Tokugawa Religious History: Studies in Western Languages*

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The study of religious history in secular academic institutions in the West is interdisciplinary--depending on the scholar or topic, it takes the form of intellectual, social, literary, or art history, and draws on the methods or insights of philology, anthropology, sociology, and cultural studies, among others. European and American scholarship on the religious phenomena of Tokugawa Japan in particular represents an increasingly wide range of approaches and themes. However, various factors have worked against balance within that diversity. First, accessible historical evidence of religious life during this period has been limited to genres produced by certain social groups. The most readily available material is documents written by educated elites--particularly records of formal doctrines and institutions--rather than first-hand accounts of the everyday practices and rituals of the majority of less-privileged people. Biographical material is extant, but consists mostly of official hagiographies and legendary anecdotes; personal testimonies by ordinary practitioners, particularly women and less-educated groups, are rarer. Second, Western scholars of religion, particularly students of the mainstream Buddhist and Confucian systems of this period, have only recently begun to shake off a long-standing preference for doctrinal and classical textual studies, a tendency that allegedly dates to the nineteenth-century Christian theological milieu in which European investigation of Asian religions originated.1

These two factors may not be completely unrelated. After the Meiji period began, new concepts of “religion” (shūkyō) and “doctrine” (kyōhō) emerged, partly in response to perceived Western assumptions that systematic belief was a defining element of religion; in the ensuing decades, curators of certain Japanese religious institutions invested more in the preservation (in some cases, reconstruction) of Edo-period doctrinal statements than in the archiving of manuals of practice, oral lore, or informal first-person accounts.2 On the other hand, a close

* Many people have assisted me during the various stages of completing this essay and the accompanying bibliography. The participants in the “Early Modern Japanese Studies: The State of the Field” symposium held at Ohio State University in April 21-23, 2000, offered stimulating responses to the first draft of this work; I am particularly grateful to the editor, Philip Brown, and to my colleague, James McMullen, for their comments, suggestions, and affirmation throughout this project. Stephen Vlastos’ and Jacqueline Stone’s comments on an early draft of the essay helped me make it more lucid and accurate. Michel Mohr, Paul B. Watt, and Samuel Hideo Yamashita have also extended their support and assistance. Numerous scholars in the field helped me identify and/or correct references in the bibliography and notes. I am especially indebted in this regard to W. J. Boot, Antony Boussemart, Herman Ooms, and Duncan R. Williams. Needless to say, I am fully responsible for all remaining errors and omissions from the bibliography.


2 Several new religions were compelled to create “Shinto”-based doctrinal identities under the auspices of the nativist/Shinto ideological campaign of the early Meiji; later, in the postwar period, some attempted to recreate their purported preMeiji systems of belief. Re the Western origins of the notion that religion requires belief, see W.C. Smith, The Meaning and End of Religion (New York: Mentor, 1964), e.g., 164; or
look at the primary records of many Tokugawa religious groups reveals a keen interest in intellectual formulation that well predates the nineteenth-century encounter with Western philosophies of religion. Not only the established Buddhist and Confucian schools, but lesser-known, heterodox groups carefully preserved written statements of belief from long before the Restoration—not necessarily systematic doctrinal treatises, but sermons, dialogues between masters and disciples, popular tracts, and not infrequently, didactic letters.

The dimension of religious life about which even these documents often remain silent, however, is religious praxis, especially personal, individual practices (as opposed to official ceremonies and rites). Documentation of the practices of ordinary people as well as of the broader social functions of religion in this period is extant. However, in addition to the reasons cited above, scholars tend to neglect these documents because they are mostly manuscripts written in cursive style (komonjo) that require significant training in order to read. Western scholars who do not use these manuscripts must limit their research to works that have already been selected, edited, and published by modern Japanese scholars. The latter in turn may represent sectarian or other interests that are not necessarily conducive to broad-based studies of Tokugawa religious history.

In any event, the Western study of Edo-period religions during the last twenty years has remained dominated by an infatuation with ideas, and consequently has overlapped considerably with the study of Tokugawa intellectual history. The latter, as Yamashita notes, has become an invigorating and even controversial field during recent years. He posits a rather evolutionary scheme according to which authors of books published between 1979 and 1992 advanced through a series of preoccupations with “modernization,” “tradition,” the “new intellectual history,” and “postmodern” theory, and depicts each of these interpretive waves as arising partly in reaction to its predecessors. In the final analysis, however, Tokugawa intellectual history as a field is not really being redefined by these disputes. Works produced during the last two decades are still concerned with discrete “schools of thought” and articulate individual thinkers, even though this scholarship adopts a growing number of novel configurations.

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informed by recent theoretical trends. Many writers enjoy elucidating ideas in terms of diachronic “developments” or “traditions,” while others explicitly argue against the coherence of such a project. The degree of attention to “context” (intellectual, social, or other) is also presented as a conscious decision, even a matter of principle, and differs radically depending on the author’s predilections.

Bolitho comments that Tokugawa intellectual history “since the mid-1980s has been in the process of splitting into two separate and contending--not to say contentious--streams.” The two currents to which he refers are the orthodox type of history that seeks the meaning of a text by relying on critical translation and interpretation of its contents in conjunction with extensive research aimed at depicting the text’s significance within a larger biographical and/or historical context, on the one hand; and the “new intellectual history” ushered in by Harootunian and Najita that draws on a variety of European theories to argue against such “common sense” historical preoccupations as “reconstructing the past” or establishing continuities, on the other. The fundamental scope of study in both camps, however, remains the same: the doctrines or values of one educated figure or of a series of educated figures within the same school or sect are examined in detail. The parameters of Yamashita’s review are accordingly defined by the quite traditional premise of most intellectual history of this period: it is the study not of people’s ideas across the board, but of the formulations of a minority of well-expressed “thinkers.” Neither he nor his critic J. Tucker consider the possibility that people other than Kokugaku and Confucian scholars might produce thought worth studying. Indeed, Yamashita’s conclusion that the new intellectual historians “chose to study those without power and influence” is highly debatable. While it is true that in terms of social origin, many of Harootunian’s nativist figures and Najita’s Kaitokudō scholars were not upper-class samurai, they nevertheless were members of privileged sectors of the population: that is, they had the resources to learn how to read difficult Chinese and/or arcane Japanese texts. These thinkers and teachers in fact spoke for elites, mostly rural notables and well-endowed merchants, who wielded their own kind of power. Koschmann comes closer to treating a broad range of the populace, though the Tengu insurrection about which he writes was also dominated by agrarian elites.7

The efforts of the so-called new intellectual historians to broaden the scope and methodology of Tokugawa studies are groundbreaking. However, regardless of whether one belongs to their “interpretive community” or to a more traditional one, the challenge of accounting for the full social and/or intellectual context of an historical phenomenon remains the same.8


Among the works that Yamashita excludes from his review are those of Walthall and Wilson, among the few scholars who have attempted to account for popular intellectual trends; see Yamashita, “Reading Tokugawa,” 5, n. 8. Cf., e.g., Anne Walthall, Social Protest and Popular Culture in Eighteenth-Century Japan (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 1986); the same author’s Peasant Uprisings in Japan: A Critical Anthology of Peasant Histories (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); and George M. Wilson, Patriots and Redeemers in Japan: Motives in the Meiji Restoration (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 77-93.

