

Article

Japan, Religion, History, Nation

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Abstract: I connect the invention of Japanese ‘religion’ since the Meiji era (1868–1912) with the invention of other modern imaginaries, particularly the Japanese Nation State and Japanese History. The invention of these powerful fictions in Japan was a specific, localised example of a global process. The real significance of this idea that religion has always existed in all times and places is that it normalises the idea of the non-religious secular as the arena of universal reason and progress. The invention of Japanese ‘religion’ had—and still has—a significant function in the wider, global context of colonial capital and the continual search for new ‘investment’ opportunities. Meiji Japan illustrates, in fascinating detail, a process of cognitive hegemony, and the way a globalising discourse on ‘progress’ transformed the plunder of colonial sites into a civilising mission. The idea that there is a universal type of practice, belief or institution called ‘religion’ as distinct from government, ‘politics’ or ‘science’ was not only new to Japan. It hardly existed in England or more widely in Protestant Europe and North America until the eighteenth or even 19th century. The idea of a secular constitutional nation state was only emergent in the late 18th century with the Declaration of Independence and the US Constitution. Most of Europe—including the colonial powers England and France—were still Christian confessional church states through most of the 19th century. The franchise was granted only to Christian men of substantial property, and denied to women, servants, wage labour, colonised subjects, and slaves. This critical, deconstructive narrative helps us to see more clearly the ideological function of the generic category of religion in the wider configuration of modern secular categories such as constitutional nation state, political economy, nature, history, and science. I also discuss the relation between History as a secular academic science, and the invention of ‘the Past’ in universal Time. I argue here that the invention of the Past by professional Historians has a significant role in transforming modern inventions such as ‘religion’ and the secular categories into the inherent and universal order of things, as though they have always been everywhere. I reveal this on-going process of ideological reproduction by close readings of some recent ‘histories of Japan’ and the way they uncritically construct ‘the Past’ in the terms of contemporary configurations.



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1. Introduction

I am grateful to Mitsutoshi Horii for the invitation to contribute to this Special Issue¹. It is many years since I have worked on specifically Japanese issues. Since then, the critique of religion has grown into a much wider critical investigation into the origin and global dissemination of the religion–secular discourse and its function in the invention of modernity, liberal capitalism, and the world order of nation states. Later in this article I would like to explore a deep connection between the invention of generic ‘religion’, the invention of the modern secular nation state, and the invention of the Past by Historians. In the second, longer section of this article, I critically review some recent scholarly works by historians of Japan to show how these contested categories are mutual inventions that operate to sustain each other.

Horii and others have contributed to a growing body of critical literature on the invention of religion in Japan (Horii 2012, 2016, 2018; Kuroda 1981; Hardacre 1989; Josephson 2012; Isomae 2005, 2007, 2017; Fitzgerald 1993, 1995, 2000a, 2002; Thomas 2019; Maxey 2014).

This issue of the modern invention of religion and religions is not confined to Japan. As a global discourse, it is part of a much wider critical literature, much of it coming from within the discipline of religious studies itself (Smith [1962] 1978; Harrison 1990, 2015; Asad 1993; Balagangadhara 1994; Chidester 1996, 2007; McCutcheon 1997, 2018; Dubuisson 2003, 2019; King 1999, 2013, 2017; Fitzgerald 2000a, 2000b, 2007a, 2007b, 2010, 2011; Masuzawa 2005; Cavanaugh 2009; Mandair 2010; Dressler and Mandair 2011; Martin 2010, 2017; Bloch et al. 2010; Fürhding 2013; Stuckrad 2013; Stack et al. 2015; Horii 2021)².

Despite this growing volume of critical literature around the category ‘religion’, it appears to be largely ignored by historians, anthropologists, orientalist, area specialists, and more generally, across the humanities and social sciences. This criticism may apply to Japanese studies, as I hope will be evident in this article.

The assumption that ‘religion’ refers objectively to a global phenomenon, and that ‘religions’ are to be found in all times and places, is a reification that has been thoroughly normalised and institutionalised. The term has long been uncritically taken as a neutral transparent category for description and analysis, with an obvious meaning and referent. There is still widespread resistance to its critique. It is in this sense a hegemonic category. It appears as innocently neutral, natural, normal and useful, as though unproblematically corresponding to an intuitively comprehended kind of institution or practice. *Meanwhile its deployment tacitly constructs the secular ground of knowledge and reason.*

2. Earlier Work on Japan

The task given by the editor of this Special Issue of *Religions* is (1) “to problematize the concept ‘religion’ in Japanese contexts”, and (2) to “disaggregate and redescribe what is denoted as ‘religion’ in Japan without invoking the sui generis idea of religion”. In my published work on Japan (Fitzgerald 1993, 1995, 1997, 2000a, 2000b, 2002), I attempted both (1) and (2).

Before going to live and work in Japan in 1988, I had already been engaged in a critique of ‘religion’ as a category. The problem was how to establish clear criteria for distinguishing between a religious practice or institution and any other kind, such as a secular, social, political, or economic one. I had encountered this problem in my research on ‘Hinduism’, caste, and untouchability in India (Fitzgerald 1999a). This problem became evident in the very different circumstances of Japan. I read a wide range of English language texts of a historical, sociological, and anthropological kind that claimed to be describing the specifically religious beliefs, practices, and institutions of Japan. I found that what counted as ‘religious’ seemed arbitrary and did not map onto the data that was supposed to exemplify it.

In my previous work on Japan, which dates from 20 or 30 years ago, I was aware, from reading experts in Japanese studies, that the discourse on religion, and religions and the secular constitutional nation state, was a product of colonial imposition dating from Meiji. I argued that so-called religions such as Buddhism, Confucianism, and Shinto are the reified inventions of modernity. These reified, orientalist essentialisations—similar to others such as Hinduism, Sikhism, Jainism, Daoism, and any number of other ‘isms’—have been invented to promote a colonial system of classification. The insistence that Japan has something called religion, and its determined application as a descriptive and analytical category, distorts indigenous values, practices, institutions, ways of classifying the world, and a specifically Japanese identity. I attempted redescrptions of Japanese institutions and practices as far as possible in different terms, derived from what Japanese and non-Japanese scholars, students, and others told me either personally or in published texts, and what fitted my own experience of living with my family and working in Japan for several years.

However, it is inevitable that any Anglophone redescription will encounter problems of translation and representation. I will now raise questions about representation in

general. Who has the right to represent who? What are the motives and for whom is the representation intended? How is it being funded and who benefits from the representation? For myself, it was primarily a problem of trying to understand the situation I found myself in. I also had an interest in promoting my career and my identity as a qualified academic and a teacher (see recent discussions in [Fitzgerald 2017a, 2020](#)).

My attempt to redescribe 'Japanese religion' as 'ritual order' ([Fitzgerald 1993](#)) was influenced by Durkheim. I saw all Japanese institutions—households, schools, universities, small family businesses, large corporations, government bureaucracies, shrines, and temples—as having common shared ritual elements that reproduced the collective representations of Japanese identity. These include the values that configure particular relationships, the institutional loyalties, the sense of being Japanese, and being a member of a Japanese nation.

The aforementioned was an imperfect experiment, and yet, it cleared a space for critical thinking around the category and its relation to the social, the political, the economic, and the secular, in general. I did not exactly try to redescribe what is already denoted as 'religion' in Japan because that would be simply to exchange labels. Instead, I tried to identify the profoundly shared values operating in all Japanese institutions, and to show that these are neither 'religious' nor 'secular', and to force them into these compartmentalised domains distorts and misrepresents. I do not know if these have been useful or not. It is for others to judge.

My critique of the use of religion as a descriptive and analytical category in the Japanese context had added strength because it was part of a larger argument about a globalising discourse on religion and religions that made the non-religious secular seem as normal commonsense, rather than what it is, which is a value-laden, ideological construct. I believed and still believe that the academic study of reified entities called 'religion' and 'religions' has the effect of making the values and institutions of liberal capitalism appear as normal common sense. The link between them is buried from view. I developed this wider argument on several fronts in my first book ([Fitzgerald 2000a](#)). I argued that one of the various agencies for the dissemination of this discourse was the phenomenology of religion and the world religions model, which is a disguised form of Christian ecumenical theology. Three chapters were given to Japan. I had also done research in India where there are also problems with the religion–secular binary. One of my targets throughout was the claimed universality of problematic binary distinctions between 'religion' and 'secular', 'faith' and 'knowledge', 'supernatural' and 'natural', and 'spirit' and 'matter'.

The widely-made assumption in Anglophone academic studies, that the Japanese must have religion and religious practices even though they do not have a word for it, seemed and still seems like an act of cognitive imperialism, all the more powerful for being unconscious and unintended. It was and is consistent with historical accounts of the impact of American power on the Japanese elites since the time of Meiji. It made sense of the search for an equivalent term culminating with *shūkyō*. It was and is consistent with the claims made by western imperial powers, that to be modern, rational, progressive, and civilised, it was necessary for Japan to become a secular centralised nation state with a written constitution that separated 'religion' from government and the 'state', and from 'secular' domains such as politics, science, law, education, manufacturing, agriculture, and sports. It was consistent with the history of the Meiji Constitution, the reification of State Shinto (*Jinja*, *kokutai*, or what has come to be called *kokka Shinto*) as the secular ethics of the Nation State, and of Buddhism and Sect Shinto as 'religions'.

My work on the invention of religion in Japan was not intended as a work of historiography. I was not claiming to be a historian of Japan myself. The historical elements were derived from experts in modern Japanese history. Other elements were derived from critical readings of anthropologists, sociologists, and religious studies experts. My methodology involved close critical readings of a large number of Anglophone representations of Japanese 'religions' by well-established experts. By exposing their internal contradictions, I

deconstructed their claims to be *describing* Japanese religions and suggested instead that they were inventing them, and this caused discomfort and some hostility.

As Josephson put it several years later, my work was “not well received” (Josephson 2012, p. 6). Despite its flaws, I believe my work was innovative and contributed to opening up a new critical perspective. I contributed to subsequent trends in critique, especially my emphasis on the ideological operation of the religion–secular binary. It would be wrong to exaggerate my own influence. Furthermore, it would be wrong to imagine that critical thinking around the categories we deploy to organise our knowledge—religion, politics, the state, economics, and many others—has been widely and eagerly embraced by academics. My readings of the work of some historians later in this essay suggest the opposite. There is a stubborn resistance to critique, and I think there are reasons for this resistance. One of the most significant, if unstated functions of secular academics and the universities in which they work, is to protect and reproduce these categories.

On the other hand, this Special Issue represents something of a breakthrough, and I am glad to be invited to participate. Professor Horii and I have worked with many others over the years in pursuing the critical religion agenda, and I am grateful to him for including me.

3. Definitional Problems with Religion and Related Categories

I come from the eclectic discipline of religious studies. I am not a professional Japanologist or a professional historian. My own work was instigated by a problem that I encountered when studying for a religious studies degree in the 1970s. When I entered the degree, I knew intuitively—or thought I knew—what the term ‘religion’ meant. I used it automatically and without critical reflection. However, by the time I had graduated, I no longer knew what ‘religion’ meant! In the anthropology, sociology, and philosophy of religion courses that I studied, we read interesting debates by experts in those fields on the definition of religion. The scope for disagreement was so considerable that I became aware that there were no clear criteria for classifying this or that practice or institution as religious, as distinct from non-religious secular, whether political, economic, scientific, or technological. This puzzled me greatly, and I wondered why we feel an intuitive compulsion to deploy the term ‘religion’ as though ‘it’ must obviously be a global phenomenon present in all places and at all times.

Every definition of ‘religion’ has its own problems. I discussed these at some length in several articles published in the 1990s (Fitzgerald 1997), and in my first monograph (Fitzgerald 2000a). Yet despite the impossibility of reaching a satisfactory definition, and the ever-extending circle of family resemblances, few people seemed to doubt that we were studying something real, a *phenomenon* that existed in the world. I may not be able to say what it is I am studying, but I have no doubt that religion and religions exist.

Nobody has ever seen ‘religion’ itself, nor any particular manifestation of this mysterious metaphysical essence. Neither religion itself nor any of its putative incarnations as particular ‘religions’ are things that can be observed such as trees, tables, or tatami mats. They are, at best, contingent classifications of whatever data the observer decides to include or not. It was, and still is, taken as a largely unquestioned assumption with historians and anthropologists, that all peoples everywhere, and at all times, have had religion or religions, religious institutions, religious practices, and have had sentiments of ‘religiosity’. This continues to be asserted even when the people who are being attributed with this phenomenon have no corresponding word for it. Much the same can be said for a lot of other terms that academics deploy, such as ‘politics’, ‘economy’, ‘society’, ‘culture’, ‘science’, and ‘nature’.

The list of things that I personally have found in my research that are described as religion—even though in other places they are taken to be secular—are almost endless: the religion of politics; the religion of economics; the religion of money; the religion of nationalism; the religion of evolution; the religion of technology; the religion of nature; the religion of progress. Nor can one take any of these as ironic. The problem is that there are no clear criteria for distinguishing between a religious and a non-religious institution, belief,

practice, or experience. Nationalism and patriotism are a case in point. The nation demands the ultimate sacrifice from devotees. Is worship of the nation a quasi-religion, a pseudo-religion, a 'religion-like' phenomenon, or a proper religion? There are no convincing criteria to make such distinctions. Furthermore, is not 'secular religion' an oxymoron?

The paradox of the matter is, that while on the one hand, just about everything can be and has been described as a religion or as 'having a religious dimension', most of our institutions such as government, the state, the civil service, business, education, law, and sports are classified as 'secular'. Written constitutions such as the US Constitution in its Bill of Rights (1790/1) stipulate that (1) the private practice of religion is a right of the Individual, and (2) the State must be protected from religion and from the influence of any particular religious faith. Most modern secular states have agencies or court procedures for determining whether or not any particular practice can be properly classified as a religion or not.

