

36 Shimaji Mokurai: *The Source of Religion* (1872)

Introduced and translated by Hans Martin Krämer

Introduction

The swift rupture that Japanese society underwent since the end of the 1860s extended to religions: their social basis was radically transformed, and religious policy underwent a dramatic change. Religion's epistemic foundations, too, were deeply affected by a modernity that was intimately tied up with Western models, the challenges posed by Christianity, and the materialist modern sciences. These developments were not, however, anonymous forces to which Japanese religions were helplessly subjected; rather, religious stakeholders in Japan reacted to them, and actively contributed to them. Most conspicuous among Buddhist reformists were priests and laymen from the True Pure Land sect (Jōdo shinshū 浄土真宗), who, from the early Meiji period onwards, sought to deal proactively with the changing circumstances.

Among the most important reform activities of Japanese Buddhism in this period were two study missions that the head temples of the two largest factions within the True Pure Land sect sent to Europe in 1872 and 1873. Thanks to his prolific writings, the most prominent member of these missions was the Nishi Honganji 西本願寺 priest Shimaji Mokurai 島地黙雷 (1838–1911). Shimaji is today mainly known for having pioneered a modern understanding of “religion” in Japan, arguing even in the early 1870s that Shintō does not fit into this category, whilst Buddhism should enjoy the privileges of religious freedom; he opined that the former point held regardless of whether some elements of Shintō were to be used as a state cult. With these ideas, Shimaji prefigured the later solution of State Shintō – i.e. the constitutional protection of religions, and a state-imposed compulsion to participate in certain rites. Simultaneously, Shimaji also called for an internal reform of Buddhism, along the lines of what he perceived to be a proper modern religion, corresponding to a liberal Protestant model. Thus, Buddhism was to shed itself of practices now understood to be ‘superstitious,’ and engage in the systematic study of scriptures, along the lines of modern textual-critical historical scholarship, as practised in nineteenth-century Europe.

Although Shimaji is mainly known for his intervention in the discourse on the relationship between state (or politics) and religion, he was also the first Japanese Buddhist author to voice ideas about the relationship between Buddhism and modern

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science.^I His stance was largely shaped by what he learned in Europe, as in the text translated here, which he authored while in Paris, London, and Berlin, in 1872 and 1873. Through his conversations with Orientalist scholars and Christian theologians, Shimaji picked up on the controversies between science and Christianity, and was quick to utilise these in his polemics against Christianity. In the source text given here, Shimaji focuses on the irrationality of presuming a creator god, and the illogical assumption of the immortality of a soul, which in orthodox Catholic theology is understood to have a beginning but no end. Both had already been points of contention between Christianity and Buddhism in Japan at the time of the first missionary wave around 1600.^{II}

Most interestingly for the issue of secularity, although Shimaji clearly delineates science and religion, he here forcefully argues for the compatibility of Buddhism with science (in contrast to Christianity), prefiguring a line of reasoning that can be found in Buddhist circles to this day. Explicitly referring to “the natural sciences” and “physics” – both terms for which, in the early 1870s, widely accepted equivalents in Japanese had not yet been found – Shimaji argues that Buddhism knows about atoms and the then-popular idea of a luminiferous aether^{III}; he posits the spontaneous emergence of living beings and things (contrary to Christian creation theory), and that the karmic law of cause and effect resembles the causality of scientific laws of nature. Given that this is a first attempt to come to terms with the problem of religion and science, many questions remain open. In other texts from the early 1870s, Shimaji makes clear that he accepts that certain truth claims of religion, in particular concerning cosmology, are no longer tenable, but must be ceded to science. Most interestingly, Shimaji eventually comes to the conclusion that, despite all the overlap he sees between Buddhism and science, religion (which, for him, emphatically includes Buddhism) constitutes an important sphere of its own, with insights unavailable to rational scientific inquiry – thus carving out a genuinely separate domain of religion, protected from materialistic or atheistic criticism.^{IV}

I See also Hans Martin Krämer, *Shimaji Mokurai and the Reconception of Religion and the Secular in Modern Japan* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015), 106–11.

II See the third fascicle of the 1605 *Myōtei mondō*, translated in: James Baskind and Richard Bowring, eds., *The Myōtei Dialogues: A Japanese Christian Critique of Native Traditions* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 165–94.

III A then-hypothesised medium for the propagation of light waves, experimentally called into question soon afterwards, by the 1887 Michelson–Morley experiment.

IV Hans Martin Krämer, “‘Even Three-Year-Old Children Know That the Source of Enlightenment is not Religion but Science.’ Modern Japanese Buddhism between ‘Religion’ and ‘Science,’ 1860s–1910s,” *Journal of Religion in Japan* 8 (2019): 98–122.