8 Yamashita borrows the term “interpretive community” from Stanley Fish, who articulates it in his Is There a Text in This Class? (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), esp. 14-17, and reevaluates and clarifies it in his Doing What Comes Naturally: Change, Rhetoric, and the Practice of Theory in Literary and Legal Studies (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 1989), 141-160. Especially in his later remarks Fish emphasizes that interpretive communities are not immutable or monolithic, but act in a kind of dialectical

heartily agree with Yamashita’s statement that “members of a single intellectual generation, no matter what their declared philosophical or religious affiliations, often share a distinctive conceptual vocabulary that they use in their speaking and writing.” Given this premise, however, why do the cultivators of the “field” of Tokugawa intellectual history (both new and old) routinely exclude study of both popular religious thought and Buddhist belief systems (which, as often as not in the Edo period, were profoundly related)? Yamashita cites the notion of a “period discourse,” but like those he critiques, he glosses over the failure of intellectual historians in general to take into account the full range of that discourse in any particular Tokugawa context. The best intellectual and religious histories of this period move beyond the conventional distinction between elite “thought” and popular “religion” that has long informed Tokugawa studies—a distinction that continues to make itself felt at the end of the twentieth century.

I will limit my discussion here to works by authors who explicitly identify their topic as “religion” or “religious” in nature and to works of intellectual history that bear significantly, even if only implicitly, on the study of Tokugawa religious life. However, I have included fashion as “engines of change”—as Yamashita in fact demonstrates in his depiction of the interrelational development of his four interpretive communities.


11 For consideration of some of the seminal works of Tokugawa intellectual history per se (as distinct from their bearing on religious studies) that appeared between 1979 and 1992, see Yamashita, “Reading Tokugawa,” in which the numerous intellectual histories that do not meet these arbitrary criteria in the bibliography, which is designed to accompany both the present survey and James McMullen’s essay in this volume. The list covers European-language books, periodical articles, and unpublished doctoral dissertations of the last two decades that treat Tokugawa intellectual and religious history understood in the broadest sense. Moreover, I have organized my remarks and the bibliography under

12 The bibliography also includes studies of art, literature, and education that bear on Tokugawa religious history, and selected studies pertinent to the transitional years before and after the formal boundaries of the period (understood here as 1600-1868). In general, I exclude periodical literature that appears in unrefered publications (newsletters, proceedings, and the like); masters theses; reviews; encyclopedia articles; and translated primary documents in sourcebooks. I do, however, include translations of primary works accompanied by introductions that have appeared as monographs, periodical articles, or unpublished dissertations. A few pre-1980 works and several post-2000 works (some of which are still in press) are cited fully in my footnotes, but not in the bibliography. Works by Japanese authors in translation are generally excluded; exceptions are cited only in order to elucidate a point or to identify an exceptional contribution to an understudied area. The works of Japanese scholars who have published directly in European languages and/or who maintain a professional presence in Western academic circles are treated as “Western.” For an exhaustive recent bibliography of Tokugawa intellectual and cultural history in European and Slavic languages, see Klaus Kracht, Japanese Thought in the Tokugawa Era: A List of Books and Articles in Western Languages (Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz Verlag, 2000). I am much indebted to Klaus Kracht for allowing me to consult his extraordinarily thorough work while it was still in press.
a set of subsections that is convenient, given the present division of the field of Japanese religious studies in the West, but artificial and misleading in its implications for the nature of Edo-period religious culture. The rubrics that I use for the “major” or “established” systems of the time—Confucianism, Buddhism, and Shinto/nativism—are, of course, intellectual constructs. They encourage us to assume that their referents are distinct, identifiable bodies of thought and practice, produced and/or consumed by people who consistently associated themselves with one system, but not the others. My utilitarian use of these categories thus perpetuates another characteristic of Western scholarship in this field that I believe is in need of revision. I will try to counterbalance this paradoxical state of affairs by identifying points of commonality in Tokugawa religious studies as a whole, across the various subfields.13

School Shinto and Nativist Studies

I use the term “Shinto” cautiously, given the disjunction between its modern usage, created in the early Meiji, and the multiple senses the word appears to have in earlier Japanese texts.14 By

13 The works listed under a particular section in the bibliography are not necessarily discussed under the homonymous section of this essay. Studies of polemical discourses by independent thinkers or sectarian critics are listed under the religious system that the writer criticizes. Studies of rangaku (Dutch learning), medical thought, and mathematics are listed in the “General, Thematic, and Interreligious Studies” section of the bibliography.

14 The Japanese historian Kuroda Toshio argued that in medieval Japan “Shinto” was not understood as a distinct religious system, but formed part of a ritual and symbolical complex ordered by the prevalent Buddhist paradigm of exoteric-esoteric truth. Kuroda’s thesis has led scholars of the medieval period to view Buddhist and “Shinto” phenomena as closely interacting elements within a broader social and cultural context. For the impact of Kuroda’s thesis among “school Shinto” in particular I mean the priestly or ritual schools of the Tokugawa period (such as Yoshida, Watarai, Suika, and Shirakawa). Compared to these institutions, Kokugaku (usually translated as “nativism” or “national learning”) has gained far more attention in the Western academy. The authors of the two most extensive treatments, Harootunian and Nosco, differ greatly in their fundamental methodological premises as well as in their chronological parameters. Nosco stresses the contexts in which Kokugaku first emerged—its popular cultural environment in the Genroku era and its changing relations with specific Confucian discourses in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—and explicitly highlights the religious quality of Norinaga’s ideas, such as his concern with reestablishing the purportedly natural unity between human beings and the gods.15 Harootunian, who resolves not to depict nativism’s “moment in history” or to identify biographical or intentional contexts, instead offers us concentrated readings of the texts themselves.16 He interprets selected themes in nativist thought as keys to its political figuration in the late Tokugawa and, ultimately, to its decline in the Meiji. The religious quality of nativism surfaces not because of any deliberate emphasis on Harootunian’s part, but almost inadvertently from his close textual analyses, which uncover specific ideas about deity.


community, and worship. Embedded in Harootunian’s intense prose are numerous valuable insights into pertinent agrarian attitudes of the period, such as Hirata’s conviction that “eating and working were religious acts.” 17 Harootunian and Nosco thus elaborate, each in his own way, on nativist ideas that played an important role in the more broad-based religious movements of the late Tokugawa and beyond. However, neither foregrounds the religious premises or implications of Kokugaku as a whole, and both concentrate on the views of educated spokespersons.

More recently, the writers of several doctoral dissertations and related essays caution us not to overlook the diversity and scope of the Kokugaku phenomena. Burns takes up late nativist attacks on Norinaga’s theory of Japan as a natural social body, while Teeuwen directs our attention to the neglected literary dimension of Kokugaku. 18 Devine discusses the issue of Christian influences on Hirata and Breen persuasively argues that the nativism of the later activist Ōkuni Takamasa and his disciples was far less xenophobic than the Kokugaku depicted in standard textbooks. 19 McNally, who attends closely to the historiography of nativist studies, argues that the modern idea of a continuous nativist “tradition” is ultimately the result of Hirata Atsutane’s efforts to legitimize his place within the Norinaga school. 20

None of the aforementioned intellectual histories, however, take up the details of how nativist sentiments were disseminated or what specific influence they had on popular religious life. 21 Walthall’s recent biography of an educated peasant woman who took up Hirata’s ideas in the Bakumatsu period is the first English-language monograph that sheds light on how Kokugaku affected the everyday life of an individual follower—much less a female one. 22 Nosco’s earlier essay on the preacher Masuho Zankō, whose exaltation of Japanese erotic and aesthetic traditions over Chinese moralism previewed Kokugaku in the early eighteenth century, also enlarges our understanding of the less formal dimensions of this movement. 23

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17 Things Seen, 213.


