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The Legacies of Imagination: Japan's Religious Challenges and Contributions¹

Jane Marie Law

*I*n the winter of 1978, I rented an apartment from a highly decorated retired World War II naval mechanic and his wife. The apartment, on Pine Street in Boulder, Colorado, was actually one side of a duplex. I rented one side. They occupied the other. Recently back from a two-year stay in Japan as a student in Kobe, I spent my days in Boulder as an undergraduate at the University of Colorado studying Japanese language and history, and Religious Studies with a focus on Japan. I took tea ceremony lessons and was active in a local Zen group. My landlord, Rusty, spent his days reliving his life aboard U.S. battleships in the Pacific, talking to his friends on his ham radio about the war, watching old war movies, and reading about various battles in which he had actually taken part. He was active in the local VFW. I never found out what Rusty did during the war other than fix and maintain ships and it never really occurred to me to ask for details, though he claimed at one time to have watched the Battleship Yamato sink beneath the waves, the veritable end of Japan's Imperial Pacific fleet. Occasionally, Rusty would emerge from his half of the house in full military uniform, get into his small and immaculately maintained station wagon, and drive to a meeting at the VFW. Usually, he brought home leftovers from these meetings, and some of them always found their way to me via his wife Lou. He taught me to grow and sucker tomato plants in a garden plot we worked together (a useful skill that still forces me to recall him each summer) and do simple maintenance on my car. I kept up my part of the bargain by being a model tenant—clean, studious, quiet, and on time with the rent. We got along just fine with what today appears to have been an unconscious pact of “don't

ask, don't tell" about what we were each doing with our lives. One day, about a year after I moved into the apartment, all of this changed. A friend of mine from Japan had phoned me suddenly from the Los Angeles airport. She and her older brother were passing through Denver and wanted to come and visit Boulder for an evening. Could they stay with me? I was delighted to hear from them, and invited them to Boulder. I mentioned to Rusty that I had an overnight guest and her brother coming, and asked if I could borrow the rollaway bed they had in the basement. Delighted to be of help, Rusty and his wife helped me set the bed up in my living room, and even brought me in a set of sheets.

My friend and her brother arrived late that evening. We stayed up talking, and the next morning, the three of us went outside on the porch to drink our tea together, where we met Rusty and his wife, reading the morning paper. I introduced my guests from Japan. Rusty and his wife, refusing to acknowledge the introductions, walked into the house without a word. A few hours later, my guests left, and I went to school. That evening, there was a knock at my door. Rusty stood on the porch, a paper in hand. It was my eviction notice. I had until the end of the month to find another place to live. They needed the extra space. Since I was on a month to month arrangement, they were giving me fair warning. Time to move on. Not on the paper were the real reasons I was being evicted, explained to me in a finger to the chest shout by Rusty. "Japs in my house! You bring Japs into my house and let them sleep on MY rollaway bed and MY sheets! They have MY roof over their heads and sit on MY porch and drink their tea. Japs are monsters. They are not fit to set foot on my property, and anyone who invites them onto my property is not fit to stay here either!" He shook military medals in my face and shouted about his friends he had lost in the war. He yelled about the Bataan Death March and the Burma Railroad and kamikaze pilots. He was in a jangled state of tears and rage when he left my apartment. His wife came a few minutes later to collect the sheets and bed. Her only words to me as she wheeled her rollaway out the door were, "And I can never forget Pearl Harbor." I never saw either of them again.

It was an ugly and upsetting experience, and the memory of it still wakes me up in the night from time to time—such an angry and hate-filled voice coming from someone who had once taught me how to plant a garden and change the oil in my car. For years I had imaginary conversations back to the shaking, raging naval repairman. I told him

about the Japan I knew, what I considered the real one. Over the years, the image of Rusty in his uniform shaking and shouting in my apartment sort of faded, and he became more of a minor presence in my mind, against which I would pit myself as I taught my classes and advised my students. Occasionally, I still meet softer-spoken versions of Rusty among my students.

I won't go into detail here about the reasons my faint hearted attempts to fight this eviction failed, or why, a few days later, I gladly packed my bags and left. At the time, I was upset not by the larger implications of the deeply racial character of the Pacific War.² In 1978, as a twenty-year-old, I experienced Rusty's cultivated hatred of the Japanese as a direct attack on what I was just beginning to do with my life. Aside from being my first up-close experience of racism from someone I thought I knew, I was most upset to find my own experience of Japan so starkly contrasted. The Japan I had experienced in the late 1970s for two years in Kobe as an exchange student seemed like a nearly model society. People were extremely polite. Crime was unheard of, and I could walk home from the station by myself through a city late at night with no worries about my safety. Children were well cared for and I never saw signs of child neglect or abuse. Friends were loyal, houses and streets were very clean, and I was utterly fascinated by a view of "art as life" that pervaded everything in Japan, from the way pencils were wrapped at the stationers to the ice cream sundaes I often bought on my way home from classes at the university. Families were strong, community relationships were harmonious, people seemed to agree about what it meant to be Japanese, religious systems did not seem to be fighting for an exclusive claim on the truth — and the trains ran on time in and out of Sannomiya Station where I caught the local everyday to school in Okamoto. My own future as a scholar was being tied irrevocably to what I experienced as this beautiful Japan.

Rusty's "Japs" peopled his imagined Japan, a landscape created in part out of his experience in the war and his generation, in part out of the deeply racist polemic the Department of Defense used during the war to counter an equally racist agenda on the part of the Japanese Imperial forces. That soldiers imagine enemies of war as utterly evil is nothing new, however lamentable it is to encounter this feature of war and its legacy.