Defining practices as religious rather than secular *quarantines* them by removing them as potential sources of opposition to the dominant regime (see Chidester 1996, 2007; Fitzgerald 2007a, 2007b; Stack et al. 2015; Goldenberg 2012, 2015). The classification of some group, belief, or practice as a 'religion' or 'religious' is ultimately a contingent act of power. This has happened globally, and Japan offers a good example. Firstly, the insistence by the Americans at the time of Meiji that Japan *must have* religion, even though there is no Japanese word for it. And then again, after the Pacific war, when they rewrote the Japanese Constitution, insisting that, of course, *in reality*, 'Shinto' is a religion and not part of the Japanese State. The Japanese needed to be instructed by the Americans in what Shinto is and what it is not. This surely demonstrates that the crucial issue is the control of the dominant narrative. It is odd that scholars think they have concepts here that are sufficiently stable for objective description and analysis, not only of contemporary Japan, but globally, and even ancient times.

The distinction between religion and politics is ubiquitous. I have shown, through detailed analyses of academic and other discourses, that politics is as indefinable as religion. On the one hand, there is a politics of everything, including all human relations. And yet on the other hand, 'religion' and 'politics' are described as *essentially* different, such that if they are allowed to mix, then violence and mayhem may result. I and others, such as William T. Cavanaugh (2009) in his book *The Myth of Religious Violence*, have described this as an aspect of the modern fiction of two entities in continual confrontation with each other, that is, fanatical faith-based religion attempting to destroy the peace-loving and rational secular order (Cavanaugh 2009; Fitzgerald 2007a, 2007b, 2011, 2017a).

I and others have argued consistently that we should be studying the deployments of the category/term/word/idea itself, not only religion, but also others such as 'politics', 'society', 'nature', or 'science', and not the putative data to which it is supposed to correspond. (See also Harrison 2015; Cavanaugh 2009; Stack et al. 2015; Horii 2016, 2018, 2021).

Just as all peoples everywhere are attributed with distinctively religious institutions and practices, so they are attributed—either tacitly or explicitly—with social, political, economic, cultural, and legal ones. If the people themselves do not make these distinctions, because they construct their world differently, then they will be redescribed by the historian or the anthropologist in the Europhone terms. However, is this not a misrepresentation, and even an act of cognitive imperialism? (See Mandair 2010 on the invention of "Sikhism" as an act of "epistemic violence"). It implies that the modern anthropologist or historian knows 'them' better than they know themselves. If a historian or anthropologist attributes a hunter-gatherer band with religious beliefs, a political process, or an economic system, he or she is imposing alien divisions that simultaneously misrepresent their reality while universalising ours. Our categories have become so 'naturalised' for us that we assume they must be normal common sense. This has, in the past, lent itself to the narrative of historical progress and development. If those people do not have words for what we take to be different kinds of practice or institution, then they are 'pre-modern' and backward—or under-developed—and need to learn English or French so that they can come to recognise

themselves in their own order of things. This is surely what happened to the Japanese people at Meiji. We may not consciously intend to associate ourselves with this imperial discourse, but is it not implicated in our representations?

Even in representations of the supposedly advanced and developed ‘West’, the definition of ‘religion’ and the ‘non-religious secular’ categories are contested and evade clear definition. This is true, not only in the context of Japanese studies but globally, in interpretations of the US Constitution, for instance.

Distinctions between religious, political, economic, or technological practices fail to map onto sociological, anthropological, and historiographical data. If one studies the actual deployments of these terms, as I and others have done in multiple texts across the humanities and social sciences, what counts as a religious as distinct from a secular practice depends on the rhetorical requirements of the moment. In my research, I have found these categories to be shifting, unstable, indefinable, porous, without clear boundaries, and frequently including so much possible data that they have no clearly distinct referent (Fitzgerald 2007a, 2007b, 2011, 2016, 2017a, 2017b, 2019, 2020). *It seems therefore that it is the reproduction of the categorial ensemble, the classification system itself, that is important, rather than any clearly defined agreement on what each term refers to.*

4. Problems with the Meaning of Religion and Related Categories in England and North America

The difficulty of translating ‘religion’ into Japanese is matched by analogous difficulties for many, or probably, most languages of the world. The same is true for politics, economics, culture, nature, society, history, science, and progress.

It may come as a surprise that the term ‘religion’ and many others that are closely related to religion through binary opposition, such as ‘politics’ and the secular state, are difficult, if not impossible to translate into 16th and 17th century England. In fact, something similar is true for all the terms that I have just listed. If these words existed at all, they operated in radically different semantic contexts. Even in the middle of the 17th century, which is frequently described as the time of ‘political’ and ‘scientific’ revolution in England, it is difficult indeed to find a consistent discourse on either ‘politics’ or ‘science’ (see Harrison 2015 for a critical genealogy of the terms ‘religion’ and ‘science’). I have searched the radical tracts of the famous Putney army debates of the 1640s, and I have not yet found a consistent discourse on the noun word ‘politics’. The distinctions between modern generic religion and politics and the state were emergent but not yet imagined. They were only just starting to emerge in the 1640s, in new discourses of a growing class of male property owners in their dangerous quarrels with the sacred monarch, in this case Charles I, the established church hierarchies, and the *ancien regime* generally.

The distinctions that we now take for granted between religion and the non-religious secular, between religion and politics, religion and science, and religion and economics, did not yet exist. My own research suggests that the modern invention of generic religion and religions emerged initially in England (perhaps it happened earlier in Holland?³) after around 1650—after the Putney Debates in the 1640s, and after the execution of the sacred monarch in 1649, around the time that Thomas Hobbes published *The Leviathan* (1652) and James Harrington published *Oceana* (1658), and especially in the 1680s in the work of Nonconformists such as William Penn (1680), the Quaker founder of Pennsylvania, and John Locke (1689a, 1689b).

The distinctions between natural and supernatural or matter and spirit were configured differently and do not map onto the modern distinction. What many writers refer to as ‘the scientific revolution’ of the 17th century, referring especially to the work of Galileo, Descartes, and Newton, began the work of transforming the relations of nature to God.

‘Political economy’ was emergent in the 17th and early 18th century with the French Physiocrats, and writers such as Montchretien and Cantillon, and became the topic of Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* in 1776 (Smith [1776] 1998). There was no discourse on

‘economics’ in the modern sense until the late 18th and early 19th century in the works of Ricardo, Bentham, James Mill, and others.

The application of modern categories to what historians refer to as medieval and early modern England tend to distort and misrepresent. Twentieth century historians retrospectively organise their representations of earlier English times in terms that had no clear equivalent and that were, at best, only emergent (Fitzgerald 1999b, 2007a, 2007b). In this way, they unconsciously smuggle into their representations teleological assumptions that misrepresent the actual priorities and habits of thought of the time. The people at those times, not only in England but in Christendom generally, seem to have lived in a different symbolic order, a different world of representations—the Bible, the church, the ancien regime, the Christian Commonwealth, the holistic organic hierarchy of the God-ordained order, the Great Chain of Being, etc.). Contemporary Anglophone descriptive and analytical categories such as religion, politics, economics, society, and science do not map onto medieval and early modern England (for religion, politics, and economics, see Fitzgerald 2007a, 2007b, 2015a; for religion, secular, and politics, see Cavanaugh 2009; for religion, nature, and science, see Harrison 1990, 2015; for ‘society’, see Horii 2021). Why then should these representations be deployed to describe Japan, especially before Meiji? It is not as if Japan or England were lacking something that they needed. The notion that somehow their language and conceptual worlds were impoverished because they did not distinguish between religion and government, or between religious practices and economic or technological practices, is itself part of the conceit of the discourse on modern secular enlightenment progress.

In England, the profound transformation in the way that the term ‘religion’ gradually came to be deployed was closely connected to a new reified discourse on ‘politics’, which referred to a new kind of government that represented the interests of male property owners who lacked rights. The new discourse on ‘politics’ was embedded in rhetorical demands for the separation of Church and State, for Toleration, and for rights of representation in Parliament for men of substantial property, many of them Nonconformists.

Less obvious but also of great significance was the emergence of a discourse on ‘religions of the world’ that arose from the colonial encounter with other peoples. There existed a burgeoning literature on this theme in Christian Europe, based on travel diaries written by all sorts of travellers and colonising agents—explorers, merchants, sailors and soldiers, missionaries, geographers, plantation owners, and the founders of new colonies. There was a proliferation of texts, and one of the burning questions was whether or not the savages, barbarians, pagans, and heathens had anything resembling religion?⁴ Religion meant Christian truth, as distinct from superstitions and idolatries. The question, ‘Do they have religion?’ was equivalent to ‘Do they have rationality, civility, and truth?’ It could even mean ‘Are they truly human?’ However, we can see the emergence of a term that was increasingly being deployed to organise knowledge of other peoples, partly as a way of classifying and controlling them. This was one of the sources of the pluralisation into ‘religions’.

However, another significant pluralisation referred to the different post-Reformation ‘confessions’ of Christian truth such as Lutheran, Calvinist, and Catholic. Religion, understood as Christian Truth, encompassed all institutions in England and Europe more widely. The idea of a non-Christian government or non-Christian law courts was quite unthinkable until the second half of the 17th century, and was a treasonous and heretical notion for long after that. The emergence of the pluralised ‘religions’—for example, in the Treaty of Westphalia (1648)—is almost always a reference to different Christian confessions. Catholicism, Lutheran and Calvinist were the main ones, but there were a plethora of different groups. In the Putney Debates, which are so often described as ‘revolutionary’ and ‘political’, the Bible was the main reference point for articulating visions of the world and how it should be ordered (Hill 1972; Bradstock 2010).

The reification of world religions as a class of phenomena that can be studied objectively, systematically, and scientifically comes later in the late 18th and 19th century, around

the same time that uppercase History was invented as a scientific professionalised discipline, from around the time that Orientalists were first coining terms such as ‘Hinduism’ and ‘Buddhism’.

Writers such as William Penn (1680, 1701) and John Locke (1689a, 1689b) had to escape persecution to Holland for suggesting that religion and government could be distinct. Simply by making this rhetorical claim, the meaning of religion was transformed, ‘politics’ emerged as a noun word, and the new narrative threatened the status quo. Tracing the emergence of the religion–politics binary, I became conscious of the equally profound change in other categories, and even their invention, terms that today we take for granted, and that seem normal and commonplace. ‘Secular’, ‘society’, ‘sacred’, ‘economy’, ‘nation’, ‘state’, ‘progress’, and ‘history’ changed radically in the logic of their deployment and amounted to inventing a new vocabulary of generic abstractions. These terms constitute much of the rhetoric of what came to be called ‘the Enlightenment’, and a family of discourses by writers such as Montesquieu, Turgot, Condorcet, Adam Smith, Jefferson, and many others on ‘progress’ and improvement—the ‘progress of nations’, and ‘the ‘progress of the human mind through universal history’.

One of the purposes of my book (Fitzgerald 2007a) was to show how professional historians reconstruct the past—in this case, the English ‘late medieval’ and ‘early modern’ past—in terms of the categories in which we think today, ideas that we take for granted, and which we suppose are universal and have transparent meanings, but which in those past days, had different meanings—if they existed as terms at all. In this way, modern professional historians invent a history of the English nation that is not merely imaginary, but which makes the past and the people of the past conform to how we think they ought to have been, according to our understandings. The process tacitly *normalises* and *universalises* our modern consciousness of the world, as though *then* was really just like *now*, and that the differences were due to *their* relative under-development.

My argument in *Discourse of Civility and Barbarity* (2007) is that ‘religion’ and related categories that today are commonplace were previously embedded—if they existed at all—into different configurations of meaning and use. People experienced the world through the conditioning of a different paradigm constructed from different categories. For example, today, post the English, French, and American Revolutions, we have a strong discourse on the rights of the Individual and the Citizen, on liberty and equality, on private property, on democratic representative government, on universal franchise, on secular nation states, and on economic development. These ideas and the discourses in which they are embedded arose largely during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

In Europe, in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, the idea of the ‘nation’ was not like the ‘imagined community’ of the centralised, bureaucratic, modern secular nation state that began to emerge in the late 18th century (Gellner 1983; Anderson 1983; Hobsbawm 1990), and which today constitutes the 193 members of the United Nations. The older usage was more like the modern usage of ‘ethnic’ or ‘tribe’, referring to a group that shared a common language, a common territory, and a common sense of identity. The heart of the nation was located in the court of the anointed monarch. The nation was seen as an organic hierarchy, typically with a sacred monarch at its heart, and created by God. One image that represented this organic hierarchy was The Great Chain of Being. Another was an analogy with the human body, whereby the Monarch was the sacred heart, his advisors were the head, the nobility and warriors were the shoulders and arms, and the peasants were the feet.

This is radically different from the “imagined community” of the centralised, secular, constitutional, bureaucratic, modern nation state with one official language, and the ideology of the modern world order exemplified by the United Nations.

The list of the imagined communities is very long indeed—the modern nation states of France, Japan, Saudi Arabia, Great Britain, India, the United States of America, Italy, Germany, Brazil, all the nations of Latin America, of Africa, of Asia, and all the other 193 fictional entities that are members of the United Nations.

What people meant by ‘England’ (or France, for example) or ‘nation’ or ‘history’ was radically different compared to today’s uses. To conflate them is to normalise and universalise what needs to be explained. The religion, history and nation states of Britain, Germany, France, Japan, or any others are modern inventions.

5. History, Historiography, the Past, and Time

Japan, Great Britain, France, Burma, or any other imagined entity with membership of the United Nations relies on historians (or mythographers) to provide the invented traditions that sustain the illusions on which national unity is based.

I have used the term ‘history’ frequently throughout. I owe the reader some explanation about how I understand this term. I hope that professional Historians will forgive me if I attempt to summarise my undoubtedly crude understanding of their sophisticated and yet endlessly contested practice.

There have been many practising historians and philosophers of history who have asked the question: ‘What is History?’ How do the plethora of competing constructions of the past differ from myth or fiction? I only mention here the ones that I myself have encountered (Bury 1920; Butterfield 1931; Collingwood 1946; Carr 1961; Walsh 1960; White 1973; Anderson 1983; Collins 2003; Jenkins 1991; Munslow 1997a, 1997b, 2012).

