Japan before 1800

Christoph Kleine

As in most premodern societies, prior to the accelerated modernisation of Japan under Western influence in the 19th century, concepts of societal differentiation were primarily focused on the relationship between religious and political institutions. It is important to note, however, that the conceptual distinctions found in discursive statements do not necessarily reflect or represent the actual state of societal differentiation. In many cases, these concepts were, in all likelihood, normative ideals that were only partly realised.

Having said this, a very brief and generalising narrative of the relationship between 'religion' and 'the secular' would run as follows.

Buddhism as a state cult

Before the arrival of Buddhism in Japan (or Yamato 大和/倭 as the state was called then) around 538, the Emperor, or 'heavenly ruler' (*tennō* 天皇), claimed to belong to the 'descendants of heaven' (*tenson* 天孫). Originally only one of a number of powerful clans (*uji* 氏), the 'descendants of heaven' had by then achieved a leading position, in which they monopolised positions of power. The 'heavenly ruler' was both the state's ruler and high priest, allowing us to characterise the religio-political system as 'caesaropapism'. This is reflected in the Japanese concept of 'unity of ritual and rule' (*saisei itchi* 祭政一致), a concept that was deliberately and strategically revived by the Meiji reformers in the 19th century. In order to legitimise eternal rule by the 'descendants of heaven', the meritocratic Chinese ideal that a ruler is endowed with a 'mandate of heaven' (*tianming* 天命), which is dependent on his virtue and success, was replaced with the concept of 'hereditary charisma'. In order to legitimise the peculiar concept of eternal rule by descendants of one particular clan, two mytho-historical records were eventually compiled by imperial order: *Kojiki* 古事記 ('Record of Ancient Matters'; completed in 712) and the *Nihon shoki* 日本書紀 ('Chronicles of Japan'; completed in 720).

Clans and Emperor

Caesaropapism
Unity of ritual and rule

Hereditary charisma of the Tennō
Legitimation by mytho-historical records

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"Like the two wings of a bird" – The medieval concept of dual rule by the 'ruler's laws' and the 'Buddha's law'

With the advent and eventual establishment of Buddhism as a state cult that was primarily responsible for conducting powerful rituals for the sake of national welfare (which often simply meant healing sick members of the court), competing or at least complementary concepts of legitimate rule were introduced. Buddhists had adopted the Indian concept of dual rule by the *kṣatriyas,* 'secular' rulers

who exercised their domination by means of military power and punishment and were responsible for worldly affairs and (2) the *brahmins,* who exercised their power by means of rituals and spiritual guidance and were responsible for communication with transcendent powers. In Buddhism, this concept of dual rule was adopted in a particular way. It was claimed that national welfare rested on two pillars or was based on the complementary functioning of two interdependent 'nomospheres'[1] or 'value spheres' (cf. Max Weber's

Wertsphären) represented by the 'ruler's laws' (Skt. *rāja-dharma;* Jap. *ōbō* 王法) and the 'Buddha's law' (Skt. *buddha-dharma;* Jap. *buppō* 佛法).

It was not before Buddhist institutions achieved a certain amount of autonomy and power, however, that this concept of dual rule was openly propagated by Buddhist monks and eventually adopted by the secular ruling elite. In the 7th and 8th centuries, Buddhist monks served mainly as ritualists and advisors to the state, and temples were effectively state organs. By the middle of the 8th century, however, the political influence of Buddhist monks had increased considerably, and a 'buddhocracy' was barely prevented. Among other things, the interference of Buddhist monks in politics resulted in Kanmu Tennō moving the capital from Nara to Kyōto in 794 and restricting monks' access to state institutions. The outcome of these measures was ambiguous: While monks were kept at a distance, the monastic institutions gained more and more autonomy.

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1 Please note that I use this neologism a little differently from David Delaney, the professor of law who first coined the term. For lack of a better term, I use it to signify an imagined and accepted system of moral values, legal codes, social conventions, rites and etiquette deemed imperative for all involved. Used in this way, the term nomosphere to a certain degree resembles Max Weber's terms "Wertsphäre" and "Lebensordnung" or a combination of the two.