21 Robertson suggests that Hirata’s ideas were spread in the countryside through his collaboration with farm-manual writers, but she does not examine the effect of these ideas in any specific religious context; Jennifer Robertson, "Sexy Rice: Plant Gender, Farm Manuals, and Grass-Roots Nativism," Monuments Nipponica 39, no. 3 (1984): 233-60. For a recent discussion of the teaching methods of a leading Kokugaku teacher, see Jacqueline Pigeot, “Le système de lecture de Motoori Norinaga (1730-1801),” in Repenser l’ordre, repenser l’heritage. Paysage intellectuel dans le Japon des Tokugawa (1600-1868), ed. Frédéric Girard, Annick Horiuchi, et Mieko Macé (Genève: Droz, 2001), 311-340.


23 Peter Nosco, "Masuho Zankō (1655-
Such lesser-known figures, especially those on the fringe of established socioreligious institutions, merit more attention—their interpretations of the world often teach us more about the processes of cultural change than the writings of famous thinkers. In general, however, the religious impact of nativism “on the ground” has not been addressed in a concerted fashion by European or American scholars; it is unclear to what extent or even whether Kokugaku as such actually pervaded the religious culture of the “masses.” Rather than continuing to focus on the published works of national-level figures who are conventionally identified with a formal school, it would be more fruitful at this juncture to search in local Japanese archives for records of discourse and practice left behind by little-known commentators in specific geographical areas, and to examine these fragments with an eye to determining the parameters of nativist influence. Japanese local historians’ work on the social and religious life of ordinary people during the late period demands more attention in this regard.

Little has been published in Western languages regarding school Shinto. Ooms courageously analyzes Suika Shinto, the complex system of ideas and symbols devised by the Confucian scholar Yamazaki Ansai.24 Teeuwen’s monograph on Watarai Shinto adds much to our knowledge of both the medieval origins and the Tokugawa development of the system of ideas associated with “Ise Shinto.”25 The Yoshida and Shirakawa (Hakke) schools, which controlled the shrine system during this period, have received little sustained attention in Western scholarship, whether in their religious, social, economic, or political aspects. These institutions were constituted by ritual systems that were closely guarded by priestly clans, and the extant texts associated with them make demanding reading. The study of historical “Shinto” phenomena, whether formal or popular, is an exceptionally difficult task.26

Confucian Studies

Several studies of Tokugawa Confucian thought have appeared in the last two decades, but treatments that emphasize religious themes are limited in number. Early on, Boot carefully contextualized the thought of the early Tokugawa scholars Fujiwara Seika and Hayashi Razan with reference both to medieval interpretive traditions and to the impact in Japan of Korean Confucian thinkers.27 W. T. de Bary, who pioneered the

26 Hardacre remarks that Shinto studies have dwindled in the American academy in the late twentieth century partly because of the decline of “Shinto” itself after the war (she presumably means the decline in shrine-centered religious life in Japan); Hardacre, “The Postwar Development,” 201. She also argues that the decrease in Western scholarship is related to the diminishing interest in the role Shinto purportedly played in Japanese militarism during the years leading up to the Pacific war—an interest that was earlier exemplified by such works as Daniel Holtom’s The Political Philosophy of Modern Shinto, a Study of the State Religion of Japan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1922). Moreover, Shinto as an academic field in Japan is not well-developed compared to Buddhist studies—although Shinto-related publications and activities appear to be gaining momentum during the last decade, especially under the auspices of Kokugakuin University. In the West, the support of the International Shinto Foundation had led to a recent surge in faculty positions, conferences, publications, and other scholarly activities related to Shinto.

27 Willem Jan Boot, "The Adoption and Adaptation of Neo-Confucianism in Japan: The Role of Fujiwara Seika and Hayashi Razan" (D. Lit., University of Leiden, 1983).
argument for the religious qualities of Neo-
Confucian thought in a number of earlier writings,
in the Tokugawa context highlighted the concerns
of Seika as well as Ishida Baigan. He identified
these figures’ interest in internal cultivation
particularly with the Neo-Confucian notion of the
“learning of the mind-and-heart” (shingaku) that
had been interpreted in various ways in Song and
Ming China and Yi Korea before it was revised
further by Tokugawa Japanese scholars. De
Bary’s salutary emphasis on Neo-Confucian
“learning” as a way of life or spiritual discipline
rather than simply a metaphysical or ethical
teaching inspired a number of graduate students in
East Asian studies at Columbia University in the
1980s (including me), but it was M. E. Tucker
who first took up the challenge of applying this
perspective to the Tokugawa context. In her book
and other writings she argues that the self-
cultivation teachings of Kaibara Ekiken
constituted a distinctive “spirituality” that was
integradly related to his activities as a botanist,
textual scholar, and moral educator. Tucker’s
approach to Ekiken did not appeal to some
intellectual historians, who yearned for more
discussion of local contextual factors and the
ideological implications of his thought, but her
work nevertheless filled a vacuum in the study of
Tokugawa religion, which had long been
identified simply with “Buddhism” and
“Shinto.”

Some of the resistance to M. E. Tucker’s
emphasis on the “spiritual” qualities of Ekiken’s
thought is not unrelated to the assumption that
educated, non-sectarian thinkers are the proper
domain of intellectual history conceived as
distinct from religious studies. In spite of the
popularity in the modern West of such open-
ended definitions of religion as Geertz’s “system
of symbols” or Streng’s “means of ultimate
transformation,” many scholars retain a
preoccupation with the theistic or devotional
(read: “popular”) nature of religion. This often
unstated premise allows historians (both Western
and Japanese) to applaud studies of religion as a
broad-based social force, while dismissing its
relevance to educated, protoscientific thinkers
like Ekiken. Younger scholars nevertheless
continue to add to the growing body of work on
Tokugawa Confucian thought that includes
consideration of its religious aspects. J. Tucker,
who has produced several innovative rereadings
of early modern Japanese thought in recent
years, revives a domain of interest that has

My own work, Confucian Values and Popular
Zen: Sekimon Shingaku in Eighteenth-Century
Japan (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press,
1993), did not come under Yamashita’s cutting
knife—he covers only monographs published

Tucker cites Frederick J. Streng’s
Understanding Religious Life (Belmont, CA:
Dickenson Pub. Co., 1985), 1-9; Tucker, Moral
and Spiritual Cultivation, 7. For Clifford Geertz’s
classic definition, see his The Interpretation of
Cultures (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1973),
90-91.