There are a number of key terms that are related together—History, Historiography, the Past, and Time. History is the term for what academic Historians intend to do, which, in general, is to discover and disseminate knowledge of the Past. This knowledge is about Facts and *the interpretation* of Facts. This Past is generally thought of as the *human* past, and therefore implies a concept of ‘human nature’, or perhaps different and competing concepts, as distinct from other flora and fauna studied by evolutionary biology. I am referring to uppercase History, *the profession that itself has a history*. To avoid an infinite regress, uppercase professional History is often dated from around the late 18th or early 19th century. However, the history of History and its origins is as contested as everything else in that discipline. The practice of History also implies a dominant conception of Time—unilinear, universal, empty, and homogenous, a Time that stretches from the past through the present to the future. Time is a kind of container, within which all possible events must take place. History is, therefore, a series of events or concatenation of events leading up to the present and explaining or illuminating the present. Historiography refers to the methods for acquiring knowledge of those past events and interpreting the interconnections between them. Historiography therefore implies a theory of knowledge, and different schools have different theories. Generally, these are empiricist, realist, positivist, or idealist. The founding of the profession is sometimes associated with the German, Leopold von Ranke, who thought that the practice of History could be a positive Science and as objective and factual as other Sciences (Iggers 2011). However, few practising Historians think of History this way, and most are critically conscious of the fragility and partiality of knowledge of the past. Given the vastness of everything that has happened in the past, knowledge of the past is partial, fragmented, contested, and, always, only an interpretation from the viewpoint of the present. Furthermore, given that historians continually contest each other’s representations of the past, it seems inevitable that historical knowledge reflects factors of bias in the present—bias in the selection and interpretation of data, bias stemming from the contingent positionality of the historian such as class, nationality, institutional affiliation, influence of teacher, sources of funding, and factors of personal biography, psychology, and temperament. These factors suggest that different historians construct or invent the past rather than describe ‘it’. In other words, there is no one ‘past’. This has given rise to deep scepticism about what Historical knowledge amounts to and whether, ontologically speaking, there is such a thing as ‘the Past’.

This scepticism can be put in the form of a question: ‘How does History and Historical knowledge differ from myth or fiction or ‘fictive writing’ (Munslow 2012, p. 2)⁵ that serves the interests of the present?’ There is a paradox or a circularity, in that, while every cognitive category such as religion, politics, history, or nation has a history, these same

categories are deployed by historians as though they did not have a history. Thus, while the Anglophone or, more generally, Europhone term ‘religion’—like ‘secular’, ‘nation’, ‘state’, or ‘politics’—has a history, it is deployed by historians as though it refers to an ahistorical constant—an objective, permanent, and universally available factor of all times and places.

6. The Invention of Japanese Religion Was Also the Invention of Japan, the Japanese Nation State, and Japanese History

On a topic such as Japanese religion and its history, we might productively start with Helen Hardacre’s observation that, at the time of the Meiji restoration, “The notion of Buddhism and Shinto as separate religions, the idea of religion itself, and the term ‘Shinto’, were all assuming a place in Japan’s intellectual vocabulary for the first time” (Hardacre 1988, p. 227; 1989). At a minimum, such a statement implicates the invention of religion with the invention of universal, uppercase History, and of the modern, secular, constitutional nation state of Japan.

Tanaka (2006)⁶ has shown how History, the Nation State, capitalism, and a new conceptual vocabulary arrived in Japan at the same time. ‘History’, in the modern sense, began in early Meiji, bringing with it a new sense of uniform, empty, homogenous time. Two significant aspects of this arrival of ‘modernity’ were the reforms of both calendrical and clock time in 1872. Clocks were adopted to synchronise timekeeping. The new way of measuring time imposed a mechanical regularity that suited new capitalist modes of production, distribution, and consumption of commodities. The Gregorian calendar was adopted, which involved a significant change from lunar time to solar time. These, in turn, generated a sense of empty, homogenous, universal time, and with it, a sense of uniform universal history. The new sense of time and history reordered the past, the collective memory, and consequently, also reordered the present. It created a rupture in consciousness, introducing a new way of thinking about and organising ‘Japan’ by overcoming myriad local and regional differences, and synchronising them into a single imagined nation state. There was, thus, a change of spatial consciousness as well as temporal. These changes bewildered and disoriented people, radically disturbing many vital aspects of their world and their lived lives. All of these sudden combined changes were wrapped in the discourse of progress from the ignorant and barbaric past to the enlightened new age of civilised modernity.

Therefore, the invention of ‘religion’ is implicated in the invention of the factual history of the nation state and a particular sense of time that is associated with modern, modernity, and modernisation. A significant component of this myth is ‘modern secular liberal (or socialist) enlightenment progress’. The configuration of categories includes the imagined community of the modern Japanese ‘nation state’ and its history. ‘History’ in the uppercase and ‘Nation State’ are as much modern inventions as ‘religion’ and the non-religious secular. The very idea of ‘modern’ and ‘modernity’ is made possible by these others. It generates other imagined times such as premodern, early modern, medieval, and ancient. I suggest that these ideas or mythemes operate together in a way similar to notes in a musical composition, or signs in a signalling system. Religion, secular, modern, progress, history, and nation state are imaginaries that are implicated together, they mutually construct each other. Moreover, they are further tangled up with a large number of other metacategories such as politics, economy, liberty, society, culture, nature, progress, revolution, and science to name just a few of the more ubiquitous ones.

These metacategories are abstractions that form part of a system of modern classification. They are contingent ways of talking about the world that have been transformed into common sense. These terms operate together in an ensemble to invent, construct, or imagine a particular and contingent kind of world. We organise the world and our knowledge of the world *as though* they are objectively real. I suggest that they are fictions that organise our knowledge and experience but do not stand for anything outside the belief system. Though the referent of each term seems intuitively obvious—we all supposedly know what we mean by ‘religion’ or ‘politics’ or ‘nation’ or ‘nature’ because we know how

to use the words—they are each and every one contested, and there is little consensus around their definition. They do not refer to anything outside the rhetorical narratives that transmit them.

The case of Japan provides one example of how these contested but normalised categories achieved their global *hegemony* by way of colonization or the threat of colonization, which implies *cognitive* colonization (hence the colonial episteme). All peoples who came under the globalising power of the Europeans had to reconfigure their own systems of representation to fit the dominant imported ones. The elites of the colonised sites internalised the dominant language and categories.

The aforementioned was not a passive internalization, and was often a first step to resistance, but resistance in the terms of the dominant. The data collected by explorers, geographers, colonial administrators, merchants, traders, soldiers and sailors, orientalist and missionaries, fed back into the Anglophone or Europhone categories and classifications, and expanded them and changed their shape. Few people who have written about these issues of translation in the colonial context of unequal power relations are unaware of what Charles Hallisey called “intercultural mimesis” (Hallisey 1995). No doubt, as Josephson (2012) has pointed out in his work, *The Invention of Religion in Japan*, it would be wrong to deny ‘agency’ to the Japanese in the face of imperial power. However, if ‘the Japanese’ (which Japanese?) had ‘agency’, it was largely the literate male elites with power and status within their own hierarchies. And it would still be true to say that change was imposed on Japan by superior military power from out of the barrel of a gun. ‘The Japanese’ did not decide of their own free will to become a modern, secular, constitutional nation state, nor did most Americans or French. How many Germans or Italians had any say in the unification of their new modern nation states in the 1870s? Perhaps few people had much say in the matter.

The problem of translating terms such as religion, secular, society, history, nation state, politics, science, or nature has presumably been global, occurring in multiple linguistic contexts. It has also brought with it the radical reordering of institutions, productive practices, modes of ownership, and the disorientation of collective memory and time. It would therefore seem fair to describe this cognitive hegemony as *the colonial episteme*. This expression bears some comparison with what Walter Mignolo and Catherine Walsh call “the colonial matrix of power” (CMP) in their work on decoloniality (Mignolo and Walsh 2018; Horii 2021; see also Gu 2020).

As I have already mentioned, my own research shows that a wide range of Anglophone terms that we take for granted today, and invest with a transparent normality of meaning, underwent radical changes in meaning and in the logic of their use since the 17th century.

The problem of much of my own research has been about the origins of these aforementioned categories—not only ‘religion’ but all the categories that have been rhetorically fused to religion. I am not talking about their etymological origins because I believe that etymological continuity misleadingly implies that there is a core of essential meaning that can be traced back to some ancient origin. According to this view, the core meaning remains stable throughout the succeeding secondary changes in different contexts. However, this ignores the intractable definitional problems of a word such as ‘religion’ and all the others I have mentioned.

Much of what has been invented as the Enlightenment constitutes the conception and birth of a new language of modern progress. Reinhart Koselleck had the idea that for Germany, the late 18th century is a *sattelzeit* or watershed marked by large conceptual shifts. This, I think, is what Koselleck meant by *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* (translated as ‘basic concepts’; see (Lehmann and Richter 1996)). I raise this issue for a very brief mention because the continual reproduction of the myths and invented traditions that sustain modern nation states as imagined communities with an ancient past depend greatly on the work of modern Historians.

7. History of Japan and Japanese Religion: A Study of Texts

- (1) Buc, Philippe. 2020. Civil war and religion in medieval Japan and medieval Europe: War for the Gods, emotions at death and treason. *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 57: 261–87.

Professor Buc's reading in several languages is impressive, with a long list of references and a very substantial bibliography. We are left in no doubt, from the outset, that we are reading the words of a master comparative historiographer. He seems anxious from early in his essay to distinguish himself from the "many historians . . . and public intellectuals" who are gulled by "master narratives". He decries the "shallow comparisons" that "enabled colonial history and constructed the Sociology of Modernity" (262). And he warns us of the need to "guard against the Western master narrative of European destiny leading to democracy" (p. 267).

Yet, Buc (2020)'s text itself appears to be organised around many of the same categories that constitute the master narrative and which invite those "shallow comparisons". According to the summary, the purpose of Buc's article is to compare and contrast "medieval Japan and medieval Western Europe" with regard to three supposedly analogous features: the comparison of "Catholic holy war" with the role of Buddhism in war; "the role played by emotions during war", and the "concept of treason". Buc tells the reader that treason was present in Christian medieval Europe whereas "Japanese warriors could and often did switch sides" and "the archipelago did not know for centuries anything approaching the European concept of treason". According to the author "the texture of the religions present in the two ensembles gave their specific form to these aspects of warfare" (p. 265).

Despite his remarks about not being gulled by the Grand Narrative, by bringing modern generic religions into his narrative of the past, Buc has tacitly brought in the whole ensemble of categorial distinctions that constitute our contemporary world and anachronistically attributed them to both 'medieval' Japan and Europe.

He summarises what he sees as both the similarities between Japan and Europe and the differences:

"The set of similarities between Japan and Europe are institutional: (1) the existence of a warrior class; (2) the existence of politically and economically powerful religious institutions, in particular monasteries, and of a clergy; (3) the presence of authority figures, emperors and kings, Japanese retired emperors, Catholic popes. The differences that this presentation will explore concern: (1) rebellion and its justifications or critiques; (2) the rules of war, the fate of the defeated, and death pollution, in relation to notions concerning emotions; and (3) side-switching or treason". (p. 265)

Buc anticipates some immediate objections to comparing 'medieval' formations. He begins his essay with a point about master narratives that signals that he is critically alert, warning the reader how these "guide the thinking of many historians as well as the non-thinking of many others, including public intellectuals and other historians" (p. 262). There is a tacit signal to the reader here that Buc is not going to fall into the trap, and that his own compare-and-contrast project will not be another shallow version of uncritical assimilation into the master narrative of colonial history. He points out that "In this earlier comparative mode, the Modern West became a universal horizon and model, and yet was made so particular a horizon that all other cultures were found lacking on the road to a European-grade Modernity. All cultures were found lacking, or rather, almost all cultures. Japan was an exception, perhaps the exception". (p. 262)

Except for quite a long time, it seems, from the late nineteenth through much of the 20th century, "Japanese historians inscribed their land's past in the then current Western historiographic models, finding or inventing parallels" (p. 264). Buc reviews the trend of historiographical models adopted in different decades during the 20th century. A key point is the critique of the term 'feudalism'. Then comes the moment where he asks:

... is the data that had allowed generations of historians to fit the Japanese archipelago in successive European historiographic frameworks fully resilient to serious comparison? (p. 264)

This rhetorical question acts as a switch point, because from here on, Buc will proceed with his own project, which turns out to be uncritical and anachronistic. He claims that:

Inverting comparative history's earlier interest in a catalogue of sameness, one can put Japan between ca. 1000 and ca. 1600 side by side with Western and Central Europe in approximately the same centuries, ca. 1000 to ca. 1500, to notice, in fact, contrasts that have to be explained; contrasts that bring out with surprising clarity the specificities of each ensemble. In short, the historian has to work to explain contrasts embedded in similarities. And conversely, sometimes, it is possible to suggest surprising similarities where master narratives had assumed difference. (p. 264)

It seems then that, despite Buc's scepticism about the universalisation of the 'medieval' construct, he thinks it is fruitful after all. Placing the emphasis on contrasts presupposes a framework of shared categories that enable unconnected things to be put side by side. Medieval is one of them. The problem with a designation such as medieval is that it tacitly places Japan under the dominance of the master narrative of colonial history. It evokes the idea of stages of development, from the primitive, to the medieval, the premodern, and early modern, finally arriving at the height of development, the modern.

This colonising episteme encompasses 'local' times and histories within the master narrative of Universal Time and Universal History, and this master narrative of History, and its authoritative constructions of a 'past', are inseparable from the colonial project introduced to Japan by Commodore Perry in his iron warship. This came entangled in a language of backwardness and barbarity, and an imperative to modernise and be civilised as the Americans and the Europeans.