Bibliographical Information

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Page numbers given in square brackets refer to this edition.

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[. . .] The source of religion (*kyōhō* 教法) certainly came about in India. This has become exceedingly clear through the research of European scholars. Moreover, it is not only religion (*kyō* 教), but also writing and language that have their foundations there. In the Indian historical writings, it is said that, in the beginning, the land brought forth the ancestors of humans after they descended from the Brahmā Heaven (*bonten* 梵天). These humans were able to send out rays of light and to fly, they were free of all disease, and independent in their actions. Only after they tasted the sweet flavour of the savoury earth, did desires blossom in them for the first time. In the end, their light was extinguished, and their bodies became heavy, and they cultivated this sweet food and made it their staple.¹ There have, however, long been three theories about what this Brahmanic religion teaches: 1. a creator, 2. a protector, 3. a destroyer. These three types of gods, so it is said, respectively create all things, maintain their existence, and destroy them. [p. 186/187] These three types of Gods, in turn, split up into many deities. This is the origin of polytheism (*shūshinkyō* 衆神教). Moses established his teaching of a creator deity, after having learned this idea in Egypt. Yet he claimed this was divine inspiration, thus turning it into an utter absurdity. As this was a common thing to do back then, we need not castigate him unnecessarily. It was partially due to the teachings of Moses that Jesus emerged, but he improved upon their weaknesses, and reordered them here and there. Yet, that he called himself the son of God went far beyond even Moses' teachings. Those that today believe in him are the adherents of Christianity (*seikyō* 西教). Those that do not believe in him are the adherents of Judaism. Christianity itself first split in two, and later three, parts; these three are the Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant confessions (*ha* 派). Furthermore, Muhammad created Islam (*kaikai* 回回), another wrong teaching (*imon* 異門). He was not a man of religion, but only used religion in order to satisfy

I HMK: Here, Shimaji is recounting fragments of the evolutionary tale from the *Aggañña Sutta* (*Digha Nikaya* no. 27), most likely known to him through one of its several Chinese versions, which are part of the classical Chinese canon of Buddhist sūtras. Shimaji adduces this example to show the genealogy of (to his mind wrong and irrational) creation myths in world religions. Ironically, the *Aggañña Sutta* is today seen by some stakeholders as a prime example of how Buddhist scripture conforms with 'Western science'. See e.g. Suwanda H. J. Sugunasiri, "Devolution and Evolution in the *Aggañña Sutta*," *Canadian Journal of Buddhist Studies* 9 (2013): 17–104.

his own desires. It is obvious that his teaching is not correct. Either way, it is not wrong to say that the source of all religions is one, such as in the case of the emergence of Zoroastrianism in Persia, which also came from India.

Well then, the “gods” (*kami* 神) are something unfathomable (*fukasoku* 不可測). When the world was still in chaos in olden times, human knowledge was shallow. Mountains, rivers, grasses, trees: all were taken to be gods. Day by day, culture opens up and human knowledge becomes clearer: for this reason, that which was previously feared has now become ordinary. This is why there were many gods in old times, but fewer later on. And finally, it has come to today’s result that there is only one creator god. Yet Christianity has, since old times, known the teaching of the trinity (father in Heaven, son of God, and Holy Ghost), and therefore Jesus is taken to be the son of God. Some, however, hold that the idea of a Holy Ghost is nothing but an unfounded tale: only the father in Heaven exists, and therefore only he is to be worshipped. Furthermore, the theory of atheism has recently become popular. As this is held by scientists (*chishitsuri gakusha* 地質理学者), it is said that it is worth thinking about. It is said that Śākyamuni lived over one thousand years before Jesus, had his great awakening, and attained a clear view (*shōken* 証見)^{II} on the principle of material being. That is to say, in his words: How can there be someone who created all things? Instead, the things take shape through the atoms’ (*gokumi* 極微)^{III} coming together spontaneously. Yet, such a thing as the human soul (*tamashii* 魂) has neither beginning nor end. At the same time, it is not just the soul that has neither beginning nor end, but this is true of the body as well. We only see how it is separated and reunited, and, in this way, we experience coming into life and demise. Although we do not know how, things separated here are reunited there; things separated there are reunited here. Neither [body nor soul] is an instant thing that came into life or dies away, that grew and shrank. And yet its outer shape already moves here and there, and changes. Its essence, however, does not change one bit. [. . . p. 187/188 . . .] In this way, the atoms of nature bring forth earth, water, fire, and wind, by coming together and clotting. Through transformation, they become humans, animals, or plants. It is due to the presence or absence of life energy that there is blossoming and withering among plants, just as it is due to the staying or leaving of the soul (*reikon* 靈魂) that there is birth and death among humans. The reason why humans differ from plants is that they have the ability to command their hundreds of body parts with thought and planning, and can use them for hundreds of goals. In this way, the difference between human and animal, regarding their intelligence, is obvious. Regarding their innate abilities, they do not yet differ greatly. We call all of them sentient beings (*yūjō* 有情), and they are subject to the cycle of transmigration (*rinne tenshō* 輪廻転生). (I asked a scientist about these things. According to