See, e.g., John Allen Tucker, "Chen
Beixi, Lu Xiangshan, and Early Tokugawa (1600-
1867) Philosophical Lexicography," Philosophy
East & West 43 (1993): 683-713; "Two Mencian
Political Notions in Tokugawa Japan," Philosophy
East and West 47, no. 2 (1997): 233-
53; Itō Jinsai’s “Gomō Jigi” and the
Philosophical Definition of Early Modern Japan,
Brill’s Japanese Studies Library 7 (Leiden,
Boston, and Koln: Brill, 1998); "Ogū Sorai’s
Understanding of Watakushi and Ōyake," in État,
remained inadequately explored in the Japanese
context in his essay on Confucian notions of
supernatural beings. 33 Historians of Confucian
thought have long been aware that their highly-
educated subjects often combined moral
theorizing and humanistic programs of cultivation
with a greater or lesser degree of involvement in
rituals that centered on spirits or gods. Some
Tokugawa scholars, notably Nakae Tōju,
constructed belief systems that clearly affirmed
personal notions of deity, as Ching and, more
recently, Steben have emphasized. 34 It is true
that Tokugawa Confucian scholars such as Itō
Jinsai interpreted theistic beings as manifestations
of the forces of yin and yang, but even so, J.
Tucker argues, they were “sincerely religious
people, and not mere atheists.” 35

However, while these scholars have rightly
directed our attention to the religious dimensions
of Neo-Confucian self-cultivation or
“spirituality,” the relation between all aspects of
the Confucian scholar’s intellectual and religious
self-presentation, including the function of non-
Confucian ideas and rituals within the
individual’s larger world of meaning, remains
insufficiently addressed in the Japanese context.
It behooves students of Tokugawa thought to gain
a more detailed understanding of the religious
diversity that characterized the life-world of these
teachers, rather than simply remark in passing
about their Shinto-type predilections or Buddhist
antipathies in the course of analyzing their
“main” (Confucian) doctrine. As part of his larger
argument that Jinsai drew on Neo-Confucian
anti-Buddhist discourse, for example, J. Tucker
describes Itō Jinsai’s personal dissatisfaction with
Buddhist meditation and gives a wealth of
references to the historical precedents of the
particular Zen technique that Jinsai repudiated. 36

In this way he establishes (within the admittedly
limited parameters of a periodical article) a
partial context for understanding why Jinsai came
to dislike Buddhism. One is left wondering,
however, what sort of Buddhism Jinsai
encountered in mid-seventeenth Japan, such that
the great philologist simply fell back on Song
nihilistic caricatures of Zen?

Even if the sources do not always provide
direct answers to such questions, given the
advance in our linguistic and research skills,
Western students of Tokugawa religious history
can at least move toward integrated accounts of
how diverse ideas, rituals, and institutions
functioned in relation to each other within each
thinker’s local universe, rather than concentrate
simply on the ways in which these scholars each
reconfigured a single “home tradition.” Histories
textualized in this way are more likely to
account for a variety of synchronic factors in the
construction of religious systems, rather than
emphasizing a unilinear development. Smits for
his part grounds the Confucian ideas of the
Ryūkyūan scholar Sai On (1682-1761) in the
broader political and social conditions of his time,
and in so doing he gives some attention (though

33 John Allen Tucker, "Ghosts and Spirits
in Tokugawa Japan: The Confucian Views of Itō

34 See Julia Ching, “The Idea of God in
Nakae Toju” Japanese Journal of Religious
Studies 11, no. 4 (1984): 293-312; Barry D.
Steben, “From Samurai to Shishi: the
Development of Ethical Idealism in the
Yōmeigaku School of Japanese Confucianism”
(unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of
Toronto, 1994); and the latter’s “Nakae Tōju
and the Birth of Wang Yang-Ming Learning in


He concludes in this regard that “for rhetorical
purposes, [Jinsai] merged Neo-Confucian
meditation . . . with Zen meditation . . . so that
he could critique them both.” Brackets added.
unfortunately too little in his book) to the non-
Confucian religious ideologies and practices
against which Sai On polemicized. 37

The most erudite work in Tokugawa
Confucian studies to appear in recent years is
McMullen’s monograph on the scholar and
activist, Kumazawa Banzan. 38 The author’s
meticulous depiction of Banzan as an exemplar of
progressive Confucian “humanism” is bracing
after decades of criticism by the “new”
intellectual historians of the “liberal, humanist
vision that privileges the individual,” to use
Yamashita’s parlance. 39 Whether one agrees or
not with McMullen’s interpretive stance (and his
corollary critique of the so-called new historians
for “short-ending” Tokugawa Confucianism), few
will dispute that the author’s forays beyond the

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naturalistic strains of thought elaborated by Ito Jinsai, on the one hand, and Kaibara Ekiken and Nishikawa Joken, on the other, supplied early modern merchant scholars with an open-ended discourse that allowed them to formulate their own “intellectual history.” Although in the final analysis, as noted above, Najita’s book is concerned primarily with the conceptions of an educated merchant sector, the author successfully shows how the ideas propagated at the school formed part of the wider social and intellectual process of the time, and in so doing he makes an important contribution to the project of including the thought of commoners in Tokugawa intellectual history. Not coincidentally, Najita also displays sensitivity to Buddhist and other non-Confucian influences on Kaitokudou thought, and offers engaging reflections on issues of interest to religion scholars, such as the idea of the Confucian academy as a “community of thought.” Perhaps future studies will pursue the insight that Confucian schools were not only groups of thinkers, but social structures comparable to religious institutions, insofar as they were characterized by shared belief systems, group rituals, and master-disciple ties. A socially-based approach to Tokugawa Confucian groups is sorely lacking in Western-language scholarship, though Ikegami offers a sociological analysis of the samurai class with which most jusha associated. Confucian scholars occupied an intriguingly liminal position in the Tokugawa social order, but they have not been treated as a social type by Western scholars since Hall’s succinct 1967 essay.

Several studies of independent thinkers and critics of the Confucian system have appeared during the last decade, notably essays by Pye, Ketelaar, Barrett, and Durt on the critical thinker Tominaga Nakamoto, and translations by Yasunaga and Hunter of Ando Shōeki’s writings (Yasunaga’s book includes an engaging introductory essay on Shōeki’s life and thought). Joly in the meantime has produced a

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full-length study of Shõeki’s notion of shizen (defined as the spontaneous movement of “vital principle”), in which the author entertains, among other issues, the question of Daoist influences on Shõeki’s thought, the latter’s critique of the legendary sage-kings of ancient China (in reaction to Ogyû Sorai’s views), and intriguingly, the conservative ideologization of the term shizen in Japan in comparison with that of nature in France during the same period.48 Consideration of gender is also beginning to inform scholarship on Tokugawa discourses, as exemplified in the recent work of Burns and Gramlich-Oka.49


49 See Susan L. Burns, “The Body as Text: Confucianism, Reproduction, and Gender in Tokugawa Japan,” in Rethinking Confucianism: Past and Present in China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam, ed. Benjamin Elman with John Duncan and Herman Ooms, UCLA Asian Pacific Monograph Series (Los Angeles: UCLA Asia-Paciﬁc Institute, 2002); and Bettina Gramlich-Oka, “Tadano Makuzu and Her Hitori kangae,” Monumenta Nipponica 56, no. 1 (2000): 1-20. See also Janet Goodwin, Bettina Gramlich-Oka, Elizabeth A. Leicester, Yuki Terazawa, and Anne Walthall, trans., “Solitary Thoughts: A Translation of Tadano Makuzu’s Hitori kangae,” 2 pts., Monumenta Nipponica 56, nos. 1-2 (2000-01): 21-38; 173-195. Yuki Terazawa has completed a dissertation on early modern and modern medical practices that foregrounds issues of gender: “Gender, Knowledge, and Power: Confucian influences in Tokugawa literature and the fine arts, as opposed to discursive representations of thought, apparently have little interest for Western scholars, though Keene has written an essay on Confucian elements in Chikamatsu’s plays. 50 Perhaps more representative of late twentieth-century approaches to Confucian themes in literature and art is Delprat’s study of anti-Neo-Confucian currents in Hiraga Gennai’s gesaku writings; or, more recently, Gerhart’s examination of the contribution of the official Tokugawa painter, Kano Tan’yu, to early shogunal ideological strategies, which encompassed Confucian as well as Shinto and other religious themes.51

Reproductive Medicine in Japan, 1790-1930” (unpublished Ph.D., University of California, Los Angeles, 2001).