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Economic changes, such as the gradual establishment of private, tax-free, and often autonomous estates or manors (*shōen* 荘園), further contributed to the growth of the economic and even military power of large temples and monasteries. By roughly the 11th century, these Buddhist institutions had become one of three dominating power blocks (*kenmon* 権門), the other two being the court aristocracy (*kuge* 公家) and the warrior clans (*buke* 武家). It is certainly no coincidence that it was in this epoch that Buddhist virtuosi successfully propagated the concept of the 'interdependence of the ruler's nomosphere and the Buddha's nomosphere' (*ōbō buppō sō'i* 王法仏法相依). While claiming an autonomous sphere of influence for the Buddhist institutions, this concept of dual rule simultaneously acknowledged the legitimacy of the Emperor's rule. What is more, the fate of the two autonomous nomospheres was indissolubly linked.

By the late 12th century, the concept of the 'interdependence of the ruler's nomosphere and the Buddha's nomosphere' was firmly established and widely accepted by the elite. A clear distinction between two social spheres was made on the basis of a peculiar dualistic Buddhist interpretation of the world. In Buddhist discourse, the nomosphere of the Buddha Dharma is responsible for all things that are deemed 'supramundane' (Skt. *lokottara;* Jap. *shusseken* 出世間) while the nomosphere of the ruler's law is only concerned with the 'mundane' (Skt. *laukika;* Jap. *seken* 世間). It is worth noting in this context, and especially with a mind to making distinctions or drawing boundaries, that Buddhism not only introduced a new notion of strong or 'absolute transcendence' (*lokottara*) but explicitly relates this to a concept of basic social differentiation. A purely theoretical or theological distinction between things belonging to the realm of birth-and-death (*saṃsāra*) and being subject to the laws of karmic retribution (i.e. *laukika*) and things which completely transcend the 'three spheres of existence' or the 'six paths [of rebirth]' (i.e. *lokottara*) becomes relevant in a socio-structural dimension as responsibility for 'transcendence' and 'immanence' is divided between the Buddha's nomosphere (represented by the Buddhist institutions) and the ruler's nomosphere (represented by state institutions) respectively. The concept of dual rule remained the standard interpretation throughout the medieval period and even beyond.

Establishment of private manors

Economic and military power of temples and monasteries

Buddhist institutions one of three dominating power blocks

Buddhism responsible for supramundane, ruler for mundane affairs

Buddhist concept of absolute transcendence

As the political situation changed, e.g. with the establishment of a military junta in Kamakura (1185–1333), a civil war from roughly 1467 to 1603, and the arrival of European merchants and Christian missionaries from 1549, tensions between the increasingly powerful monastic complexes and the state grew. Large monasteries such as Enryakuji, Negoroji, and Ishiyama Honganji became a major obstacle to attempts to unify the war-stricken country and reconstitute a central state. But even here, the concept of the 'interdependence of the ruler's nomosphere and the Buddha's nomosphere' was at times used strategically in order to avoid religiously framed rebellion and corresponding pressure from feudal lords. For instance, Rennyo, the famous leader of the Honganji, used 'parish newsletters' to urge his followers to obey the ruler's laws outwardly in their societal activities while being loyal to the Buddha Dharma inwardly. Nevertheless, the unification of Japan under the single rule of the Tokugawa clan (1603–1868) was not achieved before the power block of temple-shrine complexes was vanquished by massive military force.

Several developments in the 16th century changed the course of Japanese history dramatically. Broadly speaking, there were two major events that forced the Japanese to rearrange the boundaries between 'religion' and 'non-religion'. First, the arrival of Christian missionaries in 1549 and second, Buddhist institutions being deprived of power.

Encounter with Christianity. Establishment of the polythetic class 'religion'?