It was not until several years later (three more of them in Japan), that I came to admit to myself that I, too, like Rusty, was dealing with

my own imagined Japan. Much harder to take on board was the realization that many of the same features I had loved about Japan shared a common ancestry with the fascism that had led Japan into the Pacific War to try and create the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere. My imagined Japan, not one of brutal military excess, but one of ordered nature and cultivated aesthetics, was also a crafted image, maintained through a seamless ideology of the essential character of the Japanese people as uniquely aesthetic.

Over the last twenty years since that evening in Boulder, Colorado—a decade of it spent teaching Japanese religions at Cornell University—I have seen a changing set of imagined Japans come and go among my friends, colleagues, and students: Japan the macrobiotic; Japan the vanguard of the natural world; Japan the center for anti-nuclear activism; Japan the corporate samurai giant to be emulated and feared; Japan the technological maven to be copied and brought into collaboration; Japan the beautiful; Japan the ambiguous; Japan the animated *anime*; Japan the postmodern chic place to smoke French cigarettes, wear black, grow a mustache and get really serious about critical theory. My early imagined aesthetic Japan was relativized by all of these other competing visions of place, and my own claim on an actual part of the Japanese landscape was finally shattered irrevocably with the Kobe earthquake, when Sannomiya and the neighborhoods I had known collapsed in ruin and burned. In the absence of this seemingly solid “imagined” realm, I have come to appreciate the fragmented and diverse nature of life in the Country of Eight Islands, which has shifted so dramatically in the near distant past. I have learned to look for, and listen to, other voices in Japan besides the singular voice of “Japaneseness.” And these other voices give me cause for great optimism about the human ability to re-imagine meaning in healing ways.

In 1999, we hardly need to be told that culture is a created edifice, an imagined reality. But I have beaten home the obvious for a reason. Over the last year I have thought about this Roundtable and the questions being raised by it. I imagined myself looking out on an audience of people ranging in age from eighteen to eighty-eight. Because of the enormous changes in Japan in the twentieth century and, more importantly, the almost unimaginable shifts in the American relationship to Japan, it is critical to highlight the likely radical difference in understanding between someone born in 1922 and someone born in 1972. Whether we relive our war memories, study shrine life, watch anime and baseball, or smoke Galois and read Derrida and de Certeau in the

kissaten in Setagaya-ku, we are all actively imagining Japan. We inhabit different Japans. Our collective, generationally imagined Japans are both shaped by and participate in shaping various ways different groups of Japanese people are imagining their Japan, and their role in it.

Here, I shall discuss the challenges and contributions Japanese cases can make to a broader, comparative discussion of the possibilities of religious pluralism and the rise of hyper-nationalism around the world. I have opened with this memory of over two decades ago because this event from my own life seems to me now a grotesque coincidence in time of two polar opposite imagined realities. These two imaged realities—Japan the monstrous and Japan the sublime—represent perhaps the outer parameters of the various ways Japan has been imagined in the past sixty years by Americans and, to a certain extent, Western Europeans. Once we know our boundaries, we can move ahead. In a sense, much of the work of Japanese studies scholars is to try and dislocate our understandings of Japan from this narrow and lamentable set of choices.

I will limit myself to one dominant issue I feel has the greatest bearing on the larger themes of this Roundtable. I maintain that perhaps Japan's greatest contribution to this larger discussion of religious pluralism is to serve as a negative example of religious nationalism and the kind of legacy it affords. Furthermore, the various movements that have resulted from the utter defeat of this model of statecraft are indicative that Japan's resolution of this problem may serve as a great lesson to us in this context. I outline briefly the kinds of discourses which created a fusion of religious praxis with allegiance to the state, the unitary structure of this virtual Japan, and the moral and spiritual vacuum this "extraordinary discourse" created. I will also point out how difficult it has been for Japanese intellectuals and people in the role of "re-imagining Japan" to divest themselves from this legacy, and how the undercurrents of this past continue to try and reassert themselves into the present and future. Japanese religious life has provided the human community with many fine insights in a wide range of areas. In this discussion, however, framed as it is, we will focus on the uses of religious meanings in the rise of Japanese fascism, and ultimately how many people have valiantly struggled to imagine themselves out from underneath this weighty history. We know something of Japan's past as a hyper-nationalist state. But, to quote Yoda from *Star Wars*, "The future is in motion."

I. The Japanese Religious Landscape in a Nutshell

One question that scholars of religion working on Japan must work out concerns the meaning of tradition and religious ethos, words often used in the history of religions and anthropology to delineate certain distinct currents of practice and doctrine from others. Can Japan lay claim to a unified religious ethos or are there, in fact, many different religious traditions offering options for practice and belief? Can we talk about Japanese religion in the singular, or is it always necessary to talk about religion in the plural? How one answers this question is telling of one's comfort level with the fragmentary nature of contemporary Japan. Is it possible that the answer to both of these questions could be considered yes? I find it useful to hedge my bets on this one because, in some cases, the most interesting feature to study is a constructed unity such as the virtual Japan of "Nihonjinron" discourse. In other cases, it is the distinct voice of a given religious source speaking out of history that commands our attention.