Buddhist Studies

Considering the proliferation of Buddhist temples and obligatory parishioners under the Tokugawa rule, the relative dearth of European and American scholarship on early modern Buddhism is striking. This neglect allegedly stems from the influence of modern Japanese Buddhist scholars who have argued (not entirely without justification) since the Meiji period that Tokugawa Buddhism was intellectually dull, if not moribund. During the last decades, however, both Japanese and Western scholars have begun to reread known primary sources, to explore documents catalogued by local history societies, and to discover new ones in temple archives. A wider range of views about the significance of Buddhist phenomena during the period is thus beginning to emerge. In the West, intellectual history dominated this field through the late twentieth century, but institutional and social history is now rapidly gaining momentum and, if we are to judge by recent dissertation topics, is about to overtake the former approach.

Watt’s studies of the Shingon Ritsu master, Jiun Onkō, whose moral teachings later became an important source of Meiji Buddhist ideology, pioneered the field of Tokugawa Buddhist studies in the early 1980s. His concerted attention to the relationship between Jiun’s Buddhist ideas and the Confucian intellectual environment is noteworthy, especially in comparison with more recent Western-language studies of Tokugawa Buddhism.52 The overwhelmingly majority of Western studies of Tokugawa Buddhism during the last twenty years have focused on Zen figures, however. I will not speculate here why Westerners of this generation have been preoccupied with Zen almost to the exclusion of other forms of Japanese Buddhism, both inside and outside the academy. Hardacre reasons, I think correctly, that the recent surge in academic studies of Zen Buddhism is part of a general movement to counter the idealized image of Zen that was popularized by D.T. Suzuki and his followers in the fifties and sixties.53 In any case, the increased academic attention to Zen history has resulted in a number of excellent, in-depth studies of Tokugawa Zen Buddhist leaders and their teachings. Dissertations, books, articles, and translations by Tyler, Haskel, Schwaller, Waddell, Mohr, Baroni, Gross, and Williams have given us a basic fund of knowledge about the development of Zen Buddhism during this period. Haskel’s contextualization of Rinzai Zen master Bankei Yōtoku, a popularizer who preached to large crowds of laypeople, elucidates the reformist impulses of early Tokugawa Zen.54 Tyler and


Ooms each make modest but perceptive contributions to our understanding of the ethical stance and ideological role, respectively, of another early Tokugawa Zen preacher, Suzuki Shōsan. 55 Schwaller and Baroni cover the leading figures of the Ōbaku Zen sect, which is important especially because of its impact on the dominant Sōtō and Rinzai Zen schools of the time.56 Baroni’s book in particular sets in relief the role of intercultural tensions in the seventeenth-century Japanese reception of this Ming Chinese form of Buddhism, which differed considerably from earlier Song imports. The Tokugawa intra-Zen polemics oddly parallel Japanese Confucian debates over the relative orthodoxy of the Song versus Ming (and later, Qing) Confucian schools.

The construction of a Tokugawa history of Rinzai, which was (and is) smaller and more elitist than the Sōtō sect in Japan, has long been a challenge to both Japanese and Western historians because of the difficult, fragmentary nature of primary sources. Mohr’s extraordinarily learned study of Tōrei Enji, the successor of the great Zen master Hakuin, supplies information about the early contours of the Hakuin school that is indispensable for understanding the nature of the Rinzai sect as it exists today.57 For example, Mohr points out Tōrei’s failure to advocate systematic koan practice—suggesting that this vaunted “Hakuin” approach is in fact a creation of the nineteenth century at the earliest. 58 Moreover, unlike other scholars in Zen studies, Mohr is not afraid to compare and contrast the ideas of figures across sectarian lines; in his exploratory essays he helps undermine conventional assumptions about the self-enclosed nature of the three Zen sects of this period.59 On


the Sōtō side, Bodiford takes an in-depth look at the construction of sectarian policy in this period, while Gross discusses the issue of lineage transmission with reference to the ideas of Manzan Dōhaku, a leading sectarian reformer of the period.60

This spate of more contextualized Zen studies, whatever the driving forces behind it, goes a good way toward dispelling, at least in the academic world, the image of the so-called “free-floating” or “timeless” Zen popularized in the mid-twentieth century.61 The evolution of scholarship on the Zen monk-poet Ryōkan is illustrative of the same trend. Earlier translations of Ryōkan’s poetry, such as Yuasa’s work, have now been supplemented by Abé and Haskel’s _Great Fool_, which includes extensive commentary as well as new translations of Ryōkan’s writings.62 Abé and Haskel make a point of relating the poet’s work and ideas explicitly to the socioreligious conditions of the time in which he lived. Ryōkan’s popular image in modern Japan as a failed monk or misfit loses much of its force in the face of the authors’ argument that his behavior was a conscious critique of the Tokugawa regime’s temple bureaucracy.63

Recent literary studies of Tokugawa religious themes also include Barnhill’s use of anthropological theory to interpret Bashō’s religious sensibilities and Heine’s arguments for the centrality of Pure Land Buddhist themes in Chikamatsu’s plays.64 It is difficult, of course, to draw general conclusions about trends in the development of Tokugawa intellectual and religious history based on the study of great monks, poets, and playwrights; yet Western academics have been less interested in the informal religious sentiments and practices that were disseminated on a large scale during the

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period through vernacular texts, oral performances, and the like. A range of popular didactic literature circulated widely beginning at least in the seventeenth century, but few of these texts have received scholarly attention. Sanford discusses and partially translates the widely-read Ikkyū banashi, a series of humorous moral tales inspired by Ikkyū Sōjun, the unorthodox Zen poet of medieval times; Ooms mines a group of syncretic, anonymous tracts inspired by popularized Neo-Confucian notions of the “Way of Heaven” (tendō). The most extensive recent consideration of how Buddhist ideas were disseminated, as distinct from their doctrinal content, is Harrison’s dissertation on Pure Land preaching styles. Otherwise, we have seen few reverberations in the Tokugawa context of the recent interest in performed religious culture among Western scholars of medieval and contemporary Japan.

65  See Sawada, Confucian Values and Popular Zen, 17-26, for a summary of Confucian and Zen Buddhist genres of Tokugawa vernacular didactic literature.


indispensable for understanding the nature of today’s Japanese Buddhist communities. Along these lines, Hur has published a full-scale analysis of the Edo temple Sensōji in its local context; he emphasizes the ways in which the Buddhism of this important temple was shaped by the economic and ritual needs of its patrons.71

Williams has completed a marvelously wide-ranging dissertation on the Tokugawa history of the Sōtō Zen sect that accounts for its explosive growth in terms of social and economic factors, such as the willingness of Sōtō priests to accommodate popular pharmacological needs.72

Wright’s study of Mantokuji, a Tokugawa ancestral temple that operated as a “divorce temple,” emphasizes its role in legitimizing the shogunal house, especially the latter’s female members, and in serving the economic and political needs of the samurai and privileged commoner women who patronized it.73

Thornton for her part employs Weber’s notion of the routinization of charisma to account for the development of the social organization of the Ji sect of Pure Land Buddhism from medieval times through the first century of the Edo period.74

The new socially-oriented histories of Buddhism fill an important need in the field for detailed information about Tokugawa religious institutions; without works like these, Western observers will continue to underestimate the scope of religious life in early modern Japan. Of course, each new wave of interpretive approaches harbors the seeds of its own demise; preoccupation with the social and economic functions of religious communities can become as insular in its own way as infatuation with intellectual “traditions” taken out of their social context. The ideal approach to the study of religion is concerted attention to particular institutions, practices, and ideas in relation both to each other and the wider world. Especially in the case of Japanese Buddhist studies, concentration on local, contextual factors in the development of temple communities, sects, or on early Tokugawa ritual systems, titled “Gift Society: Rituals of Exchange in Tokugawa Iemitsu’s Japan (1623-1651) (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Princeton University, 2001). See also Helen Hardacre’s recent book, Religion and Society in Nineteenth-Century Japan: A Study of the Southern Kantō Region, Using Late Edo and Early Meiji Gazeteers (Ctr. for Japanese Studies, University of Michigan Press, 2002), as well as her article in “Sources for the Study of Religion and Society in the Late Edo Period,” Journal of Japanese Religious Studies 28, nos. 3-4 (2001): 227-260. This issue of the Journal, titled “Local Religion in Tokugawa History” (edited by Barbara Ambros and Duncan Williams), is a major contribution to the social history of Tokugawa religion. It brings together the work of several emerging and established scholars whose work has been inspired by Tamamuro Fumio’s call for localized research methods in the study of Japanese religions.