Buc deploys the term 'religion' as a global category encompassing sets of data about different peoples with different languages and, until the 16th century, very little contact. He seems entirely unaware of the large corpus of published research on the category religion that I have referred to earlier. For example, he says:

This presentation will focus on medieval Japan and medieval Europe's cultures of war and on how the religions present in each contributed to the form that warfare took. In West and Central Europe, there was just one religion: a Catholic Christian faith increasingly centralised and homogenised, after ca. 1100, by the Roman papacy. In Japan, religion was a hybrid of a Buddhism brought from Korea and China alloyed with the cult of local gods, the kami. Additionally, there were notions stemming from Confucianism, and elements coming from Daoism (which are hard to disentangle from native beliefs). (pp. 264–65)

However, to describe medieval Catholic faith as "just one religion" is to imply that in the language of that time, there could have been more than one Christian truth, as though the Universal Church might have been one among several 'religions'. This constitutes an anachronism and a misrepresentation. The anachronistic attribution of modern constructs appears also as 'religions' such as Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism. There is a misplaced shift in register between different meanings of the term 'religion'. The shift in meaning from Religion as Christian Truth to religion as a kind of practice and institution that can be distinguished from non-religious secular institutions such as the nation, politics, economics, and science is a shift in overall paradigm. It is to redescribe the past of both Europe and Japan in terms of the globalising hegemonic discourse—the 'grand narrative' that Buc claims to be avoiding.

Buc claims with confidence:

Of course, no one would deny that there was in the Japanese Middle Ages religion *in* war (as opposed to religious war). As is common in most premodern societies, Japanese medieval warriors mustered temples and shrines' prayers, curses and

spells; and they believed that the gods helped them in battle . . . However, unlike in Catholic Europe or Islamicate polities, the scholarly consensus is that there was no war *for* religion. (pp. 265–66)

There are some problems with this claim. There is the invocation of the ‘premodern’ which only has meaning in the context of the master narrative of modern progress that the author claimed he was avoiding. And there is a problem with the apparent meaningfulness of the distinction that Buc is making here between “religion *in* war” and “religious war” or “war *for* religion”. This presumes a clear idea of what religion or ‘a religion’ is, as distinct from any other belief, practice, or institution. It is a spurious distinction when one realises that there was no such thing as religion in either medieval Europe or medieval Japan. There is also a tacit assumption that religion refers to temples, shrines, prayers, curses, spells, and gods—all the clichés about the irrational “premodern” past.

“There is no religion in the Bible” either. As Naomi Goldenberg has argued in her article with that title:

The author argues that ‘religion’ as a term designating distinct phenomena or institutions is alien to the Bible, the text that supposedly anchors the concept in Western politics and imagination. She analyses excerpts from books and lectures by prominent scholars to show that even when they state outright that ‘religion’ is non-existent in biblical times and thus is a misleading and inaccurate descriptor, each one then ignores this insight and proceeds to employ the fiction that ‘religion’ is present in ancient cultures. Such habits of contradiction perpetuate an illusion. The author then discusses several specific texts from each testament to argue that the subject of biblical literature is governance. She contends that biblical depictions of God and His representatives are narratives about sovereignty, authoritative jurisdiction and communal allegiance. (Goldenberg 2018; see also Stack et al. 2015)

Let us remember that Buc began his essay by criticising the “shallow comparisons” that “enabled colonial history and constructed the Sociology of Modernity” (p. 262).

Buc uses the term ‘supernatural’, as in “Prince Shōtoku (pp. 574–622) had, with supernatural help, victoriously fought with the opponents of Buddhism” (p. 267). This may seem innocent and beyond critique. However, it is part of a pattern. Is he sure that Shōtoku or any of the people of that time and place distinguished between the ‘natural’ and the ‘supernatural’? Like his use of the Japanese term *kami* to mean ‘gods’, it seems normal and a quibble to critique it, but it is unclear what is being identified. It is well known to Japanese and foreign scholars in religious studies that the term *kami* can mean many things, including sacred aspects of what moderns refer to as ‘nature’. In English, the term ‘gods’ is radically unstable and has a plethora of uses and references.

Durkheim long ago argued that ‘religion’ cannot be defined in terms of belief in the supernatural because many, and perhaps, most peoples in the world make no such distinction (Durkheim, Emile 1912). Arguably, it is a modern distinction, part of the package of modern secular reason and progress. It comes with the rhetorical separation of ‘religion’ and its beliefs from the claims of materialist, empirical science. The Anglophone terms ‘natural’ and ‘supernatural’ changed radically since the 17th century, and while today there is a commonly-made rhetorical distinction between supernatural and natural, it is unclear how it *can* be made. Neither nature nor supernature are available for empirical inspection. They are both metaphysical abstractions containing vast amounts of arbitrary data. What seems interesting to the present writer is the persistence with which scholars with research skills consistently ignore the critical literature on these issues.

- (2) (A) Delmer M. Brown (ed) *The Cambridge History of Japan, Vol.1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1st published 1993, reprinted 1997, 2003, 2006, 1st published online 2008); (B) William Tsutsui (ed) *A Companion to Japanese History*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2007.

Before I begin to make critical comments about *The Cambridge History of Japan* (Hall et al. 1993), let me start by noting the view of William Tsutsui, the editor of another substantial

work on Japanese history. In his Introduction to *A Companion to Japanese History* (Tsutsui 2007) Tsutsui comments about *The Cambridge History of Japan* in negative terms:

Published between 1988 and 1999, the Cambridge History volumes were anachronisms from the moment they appeared, “caught in a time warp,” as John Dower described them. Resolutely chronological in organization, conservative in thematic coverage (with an emphasis on tried-and-true categories of political, economic, and social history) . . . the Cambridge History was squarely in the hoary modernization paradigm and excluded mention of most of the critical new approaches to Japanese history that were already transforming the contours of the field by the 1980s. (p. 5)

Yet Mark J. Hudson, the contributor to the first chapter of the first section, “Japanese Beginnings”, says that “Volume 1 of *The Cambridge History of Japan* . . . remains an essential overview of the documentary history of ancient Japan”.

*The Cambridge History of Japan*⁷ was first published in 1993, which is only around 30 years ago. It was reprinted in 1997, 2003, and 2006, and it was republished online in 2008, only 14 years ago. It is therefore well established in the public domain and will have been consulted as an authoritative text by diverse people. It is highly representative, having been written and edited by some of the top scholars of Japanese history under the prestigious aegis of Cambridge University. Furthermore, the issues that we are discussing do not change in such a short time.

I am not convinced that Tsutsui’s own edited collection is really such an advance in theoretical and methodological terms⁸. Changes in historiographical fashion and contestations over the interpretation of data between different theoretical schools are ubiquitous. However, the overall paradigm of secular historiography and the basic Anglophone or Europhone categories that historians deploy to organise their knowledge of the past hardly change at all.

As I have suggested earlier, the professional academic production of historical narratives about an imagined past depend on the use of categories that arose under specific circumstances of conflict between powerful interest groups or classes in Christian Europe in the 17th century onwards, were embedded in enlightenment narratives of progress from the backward past of religion and superstition into the rational liberty of Individual private property rights and the constitutional Nation State, and have long been transformed into universal commonplaces, and into academic abstractions deemed neutral, universal, and objective. The ‘Modern’ in modernization theory seems comprehensible only in this context.

I question whether Tsutsui as editor can extricate himself from the basic paradigm within which the idea of modernization was born and which he decries in *The Cambridge History*. I argue that the hegemonic power of modern categories lies partly in the forgetting of their origins. The invention of the modern progressive secular—the secular study of History, the secular University, and the idea of the objectivity of secular reason—was and is symbiotic with the invention of religion as a reified universal phenomenon acting as a sign for the backward past. This forgetting of origins is exemplified here, when the editor Tsutsui says that “a consideration of Japanese ‘religion’ has unfortunately been omitted due to length considerations: the history of Japanese religion is so rich that it is worthy of its own “state of the field survey” volume” (p. 7). This mystification—so rich that it is worthy of its own survey—assumes that there is or ever has been such a thing as “Japanese religion”, which is the topic of this Special Issue. At the same time that the editor is reifying Japanese religion and ‘its’ history, he is quietly and tacitly normalising the non-religious secular as the universal (if unstated) ground of objective and authoritative knowledge. It is, after all, the ground from which he himself speaks, and which gives his expertise concerning the Japanese past its authority. Paradoxically, *this exclusion of religion has the same discursive effect as its inclusion would have!* In both cases, ‘religion’ becomes reified and separated out as a distinct phenomenon, typically pluralised as ‘religions’, and the problem of identifying the phenomenon and distinguishing it from culture, ritual, politics, or society is discreetly side-stepped. Of course, this is not a conscious strategy. The power of hegemonic categories

lies in their being unconscious. This is how the myth of secular non-religious reason and development makes its appearance as simple fact, or as the background to all facts. It is the technique whereby a rhetorical invention with ideological commitments becomes transfigured into a largely unconscious working assumption.

There are other indicators of a lack of critical reflexivity. Tsutsui is very critical of the American historians of the past who “structured their narratives” with “modernization theory” (p. 2): These scholars figured “the rise of modern Japan” as “an edifying success story, an almost textbook case of the inevitable triumph of rationality, democracy, and capitalism, a trajectory interrupted in the Japanese example only by a “temporary” and “aberrant” prewar turn to authoritarianism and expansionism . . . ” On this perspective, Japan “should become increasingly similar to the advanced nations of Europe and the United States as they ‘modernised’ along capitalist lines . . . Thus, the assumed endpoint of Japan’s historic “upward course” was becoming “just like us”, tracing a step-by-step process of convergence toward the modern ideal of all-American economic, political, and social freedom” (p. 2).

Has the structure of modernization theory and history written in the vein of “a modernising teleology” been overcome? Tsutsui seems to think his volume has overcome it, and he gives quite optimistic reasons for this. I suggest ‘no’ for several reasons, which are in line with the theoretical and methodological orientations briefly outlined earlier in this essay. One is the belief that you can exclude ‘religion’ from an account of Japan’s past without tacitly invoking the whole Enlightenment discourse on progress in which the invention of religion is embedded. Another is that the very idea of academic, professionalised history as an objective empirical factual reconstruction of ‘the past’ is again part of the same modern configuration that arose out of the matrix of progress and development. Is Tsutsui advocating a different kind of critical History? I do not think so. Also, if my argument can be accepted, then the critique of religion and its binary opposition to the non-religious secular seems, logically, to involve a critique of those other related categories—politics and economics, for example—that frame modern consciousness and the discourse on progress.

It is worth bearing in mind a couple of points made about history, religion, and politics by another serious expert on Japanese studies, George Macklin Wilson, in his essay “Time and History in Japan” (1980), which illuminates the thesis that History in the modern sense—professionalised universal History and its concomitant empty homogenous time—entered Japan at the time of Meiji. He quotes a remark made by a Japanese person in 1876: “We have no history. Our history begins today” (quoted in Wilson 1980, p. 570; also quoted by Tanaka 2006, p. 1).⁹

Another remark that Wilson makes that bears on my thesis here concerns the impossibility of distinguishing between religion and politics in ancient Japan. He says:

Nothing intervened between politics and other aspects of official life. Religion in the strict sense had no independent existence . . . What was political was religious; the religious was equally political. *Matsurigoto* (“ceremonial affairs”) is the first Japanese word for government, and it guarded against a schism between the civil and the sacral. It means government and also conveys the sense of religion. (p. 565)

In their Preface to *The Cambridge History of Japan, 1993, 2008 (Vol. 1)*, the general editors of the Series, John Whitney Hall, Marius B. Jansen, Madoka Kanai, and Denis Twitchett skillfully summarise many of the problems with the writing of History in general. It is helpful, therefore, to look at what they say in some detail:

The task (for a History of Japan) was not to be easy. The details of Japanese history are not matters of common knowledge among Western historians. The cultural mode of Japan differs greatly from that of the West, and above all there are the daunting problems of terminology and language. (p. v)

They go on to point out that “foreign scholars have been assisted by the remarkable achievements of the Japanese scholars during the last century in recasting their history

in modern conceptual and methodological terms". A pertinent point here—and being an obvious point does not make it less significant—is that Japanese historians must *recast their history in modern terms*. 'Religion', and all those domains that moderns construct as distinct from religion, is a case in point. This is equivalent to translation into the dominant colonial episteme that derived from the categories of the European Enlightenment.

The editors also indicate the tension between local history and 'universal' History. They claim that 'history' and a historical consciousness was, in some sense, already in Japan long before the advent of Modern History:

The importance of history was . . . emphasized in the continental cultural influences that entered Japan from early times. *Its expression* changed as the Japanese consciousness turned to questions of dynastic origin, as it came to reflect Buddhist views of time and reality, and as it sought justification for rule by the samurai estate. (p. v; my italics)

Note that there already existed something the editors call "the Japanese consciousness", which surely seems a bit premature.

Note also that 'history' has been essentialised as already present "from early times" but has been obliged to change "its" expression or form when "it" was confronted variously by the questions mentioned.

The reader might feel that, tacitly, 'history' or 'Japanese historical consciousness' is similar to an organism that is struggling to survive and evolve in a hostile landscape of external challenges. Eventually, this essentialised 'history' will flower into proper universal History:

In the nineteenth century, the Japanese became familiar with *Western forms of historical expression* (my italics) and felt the need to fit their national history into patterns of a larger world history. (p. v)

This editorial essentialisation of Japanese 'history' as something persisting from earliest times through the centuries continues, when in the 18th century, there arose the need "to explain the divinity of the government, justify the ruler's place through his virtue and compassion, and interpret the flux of political change . . ." (p. v).

'Political change' has already seeped into their text as though such an expression is unproblematically universal. This is especially pertinent because it refers here to "the divinity of the government", and we will see that early Japan was ruled by king-priests, and therefore, they presumably did not distinguish between religious and non-religious secular government and state in the modern sense. (This was [Wilson's \(1980\)](#) point).

Why are the authors at such pains to insist on this early presence of historical consciousness in an incipient but undeveloped form? One reason is, presumably, that modern historical consciousness incorporates a linear notion of time, which conflicts with the models of cyclical time that are evident in Buddhist philosophy and cosmology.