The Japanese religious landscape has currents coming from a number of sources and, for the purposes of this discussion, we can list six. First, there is the pre-Buddhist world of meaning, which throughout Japanese history gets codified, transformed, invented and reinvented, and is often easily labeled simply Shintô, though the use of this term to name an entire tradition as a distinct phenomenon is a very recent, nineteenth-century phenomenon. This composite, fluid source provides a grand narrative for Japanese identity in the form of the *Kojiki* and *Nihongi* narratives;³ an elaborate human physiology-based system of purity and pollution which has wide ranging influence on Japanese culture throughout its history;⁴ a tendency to view the natural world as inherently sacred, providing a fertile ground for theories of symbolism, aesthetics, poetry, nature, and views of the material world; a lexicon of deities, intricate stories about their characters, and elaborate systems for understanding their changing aspects in relationship to the human realm, as well as instructions for how they are to be worshipped; and the fundamental architecture of a national body politic, complete with a mythology of an unbroken imperial line and a crafted image of the emperor as the father of the nation. While the pre-Buddhist world of meaning and the Shintô tradition of the twentieth century are vastly different religious systems, separated in time by over 1,500 years, the contemporary tradition claims an unbroken continuity with this ancient, "pure" Japanese faith.⁵

Second, we have the highly organized philosophical and ritual systems of Mahâyâna Buddhism, which is brought to Japan from China via Korea from the fifth century onward in several waves,⁶ and over the next several centuries brings to Japan five powerful apparati of a civilization religion: written texts; a highly organized religious hierarchy; elaborate systems of symbolism, iconography, and art (including visual and plastic arts); technologies for constructing enduring and imposing examples of monumental architecture (not to mention the religious motivation to bring them about); and last, a universal ideal of Mahâyâna Buddhism, that all sentient beings are able to achieve salvation and it is the duty of Buddhists to actively pursue their own and others' salvation through the ideal of the bodhisattva. Buddhism was established as a main feature of the elite religious landscape in rather arid and academic discussions during the Nara period in the eighth century (710–794 CE). Over time, through the work of careful (or simply ambitious) religious thinkers such as Saichô (767–822) and Kûkai (774–835) in the Heian period and later Hônén (1133–1212), Nichiren (1222–1282), Shinran (1173–1263), Dôgen (1200–1253) and others in the Kamakura period, Buddhism in Japan developed into the major schools we can identify today. Dominant among these schools are Tendai, Shingon, Pure Land, True Pure Land, Nichiren, and Zen Buddhism, and all the variations each of these dominant strands has spawned. While all of these schools (with the exception of Nichiren Buddhism) have strong correlating schools in Chinese history and elsewhere in the Mahâyâna world, each of these schools develops and is successful precisely because it adapts itself to issues particular to the Japanese religious climate. In particular, formulators of these schools were forced to adapt to the very strong demands that religion must in some way promote the unity of the body politic, if not subtly through ritual support and prayers for the imperial family and the safety of the country, then overtly, through direct calls for ardent support of the “divine country” (*shinkoku*). Because of the great success of different schools of Buddhism in Japan, it is possible to look to the contributions of various Japanese thinkers in different schools as fully mature thought in the Mahâyâna tradition. Ideas of compassion, non-violence, and altruism are as abundant in these writings as elsewhere in the Buddhist world.

Third, we have the religious, ethical, and ideological source of Confucianism, which originally enters Japan at an elite level near the end of the fourth century of the Common Era. About Confucianism, the

Japanese intellectual historian Maruyama Masao writes, "Confucian ethics made the subordination of the son to the father the basis of its moral code and compared the specific human relationships between lord and subject, husband and wife, elder brother and younger brother, to that of father and son. After linking them together into relationships of high and low, noble and base, it taught the necessity of maintaining these distinctions rigidly."⁷ This system, in a modified form (as Neo-Confucianism) following similar attempts at synthesis by the military feudal dictatorship of the Tokugawa shogunate, is crafted by later nativist scholars into a wide reaching ideology of identity and an emerging concept of a national character (*kokuminsei*).⁸

Fourth, we have the cosmological claims of Philosophical Taoism (called in Japanese, *Dōkyō*), with its elaborate systems for understanding the human body, the heavens, calendrical systems, and the nature of change and constancy in the universe. Philosophical Taoism, perhaps, has had its greatest influence on Japanese religious life through its categories of divination and its views of sickness and wellness.

Fifth, we have two interrelated sources of religious meaning, religious Taoism (referred to as *Onmyōdō*, the way of yin and yang, as distinct from *Dōkyō*, the teachings of the way) and shamanism, both heavily influenced by many Korean sources. From *Onmyōdō* and shamanism, spread and assimilated into these larger traditions in great part through the interesting figure of the deity-bodhisattva Hachiman, we can trace the performative nature of Japanese ritual, exorcism and rites of spirit appeasement, magical understandings of epidemic illness and its causes and means of aversion, and many popular practices that on the surface would appear to be the product of a total syncretism at work.

Last, and late enough in the game of working out the dynamics of syncretism, we have Christianity, arriving in Japan at the start of the seventeenth century, which, along with Buddhism, joins the list of options with a vision of a universal soteriological ideal.

I have not mentioned folk religion as a separate category for a source of religious meaning because, to my mind, folk religion in Japan is not a distinct source of tradition, but rather a product of that very syncretism evident at all levels of class in society.

The interrelationship of these six sources in Japanese religious history has been described by many scholars as an example of a highly accommodating syncretism, where no given religious voice is dominant and each source lays claim to a particular corner of religious life,

with all sources blending to create a more unified whole. Determining how syncretism works is a difficult job and I will not address it here. However, to claim a simple unity of all faiths in Japan (and to hold that up as a simple Japanese lesson on pluralism) papers over many interesting and, in some cases, alarming cracks and fissures that run between traditions. Further, it fails to take into account how each of these currents of religious practice and thought often develops in dramatic contrast to other currents and precisely because of their conflicting claims on issues such as symbolism, transcendence, redemption, worldly action and, as we shall see, ways of linking the individual person to a larger collective community. It can be argued, for example, that what we call Shintô and Buddhism sparred their way through Japanese history, allowing each to formulate new dimensions that otherwise may not have come to the fore in another setting. Japanese nationalism can at one level be understood as a logical chapter in a virulent competition between Buddhism and "Shintô" to lay claim to being the state religion.