When Francis Xavier (1506–1552) and his successors began to spread the Christian gospel in Japan, the Japanese were forced for the first time in history to systematically compare two well-institutionalised missionary traditions with a universal claim to validity. For both sides – the Christian and the Buddhist – it was absolutely clear from the outset that Buddhism and Christianity belonged to the same class of social institutions, striving for dominance in the same field of activity. As the first missionaries arrived from Goa in India, many of the Japanese even believed that the Jesuits had come to spread a new form of the Buddha Dharma. Once they realised that Christianity was a different yet functionally equivalent tradition, a fierce competition commenced. The letters of the Jesuits and other missionaries as well as anti-Christian treatises written by the Japanese provide extremely interesting information on how a discrete polythetic class of social institutions was conceptualised in a way that goes

Establishment of a military junta in Kamakura
Civil war
Christian missionaries

Encounter with Christianity and European powers

Mutual acknowledgment of Buddhism and Christianity to belonging to the same class of social institutions

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beyond the mere distinction between 'religion' and 'the state.' In Japan, the somewhat traumatising encounter with the Christian missionaries resulted in a policy of isolation (*sakoku* 鎖國) and in the production of anti-Christian pamphlets, such as the *Ha daiusu* 破提宇子 (1620) by the convert and later apostate Fukansai Habian 不干斎ハビアン (1565–1621) or the *Ha kirishitan* 破吉利支丹 (1642) by the Zen monk Suzuki Shōsan 鈴木正三 (1579–1655). Both adhere to the idea of the 'interdependence of the ruler's nomosphere and the Buddha's nomosphere' and thus stress Buddhism's responsibility for the welfare of the nation while defining Buddhism as a core element of Japan's national identity. At the same time, awareness of the mutual interchangeability of Buddhism and Christianity sharpened awareness of a distinct, internally differentiated category of societal activities focused on moral instruction and cultivation of the individual, providing normative and cognitive orientation for the sake of domesticating the populace. Buddhism, Brahmanism (present only in Buddhist texts), Daoism, and Confucianism were subsumed under this one category as early as the 9th century. From the 16th century onwards, these traditions were complemented by Christianity and Shintō. All these traditions were seen as functional equivalents belonging to a category sometimes designated as *hō* 法 (law, order, nomos), sometimes as *dō* 道 (way, path), sometimes as *kyō* 教 (teaching), or more specifically, referring to social formations as *shū* 宗, *shūshi* 宗旨, *shūtei* 宗低, etc.

<div style="color:gray">**Policy of Isolation**</div>

<div style="color:gray">**Mutual interchange-ability of Buddhism and Christianity sharpens awareness of a distinct category of societal activities**</div>

State control over Buddhism, secularisation and the rise of anti-Buddhist sentiments

After powerful monastic or sectarian institutions such as Enryakuji 延暦寺, Honganji 本願寺, and Negoroji 根来寺 were finally defeated by military force, the new centralised power of the Tokugawa *bakufu*, located in Edo (present-day Tokyo), sought complete control over all Buddhist institutions. Whereas in ancient and medieval Japan, the boundaries between 'religion' and 'the state,' were drawn by Buddhists or in Buddhist discourses in order to claim autonomy for the monastic complexes, from the 17th century, it was the Tokugawa regime that distanced itself from the Buddhist institutions and tried to restrict their power while simultaneously using them as state agencies in order to eradicate Christianity once and for all from Japanese soil. In order to achieve the first objective, i.e. to fence in Buddhism, a number of so-called 'temple regulations' (*jiin hatto* 寺院法度) were

Powerful monastic institutions defeated by military force

Effort to eradicate Christianity

Temple Regulations

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issued. These regulations led to an increasing 'denominationalisation' of Buddhism. A pyramidal 'system of main and branch [temples]' (*honmatsu seido* 本末制度) was established. A head temple was selected for each denomination. All other temples in the country were assigned to a particular denomination and put under the control of the relevant head temple. The 'temple regulations' also determined all particularities of ranks, education, principle texts and doctrines, rituals, etc. for each denomination, thus also delineating the proper obligations and responsibilities of Buddhist institutions. The boundaries between 'religious' and 'non-religious' activities were thus more clearly demarcated than ever before.