The Editor of Volume 1, Delmar M. Brown, had a significant part to play in its production. He wrote the Preface and the Introduction to Volume 1, Ch. 2, "The Yamato Kingdom" and Ch. 10, "The Early Evolution of Historical Consciousness", and was involved in the production of Ch. 3, "The Century of Reform" with Inoue Mitsusada, and Ch. 7, "Early Buddha Worship" with Sonoda Koyu. In his chapter "The Early Evolution of Historical Consciousness", Brown locates the emergence of a lineal concept of time—replacing earlier cyclical notions of time based on the cycle of the seasons—in the Burial Mound period (250–600 AD) when:

. . . leaders of emerging states seem gradually to have become preoccupied with a fundamentally different kind of temporal progression: the replacement of one hereditary ruler by the next. They were henceforth concerned not only with the cyclical activity of natural phenomena but also with a succession of reigns moving in a linear fashion from distant points in the past to an indeterminate future. (p. 504)

It does seem to me to be of methodological importance that cyclical notions of time based on the seasons were there at the beginning among hunters and gatherers and early agriculturalists, and that these pre-existed the more elaborate notions of cyclical time that were imported from China via Buddhist cosmologies. It also seems significant that it was the “leaders of emerging states” who were preoccupied with linear progression. Could not the succession of reigns have been compatible with a concept of cyclical time? And does the evidence for this linear time amount to a modern idea of “historical consciousness”?

One of the many reasons that this essay is of interest is Brown’s knowledgeable discussion of cyclical concepts of time. However, the existence of cyclical concepts of time based on day following night, season following season, and changes in crop harvests might be taken to clash with his other claim that the ancient people living in Japan had “historical consciousness”. This relates to my earlier point about incommensurability of worlds, and therefore, the problem of representing the ancient or the past or, more generally, ‘the other’ in terms of the present dominant categories.

Brown (1993) attributes “historical consciousness” to the ‘pre-800 AD’ period. His intention is to trace “the pre-800 stages in the rise of this new type of historical consciousness” (p. 504). There is something paradoxical and confusing about his aims and intentions, for this historical consciousness has its roots in “prehistorical times”. He asserts:

“... we now have enough historical, archaeological, and ethnological evidence to be quite certain that the three characteristics of historical expression found in early accounts of Japan’s past, and discussed in this chapter, were grounded in beliefs of ‘prehistorical’ times”. (p. 505)

This is presented as the very earliest stage of Japanese history.¹⁰ As the title indicates, this historical consciousness is placed in a perspective of evolution and development, and can be detected in an early but undeveloped form. The narrative thus seems to be set in a framework of teleological assumptions about modern historical consciousness being truly universal and developed, and local Japanese historical consciousness being found incipiently and in undeveloped forms, requiring to be further developed to become fully ‘historical’. We seem to be caught in a circular construction, whereby what we mean by historical consciousness is present in either ‘prehistory’ or early ‘history’. But this assertion is being made in an essay that is constructing one possible version of that history. This is not a point about the historian’s knowledge and skills, which are impressive and considerable, but about the categories in which we are all entangled.

In his chapter, Brown introduces a tripartite scheme of three analytically separable characteristics of “Japanese historical consciousness”—linealism, vitalism, and optimism.

The three characteristics that constitute ‘historical consciousness’ are described as such: linealism arises “from an early and lasting belief in the importance of sacred-ruler descent”, vitalism stems “from a constant preoccupation with the origins and enrichment of physical life”, and optimism flows “from convictions that the immediate future will be better than the present or the past” (p. 505).

The author makes it explicit that these are the major components of what he refers to continually throughout the essay as “Japanese historical consciousness”: “I submit that all three (characteristics), separately and in combination, were especially strong and persistent in the early evolution of Japanese historical consciousness” (p. 549).

The author reminds us that he only has access to the consciousness of the literate ruling elite “who wrote poems and stories and who compiled anthologies, legal codes, gazetteers, and chronicles” (p. 548). He says that “Evidence for this study has been taken almost exclusively from materials written by members of Japan’s ruling elite, men and women who did not concern themselves with the thoughts and beliefs of commoners” (p. 549). This is an important point that indicates the fragility and partiality of the historical imaginary.

7.1. "Linealism", Time, and History

There may be a basic, common sense, ordinary language notion of 'time' as one thing following another. One day and night follows another, one season, one event. This can become extended into more elaborated worldview concepts of time, for example, in terms of a succession of ruling lineages, as when one sacred sovereign follows another. This marks out larger chunks of time such as 'eras' than merely days or seasons. However, I would find it difficult to believe that this amounts to "historical consciousness".

Brown uses the term 'linealism' to denote a characteristic of historical consciousness. He also uses "linear" as in "a historical consciousness focused on the origin and *linear* development of life" (p. 533; my italics). The idea of time in this very simple sense as one thing following another would or could presumably apply to what are typically referred to as *cyclical* notions of time. In both Hindu and Buddhist cosmology, there is an idea of time as moving in vast cycles or *kalpas*. This does not mean that things do not happen one after the other, or that there is no consciousness of a succession of events. *Kalpas* move in a succession, one after another. Within *kalpas*, there are lesser *kalpas* that follow each other. And presumably within a *kalpa*, there can still be a succession of sacred monarchs or king-priests.

However, the gaps between these *kalpas* transcend time. The world contracts and expands in vast cycles of time, and during the periods of contraction, then, presumably, there is no time.

One *kalpa* follows another eternally. There is no ultimate beginning or end. This idea of time is profoundly different from the idea of linear or lineal time that represents an evolution from a once-off act of Creation or a Big Bang through a process of upward stages towards increasingly advanced complexity. It is a different idea from the time of progress and development that informed the study of History in its Enlightenment origins.

To differentiate this minimal sense of a succession of events from the time of History born in the European Enlightenment, one would need the additional and crucial element of a primitive origin moving through higher and higher stages of qualitative progress and development. The purpose of Enlightenment History would be found precisely in that sense of universal progress from the backwardness of the primitive past towards the full realisation of rational secular modernity. Brown claims that it is already there in the evidence of optimism that flows "from convictions that the immediate future will be better than the present or the past" (p. 505). This does seem similar to a vague sense of general progress. Is this really sufficient to establish the presence of what we would understand by "historical consciousness"?

Brown's interesting and knowledgeable account of Buddhist time, including "kalpic decline", seems inconsistent with 'history' in the sense of universal and uniform historical time that characterises modern historiography. Brown attributes this concept of time to "one leading Buddhist school (the Kusha) of the Nara period (which) embraced the Abhidharma kosa" (pp. 540–41).

On the basis of his reading of the relevant *sutra*, Brown describes knowledgeably and with skill the complex doctrine of *kalpas* within *kalpas* or cycles within cycles and the vast, though diminishing, time scales involved. However, he deploys the term 'history' quite freely to this doctrine:

... the *sutra* claims that *world history* is now in the deteriorating half of the twentieth small *kalpa* of a middle *kalpa* ... Buddhist students of the *sutra* came to believe that *history will be subjected to general and progressive decay* for a very long time to come. The Abhidharma kosa delineates three stages of *deterioration in the history of Buddhism itself* ... (pp. 540–41; my italics)

Is it not problematic to use the term 'history' to describe the Buddhist theory of Kalpic decline? It adds another confusing sense of 'history'—a 'history' that will be subject to decline, a 'history' that deteriorates. The word 'history' and the idea of a historical consciousness is surely too entangled discursively with what Brown himself is doing,

which is secular modern professional historiography, the discipline that entered Japan at Meiji associated with a concept of time as empty and homogenous.

The idea of uppercase professionalised History is ambiguous because the older uses of the English language word ‘history’ as records of past events was, in some ways, superseded by the new professionalised discipline that looked for universal meanings and cause–effect relationships and patterns of meaning. The modern professionalised study of History was born in a context of doctrines of progress—the progress of nations from oppression into liberty, progress from religious superstition to scientific enlightenment, progress from magic to secular reason, progress as the unfolding of the destiny of nations, the progress of world history, progress as the qualitative development of individuals and nations, progress as the result of Individual self-realisation through educational improvements, progress by way of liberalisation and free markets, commodity exchange and the accumulation of private property. One could add progress from history (myth and legend) to History (objective fact).

Historical progress from the backward past into the Enlightenment future, and also evolutionary time, are surely very different from the ideas of time, or the experience of time typical even of medieval Christian Europe, let alone Heian or pre-Heian Japan. We surely cannot assume that time as a concept and an experience was the same before and after the Copernican revolution, or before and after the invention of mechanical clocks, or before and after the introduction of factory time, or before and after world time zones. Nor can we assume that the measurement of time, nor the experience of time, was the same before and after Meiji. It might be that the claims and demands of ‘modern progress and development’ and the introduction of the universal, uniform, monolithic time of History was as radical as any other change instituted during Meiji (Tanaka 2006). Just as local nations and histories are subsumed within the uppercase modern Nation States and Histories, so local times are subsumed by Universal Time along a single axis of progress and development.

Even in 17th century England, the main reference was Biblical times and the revelation of God’s order. The purpose of good government was to maintain that order instituted by Christ. Words such as ‘progress’ and ‘revolution’ existed but had different meanings from the ones they acquired in the 18th century. Compare the progress of the king’s entourage around the streets of London to the progress of the human mind through universal history. Compare the revolution of heavenly bodies or the turning of a cartwheel with the French Revolution. Historians and other professional, middle-class academics live and work in a time-consciousness that, it seems reasonable to suppose, is very different from the people he or she claims to be describing. We are all located in conceptions of time that are peculiar to modernity—clock time, work time, production and consumption time, GMT and world time zones, skeletal Christian calendars once rich in sacred collective festivals—holy-days, but now hollowed out and transformed into empty vacation time.

How can we assimilate the experience and concept of time of the modern professional historian with that of feudal Christian Europe, or pre-Heian or Heian or Edo Japan, or ancient Egypt, or the vast varieties of time-consciousness, expressed in the cosmologies and cosmogonies of hunter–gatherers, forest-dwellers, agricultural peasants, literate elites of ancient complex societies, and so on?

Is it sufficient to say that, because the ancient people who lived in the archipelago that is today in English called ‘Japan’, had a sense of lineal time—the lineage succession of king-priests—that therefore they had “historical consciousness”?

Brown also uses the expression “form of historical writing”:

Still another *form of historical writing* appeared during the last two centuries of the Heian period: the military tales (*gunki monogatari*) . . . Linealism was a prominent characteristic of all *historical works* written in Japan’s aristocratic age, and it continued to affect *Japanese historical writing* in later times. (pp. 519–20; my italics)

The adjective ‘historical’ is not problematised but is slipped into the historian’s construction of the past almost unconsciously. This strengthens the feeling that we are caught

in a circularity, where what is presupposed is invoked to establish its origins. Here again, we find the sense of time constructed partly from the lineal succession of sacred rulers descended from the Sun God described as *Japanese historical works*, and *forms of Japanese historical writing*, thus deploying an ambiguous and unstable meaning of ‘history’ and ‘historical’ to further embed a confusion of the sense of time of a remote period:

... the whole of Nara culture, including history writing, was affected by principles enunciated in the Confucian Classics, and from early Nara until today, *Japanese historical works* have usually born a Confucian stamp. (p. 521)

According to Brown, the reason why the people of the ancient period developed a historical consciousness whereas, by implication, the Chinese did not, is that:

Instead of being influenced by a Chinese-style absorption in the rise and fall of dynasties, Japanese aristocrats were preoccupied with a single line of sovereigns created by the Sun Goddess. Instead of assuming that the course of human affairs was shaped by the moral and immoral actions of humans as propounded in the Confucian Classics, ancient chronicles made vitalistic strength (*ikioi*) a major historical determinant. And instead of accepting Buddhist doctrines of inevitable decline, poets and chroniclers were buoyed by a widespread assumption that the future would be better than the present. (p. 548)

What this seems to imply is that proper History is comprised of *lineality* (one king-priest following another in a lineage); ‘this worldly’ *vitality*, and *optimism*, an optimistic belief in the future. Surely, though, the author is not assimilating an optimism about the future to the optimism of progress in the sense that, say, Steven Pinker (2018), in his book *Enlightenment Now*, has optimism? To claim these as equivalent to historical consciousness seems a very reduced concept of ‘historical consciousness’.

Brown claims that “Recent mythological studies enable us to see that the *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki* myths have a *definite historical cast*. They can be seen to deal with three successive stages of creation ... ” (p. 527). Surely this confuses the practice of modern history and its claims to objective scientific factuality with what modern historians wished to supersede—myths and legends. The author is working with a concept of ‘history’ that is too flexible to be believable.

These characteristics of historical consciousness thrived “in constant tension with polar opposites”:

That is, a belief in Japan’s sacred imperial line was in conflict with imported Chinese ideas of a cyclical rise and fall of dynasties; Shinto preoccupation with the life creating power of the *kami* (native deities) always stood against the Confucian principle that events in human history are affected by virtuous or non-virtuous behavior; and historical assumptions of future improvement were seriously challenged by Buddhist doctrines of inevitable deterioration over time and by the Confucian belief in the “golden age of antiquity”. (p. 505)

The historian’s deployment of the idea of conflicting polar opposites appears as a technique for over-essentialising a specifically ‘Japanese’ consciousness. One can understand and appreciate *difference*, such as, the difference between the typical ways of thinking of the elites ruling in different power centres. However, it seems surprising that the author wishes to make a case for the “uniqueness” of the “Japanese historical expression” in polarised contrast to “Chinese ideas of a cyclical” time.¹¹

But a study of Japanese historical expression in these pre-800 years indicates that beliefs, ideas, and assumptions on *the Japanese side of the polarity* account for uniqueness in the Japanese historical outlook and help us identify and understand early stages in the evolution of historical consciousness. (p. 505; my italics)

One can understand a historian claiming to be able to identify some difference of emphasis, some distinctiveness and peculiarity. However, to describe the difference between Chinese and Japanese concepts and experiences of time in terms of “uniqueness” and “po-

larity” seems to set up an overly essentialised contrast. Was there such a thing as Chinese against Japanese consciousness? This seems too much like anachronistic attributions of modern senses of identity. After all, the author is not denying the presence in the ancient period of imported forms of thought deriving from Buddha and Confucius, for instance, only that these were confronted and challenged by indigenous ones that were different in emphasis. It is almost as though the author is attempting to turn alternative concepts of time into an essentialised difference, a binary polar opposition.