It is important to underscore this syncretic nature of Japanese religious life, a feature which makes it almost meaningless, and quite difficult, to speak of Japanese religious traditions as distinct centers of meaning and value. Syncretism, then, is the first dynamic I will point out.

Second, I would like to point out the ritual based, often surprisingly pragmatic, orthopraxic nature of Japanese religious life. The scholar Wilfred Cantwell Smith argued for a distinction between what he called orthodoxic religious systems of behavior and orthopraxis systems. The former are those in which belief in or allegiance to a given doctrine is the dominant mode of participation. For example, regardless of what you *do*, you cannot be a Christian without acceptance of a certain set of dogmas concerning the status of Jesus Christ as the son of God, his burden as the sacrificial lamb for all sin for now and all time, and his crucifixion and resurrection. Smith's category of orthopraxic, on the other hand, points to another option for engaged and committed religious involvement, namely, ritual. Ritual, action, doing, even "going through the motions" (as ritual systems are often maligned), is understood to be its own mode of cognition and experience. Rather than ritual being secondary to dogma and belief as a mere acting out of a prior set of religious tenets, ritual becomes the primary mode of both experience and expression.

The story, perhaps apocryphal (though I think I have met him a few times), is told of a famous Western post-war scholar of Japan, eager to write the definitive study of post-war religious life in Japan. After careful study, he concluded (with some relief, given where certain features of religious life had gotten the Japanese in the war years) that the Japanese were not religious. It was later revealed that he had determined this by using a limited and inappropriate yardstick for religious life — belief. Asking Japanese people “What do you believe? Do you believe in God?” received mumbled, evasive answers, which he interpreted as confirmations that Japanese people, then, had no religious life. Had he asked more about action, ritual, and routine, he would have gotten a wealth of data, which would have required a different set of methodological lenses to interpret. It is important here that we underscore this pronounced *action* dimension of Japanese religiosity. Writ large, Japanese religious life is decidedly orthopraxic. If we are to discuss the challenges and contributions of religious traditions to any sort of a global humanism in the next millennium, we must be sure our discussion allows for the participation of religious systems where belief in a carefully proscribed set of doctrines is not the only measurement of participation and commitment. With a few exceptions (namely, the Christians and the Pure Land Buddhists), it tends to rule out of discussion much of Japanese religious life. Pragmatism and orthopraxy, then, are the second dynamics of Japanese religious life I wish to underscore at the outset.

The third and final preliminary dynamic concerns the tendency in Japanese religious life to repeatedly return to emphasizing a limited social group, be it the clan (*uji*), the extended family (*ie*), the village or community, the school, corporation, or the nation. In his audaciously titled but useful book of 1964, *Ways of Thinking of Eastern Peoples*, the Japanese Sanskritist and Buddhist Studies scholar Hajime Nakamura identified “the tendency to emphasize a limited social nexus” as a dominant cultural pattern in Japanese society. It is beyond the scope of this discussion to trace many of the ways such a view of the person was crafted and to what political and ideological ends. But I must point out that, often, ritual life both grows out of and reinforces the social group as the locus of meaning and even sacrality. This tendency in Japanese cultural behavior is, as we have seen in the twentieth century, both its greatest blessing and its gravest danger.

These three dynamics, syncretism among at least six sources of religious meaning, orthopraxy, and the tendency to emphasize a limited

social nexus are to be borne in mind as I now discuss of the challenges facing Japan as we move into the next millennium.⁹

II. "The Style in Which They are Imagined:" The Japanese Nation in the Near Distant Past

Nation, like religion, is a word that everyone seems to understand but no one can quite define. One of the most useful definitions to come out of scholarship on nationalism is offered by Benedict Anderson. He writes:

I propose the following definition of the nation: it is an imagined political community — and imagined both as inherently limited and sovereign. It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their community. . . . Communities are to be distinguished not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined.¹⁰

When we engage in the optimistic activity embodied in a Roundtable of this nature, our deepest hope is that somehow, by looking at the various options of imagination available to the human community, we can find answers to some of the troubles that beset us, what has been described by this Roundtable's framers as "the antithesis [of fellowship] . . . mutual repugnance and demonization" and all the horrors of violation in the human community that we have witnessed such attitudes to make possible. While universal fellowship through religious pluralism may be a desirable outcome of the "global moment" or, conversely, our only hope of surviving such a moment without destroying one another, it appears that what globalization is doing is fostering a crisis of identity, sending us running to our various identity constructions to find a sense of belonging in the world.

What can Japanese cases contribute to this discussion? Here, I would like to discuss a particular "legacy of imagination," as I will refer to a host of interrelated ideologies and discourses in recent Japanese history that have all in some way supported a nationalist agenda. Japanese history leaves many legacies to the human community, but one in particular has a bearing on this discussion, namely, the intricate process which created a fusion of a religious system (a highly constructed one at that) with a vision of the nation-state. It was a highly

successful imagined community and, for all its atrocities, it has proven harder to dismantle than anyone ever suspected. In short, Japan's contribution can be a stern warning that unitary meaning structures undergirded by religion as solutions for solving the crises of fragmentation and identity displacement in the global context are *bad* solutions, however tempting they may be or however neatly they can reframe a messy world. While our Japanese cases don't yet get us where we need to be, they let us know what roads we would do best *NOT* to walk down.