73 Diana E. Wright, "The Power of Religion/the Religion of Power: Religious Activities as Upaya for Women of the Edo Period. The Case of Mantokuji" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Toronto, 1996); "Severing the Karmic Ties That Bind: The 'Divorce Temple' Mantokuji," Monumenta Nipponica 52, no. 3 (1997): 357-80. Although not specifically concerned with Buddhism, among the recent socially-informed histories of religious practice I would also include Reiko Sono’s work

practices loses power when it is not informed by awareness of patterns throughout Buddhist history in Asia, or for that matter, religious history in general. In practice, this means perusing formal and popular doctrinal texts, as well as the detailed economic and social data conserved in temple archives, and interpreting these holistically in such a way as to contribute to broader scholarly debates—a daunting task.

Heterodox and Popular Religious Movements

The topic of Christianity in Japan is receiving less attention in recent years compared to other religious phenomena. With regard to the Tokugawa, coverage inevitably focuses on the Kakure Kirishitan communities, with occasional forays into later, isolated Christian influences in the nineteenth century. Ōhashi calls attention to the influence of social class within the Kirishitan community, arguing that the government at first targeted the foreign missionaries and their samurai converts and only later shifted its attention to the general populace. Because of its underground past, however, treatments of the Kirishitan movement usually concentrate on modern survivals more than any specific Tokugawa history. Turnbull’s thorough monograph relies on primary historical documents as well as contemporary fieldwork, but even so he deals mostly with today’s Kakure communities. His and Whelan’s studies of the 1823 Kirishitan scripture, Tenchi hajimari no koto, offer additional insight into the Tokugawa configuration of the Kirishitan belief system; Turnbull in particular suggests that the content of this canon may shed more light on the early Catholic missionaries’ accommodation than on the alleged indigenous “corruption” of Christian ideas. Nosco in turn discusses issues of secret transmission in the Kakure Kirishitan movement. Much remains to be done, however, on underground movements in general (such as the kakure nenbutsu phenomena), following the lead of Japanese scholars.

It is no coincidence that in studies of heterodox movements, new religions, and so-called folk religion, attention is frequently focused not only on the doctrines or ideas of the religious subjects in question, but also...
(sometimes overwhelmingly) on their practices and institutions. Intellectual history plays a less important role here than in the mainstream fields, if for no other reason than that primary statements of these groups’ beliefs were never recorded in the first place, are not extant, or at best, still languish (often in near-undecipherable form) in little-known private collections. However, the condition of these sources is not the only factor in the downplaying of popular thought. The ideas of the spokespersons of these movements (whether founders or articulate members) are often not deemed intellectually creative enough to merit exhaustive analysis. Late twentieth-century European-language studies of popular religious phenomena (minshū shūkyō), including the early new religions, tend to depict them as communities or episodic movements, often with more attention to their social, economic, and political dimensions than is common in treatments of outstanding thinkers. To be sure, the ideas associated with non-mainstream religions are not always assumed to be without interest; in some cases, they constitute the chief topic of study. A rare example of this approach is Parker’s dissertation on Nyoraikyō, an obscure late Tokugawa movement that remains understudied because access to the group’s Edo-period sources is routinely denied to outsiders, particularly scholars (both Japanese and other). Parker, who was greatly aided by Murakami Shigeyoshi and his assistants at the time, Kanda Hideo and Asano Miwako, devotes approximately two-thirds of his text to a description and analysis of the founder Kino’s teachings.

Regardless of the availability of sources, concentration on thought is in fact a critical first step in the study of small, obscure, and heterodox religious groups. Without extensive clarification of the vocabularies and discourses peculiar to these movements, analysis of their rituals and institutions (much less interpretation of these groups within a wider intellectual or social context) simply cannot proceed. Close attention to articulations of belief is particularly desirable in the study of groups in which doctrines were purportedly revealed to uneducated or illiterate religious figures (because of the difficulty of sorting out the various “voices” involved in the formulation of credal statements); but it applies to all studies of non-mainstream religions, since the members of these associations do not necessarily share the theoretical premises of the established Buddhist, Confucian, or Shinto systems with which scholars tend to be familiar.

The importance of mountains in Edo religious history has been recognized in a number of Western-language essays in recent years. Tyler and Collcutt identify the distinctive religious concerns of the leaders of Fujikō (the devotional movement dedicated to Mt. Fuji) and their common ground with Confucian conceptions of the time. Miyazaki pioneers the Western-language study of Fujidō (a Fujikō offshoot) in a nuanced essay on the group’s conflicting responses to the nativist ideologies of the late Tokugawa and early Meiji. Hardacre touches

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on mountain religion in her essay on conflicts between Shugendō and the emergent new religions in the Bakumatsu period. 85 Dissertations by Devi and Thal treat the Konpira pilgrimage movement associated with Mt. Zōzu, a mountain in Kagawa prefecture. The former reportedly highlights the “pragmatic and utilitarian” aspects of this syncretic movement; the latter treats especially the Meiji reconfiguration of Konpira pilgrimage practices, but is well worth consulting for retrospective insight into the group’s late-Tokugawa history.86 Formanek has recently written on the relevance of the Edo-era Mt. Tateyama pilgrimage to modern Japanese life; Miyazaki and Williams take up practices related to Osorezan, and Ambros discusses the role of the oshi or mountain guides at Ōyama.87 Bouchy’s and Rotermund’s research on mountain itinerants deserve more attention from Anglophone scholars of Japanese religions.88 In her work on the nenbutsu-reciting ascetic Tokuhon, for example, Bouchy treats the adept’s life, his understanding of religious practice, and his relations with other wandering ascetics and with the Pure Land sect; she also addresses more general issues, such as the nature of the nenbutsu and its function in popular religious contexts.