The second objective, i.e. eradicating Christianity, was achieved by establishing a 'temple registration system' (*terauke seido* 寺請制度). Throughout the country, every household member, including babies, was forced to register at a Buddhist temple and thus to swear allegiance to Buddhism, which excluded adherence to the 'evil doctrine' (*jakyō* 邪教) of Christianity. Despite this, Buddhism lost much of its influence on many aspects of society such as art, the economy, literature, justice and politics. Even education, often the last refuge where religious institutions can maintain 'plausibility structures' (Berger/Luckmann) and dominate the 'social construction of reality', gained a high degree of independence from Buddhism during the Tokugawa period. Cognitive and normative orientation was mainly provided by the Zhu Xi school of Song Dynasty Confucianism. The Confucian temple Yushima Seidō 湯島聖堂 was designated as a training centre for bureaucrats and thus gained a status as *the* education centre of Japan. Although the institution of *terakoya* 寺子屋 (literally: temple child houses) as schools for common citizens was continued, these focused on secular learning, despite their name, and were not necessarily headed by priests. In most cases, the schools were located in the private homes of samurai, Buddhist priests or common citizens. Most teachers (*shishō* 師匠 or *tenarai shishō* 手習い師匠) were commoners; only some were samurai and Buddhist clerics. That being said, the 'secularisation' of education may be said to have started in the 8th century when the Daigakuryō 大学寮 was established in accordance with the Taihō code. It is important to highlight that even in medieval Japan, when Buddhist priests were heavily involved in education, this did not necessarily mean that Buddhist subject matters figured prominently in the curriculum.

Further remarkable evidence of the increasing secularity of Japan under Tokugawa rule is the emergence of a distanced and critical or even hostile discourse on religion or, to use Charles Taylor's term, the emergence of

the "secular option". The most famous example of an autonomous rational thinker who criticises all of Japan's religious traditions (thus classifying them as belonging to the same social institution) as inappropriate without himself referring to any traditional authority (religious or secular) is Tominaga Nakamoto 富永仲基 (1715–1746). Searching for the 'way of ways' (*michi no michi*), i.e. a system of cognitive and normative orientations for the Japanese to follow, he concludes that Buddhism, with its irrational predilection for magic, was suitable for India, but rubbish for the Chinese, not to mention the Japanese. Confucianism, with its esteem for language and literature, was fine for China but rubbish for Japan. And finally, Shintō was fine for the ancient Japanese but not for the present day. As such, the 'way of the three teachings' (*sankyō no michi* 三教の道) cannot be the basis of the society of 18th century Japan.

Another striking example of a secular criticism of 'early modern secularism' (Teeuwen 2013) is the text *Seji kenbunroku* 世事見聞録 (Matters of the World: An Account of What I Have Seen and Heard) written by a samurai calling himself Buyō Inshi 武陽陰士 in 1816. The text harshly criticises the priests at temples and shrines as non-productive idlers who are potentially a danger to societal development and political stability. The author takes a purely innerworldly perspective, maintaining that if religion does not serve the state through 'domesticating the masses' by controlling human action – which he sees it failing to do – it is of no use whatsoever. The author's position can be characterised as 'legalistic' in a very strict sense that has no place for religion at all. Legalist positions were by no means uncommon in Tokugawa Japan which was otherwise dominated by Zhu Xi's philosophy. The famous Ogyū Sorai (1666–1728), for instance, rejected the Neo-Confucian stance that moral cultivation of the individual should be the main purpose of education. In his view, men were not to be domesticated by moral instruction but by establishing institutions.

Conclusion

It is evident that the Buddhist notion of dual rule (complemented by Chinese notions of the absolute sovereignty of the ruler) provided a rationale for a functional differentiation between two autonomous – though interdependent – value spheres or normative systems which eventually led to an accelerated secularisation of Japan under Tokugawa rule. For the Japanese, Western ideas of a secular state or a clear differentiation between state and religion were by no means incompatible with indigenous concepts. They could easily be adopted for the sake of building a modern nation state while maintaining or creating a distinct cultural identity.

Quoted and Further Reading

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This text is part of the *Companion to the Study of Secularity*. The intent of the *Companion* is to give scholars interested in the concept of Multiple Secularities, who are not themselves specialists in particular (historical) regions, an insight into different regions in which formations of secularity can be observed, as well as into the key concepts and notions with respect to the study of secularity. It is published by the Humanities Centre for Advanced Studies "Multiple Secularities – Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities". For as long as the HCAS continues to exist, the *Companion* will be published and further expanded on the HCAS' website. Towards the end of Multiple Securities project, all entries will be systematised and edited in order to transform the *Companion* into a completed Open Access publication.

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