As I begin my discussion of Japanese religious nationalism, I would like to interject one caveat: While Japan is an example here, and a negative one at that, it is by no means the only example. I could cite many other examples from around the world. Recent exhortations from the halls of Congress in the impeachment hearing of President William Jefferson Clinton about "Christian America" should give us cause to reflect, should we be tempted to any self-righteousness about the separation of religion and state here in the United States.¹¹ Japan's negative example is good medicine for Indonesia and Serbia. It is also good medicine right here in River City.

A. Selfless, Obedient *Others*

When the Yellow Peril was being (re-)inscribed in American consciousness throughout the 1930s and early 40s, the haunting image was of a large population of (racially *Other*, somewhat simian) non-individuals, subjugated under a single authority structure and hell bent on world domination. While the amorphous dimension of this imagined *Other* was in part the result of an inability to see the "Orient" beyond one's constructions of it, the mythic peril found a concrete object when the Japanese military advanced across Asia in the 1930s. Early depictions of Japanese soldiers talked of their superhuman strength on the battlefield, due in large measure to their utter obedience.¹² American and Allied Western Europeans heard only of the "utter obedience" of the Japanese soldier, best exemplified in the image of the kamikaze pilot. What could be a greater subjugation of the self than a suicide mission? The kamikaze pilot became, then, a symbol of all that Japan represented in the American mind.

Kamikaze pilots were real. What we can only imagine is the internal decisions and psychological lives of these people. They did not speak for themselves, for their role was created for them, and they were

imagined (on both sides of the Pacific) as people at peace with death. Real, also, were the many dissidents who resisted the war effort in Japan, and who were quickly suppressed and often executed through a reign of terror. We heard little of them until recently, and what was presented to an outside world was an image of a fully unified Japanese identity, a nation of people who viewed their emperor as divine, and were absolutely committed to protecting what they considered a divine nation. We were told, and continue to be told, that this understanding of Japan is as old as Japan itself. In fact, the ardent religious nationalism of the Japanese fascist government came about as a result of an intricate response to precisely what we are discussing here today — modernity, and the need for a national identity among nations in the world. Of all the different ways identities can be imagined, what process allowed this one to become hegemonic in Japan? Several important ideas and intellectual currents in recent Japanese history help us understand this version of an imagined community: the idea of the divine country (*shinkoku*); the “way of the warrior” (*bushidō*); the scholars of *kokugaku* (a term which has been translated as “national learning,” or simply “nativism”); the Meiji idea of “restoration” of the emperor following the tremendous changes in Japan after the fall of the feudal state in 1868 and the inherent ideas of religion and the state in that constitution; and the theories of Japanese racial and moral supremacy derived from these earlier currents of proto-nationalist discourse. Finally, I hint at the post-war continuations of this discourse in what has generally come to be called *Nihonjinron* or “discourses on Japaneseness.”

B. Home to the Gods: Shinkoku as an Idea

A two character compound, often used to refer to the collectivity of the Japanese islands under the emperor, used from the thirteenth century onward, was *shinkoku*, written with the characters *kami* (sacred, deity, divine) and *kuni* (country).¹³ This term referred to the special relationship of the Land of the Eight Islands, as the Japanese archipelago was called in the ancient narratives of the *Kōjiki* and *Nihonshoki*, and to the *kami* (divine beings) mentioned in this narrative. What connected the people to this narrative was the claim that the imperial line was a direct descendent of the Sun Goddess, child of one of the primal deities, Izanagi no Mikoto, who created her when he washed his eye after a trip to the polluted land of death. The term is used intermit-

tently in texts referring to the imperial family throughout Japanese history, and often the lines “because we live in a sacred country” opened documents carried by ritual specialists who performed sacred rites of purification. In the early uses of the term, these characters tied the idea of the Japanese people to a mythology, and the designation of the Country of the Eight Islands as a divine sphere did not extend to a comparative trope *vis-à-vis* other (imagined or real) countries. This new dimension of the idea of *shinkoku* came much later in the nineteenth century, as we shall see, and the basic idea was put to work in a larger project of national identity.

C. New Models of Synthesis and Unity: Tokugawa Feudalism

When Japan emerged from a period of intense civil war following the victory of Tokugawa Iyeyasu at the Battle of Sekigahara in 1600, foremost on the agenda for the new shogunate government (to be officially established three years later) was unifying the various feudal factions in Japan and establishing a long lasting political and social stability. To accomplish this, the Tokugawa government made extended use of Chinese Confucian categories and divided the society into four classes (with outcastes considered non-human below the four-tiered society, and the imperial family above it). These four were the warriors (*shi*), farmers (*nô*), artisans (*kô*), and merchants (*shô*). Furthermore, the country was divided into five man units (*goningumi*), which allowed for tight control and censorship over all elements of daily life at all levels of society. Warriors had the role of ensuring the order of society, and many served the role of what we would consider simple civil servants, in military attire. This division of society departed radically from the Chinese model in that Chinese society had made the educated Confucian gentleman (*chun tzu*) the purveyor of societal values. This new synthesis placed the warrior in that role.