Neither Shugendō nor localized mountain groups, which tended to combine elements from diverse religious systems, have received the sustained scholarly attention they deserve, however. This apparent oversight is partly related to the early Meiji state’s “cultural revolution,” as Grapard calls it—the proscription of syncretic religious phenomena. The policy of shinbutsu bunri (separation of gods and Buddhas) led in some areas of Japan to the destruction of documents, artifacts, and oral/ritual traditions. Grapard, incidentally, is one of the few scholars who has explicitly argued for the need to address the “combinatory” nature of Japanese religion (his own research centers mostly on medieval Buddhist-Shinto religious systems). 89 Also

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89 Allan G. Grapard, “Japan’s Ignored Cultural Revolution: The Separation of Shinto and Buddhist Deities in Meiji (shinbutsu bunri) and a Case Study: Tōnomine.” History of Religions 23, no. 3 (1984): 240-265; later published in revised form in the author’s Protocol of the Gods: A Study of the Kasuga Cult in...
hard-hit during the first Meiji years were heterodox or non-established religions that had proliferated (usually underground) in the late Tokugawa; when constrained to reconfigure their doctrines and institutions under the now mutually exclusive rubrics of “Shinto” and “Buddhism,” these groups lost their incipient identities. The same difficulty applies to the study of several other phenomena that disappeared in the middle of the nineteenth century, such as Onmyōdō (yin-yang divination). In Western languages only Hayashi valiantly attempts to treat the early modern phase of this prognosticatory system, which at least in its social presentation possessed distinctive religious overtones.90

Nevertheless, the paucity of sources, as I have indicated, is not the only reason for Western scholars’ lack of enthusiasm for historical studies of popular, interreligious phenomena. Some Tokugawa syncretic movements are well-documented, despite the ideological trauma and severe decline that they suffered in the Meiji.91 Critical annotated editions of several major texts of the older new religions were made available in 1971 in volume 67 of *Nihon shisō taikei*, edited by Murakami Shigeyoshi and Yasumaru Yoshio.92 Yet no Western-language scholarly monograph on the Tokugawa phase of a new religion has been published in the last twenty years, and periodical literature on the preMeiji development of these groups is limited.93 Folk religious phenomena or episodic movements, such as pilgrimages, have also been relatively little studied in the West, with a few important exceptions (including Foard’s work and the

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91 I was fortunately able to draw on a well-preserved collection of sermon records, regulatory documents, primers for children, and block-print pictures when investigating the ways in which Shingaku preachers interpreted Buddhist, Shinto, and Confucian ideas for Tokugawa popular audiences; Sawada, *Confucian Values and Popular Zen*.


Most recently, Kouamé has completed a full-length study of the Shikoku pilgrimage as it developed during the Edo period. Davis offers stimulating if not always convincing sociological and anthropological insights into the okage-mairi, ee-ja-nai-ka, and social protest movements of the late Tokugawa. Further studies along these lines have not appeared—few sociologists have had the breadth (or temerity) to address Japanese historical phenomena in the way that Davis does.

A small number of Japan historians have assayed socially-based analyses of popular religious phenomena of the period. It must be said that Western authors and editors of surveys and essay collections on early modern Japan have not always regarded Tokugawa “religion” as a topic worthy of distinctive enquiry, though recent histories give late Edo religious movements more attention. Alex Vesey recently pinpointed the issue when he informed me that the general thrust of his dissertation is “institutional in nature (a stance taken in the hopes of making ‘the study of Buddhism’ more palatable to the larger body of early-modern historians who normally would not give a hoot about religion).” When Tokugawa historians do take up religion, it is usually depicted as one dimension of a larger social or political drama. Wilson persuasively interprets both the new religions and pilgrimage movements as active forces in the Bakumatsu social ferment. Harootunian elucidates the political significance of the new religions by interpreting them as forms of opposition discourse, parallel to nativism and the later Mito school. McClain has written an informative analysis of local festival practices in Kanagawa during the Tokugawa period. He emphasizes that seasonal religious rituals functioned as political strategies engineered by domain leaders, but he does not neglect the other side of the coin, whereby the populace reclaimed festival practices for its own purposes. The author’s concern with the social and political functions of these spectacles does not overwhelm his sense of their genuinely religious dimension—a rare balancing act. Rotermund for his part has produced a rich study of the religious practices associated with the prevention and treatment of smallpox in Edo Japan. Hopefully historians of the Tokugawa

97 E.g., Conrad Totman, Early Modern Japan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

98 G. Wilson, Patriots and Redeemers in Japan.
101 Hartmut O. Rotermund, Hôsôgami, ou la petite vérole aisément: Matériaux pour l'étude des épidémies dans le Japon des XVIIIe, XIXe siècles (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 1991). For an English-language presentation of Rotermund’s research on this topic, see his “Demonic Affliction or Contagious Disease? Changing Perceptions of Smallpox in the Late Edo Period,” Japanese Journal of Religious Studies 28, nos. 3-
will continue to foster an appreciation of the complexity of religion during this period as a wide-ranging cultural and social process.

**General, Thematic, and Interreligious Studies**

We have seen no book-length characterizations of religion during the Edo period as a whole in the Western academy during the past two decades. The reluctance to address the grand sweep of several centuries of diverse phenomena is a natural corollary of the increasing specialization and sophistication of scholars of Japanese religious culture. The detailed studies of specific figures, movements, and institutions that have appeared in the late twentieth century are in fact attempts to compensate for the overly-general nature of earlier postwar treatments. Bellah’s sociological study of early modern religious life, *Tokugawa Religion*, is based on questionable theoretical premises and draws on now-dated Japanese scholarship. Yet it has become a widely-read classic (now in its second edition), whereas the more recent, “sophisticated” monographs on Tokugawa religious history mentioned in this essay appeal only to a narrow audience of specialists. Perhaps it is time for one of these specialists to venture a broader, updated analysis of Tokugawa religious culture. The intellectual history of this period as presently constituted in the West has not proven much more amenable to general treatments. Most surveys and wide-ranging essays on Tokugawa thought as a whole are the work of Japanese scholars in translation.

More ambitious are intellectual histories that attempt to characterize disparate phenomena in terms of specific commonalities or themes. Harootunian draws on diverse intellectual and religious systems to illustrate pre-Restoration patterns of political and social thought, such as the drive toward “secession.” Najita uses the themes of “nature” and “history” to characterize eighteenth-century thought. Ng adopts a novel approach to the cultural history of the period by concentrating on the influence of the *I Ching* (Book of Changes) across a wide spectrum of social and religious contexts—Shinto, Buddhism, medicine, economic theory, and the military, among others. I briefly explore variations in the theme of “linguistic alienation” during the late Tokugawa across Confucian, Buddhist, and Shinto-type contexts. Polemics between spokespersons of different religious communities also provide a framework for comparative and thematic analysis, though interreligious disputes often turn out to have economic, social, and political subtexts, to judge by several studies included in a special issue of the *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*

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104 Harootunian, "Late Tokugawa Culture and Thought," 168-258.


106 Wai-ming Ng, *The I Ching in Tokugawa Thought and Culture* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2000).

religious conflict in Japan. Ooms’ *Tokugawa Ideology*, quite apart from its chief accomplishment of identifying the diverse sources of the shogunate’s official ideology, is remarkable for the way in which the author draws out his thesis from materials that are highly diverse, both in terms of socioreligious identity (Buddhist, school Shinto, Confucian, popular syncretic) and textual genre (anonymous didactic tracts, learned treatises, legal codes). Ooms, *Tokugawa Ideology.*

Scholars of religion who operate in the intellectual history mode can learn much from Ooms’ theoretically-informed approach, which shows how a system of ideas is in fact a constant process of interaction across a wide gamut of texts and/or spokespersons.

The more ambitious the theme or theory, of course, the less attention to particular contexts. The deliberate exclusion of considerations of intellectual lineage or other chronological factors, as I noted above, marks several works in the “new” or “postmodern” styles of Tokugawa intellectual history. Sakai’s study of the debate over language that took place in the eighteenth century leaves the reader without any refuge at all in an “historical imaginary” (except in his footnotes). He warns us at the outset of his book that he does not “aspire to know the ‘thought’ of an author or the genealogy of a school,” and indeed that he uses the rubric “eighteenth century” only in a symbolical sense “to allude to the locus of a discursive space” in which the status of language was discussed.

