicating private convictions. He puts religion on the same footing as laws and education,

thus emphasizing its fundamental societal relevance. More specifically, he emphasizes the socially unifying effect of religion due to its influence on the individual's mind. Religion aims not only at stabilizing each individual's mind (*ikkōjin no seishin wo antei suru* 一個人の精神を安定する) by tying it to some mysterious form (*tai* 体), it also integrates these minds into a community of convictions, in this sense unifying people's minds (ibid.: 28). For him, this effect of supporting public peace and preventing social upheaval is brought about by various means:

(1) Religion provides the individual with peace of mind, resulting in joy of life and satisfaction with one's position, hence it contributes to the happiness of the citizens and a harmonious society (ibid.: 73–74).

(2) With regard to morality, Inoue observes that, in the process of differentiating politics, law, and scholarship, moral education has been separated from religion and is nowadays approached academically. As a consequence, he distinguishes between the intellectual ethics (*chiryokuteki rinri* 智力的倫理) taught in schools and the emotional, “belief-based ethics” (*shinkōteki rinri* 信仰的倫理) taught and practiced in Buddhist temples and communities. As places where customs and traditions are preserved, temples contribute in a particular way to the maintaining of morality, thus supporting and complementing education in families, schools, and society (ibid.: 77–81).

(3) In religion, salvation is open to everybody, notwithstanding differences in wealth and rank, i. e., all people are considered equal: “Although a society comprises high and low ranks, this differentiation is irrelevant in religion; everybody is equally led to realize peace of mind (*anshin ritsumei*) and feel the same joy (*kairaku* 快樂)” (ibid.: 83). It thus serves to compensate for the social inequality people experience in society (ibid.: 84).

(4) Religion provides society with its ceremonies (*gishiki* 儀式) and etiquette (*reisetsu* 禮節). In the case of Japan, Buddhism and Shintō offer rituals for the main biographical events, thus helping to consolidate the country's stability and order, and to harmonize the emotions of the people (ibid.: 85–86).

As indicated in the fourth argument, not every religion can fulfill these functions: “[B]ecause Buddhism is in fact the inherent religion of our country, and because for more than a thousand years it has governed the hearts of the people, and because Buddhism is neither primitive nor irrational, we must propagate it today. Moreover, the Japanese people have the obligation to believe in it. It is because we can teach Buddhism even academically as truth that I propagate Buddhist ideology (*bukkyō shugi* 仏教主義)” (ibid.: 31).

Conclusion

Inoue's reflections on religion and science, as well as on the social position and functions of religion, are characterized by a strongly apologetic motivation. His notion of religion is modelled on his view of Buddhism as the Japan-specific religion and as a philosophical religion. Shintō – not State Shintō – is acknowledged with regard to its ritual relevance for the life-cycle events of Japanese people, and Christianity is excluded because of its theoretical insufficiency. In his models of sciences and of societal spheres, religion plays an indispensable role as the force that unifies people on the basis of belief and guarantees their emotional balance (ibid.: 100). Moreover, it can have this influence on people's minds because, or if, it is “scientifically approved”, otherwise it is not accepted by educated people. In this sense – that is, with regard to its influence on public sentiments – religion is presented as a superior to science.

Inoue acknowledges the partial separation of morality from religion, but without claiming religion to be a completely private affair. Instead, believing in Buddhism for him is a patriotic duty of the Japanese. In this regard he differs from Shimaji Mokurai who in the 1870s conceptualized “religion” (*shūkyō*) in opposition to “secular teachings” (*jikyō* 治教) “as the realm of the inner heart, the shapeless, and the unspeakable” (Krämer 2017: 70). By means of this distinction and the definition of Shintō as mythology, ancestor reverence, or civil rights, Shimaji and other Shinshū Buddhist priests tried to protect Buddhism from competition with Shintō (ibid.). In contrast, Inoue tried to strengthen Buddhism by emphasizing its state-supporting, public role. The intention behind his conceptualization of religion is to rule out Christianity as a potential rival and to stress the close interrelationship, if not interdependence, between religion and secular realms such as politics, education, or science. In this way, he acknowledged and counteracted this differentiation by defining the functions of a religion adapted to the modern conditions of nationalism and the “scientific age”.

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