^{II} HMK: As a Buddhist technical term, this means the unobscured view on reality only available to Buddhas, in contrast to how non-awakened beings regard the world based on belief and intellect (*shinge* 信解).

^{III} HMK: Skr. *paramāṇu*, the smallest particles of matter, according to Buddhist teaching.

him, humans and animals did not differ greatly in the beginning. Slowly, however, knowledge evolved, and later there was nothing that humans could not investigate and use purposefully, nothing that they could not do. [. . .] And yet Christianity distinguishes humans and animals, and claims that, although the human soul (*reikon* 靈魂) would never vanish, the soul of animals (*kakukon* 覺魂) will perish upon their death. Therefore, they claim that animals were created by God solely for the use and nourishing of humans. This greatly contradicts reason! In enjoying life and hating death, seeking idleness and avoiding trouble, animals and humans do not greatly differ. If one must love one's next human, one must also love animals. If one must not kill other humans, one must also not be allowed to kill animals. [. . . p. 188/189 . . .)]^{IV}

The essence of religious teaching, however, only emerges when it is directed towards humans. The teaching of reincarnation and of the rise and fall aims to increase the good, and further virtues within humans.

Now, after matter has come together, the soul emerges within the unformed; if it rises up, it will become that of a human, if it sinks down, it will become that of an animal. The cause of the manifold differences, such as those between poor and rich, high and low, longevity and early death, is the difference between suffering and happiness within the karmic effects (*hō* 報), based upon the good and evil of actions in one's former lives (*shukuse* 宿世). In the same way, the good and evil we perform today will result in suffering and happiness in the future. Depending, however, on whether the karma is light or heavy, shallow or deep, the karmic effects can occur immediately, later, or not until the next life. Cause and effect (*inga* 因果) are not the least bit distant from each other within the context of karma. The truth of the Dharma takes its natural course. [. . .] One cannot push aside the smallest good, let alone a great good. If one cannot ignore a small evil, how then the extreme evil? This is called the principle of all phenomena being only in the heart (*manbō yuishin* 万法唯心), also known as the principle that there are no phenomena outside of the heart (*shinge muhō* 心外無法), or the teaching that causes and effects correspond to each other (*inga ōhō* 因果応報), or that one must stop the evil and cultivate the good (*shiaku shūzen* 止惡修善). This is, roughly abbreviated, the teaching of Śākyamuni.

The teaching of a creator deity in the West is, in my opinion, basically the same teaching as that in our land, or India, etc. – there are, by and large, but little differences between these teachings. All of them speak of a beginning in ancient times, or something similar. Yet, something like a divinely revealed holy scripture like the Old Testament is nothing but an absurdity, unworthy of further discussion. This scripture claims that there was a distinction between day and night even before there were sun and moon; also, that after six days of creation the seventh day was a day of rest, after which

IV HMK: The passage marked by parentheses here, as with a similar passage below, is printed in smaller type in the original, a common device to denote information of minor importance in premodern East Asian texts, functioning somewhat equivalently to a footnote.