Furthermore, the rather stark contrast between “a belief in Japan’s sacred imperial line . . . in conflict with imported Chinese ideas of a cyclical rise and fall of dynasties” seems offset and ameliorated by the Chinese practice of compiling official chronicles “to glorify and sanctify the imperial line of descent and to add legitimacy and authority to the position of the current ruler” (p. 514). It may well be that the practices of keeping chronicles had differences, but to spin the differences of convention into polar opposites may be over-determined by the author’s desire to assert the early existence of “Japanese historical consciousness”. And again, the author qualifies this supposed opposition by making room for challenges, when, for example, he points out that:

Linealism was nevertheless severely challenged in the middle of the eighth century by rulers who were influenced by Buddhist conceptions of sovereignty. Evidence of this challenge is most clearly seen in the contemporary chronicle (the *Shoku Nihongi*) that covers events at court from 697 to 791. (p. 514)

7.2. Vitalism

The author’s concept of ‘vitalism’ is put with ‘linealism’ and ‘optimism’ to make up “*the core of Japanese historical thought* in these early times . . . ” (p. 521; my italics). Vitalism is an idea that stems “from a constant preoccupation with the origins and enrichment of physical life” (p. 504) and is identified with *kami*: “. . . Japanese assumptions and ideas concerning the passage of time have been influenced since early times by a deep and pervasive belief that the kami were worshiped, above all, for their mysterious power to create, enrich, or prolong any form of physical life” (p. 522). I cannot believe that this is really sufficient to give us the equivalent of a historical consciousness deeply implicated in a concept of empty, homogenous universal time, one that was also not available to Europeans before around the 17th or 18th century.

7.3. Optimism

The third characteristic of *early historical consciousness* (optimism about the immediate future) emerged as a by-product of interaction between the first two characteristics: linealism . . . and vitalism. Although linealism is revealed when examining ancient historical writings against the backdrop of Chinese belief in dynastic cycles, and vitalism, against the backdrop of Confucian concepts of moral power, *optimism is reflected in resistance to Buddhist doctrines of historical decline*. Like the first two characteristics, the third has roots that run deep into ‘prehistoric’ times. (p. 537; my italics)

Why should we assume that Buddhist doctrines of decline are doctrines of *historical decline*? The meaning of *history* and *historical* is what is at stake. This expression smuggles into the text a circularity. And surely what follows is a contradiction: “. . . people were not then absorbed in questions about either the distant past or the distant future but in the forward movement of life through seasons and life cycles” (p. 538).

Again, the aforementioned suggests that, while distinctive tendencies of the thinking and attitudes of the literate ruling elites of the ancient period might be validly identified by an expert such as the author Brown, there are, simultaneously, factors that balance them out, or at least invalidate stark polarisations and binary oppositions. There is circularity and confusion in the author’s determination to attribute the ambiguous expression “historical consciousness” to a time and place that was dominated by other conceptions.

In the following, I list some additional anachronisms in this representation of very early times that in low key, subtle, and misleading ways serve to universalise the present dominant regime of “historical consciousness” by clothing the past and the other in the cognitive attributes of the present.

7.4. *Japan, Japanese, and Japaneseness*

I have already made critical reference to the concept of “Japanese” as in “*Japanese historical writing*” (p. 520) which is attributed to a past that is hardly retrievable. Would this be the same ‘Japanese’ as we find in the post-Edo period of the invention of the modern nation state, nationality, and ‘Japaneseness’? This same point would apply, in principle, to any other modern national identity such as Britishness, Frenchness, or American. The idea of ‘Britishness’ is an artificial modern construct—an imagined community—and has no clear empirical referent. It is part of the rhetorical imagining of a modern national identity, a mytheme. To attempt to stretch it back into the remote past would be misleading to say the least. It might be to confuse it with ‘ancient Britain’, for example, before the Roman occupation or under the Roman occupation. The use of language represents an entirely different milieu, conceptual world, cosmology, belief system, and so on. Whatever the vague expression ‘ancient Britain’ might be intended to refer, it is incommensurate with ‘Modern Britain’. And the term, ‘Modern Britain’, is, anyhow, an empty abstraction. It is a juridical identity. Its most tangible sign is probably something akin to a birth certificate or a passport. It has meaning, not because it refers to anything objective and independent, but because it operates in a system of categories that is protected ultimately by taboo and violence. Surely, the attribution of Japaneseness to the ancient period is similarly misleading?

How valid is it to describe these early times in terms of ‘Japan’, ‘Japanese’, and ‘Japaneseness’? Is there not an inherent confusion of identities here? Did people living in this ancient period really think of themselves as ‘Japanese’?

There is a reference to “*the Japaneseness of the Izanami death myth . . .*” (p. 528) as distinguished from other Asian peoples. There were “*Japanese sovereigns*” and “[*the Japanese*] *government*” (p. 516) attributed to Empress Shotoku in the 8th century. There is no doubt that some readers will think that this is quibbling, that we have to use available words, and ‘we all know what is meant’. This is what I wish to question.

7.5. *State, Politics, Secular Rulers, and Religious Artefacts*

The author attributes ‘a state’, ‘politics’, ‘secular rulers’, and ‘politically-motivated’ actions to the imagined order of power in these early times. Again, readers might think it unfair and merely pedantic to criticise the use of terms that are current, ubiquitous, and transparent in meaning. Again, this is what I question. We are all caught in the circularities of contemporary language, this author included. My purpose is to draw attention to the way that the invention of an imaginary past serves to consolidate the present day arrangement and interests, and to give ‘modernity’ a persuasive feeling of substance, of inescapable universality. The English noun-word ‘politics’, generic ‘religion’, and the modern idea of the state were all invented in the 17th century to make possible the idea of government that represented the property interests of a class of men who lacked rights, and whose power was increasing as a result of their ability to exploit the colonial opportunities. This was a significant part of the early institutionalisation of liberal capitalism and helps us to understand the cognitive colonisation of the world.

For example, Brown says that: “The Kogoshui, like the Kojiki and Nihon shoki, is therefore a *politically motivated* record of myth and history focused on the sacred and ever lengthening imperial line . . .” (p. 508; my italics).

On the other hand, ‘linealism’ and thus, “Japanese historical consciousness” is constructed by the author in such a way that the succession of rulers is sacralised by being related to *kami* such as the Sun God, and by rites such as the building of mounds. Note that

we find the expression ‘kami *worship*’ (a term redolent of monotheistic theology) and that the rites are referred to in passing as ‘*religious*’:

... concrete evidence of linkage between *kami worship* and the rule of hereditary kings and queens ... it seems logical to deduce that the queen and those who followed her were performing rites by which their positions on one particular line of descent were sanctified by divine beings, possibly already designated as kami. This linkage between hereditary rulers and *religious rites* is more sharply defined by archaeological evidence for the following Yamato period (ca. 250–589). (pp. 506–7; my italics)

Could the rites not equally have been described as ‘political’? My point here is that in modern parlance, ‘politics’ is put in binary opposition to ‘religion’, which, in turn, is misleadingly identified with the ‘sacred’. However, here, “politically” is put into conjunction with “the sacred ... imperial line”.

These terminological confusions may seem unavoidable and normal, and it may even seem unfair and nit-picking to criticise an author for using such common expressions. However, this is not a personal attack on the author, but an analysis of the displaced meanings conveyed by the uncritical deployment of tropes. I would suggest that an accusation of ‘unfairness’ is a defence that assists and promotes the normalisation and universalisation of modern ideological terminology. It is surely an anachronistic fallacy to attribute modern discursive representations, which are the product of a particular colonial episteme and entirely normalised in a world of invented religions and imaginary modern secular nation states, to sets of human relations and orders of power that simply did not think in such terms. The accumulation of instances of their deployment compounds the distortions that are already inherent and unavoidable in representations of the past. It conveys the teleological idea that the period he describes as ancient or pre-800 AD was already working its way into ‘our’ advanced modernity but had not quite arrived.

The author implicitly affirms this point when he deploys the expression ‘*priestly ruler*’ and ‘*the sacred chain of priestly descent*’ (p. 508). I have already quoted Wilson, who is also a vastly qualified expert in this field, that the religious was political and the political was religious, and that the two are encapsulated in the category *matsurigoto*. The idea of a ‘*priestly ruler*’ tacitly draws attention to the point that the distinction between religious and secular rulers is a modern European one. The English, French, and American revolutions have been described as ‘*revolutions*’ because they subverted the established power of the sacred monarchs of the Christian ancien regime. It is almost precisely what the Americans wanted the Edo and Meiji rulers to incorporate into their written constitution. They were criticised for failing to achieve this in the Meiji Constitution of 1889 and this is one of the corrections that the US occupying administration made when it instructed the production of a new Constitution (1946) that clearly separated priest and governor.

Such an expression ‘*priestly ruler*’ may be conceptually much closer to the medieval and early modern Christian European sacred monarchs. I say this not to try to assimilate ancient Japan to medieval Europe, but rather to relativise and provincialise the modern cognitive apparatus (Chakrabarty 2000; Masuzawa 2005). The distinction that was rhetorically constructed in the 17th century between ‘*religion*’ and ‘*non-religious government*’ embodied a *critique* of priestly rulers and sacred monarchs. The separation of ‘*government*’ and ‘*governor*’ from ‘*religion*’ and ‘*priest*’ was a fundamental project of bourgeois modernity, and quickly defined the emergence of the idea of ‘*the state*’—especially the Republic—as distinct from the ‘*estate*’ of the sacred monarch. It also became closely allied to the discourse on secular scientific progress that emerged most fully around the time that modern History was being imagined in the early 19th century.

There is, therefore, an inherent danger in attributing such imaginaries as ‘*state*’, ‘*politics*’ or ‘*secular rulers*’ to medieval and early modern Europe. Yet, here, the author is attributing them to the ancient period of Japan. The reference to “*secular rulers*” when talking about the sutras is problematic for the same reasons: “One of them, the Benevolent King Sutra (Ninno-kyo), directs this message to *secular Rulers* ... ” (p. 514).

Many readers will feel confused that sacred king-priests who performed 'religious rites' were 'secular rulers'. The problem is that, even in the context of English history, these terms are unstable in meaning and referent. In late medieval England, sacred Christian monarchs were sometimes referred to as 'secular' in the older deployments of that term. However, the 'secular priesthood' was an even more common expression. Today, the conjunction of 'priest' and 'secular' seems contradictory. This is because the term 'secular' became transformed in the dominant discourse of modernity to mean 'non-religious'. Furthermore the 'secular courts' worked hand in hand with the ecclesiastical courts to bring heretics to justice. This makes the term 'secular' as ambiguous and unclear as 'religious' and 'historical', and invites confusion when introducing it into a representation of the Japanese (or European) past.

The idea of the 'non-religious' is a co-product of the modern idea of religion. In the older discourse, 'the religious' were the monks, friars, and nuns who belonged to the 'religious orders' and renounced the world. However, the dominant modern usage of 'religious' is generic and strongly linked to the modern discourse on generic 'religion' and 'religions'. Yet, in *yayoi* times, according to the author, there were "religious artefacts", "religious ritual" and "religious practices" associated with "kami worship" (p. 522).

The expression 'a state religion' feels truly anachronistic (p. 540).

The author also resorts—like so many historians—to expressions from contemporary Sociology such as "social and political control" (p. 522) and "socioreligious relationships" (p. 524). The conjoining of two terms that are each already unclear in referent is ubiquitous among academics and merely compounds the problem of meaning.

It is one thing to say that the shrines that housed the *kami* and the temples that housed the Buddhas were different, as in, "Both kami shrines and Buddhist temples supported the position of priestly rulers" (p. 526). However, to say that "Buddhism was clearly distinguished from Shintoism" (p. 525) is to import modern orientalist essentialisations of world religions. Perhaps it is unfair to criticise Brown for this, given that the critique of religion as a category, though initiated by W. C. Smith of Harvard in 1962, had hardly started in the 1980s, which may have been when Brown was writing. One cannot blame the historian. How could he avoid it? The professionalised scientific study of religion invented these entities and is still propagating the discourse on world religions. I am directing the reader's attention to these points because there is a pervasive issue of how modern categories such as History, Nation, and Religion are projected anachronistically back into the past: "The third stage of pre-Nara linealism (pp. 589–710) was not associated with mound building but with the construction of Buddhist temples following the introduction and *spread of Buddhism* in the sixth century". (p. 510).

The expression, "the spread of Buddhism", is so common today that it seems as natural as spreading butter on toast. We all suppose we know what is meant. However, the invention of this kind of language is too convenient, and instead of helping us to understand, it tends to obscure any view of the grassroots meanings, cognitions, institutions, and processes of power.

It seems that building Buddhist temples and venerating Buddhist artefacts was, in some ways, a continuation of the function of building mounds, which in itself is an interesting point, but it does not amount to the presence of a 'world religion' in the modern sense.

This tendency to reliance on modern neologisms such as Buddhism is, to some degree, broken down with more manageable expressions such as statues, sutras, memorial services, and deceased clan heads:

Historical references to hundreds of Buddhist temples built in Japan during the following century leave little doubt that making Buddhist statues, reading Buddhist sutras, and holding Buddhist memorial services were largely to console and honor the souls of deceased clan heads. (p. 511)

In the first instance, these sentences go some way towards deconstructing 'Buddhism' by rightly indicating a *difference*—these acts (building temples and statues, and reciting the sutras) were less about enlightenment and liberation from the wheel of karma than about

venerating the ancestors. Unfortunately, any gain is immediately lost by the sentence that immediately follows: “Thus Buddhism already stood at the core of what has been loosely called Japanese ancestor worship” (p. 511).

The idea of “Buddhism” standing “at the core” of “Japanese ancestor worship” is to pile one essentialised entity onto another. It transforms valid distinctions into gross, reified abstractions.