On the surface, the Tokugawa synthesis was successful, for Japan had a degree of *political* stability for nearly 268 years. This was accomplished, however, through a radical closed country policy (*saikoku seisaku*) which forbade foreign trade and travel (with minor exceptions), held together by a military dictatorship that used terror, frequent informing to the authorities by all members of the society against one another,¹⁴ and taxation as a means of enforcement. (I always found it chilling that it was *this image* of Japan which American popular culture fell in love with during the Reagan era.) Here, we will

look at one ideological creation of the Tokugawa synthesis, the concept of *bushidô*, the way of the warrior. In this idea, we can see early structures of an ideology of Japanese uniqueness and identity fused with militarism. It is an early idea of a Japan very self-conscious of a relative place in the world *vis-à-vis* other countries.

What exactly was the ideological claim of the bushidô ideal? First, the claim was that the samurai (warrior) was charged with nothing less than maintaining public morality. For example, listen to how the third prince of Mito, Tokugawa Mitsukuni (1628–1700) addressed his retainers:

What then is the use of the samurai class? Its only business is to preserve, or maintain *giri* (social obligation, i.e., order). The people of the other classes deal with visible things, while the samurai class deal with invisible, colorless and unsubstantial things... if there were no samurai, *giri* would disappear from human society, the sense of shame would be lost and wrong and injustice would prevail.¹⁵

The bushidô ethic can be summarized, in short, as a view of life in which loyalty to one's lord and master is an unquestioned and all-encompassing duty in life. Furthermore, one is to be ready at all times to die, and should reflect at all times on death. In this regard, samurai were often attracted to Zen Buddhism, which provided a stark aesthetic and a metaphysical grounding for reflection on death as the removal of desire and attachment. The notion of loyalty, a strong Confucian virtue, is carried to its most radical extreme in that the greatest honor was to follow one's lord to death. Robert Bellah has pointed out that this ethic, imagined by and upon the ruling elite of society, provided political rationalization and the creation of a seamless ideology for those entrusted with its preservation.

The Tokugawa period was riddled with social unrest and uprisings (*ikki*), usually violently suppressed through direct military action. It was clear that for all the Tokugawa shogunate had accomplished in unifying Japan politically, at the level of an imagined community shared by all members of society, the system did not work. Most scholars of Tokugawa history point out that the failure of this imposed system of unity lay in the fact that it was merely a new composite of separate feudal domains and did not provide a new model, only a larger one. Maruyama writes, "The social structure of Tokugawa feudalism itself, then, functioned as the decisive obstacle to the formation

of a unified nation, and the corresponding sense of a national unity."¹⁶ Bushidô, for all its glamour among samurai and their lords, did not extend across the spectra of society as an engaging vision of rationalized ethics. Though intended to serve as such, bushidô failed as a unifying identity principle for delineating "Japaneseness."

Before turning to the next attempt at an ideology of unity, it is worth pointing out that, while bushidô was never successful in unifying the entire Japanese population, the ideal did not go away. It became a permanent part of the language of identity in Japan and was easily pressed back into service in the 1930s, and again — shockingly, given its history — in the 1970s and early 1980s, when Americans and others had a love affair with the ethical world of loyalty unto death of the "Japanese corporate samurai."

III. Grassroots Nativism: The Kokugaku Scholars Invent Japaneseness

The next major movement we will briefly visit arose in large part in response to the failure of the Tokugawa military elite to posit a shared unitary structure of reality. It would be futile to try and outline the enormous intellectual movement in Japan known as *kokugaku* (literally, "national learning" or "nativism"), especially since it has been done so successfully by Harootunian in his work *Things Seen and Unseen*.¹⁷ For the purposes of this discussion, I will mention a few key strategies in the kokugaku ideology, with an eye to how this discourse laid the groundwork for a new synthesis of religious life, identity, and the state in a compelling way unprecedented in Japan.

Kokugaku was a predominantly elite intellectual movement, which had as its overriding goal an elucidation of a Japanese national polity (*kokutai*, literally, "body of the country"). In this movement, we see the strong beginnings of Japanese nationalism as we would recognize such an enterprise today, sketched out against an imagined China, but made urgent by a growing awareness that a larger world would soon demand Japan open its doors. As a movement, kokugaku scholars were concerned with "discovering" and excavating an essential, pure Japanese spiritual essence and mentality. Convinced that the woes of Japan's wobbling national stability were due to the encrustations of nearly a millennium and a half of imported, foreign, Chinese ideas and sensibilities, the kokugaku scholars thought that through a careful philological analysis of the early narratives and poetry of Japan (most

importantly *Kojiki*), it would be possible to release *at the level of language* a pure, pre-Chinese Japanese language and sensibility, which would, in turn, manifest a pure Japanese spirit (*yamato tamashii*).

Because a disproportionate amount of kokugaku scholarship was centered on written texts central to Shintô, the kokugaku movement posited Shintô as the pure faith of the Japanese people and the imperial line as the natural order of the nation. Furthermore, kokugaku scholars, particularly Hirata Atsutane, developed a theory of religiosity that appropriated the everyday religious life of the peasantry, based in agricultural work and agrarian festivals, as the “authentic” Japanese mentality. The “elegant symmetry” was this: to be spiritual was the natural mentality of the Japanese and the natural spirituality was based on agrarian labor. Through the production of rice (incidentally, the backing of currency in the Tokugawa period), farmers connected themselves to the larger creative unifying force of *musubi no kami* (the divine force that unifies creation). By growing rice, one was, in essence, unifying the nation. Labor was a spiritual act.