Concluding Reflections

A key issue in the debate between proponents of the “new” and “old” intellectual history is the relative valuation of diachronic and synchronic approaches to the material at hand. Najita summed up the emerging appreciation of “synchronous” approaches to history in 1982 when he remarked that

[i]ncreasingly . . . the tracing of chronological sequence has come under critical scrutiny. It is not necessary that one historical phase produce another . . . . A chronological series, in other words, represents a particular “totalization” from the perspective of the historian’s construction rather than encompassing an homogeneous flow.

The tendency to neglect synchronic factors in the study of religion -- whether contemporaneous economic or political conditions, on the one hand, or the discourse shared by diverse members of the particular “intellectual generation” in question, on the other--is closely related to Western scholars’ overemphasis on high intellectual history or doctrinal studies in this field. While past historians sometimes approached the other extreme, depicting religion as an epiphenomenon or mere reflection of the “hard” social or economic realities of the time, for the most part late twentieth-century religious and intellectual histories of the Tokugawa period have followed diachronic models in which the main focus of interest is the way in which great religious leaders and thinkers purportedly revived,
developed, or dissented with preexisting “traditions.” In proportion to the degree of this unilinear emphasis, the interreligious and intersocial dimensions of these systems of thought tend to be marginalized: they appear to be extraneous elements that do not neatly fit into our “totalizations.” As a result, the religious sentiments of the majority of the people, who were not necessarily consciously engaged with a mainstream “tradition” that is well-studied today, seem less creative and significant. Approaches informed by discourse analysis do not necessarily solve this problem. “Obscure” forms of thought and practice will remain obscure to us until we take them seriously—whether we treat them as intertraditional “developments” or as “spaces” within the so-called period discourse.

All this is not new. Yet despite the general recognition by scholars that the religion of the Tokugawa period was an ever-changing composite of rituals, ideas, and institutions, the field of religious studies as constituted in the West today perpetuates the treatment of individual traditions (or discourses) in that complex, in isolation from each other and, in some cases, from immediate economic or political conditions. Area studies and history faculty no doubt urge their students to attend closely to the social, political, and economic significance of religious phenomena. One might expect that, as opposed to religion scholars, they would also encourage the sort of cross-over research that is needed to redress the conventional preoccupation with single religious “traditions” (or as the case may be, discursive “formations”). Hardacre has remarked that whereas world religions took a particular religion as the framework of analysis, area studies facilitated an approach in which a particular country or society, and religious life as practiced there, constituted the basic unit of analysis. Thus, whereas a world religions approach to Japan would inevitably give a dominant position to Buddhism, an area studies approach would tend to be more attentive to the variety of religious life, recognizing within the religious life of a single individual or community the influence of folk religious ideas, Shintō, new religions, and Christianity, as well as Buddhism.112

However, even the doctoral theses generated by history and area studies departments tend to focus on single schools of thought, discourses, or sectarian institutions to the exclusion of others. Faculty in these departments appear to be as diffident as those in religious studies about fostering projects that take into account the overlapping, multireligious character of early modern Japanese ideas and practices. No doubt this hesitation is due to practical considerations. It is difficult if not impossible for a graduate student in any department to complete in a timely fashion a dissertation that requires expertise in more than one religious (and therefore linguistic) system of this period. Given these constraints, as well as simply the established structures and economic interests of universities today, graduate students almost inevitably specialize in Buddhism, on the one hand, or Confucian or nativist thought, on the other. The graduate study of Japanese religions at American research institutions in particular is dominated (with one or two important exceptions) by Buddhist studies faculty, while dissertations in Tokugawa intellectual history (Confucian or nativist) are usually supervised by area studies and history scholars. The study of religious phenomena that are not clearly identified with these formal systems of thought does not really have the status of a field; the seemingly amorphous new religions or episodic movements of the Edo period are most often studied as background for social scientific analyses of contemporary Japanese religions. A student who wishes to gain the skills necessary to examine non-mainstream phenomena or themes across religious systems in the Tokugawa context must therefore battle against these ideological/institutional divisions—not only in graduate school, but also in the job market. Senior scholars are no doubt in a better position to cross boundaries, experiment, and train themselves in unfamiliar areas.

The accompanying bibliography documents that the representation of Tokugawa religious phenomena in European-language scholarship advanced immensely during the last two decades of the twentieth century. For most of this period, intellectual history dominated the subfields of nativist, Confucian, and Buddhist studies—and its practitioners, regardless of their theoretical framework, focused on the products of educated thinkers. In the meantime, however, boundaries have become more permeable in the increasingly interdisciplinary climate of today’s academy. Students of early modern religion, especially those who study Buddhist-related phenomena, have begun to emphasize the social and economic significance of their materials, and many individual scholars across the subfields are now more appreciative of the ways in which diverse religious elements functioned interactively in specific Tokugawa contexts.

Nevertheless, taken as a whole, scholars of Buddhism, on the one hand, and historians of Confucian or nativist culture, on the other, are in need of more interaction. To my mind, these academic groupings are more hard-edged than the interpretive communities hypothesized by Yamashita, which after all evolved from each other (allegedly). The modernization, tradition, new intellectual, and postmodern scholars whom Yamashita discusses at least tried to read each other’s works, even when they disagreed intensely. It is true that Fish’s notion of the interpretive community originally referred to groups or institutions that put forth a particular interpretation of a text, as opposed to a different interpretation of the same text by another community. It may be argued that Confucian, nativist, and Buddhist studies scholars (in both Japan and the West) are in fact reading different “texts,” in which case Fish’s term is inapplicable to their “communities.” I am suggesting, however, that we reevaluate our concept of what constitutes a “Confucian text,” a “Buddhist text,” or a “nativist text”—and by extension, a Confucian, a Buddhist, or a nativist. Most educated persons in the Edo period were well-read in a number of canons and drew from them, even if reactively or inadvertently; the less-educated for their part were routinely exposed to multireligious vernacular and oral texts. The entire range of intellectual and religious discourse of the period in question, regardless of the group with which each segment of it is conventionally associated, constitutes the larger text over which our interpretive communities should dispute.


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As Bashō lay on his sickbed in the spring of 1687, he heard the sound of a booming bell, and wondered, ‘Is it Ueno? Is it Asakusa? (Zoku-minashiguri)” He was not just hesitating between two temples, but between two entire socio-political constructions of Buddhism. The Ueno Kan’ei-ji had been built to match the Hieizan Enryaku-ji, and to make this clear it was located in a similar north-easterly direction, and bore the name of the era (nengō) of its foundation – as was rare in temple nomenclature. The Kan’ei-ji was home to a wealth of politically and institutionally important edifices, not least the Tōshō-gū, and [the] mausolea of about half the subsequent shoguns. Ueno was full of pomp and magnificence, if not exactly always fun. Its twin was the Shiba Zōjō-ji, which housed the other mausolea and a second Tōshō-gū.

The Asakusa Sensō-ji was, to use a vernacular appropriate to the flavor of the place, a different kettle of fish. The temple did have something to do with fish in fact, since it began as a place of veneration in 628, when two fishermen hauled up a Kannon statue and enshrined it there. The Sensō-ji thus long antedated the Kan’ei-ji whose era-name badge locked it clearly into the modern world of the Tokugawa regime (Kan’ei is 1624-44). The Sensō-ji’s history, by contrast, was lost in legend and myth. The Tokugawa had patronised it directly for a time, and Ieyasu thought its holy image had assisted his victory at Sekigahara, but they soon shifted attention (in 1625) to the new sacred site then emerging in architectural glory.

Ueno and Asakusa, the Kan’ei-ji and the
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