the devil had provided a forbidden fruit to eat, thus causing original sin; [p. 189/190] finally, there was a deluge to punish the plethora of sins and transgressions – God appears here and there to lead or to praise or to punish. Love and hate, praise and punishment, ten thousand confusing states: Even when one tries to track them in detail, no sound explanation emerges, and, indeed, the various Christian denominations argue among themselves about the interpretation. Today, one usually avoids discussing these things, and only the principle of the creator god might be worth inquiring into. For he may well be real. Let us try asking to what ends God created all things. What was God's joy in creating Heaven, erecting a hell, and imposing thousandfold pain and suffering upon humans? The holy man (*shōnin* 聖人) cherishes doing nothing (*mui* 無為), and is in no need of a hell. It is better to do without things such as reward and punishment, praise and reproach from the beginning. [. . .] How extraordinarily stupid it is to ascribe all of this to God! Furthermore, Heaven is unlimited at its margins; the celestial bodies that are close to Earth are visible to us, those that are far from us are invisible. There is an endless variation of big and small, wide and narrow. But where all phenomena are spread out, there is, besides air, also something like "aether" (*ēteru* エーテル). (We can translate aether with "dark *qi*" (*genki* 玄氣) or "pure *qi*" (*seiki* 精氣). This, however, does not quite hit the mark. This is because aether means that which naturally exists in the air and in all things, but also far away from the air that surrounds the Earth, as well as at that point where all gases and solid things are depleted. If there were not this aether, how then should the rays of the sun reach us?) If this is the case, then, if Heaven is unlimited, all immaterial and material things are also unlimited. There is then no reasonable way to reconcile the claim that these unlimited things are the result of a creation. If things have a beginning, they must necessarily have an end. If the human souls were created by God in the beginning, they must at one point meet their end. If the souls are, however, unending and immortal, then they cannot have had a beginning. Whoever still claims souls have no end, even though they had a beginning, must be called weak in physics (*butsuri* 物理). Furthermore, why are there poor and rich, high and low, life and death, strong and weak – why is the divine creation not more equal? Some people say that one could not differentiate the functions in the world properly if there were no poor and rich or high and low. If that were the case, which functions would one differentiate by the life and death of strong and weak? There are, after all, humans who are poor and lowly. And there is no greater calamity than this. It would be very odd if God had provided this, rather than its having come into life by itself. If it were so, on what basis should we reward the good and punish the evil if the grounds for reward and punishment were in such confusion? [p. 190/191] Should one, however, say that God is merely reason, or that the original creation of all things is original reason, then this would not be a God at all. There would be no-one who rewarded or punished, and there would be no lord to pay respect towards. How could one call such a thing religion (*kyōhō* 教法)?

Doubts such as these are like fishing in murky waters: there is no way to bring forth anything clear. And this is why I dare to claim: God did not create man, but man

created God. How could it not be so? Basically, it is the same as already stated above: one calls the inexplicable “God.” In recent times, science has been making progress every day, and reason, too, has been advancing daily. Religion, however, sticks to the absurdities of old times, strives to keep the simple people stupid, makes extreme ignorance its basic principle, and is therefore sometimes hated by knowledgeable people. [. . .] The teaching of Śākyamuni, that all things are created by the heart (*banbutsu shinzō* 万物心造), is different from all of this. [. . .] When constructing his teaching, Śākyamuni fervently wished to go along with reason. This is why he taught, when discussing matter (*butsu* 物),^V that it was made up of atoms, and when he discussed nature (*shō* 性),^{VI} that worldly humans and holy men shared the same Buddha nature (*bonshō ichinyō* 凡聖一如). Or, he said that the difference between illusion and awakening was solely up to whether our heart was soiled or pure, and that the difference between suffering and happiness followed our happy desire for paradise, leaving behind our soiled existence (*engon* 厭欣).^{VII} [. . . p. 191–196 . . .]

Now, there are numerous religions in the world. The stupid enjoy them, while the knowledgeable reject them. Those that enjoy them do not distinguish between the deeper meaning of a religion, and the outward means to express this; nor do they know about its advantages and disadvantages – instead focusing superstitiously on the confusing and the dark. Those that reject religion outright only deride the outward means, without pursuing its deeper meaning, and only point to the disadvantages and lacunae, without also thinking about its advantages and merits. Only the excellent and wise are equipped with great knowledge. They understand the distinction between the deeper meaning of religion and the outward means of expressing it, and with the emptiness of the formless they control the hearts and feelings of the sentient world; with the happiness or suffering in the next world, they make sure that the moral state in this world is kept in order. Regardless of the outward means, they grasp the consequences of the deeper meaning, and make good use of it, all the while avoiding its disadvantages. This is what we call truly knowing religion and making use of it.

Yes, there is but one religion in the world. Yet, at the same time, there have to be many. That of which there is only one is the deeper meaning of religion. This meaning is rewarding good, punishing evil, and making man *man*. That which is different are the outward means. This is, for example, speaking of gods, or of the awakening, or of two or three worlds. If we speak of advantages and disadvantages, we are talking about outward means, not the deeper meaning. [p. 196/197 . . .] We must order our times in such a way that spreading Buddhism becomes as easy as possible. The advantages and disadvantages, and use and harm of Buddhism are solely up to those humans making use of it.

V HMK: As a Buddhist technical term, this designates the objects of the real world.

VI HMK: “Nature” is here to be understood in the sense of essence or characteristic.

VII HMK: Abbreviation of *enriedo gongujōdo* 厭離穢土欣求淨土.