The view of the world presented in the *Kojiki* and *Nihongi*, as well as the ancient collection of poetry known as the *Manyô'shu* (as interpreted by kokugaku scholars) was posited as a unique mentality of the Japanese people, a mentality that was ontologically (and later racially) different from that of the Chinese. A further extension of kokugaku was to extend the body politic of the neo-Confucian emphasis on the family as the root metaphor for the family to include religious worship. One's living body was a vessel for expressing the divine will of *musubi no kami*, and this was best expressed through reverence for one's parents.¹⁸

The imperial family was regarded as the parent of the nation. Worship in one's home and reverence for one's parents, as well as daily labors in the fields or the business, were expressions of one's connectedness into a grand unifying world of sacrality. The rites of this life were those of peasant worship at the local tutelary shrines, a domain of religious expression which was under the loose control of Shintô (rather than the foreign-imported Buddhist) centers. Furthermore, these rites were not regarded as “religion” but rather were seen as the natural actions of the fully natural person.

The dominant ideological strategy of kokugaku scholars was the ability to adopt and implement what Harootunian calls an imaginative “metonymic strategy.” By this term, he means that “nativism, together with other contemporary discourses, was able to create an apprehen-

sion of a world in which one thing—the part—was reduced to another or substituted for the whole.”¹⁹ Labor in the fields—which, incidentally, because of taxation kept most at the brink of starvation—equaled “being Japanese.”

For the purposes of our discussion, we can isolate a single intellectual movement in kokugaku that unifies religion and the new national polity while at the same time removing it from the realm of critical inquiry: religious ideas and rites which were Shintô in nature were no longer considered religion but were, rather simply, natural behavior. To be a true Japanese was to be a part of an invisible, interconnected world, held together by *musubi no kami*. To worship in a “Shintô” way was to express one’s identity and belonging. A religious system of transcendent meaning had been appropriated to accomplish what other systems had up to this point failed to do: provide a rationalization for the national unity that extended throughout all levels of society, even if supported on the bent backs of rice farmers.

There is a grand irony in the kokugaku appropriation of Shintô worship and texts as a natural “faith” for Japan. It is precisely at the moment that Shintô is presented as a natural system of being in the world and one that is *not* a religion that it actually gets its fullest expression as a distinct religious tradition in its own right. It went like this: Shintô, the way of the *kami*, was also the way of Japanese people. But it was not a religion. Now let’s see how this dislocation of the religious from the sphere of religion gets worked out in the next major formulation of the body politic in Japan, the Meiji Constitution.

A. Religion as Public Affair: The Meiji Constitution

The final breakup of the Tokugawa regime (which took over a quarter of a century) in 1868 was due at a deep level to the inability of the regime to adapt to the new demands for an express view of the nation. Of paramount importance in Japan was to imagine itself anew as a country in the larger world. The new Meiji synthesis was to restore the imperial family as the center of the body politic, and so the rites of imperial worship became the rites of the state.

Emperor Meiji commissioned a group of scholars to draft a new constitution for the country, and several Japanese studied in Europe to understand how such a constitution could be drafted.²⁰ Naming a religion as the *state religion* was suggested by a number of German consultants to the project. Various drafts from Emperor Meiji’s different

confidants indicate that the relationship between Shintô and the state, and the concern with religious freedom, were also of paramount concern. One draft by the emperor's Confucian tutor was telling, and reveals a continuity with the claims of the kokugaku movement. It read: "Worship at indigenous Shintô shrines is the symbolic expression of acknowledging civic obligations and human virtues, and shall not be understood as a matter of religious belief."²¹ While not enacted, the claim that Shintô was to be afforded a special status in the question of religious freedom was obliquely protected in the final constitution. The drafter of that final constitution was Itô Hirobumi who studied with constitutional scholar von Geist. Itô's assistant was, in turn, assisted by another German scholar, Herman Roesler. Roesler had the following advice to give which, along with the claim that Shintô was not a religion, was adopted into the final constitution. He wrote:

By the Japanese constitution, the public exercise of religion is not freely permitted, but remains entirely under the existing laws and ordinances; and further settlement of these grave matters belongs to the future policy of the government. Religion is not altogether a private affair, nor can all the different religious denominations enjoy the same equality of rights. A state religion may be established upon the basis of a national faith, and privileges may be accorded to such religion or to others related therewith.²²

I noted earlier that a distinctive feature of Japanese religious life was its orthopraxic nature. Ritual, by its very definition, is largely public. To have drawn a distinction between public and private religious life was to have imported a new idea of religiosity into the legal discussion, one that did not suit Japan. Hence, by retaining control over the public exercise of religion, the final version of the Meiji constitution afforded religious freedom in the letter, but in practice it controlled the cultic life of the nation through Shintô rites which, as we have seen, continued to be presented as a natural mode of being in the world and not a religious system. Hardacre sums up the gains and losses of the Meiji Constitution as follows:

The idea of establishing a state religion was rejected. A limited provision for religious freedom was enacted. This both guaranteed subjects' right to private exercise of their faith and gave the state the authority to limit that right by appeal to civic duty and law. A crucial distinction between private and public exercise of religious faith was introduced, and the sta-

tus of Shintô remained ambiguous, with a growing tendency to separate it from the sphere of religion and to align it instead with custom and patriotism.²³

It can be argued that this calculated step on the part of leaders in the Meiji government to set Shintô apart had the unintended result of making it publicly highly visible, but no longer religiously relevant. What would once have been the ground for religious cultivation was now in the service of nationalism. If one is to look for a clue as to the perceived vacuum of meaning in contemporary Shintô today, a good place to begin one's investigation is in this "triumph" of the Meiji Constitution.

IV. The Legacy of Imagination

It is not necessary to rehearse the tragic consequences of Japanese nationalism in the twentieth century, nor to point out the excesses of violence that accompanied the full expression of this "manifest destiny" of the Japanese imperial army to extend across Asia under the guise of creating a unified Asia under Japanese rule in the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity sphere. That the need for a coherent national polity extracts such a high price is a riddle we can agree upon across the planet. I will also leave aside a discussion of some of the racist implications of the Allied war trials, but mention it lest we fall prey to the facile sense that the Allied victory in the Pacific revealed all the guilty in the trial of atrocity and nationalism in the Pacific War.