(3) *Karl F. Friday (ed) (2017), The Routledge Handbook of Premodern Japanese History*, London & New York: Routledge¹²

This is an impressive collection of essays that only recently came into my hands and I have been unable to read the whole book. I only have the time and space in this short essay to look critically at the methodological implications of some aspects of the book’s construction (Friday 2017).

The title of the book is a simple announcement that there is such a thing as “Premodern Japanese History”. However much contestation there might be about ‘premodern’, “Japan”, or “history”, it has the grammatical form of a statement of simple fact.

Part 2 makes it clear that there were ‘political institutions’ in this imagined premodern Japanese community. These were exemplified by ‘the state’ and its early formation. The inevitable suggestion of development is found in part of the title of the chapter by Mikael S. Adolphson (2000), “From classical to medieval . . .”, and the frequent use of the term ‘medieval’ in the title of several of the chapters locates a dominant sense of universal historical time.

‘Religion’—which is tacitly a universal essence—was also present in those imagined communities. There are chapters on “Religion in archaic Japan” by William E. Deal, “Religion in Nara and Heian Japan” by Mikael Bauer, and “Religion in Medieval Japan” by Brian Ruppert (2017).

The title of Part 3 is “Society and Culture”, and the title of Part 4 is “Economy and Technology”. This parading of abstractions implies that it is possible to distinguish between religion, society, culture, and economy, not only today but in the imagined communities of premodern Japan. This is the mythological language of modernity transformed into universal commonplaces. It is how an imaginary past is invented with the rhetorical inventions of the present.

In his Introduction the Editor Friday engages ambiguously in a reifying construction of the Past, and, simultaneously, in its deconstruction. His first announcement is “History changes” (p. 1). This suggests that there is something there to change, “the Past itself, that must be immutable”. However, the supposedly immutable Past is distinguished from the mutable representations of historians that change with each generation, and the imaginative reconstructions that are “assembled to enrich a society’s understanding of itself”. Is this dichotomy between the immutable past itself and the mutable representations of that past intended ironically? Moreover, I wonder if there is such a thing as “a society” with “self-understanding”? It is one cliché after another. I suggest that our impulse to reify the dominant categories as though they stand for something real and objective persists amidst the critical and deconstructivist turn.

To “reconstruct premodern Japan” is to invent it. It is to write a particular kind of fiction—or “fictive writing” (Munslow 2012)—that serves the present order of things. The secular discipline of History is itself a modern construction, or a construction of the ‘modern’. This circularity is evident where Friday says that the book “reflects prevailing conventions within the profession that divide Japanese history into three major epochs (premodern, early modern and modern) or two (premodern and modern) with the break at or around 1600” (p. 1). This amounts to a ritual reconfirmation of ‘the modern’ and its universal time as the locus of the real. It is a teleological scheme that makes ideas about progress and development from the past to the present inevitable. It embeds universal modern History into the order of things.

Friday recognises this. He refers specifically to the ‘teleological’ implication of the expression “premodern Japan” (p. 2). However, he seems to dismiss it as mere “hypercrit-

icism, a challenge to identify an appropriate alternative label that decades of conference panels, editorial discussions, and professional conversations have thus far been unable to meet, except with more awkward expressions like ‘Japan before 1600’” (p. 2).

Friday has here managed to deflect from the fundamental issue into a mere terminological dispute. This more fundamental issue is the hegemonic role of uppercase History. It concerns misconstruing a past in a way that serves present-day interests by uncritically deploying present-day categories as though they are universal and innocently unproblematic. It is really only a matter of “awkwardness”. “Japan before 1600” is a mouthful. It is much easier to say “premodern” or “medieval”.

Friday lists the dates of the conventional periods in terms of the international construction of universal time: Asuka or Yamato (6th century to 8th century), the Nara (710–794), the Heian (794–1185), the Kamakura (1185–1333), the Muromachi (1333–1568), the Azuchi-Momoyama (1568–1600), the Nanbokuchō (1336–1339), and Sengoku (1477–1573) periods. These periods are part of the colonial episteme. They are positions on a time sequence which has, at its central event, the life and death of Jesus Christ. BCE (Before Common Era) is a recent version of BC (before Christ). CE (Common Era) is the recent equivalent of AD (anno Domini), which means “in the year of the Lord” in Latin. These are used to number years in the Julian and the Gregorian Calendars. The Gregorian calendar, which was an adaptation of the earlier Julian calendar and is based on Christian history, was introduced by Pope Gregory XIII in 1582, and gradually adopted over the next centuries of globalisation by modern secular nation states. It was adopted in Japan in 1873. Every people had, and often still do have, their own calendars and their own ways of marking time. In Japan, the indigenous system of counting the years operates side by side with the international system. Much of the administration within Japanese institutions is, in this sense, binary. One’s birthday and other significant dates are recorded in terms of both systems. However, it would presumably be difficult to be a member of the United Nations, or to conduct any kind of international affairs, without submitting to the international system that derives from the colonial powers. Japan has been incorporated (or her ruling elites have incorporated her) into the dominant, Christian-derived system. The practice of History in Japanese universities, and in all departments of history that study Japan or any other nation, must inevitably follow it.

However, these periods, which had “socio-political structures”(p. 3), are not without their problems, because “many of the key cultural, social, economic and political changes that interest the historians did not coincide neatly with shifts in the location of the capital, or even with changes of leadership” (p. 2).

As I have suggested before, this recitation of empty categories along with the standardised periodisations of the past is a liturgy of secular modernity. What is a ‘socio-political structure’ and how does a ‘social’ structure differ from a ‘political structure’ or a ‘culture’, or any other ‘structure’? As I have argued in many publications, these empty metaphysical terms mystify us, even while they have become so normal that we cannot think without them.

Friday discusses the problems—the “foibles”—of these periodisations with competence and skill, and continues to complicate and finesse them, much like any theologian or liturgist.

At the end of the Asia Pacific War, the “shackles” of nationalism came off, and “historians found themselves newly free to question even the most basic premises of received wisdom”(p. 4). Is that really true? How did that questioning of basic premises proceed? “Postwar scholarship on premodern Japan has been dominated by two groups—Marxist Socialist historians led by Ishimoda Sho and a positivist or empirical school led by Sato Shin’ichi”(p. 4). But a Marxist or a positivist viewpoint is not to question the most basic premises of received wisdom, but to adopt them. Whether nationalist, Marxist, or positivist/empiricist, historiography remains part of the same dominant materialist paradigm. They are different ways of being captured by the basic trope of modern secular reason and development up to the objective, scientific present.

The myth-making that seems arguably to be the function of History has been growing as more and more young people, in the search for meaning and for jobs, are recruited:

Since the 1960s scholarship on premodern Japan has broadened, deepened and expanded exponentially. In both Japan and the West an unprecedented number of specialists have entered the field. Collectively their work is marked by a shift in focus from the history of elites to a broader examination of social structures and their intersection with political, economic, institutional and cultural evolution . . . analysis guided by theoretical constructs borrowed from the social sciences; and a fundamental reassessment of nearly all the key tenets of what was once the received wisdom. (p. 5)

I suggest that the key tenets of received wisdom are heavily present, and fairly buzzing with metaphysical abstractions such as ‘social structures’, and the imposition on the imaginary ‘other’ of ‘religious’, ‘economic’, ‘social’ and ‘cultural’ institutions, and evolution. The challenge for those who claim to be writing specifically about religion, and religious institutions and practices, is to explain what specifically distinguishes the religious elements from the cultural, from the social structures, from the politics, and from the economics? What criteria are operating in the identification of a practice as specifically religious? The fact that there is a tradition of scholarship that makes this assumption does not validate it.

The Routledge Handbook of Premodern Japanese History contains Brian Ruppert’s chapter on “Religion in Medieval Japan”. Ruppert points out that “one scholar”—he is referring to Jason Ananda Josephson—“has argued that the term ‘religion’ (*shūkyō* in modern Japanese) should not be used in reference to Japan prior to the Meiji restoration in 1868” (p. 330). It is unfortunate that the influence of Josephson’s (2012) otherwise excellent book *The Invention of Religion in Japan* should have conveyed the idea that there is only one scholar saying such a thing about religion, and that the stipulation about Japan should be so insular, and not include any recognition that the issue of the modern discourse on religion is global.

Ruppert tries to sidestep the problem—“Some kind of terminology must be used to convey the broad set of beliefs and practices in premodern Japan, and most scholars continue to use the term since there are few useful alternatives” (p. 330). This entirely misses the point that the way one classifies ‘beliefs and practices’ has an effect on our understanding. It is not simply a question about what is ‘useful’. Useful for what? It might suggest, for example, that the institutionalised practices that the writer identifies as religious have essentially nothing to do with power, or hierarchy, or government, or warfare, or technology, or the production of food, or household etiquette, or the ordering of life in villages. It cuts the joint in ‘unnatural’ ways and distorts the self-understanding of the people who the historian is claiming to represent. Ruppert’s discussion of what he refers to as medieval Japanese religion is highly proficient within its own scholarly parameters, and yet lacking in any kind of familiarity with, or interest in, the wider critical literature on the invention of ‘religion’ or ‘Buddhism’.

Given that Ruppert is deploying a descriptive and analytical term that is applied globally to a vast mass of data about human institutions and practices, what common feature would he identify? I also cannot help wondering how Ruppert or any of his co-religionists would deal with the argument of the author discussed earlier, Phillippe Buc, on the comparative role of ‘religion’ in the warfare of medieval Japan and medieval Christian Europe.

(4) Jason Ananda Josephson (2012) *The Invention of Religion in Japan*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press

In contrast, Josephson’s (2012) monograph, *The Invention of Religion in Japan*, has been a significant addition to the critical investigation into the category of religion. This is the book that the previous author, Ruppert, cited but did not seem to think was sufficiently relevant to his own work to be given much serious consideration. I am interested in the positive aspects of Josephson’s book, and I am deeply impressed by his language skills, for he reads in several languages, apparently including Japanese, Chinese, Dutch, German, and

French, as well as English. He produced new material to add to the existing discussions of the way in which ‘religion’ entered into the Japanese language as *shūkyō*:

Drawing on a wide range of historical materials, I trace the sweeping changes—intellectual, legal, and cultural—brought about by the construction of the category of religion in nineteenth-century Japan. (p. 5)

The main categories that he subjects to critical analysis are religion, science, and superstition as they played out in a ‘trinary’ formation as part of the rhetorical powerplay whereby the Japanese elites were obliged to formulate their own understandings of foreign-imposed categories:

I see a trinary formation in which the “real” (or in its political form, the “secular”) is negated by “superstition,” which is in turn negated by “religion”. I will explore not only the genealogy of religion in Japan, but also the entangled genealogies of the secular and superstition. (p. 5)

This is a productive aspect of his book. It clarifies the rhetorical manoeuvres that the Japanese elites deployed to formulate a secular Shinto nation state. The idea that a trinary rhetorical relation between religion, superstition, and a secular scientific Shinto operated in the Japanese invention of a modern Constitutional Nation State is interesting and may have wider relevance. In 17th century England, for example, and, presumably, Christendom more widely, in the reports on foreign travel and the encounters with savages and barbarians, there is a tendency to distinguish between True Religion and the false beliefs and practices that might look superficially like religion but are really superstitions, the irrational substitutions of true religion. These practices included marriage, child rearing, government, diet, technology, and much else. There was a Christian, rational, civilised way to do most things.

In the late 18th century, the US Constitution registered a change in the discursive form of ‘religion’, in its privatisation of religion and its separation from government. The Bill of Rights grants a special right to the personal and private practice of ‘religion’, while also protecting the government and the state *from* religion. However, the older discourse on Religion as Christian Truth was still very much available, even at a time when a few writers were advocating rights for the religions of ‘Hindoos’, ‘Mohammedans’, Jews, and even the Indian ‘savages’ who either had something like ‘religion’ or had no religion at all. The Bill of Rights does not define with any precision what is meant by religion or make an explicit distinction between religion and superstition. However, it is arguably there, implicitly. It was in the thinking of the Founders such as Jefferson (Fitzgerald 2007a). Today, many or most nations have court procedures or special agencies such as the British Charities Commission for deciding whether or not a practice is a *genuine religion* or not (Owen and Taira 2015; Taira 2010).

I would like to extend Josephson’s line of thinking here on a third term towards the chain of binaries that have been rhetorically deployed as correspondences to the religion–nonreligion binary: not only religion/politics and religion/science, but also faith/knowledge; fiction/reality; metaphysics/empiricism; spirit/matter; supernatural/natural; other world/this world; subjective/objective; inner/outer; value/fact. These oppositions are ubiquitous in the construction of modern consciousness. All of these oppositional distinctions are deployed in a circle of binary substitutions to validate each other. And yet all of them are contested, non-observable abstractions that organise our knowledge. These are all signs in the signalling system that constitutes modern secular progress against the backwardness of religion and superstition. Is there a third term for each of these?

Josephson’s research on Shinto is interesting and worthwhile. He enhances our understanding of the manufacture of Shinto as a non-religious state ideology, linking it to the 18th century Kokugaku movement that “rendered Shinto as a ‘science’ ... what kokugaku Shinto offered to supply Meiji leaders was not a faith, but a form of knowledge and a model for statecraft” (p. 19).

He goes on to point out that, “The concept of a nonreligious Shinto was useful to the Meiji state because it allowed them to interweave Shinto into the fabric of government, and to mandate the performance of Shinto rituals without contravening new guarantees of religious freedom” (pp. 94–95).

Josephson says that this idea of a nonreligious Shinto:

is a problem for scholars because it does not fit many contemporary models of religion, modernity, or the conflict between religion and science. Particularly problematic is the fact that the formation and ascent to power of something called ‘Shinto,’ this putatively premodern religion—polytheist and nature worshipping—coincided not with a premodern politics (Japanese feudalism say) but precisely with the rise of the modern nation-state. (pp. 94–95)

This is less clear to me. Josephson *seems* to be anachronistically referring to “premodern politics (Japanese feudalism say)” just at the same moment he is describing the invention of ‘religion’ and the invention of a modern secular Japanese Nation State. Surely then, the idea of premodern politics is also as problematic as a premodern nation state or a pre-modern religion? It could be, as one reviewer helpfully pointed out, that his intended meaning is a critique of the anachronistic deployment of all three categories. I would prefer to think that this was his intended meaning. Even in England, there was no consistent discourse on ‘politics’ as a distinct domain before the second half of the 17th century—even at the height of the civil wars in the 1640s. There was no ‘premodern politics’ in English. Generic ‘politics’, like generic ‘religion’, is a key term in the rhetorical construction of the ‘modern’. I do not want to put words into his mouth, but I think Josephson would probably agree that it would be a mistake to assume a discourse on ‘politics’ in Japan before the invention of the idea of government separated from ‘religion’. I hope he would agree that these discursive categories all arose together in a mutual construction of ‘modernity’.

One possible answer to the apparent dilemma of a non-religious State Shinto is that the Japanese elites had observed US, French, or British symbols of national allegiance, the rituals that surround supposedly non-religious modern nation states, and the emotions of patriotism and nationalism associated with them. The patriotic sentiments around the American nation, its manifest destiny, its exceptionalism, and its public rituals are difficult to distinguish from what, in other contexts, might be described as ‘religion’ or ‘civil religion’.

It is also worth bearing in mind that, though the Meiji Constitution was modelled to some degree on the Prussian Constitution of the 1850s, the German nation was not unified until 1871, so it only just predates the Meiji Constitution. Moreover, it is difficult to separate the German nation from sentiments of patriotism and self-sacrifice. Much the same can be said about the patriotic fervour of Great Britain and France. Furthermore, from the Japanese perspective, the so-called ‘advanced’ nations might have looked rather backward on the basis of their own criteria. In the case of Britain, the Monarch was—and still is—the Head of Church and State, which makes the idea of Great Britain as a modern non-religious secular nation state problematic, to say the least. This is yet another example about who controls the dominant narrative. In the case of France, Church and State were not formally separated until 1905. Women were not able to vote in Britain until after World War I nor in France until 1944. So much for progress.

Modern, supposedly progressive, nation states are all built on mythological foundations, with national history frequently providing the narratives. Recently invented traditions are displayed in elaborate state rituals that embed the modern state in illusions of antiquity. Modern states are stage managed to appear continuous with ancient times, great events, and founders and heroes. Much has been written by scholars on the ‘civil religion of America’, which surely ought to be a non-sequitur or an oxymoron. Some scholars have attempted to classify secularism as a religion. Some have claimed that nationalism is a pseudo-religion. These interventions highlight the extent to which the religion–secular binary is unstable, and the contingency of the criteria for deciding what goes into one side of the binary and what goes into the other. The Japanese male literate elites had

perhaps concluded, very reasonably, that the secular can look very much like what, in other contexts, would be considered a 'religion'. The boundary between the religious and the non-religious is porous and unstable, and if powerful 'modern' nations such as America, France, Germany, or Britain can institute the sacrificial worship of the nation state in all its transcendental glory, then why should not Japan?

Josephson claims that:

Previous studies of the genealogy of religion in the West have focused on the term's emergence among European intellectuals and its subsequent imposition on other cultures. I will argue that the modern concept of religion owed less to Enlightenment scholarly discourse than to the power struggles of international diplomacy . . . As this chapter will demonstrate, religion is principally a diplomatic category whose contours emerged through a process of negotiation. (p. 73)

Josephson's description of the power struggles over language in the process of negotiations are valuable. However, "international diplomacy"—as he himself points out—came out of the barrel of a gun, and surely a major reason why the translation of 'religion' was important was its relations to trade and profit. The invention of 'religion' was closely connected to the invention of a modern language of liberal political economy and private property rights.

Josephson points out that:

A new language was born in this diplomatic crucible of the mid-nineteenth century. In the years of intense treaty negotiation from 1853 to 1872, Japanese translators, working under intense pressure, coined new terminology for a range of novel ideas. There were few precedents for describing many of the concepts built into the structures of Euro-American modernity. Although standardization came much later, this conjuncture ultimately gave birth to new Japanese terms to describe foreign concepts. Japanese translators formulated neologisms to render "steamship," "telegraph," and other new devices, such as 'republics' and 'rights.' . . . In each case, new terms were devised when necessary to describe the artifacts and concepts of modernity. (p. 72)

Clearly this is an important point. Steamships and telegraphs were significant, world-changing technologies of a concrete and tangible kind. "Rights"—as in the universal rights of man—and "republics" are also world changing, but they are more abstract, and tend to congregate with closely related terms such as 'politics', 'political economy', 'citizen', and 'nation state'. There is only a limited amount that any of us can achieve in a single monograph, and Josephson has achieved a lot¹³ I would, however, encourage him (and other scholars) to employ his skills to problematise the other related secular categories as well as 'religion'. Horii has made important moves in this direction.

To take a couple of fairly random examples, he says:

These developments reflect back onto the global discourse of religion, such that the political goals of Japanese state officials have shaped, in subtle but significant ways, our own understanding of that concept today . . . (p. 5)

Later he says that:

. . . the book's chief business, is to document the belated adoption by some Japanese policymakers of that concept (religion). One of the more striking features of this story is that religion takes hold in Japan as a nakedly political category, first considered useful by politicians and put to directly political uses. (p. 71)

However, what is a distinctively 'political' goal? And is not the global discourse on politics equally as problematic as the global discourse on religion? 'Politics' and 'religion' are rhetorically fused together in a mutual mystification. This is apparent when Josephson describes 'religion' as a "nakedly political category".

I suggest that the family of terms around ‘politics’ and ‘political economy’ are as problematic as ‘religion’. Josephson discusses The Treaty of Amity and Commerce, also frequently referred to as the Harris Trade Treaty (1858), as though it was more about ‘religion’ than about what presumably required a raft of key terms around ‘economy’, property laws, ‘the individual’ as in ‘rights of the individual’, ‘liberty’, ‘society’, and so on.

Townsend Harris (1804–1878), who was the first U.S. consul general to Japan and who conducted the negotiations, was a devout Christian and an international merchant from New York who made his money in trade with China, and had interests with Siam, too. Which was more important to him personally, his faith in money or his faith in Jesus? Josephson suggests, from a reading of his private diaries, that Christian mission was a more significant motivation than trade mission. However, he seems ambiguous:

Harris articulates his mission not simply in the prosaic context of commerce, but as part of a decisive historical moment leading to the advent of Christianity in Japan. Thus, in his own self-representation at the very least, the progress of international capitalism was placed in the rhetorical frame of a global religious mission . . . Hence, while trade was the Harris mission’s primary purpose, it seems clear that its secondary function was to encourage the spread of Christianity. (pp. 80–81)

It is well known that Christian missions were closely linked to trade missions globally, in Africa, China, and south-east Asia for example. The Treaty of Amity and Commerce was fundamentally about trade and commerce. The significant point about the translation of religion was, presumably, that it cleared the discursive and juridical arena of any practices and institutions that stood in the way of liberal capitalism, American concepts of private property rights, and the legal reforms that facilitated global capitalist institutions. The ‘right to freedom of religion’ gave access to US business interests. America had many trading links with China and other Asian countries. On the menu were the opening of ports to US ships; rights for US ships to secure fuel, in particular, coal, which could be mined in Japan; fixed low import–export duties, and the granting of extra-territorial rights to US citizens. The freedom of worship and building of churches was part of the agreement, but was it the dominant part? Or did it facilitate the dominant part?

Josephson says that the Japanese saw Christianity as a ‘heresy’ and Christians as a threat, and that its introduction would threaten the stability of Japan and sow the seeds of rebellion and chaos (pp. 84–85). This seems like a very reasonable fear, both in the light of the Japanese experience with the Portuguese and Spanish in the 16th century, and also in the contemporary situation in Asia—the Opium wars being only one example. Opening Japan or China, or any other colonised people to Christians, was simultaneously opening them up to trade, ‘markets’, changes in land ownership, American and European notions of private property, and incorporation into the progress of universal History and the cognitive dominance of Euro-America.

8. Conclusions

My contribution to this Special Issue has been a response to the task given by the editor, viz “to problematize the concept ‘religion’ in Japanese contexts”. I have felt it necessary to continue the project that I was pursuing in [Fitzgerald \(2000a\)](#), by placing the problem of Japanese ‘religion’ in the wider, global context of colonial capitalism. I pursued that agenda in the books that quite quickly followed ([Fitzgerald 2007a, 2007b, 2011, 2015b](#); also many journal articles and book chapters). This project has required consideration of the origins of the contemporary discourses on religion and religions in 17th century England with a class of property-owning men without rights of representation, anxious to exploit new colonial opportunities, but frustrated by the arbitrary powers of the sacred monarch, and the domination of law and government by Lords Temporal and Ecclesiastical. This scenario helps us to understand the demands for the separation of Church and State, a discourse on religion and politics, and its emigration to the North American colonies. This discourse was quite fundamental to ‘the Enlightenment’ in France, Germany, Scotland, and more widely.

This critical, deconstructive narrative helps us to see more clearly the ideological function of the generic category of religion in the wider configuration of modern secular categories. In particular, I have focused on religion in relation to the Enlightenment Project of Universal History, and the invention of 'Japan' as an imagined community in the form of a modern, secular, constitutional Nation State. I have argued that we cannot properly analyse the term 'religion' and its problematic translation without putting the issue in the wider context of the colonial civilising mission, the insistence on a written constitution that separates religion and the state, and the introduction into Japan of American understandings of the Individual and (his) property rights. In my view, the project must be the critical deconstruction not of religion alone, but of the unconsciously and thus, uncritically reproduced ensemble of signs. This is the signalling system that transforms the dominant power relations of modernity into the really real, the inescapable nature of things, the normal.

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Notes

- ¹ I am grateful to Professor Mitsutoshi Horii for his invitation to contribute to this Special Issue, and for his help in obtaining some texts. I am also grateful to my six anonymous reviewers. The first three reviewers read an earlier version of my text. One loved it and highly praised it. I am grateful to that reviewer for his or her appreciation. The other two hated it, struggled to say anything positive about it, and seemed personally affronted by it, as though I was attacking *them*. How to explain such opposite views? To my way of thinking, the negative readings revealed an unfamiliarity with the critical literature from within their own (or any other) discipline. And they seemed entirely uninterested in my substantial critique of *religion and related categories* in the context of English, and, more widely, Christian European discourse. They were especially irritated by my critical reading of *The Cambridge History of Japan*. They claimed that it is outdated, idiosyncratic, and not representative of the state of the field. My response has been an *expanded* version of the original argument with critical readings of *additional* texts by historians of Japan. My purpose in doing this has been to demonstrate that the problems of historical representation found in *The Cambridge History* are not idiosyncratically confined to one (supposedly) out-dated text. They are widely and deeply entrenched in the act of representing the Japanese past. Every text is different, some are more critically aware than others, but there are common problems and I have tried to identify these. *The Cambridge History* is different, but not that much different in regard to the problems that I identify and analyse. My revised and expanded version was then sent to three more anonymous reviewers. They all gave very positive readings, and I am grateful to them for their helpful suggestions, which they all stressed were only minor. One of these reviewers felt that the inclusion of the critique of *The Cambridge History* made the paper unnecessarily long. I appreciate his or her point. However, after discussing this with Mitsutoshi Horii, I have decided to retain it nevertheless. I want it to stand on record for reference. It can be skipped by the busy reader without the central argument being damaged. I have incorporated as many of the other reviewers' comments as I can in the short time and space available. If I seem to have ignored any of them, I hope this will not be taken as a lack of appreciation, but as a problem of meeting the editorial deadline for publication.
- ² This is obviously not a comprehensive list. There are many contributors to critical religious studies.
- ³ Holland has significance as the centre of global capital in the 17th century for understanding both the later emergence of Japan as a major world power and also for our understanding of the origins of global capitalist institutions such as international banking.
- ⁴ See my close critical reading of Samuel Purchas in (Fitzgerald 2007a).
- ⁵ Alun Munslow (2012) in *The History of History*, which is a critique of "modernist common-sense empirical, practical realist and representationalist historians" (Munslow 2012, p. 2) makes a distinction between 'fictional' and 'fictive' viz. "... every history is a narrative discourse that is the construction of the historian ... This is not to say that the (hi)story is a made-up fiction. The important point is that acknowledging that *history is a fictive (as opposed to a fictional) cultural discourse* still takes it out of the ontological category of empirical practical realism ... " (Munslow 2012, p. 2) I am personally not convinced by this precise distinction between fiction and fictive writing but I do feel quite persuaded by his critique of empirical practical realism.
- ⁶ I am grateful to Mitsutoshi Horii for drawing my attention to Stefan Tanaka's (2006) interesting book.
- ⁷ Two of the three anonymous readers of an earlier version of this essay objected to my critique of the Cambridge History on the grounds that it is an old text and does not fairly represent modern historiography of Japan. I find this objection difficult to comprehend for the reasons given.

- 8 I say this on the basis of my analysis of his editorial introduction. I have not read the whole book.
- 9 I am indebted to Stefan Tanaka, who quotes this near the beginning of his own book on time and history in Japan, briefly discussed earlier.
- 10 In his essay “Time and History in Japan”, Wilson also seems determined to find “historical consciousness” in ancient Japan (Wilson 1980, p. 557). This surprised me, considering the quote on History entering Japan for the first time at Meiji. Like Brown, Wilson links this historical consciousness to a linear sense of time. At other times, Wilson seems ambivalent on the matter, by suggesting that the linear and the cyclical were not incompatible and that they co-existed.
- 11 Compare this with Wilson (1980, p. 560): “Neither Japanese nor Chinese speculations about history show an exclusive bent toward linear as opposed to cyclical projections”.
- 12 I am grateful to Mitsutoshi Horii for finding this volume for me. I was unable to read much of it, partly due to time and partly due to the very small print. I could not find it online.
- 13 I have not yet been able to read Josephson’s (2017, 2021) more recent works.

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