It would be easy to say that Japan's defeat in August of 1945 was also a defeat for a religio-political racist ideology of Japanese uniqueness. The post-war Constitution, in two articles (numbers 20 and 89), provided for a distinct separation of church and state, and very clearly indicated that Shintô is a religion, and Shintô shrines are religious places, unentitled to government support. But this ideology transmogrified into something else, in large part with help from the occupying forces who wanted a recognizable *Other*.

Two final challenges face Japan if it is to emerge from under the specter of what one scholar called "the dark valley" of Japanese history. How these challenges are faced and resolved will tell us a great deal about how Japan is to imagine itself and be imagined in the near future.

The first of these challenges is to dismantle the dominant national discourse of “Japaneseness” (Nihonjinron) as a national obsession. Books and articles, magazines and television programs about what it means to be Japanese are as *en vogue* today (though have perhaps declined a bit in the last five years) as they were in the 1950s, and with a much wider readership. The discourses on Japaneseness continue to set up a unique and often eugenically argued view of the Japanese national character, the Japanese spirit, and Japanese values, which in the modern day are most often aestheticized, though just as often appeal to a tamed bushidô ethic. These images of Japan are neat and tidy and easily exported to foreigners, eager to have an *Other* that is laid out so clearly. The “Japan the beautiful” that I consumed with gusto while I studied in Kobe in the 1970s and continued to imbibe while a student in Colorado was a commodity of this remarkable discourse tradition. Under the guise of helping Japanese people feel connected to a sense of themselves and giving Japan a proud place in the world, Nihonjinron discourse continues to feed the very structures of society that give rise to rampant nationalism in the first place. They shortchange the real beauty of Japan, a beauty that is rooted in incredible diversity.

Does something need to take the place of Nihonjinron? Yes, and it is already there. The vibrant intellectual movements of scholars and writers, such as Oe Kenzaburo, attest to the fact that Japanese have other ways of imagining themselves in the world outside of nationalist ideologies. The title of Oe’s Nobel Prize acceptance speech, a direct refutation of the nativist flavor of the previous Japanese recipient of the same prize, Kawabata Yasunari, was “Japan the Ambiguous and Myself.” Kawabata had titled his “Japan the Beautiful and Myself” and his speech is a masterpiece of post-war Zen nativism. It sparkles with claims to a unique Japanese way of being in the world through aesthetics. Oe’s award speech, with references to foreign literature and a discussion of his handicapped son, was a triumph for those who would dismantle nativist discourse in favor of diversity and difference. Another passing example: In 1998, a samisen player from the Awaji puppet theater on Awaji was named a Living National Treasure. She earned it. But she also came from a performing arts tradition historically identified as presented by outcasts. People in the Awaji tradition have been overlooked for awards of this sort since such awards were inaugurated. These are signs that the nativist claim to speak for the “real” Japan is being eroded. Other examples from literature, the arts,

and both popular and traditional culture abound. But it remains to be seen what will happen.

The second major challenge concerns the overt reassertion of nationalism and militarism through a conscious effort by the Japanese right to rehabilitate the pre-war imagined unity of Japan and the imperial family. The major vehicle of this movement is the dangerous tool of historical revisionism. From denying that the Nanjing Massacre of 300,000 Chinese (many of them women and children and most civilians) ever happened, to attempting to change textbook descriptions of Japanese involvement in the Pacific War, historical revisionists in Japan are active and successful. Their successes only serve to undermine Japan's role in Asia as a leader, as each attempt to revise the past is met with outrage among formerly occupied or invaded Asian nations. Visits by Japanese heads of state to the Yasukuni shrine which apotheosizes the war dead (including many convicted war criminals) are all applauded by the Japanese right as vindication of Japan's image from the war era.

Historical revisionists and Nihonjinron producers would have the rest of Japanese society, and any of us willing to listen, believe they are merely finding a place for Japan in the post-modern age. As a professor of Japanese religions who teaches courses on Shintô, I am often sent invitations to assist in allowing Japan to regain its "national faith" which, in essence, means to cleanse Shintô institutions of any responsibility for the excesses of Japanese nationalism. Invariably, these pleas for my academic collusion include appeals to review the record on Japanese war crimes as an Allied fiction.

Like many of my Japanese friends (few of whom, incidentally, fit the descriptions of the "Japanese national character" of either Hirata Atsutane or the latter day nativists), I am an optimist. But my optimism is tempered by the awareness that we all participate in imagining national communities. Benedict Anderson was right when he said that nations distinguish themselves by how they are imagined. I am looking into the near distant future to see how new models for Japan address these challenges of the legacy of past imagination.

Notes

1. I am deeply indebted to the writings of Carol Gluck, Helen Hardacre, and H. D. Harootunian for the writing of this paper. These scholars have opened up the study of the relationship between Japanese nativism and religion in profound ways.
2. John Dower, in his powerful book *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War*, explores the racist nature of the Pacific War on both sides of the ocean. His book presents the complex ideological apparatus on both sides that would allow a racial hatred such as Rusty's to last well beyond the period of the war. Dower, however, opens with an optimistic observation, one that could have been written about my generation of people studying Japan. He writes: "War-crimes trials were conducted after Japan's surrender; reports of wartime atrocities preoccupied journalists and jurists for many months; and there was hardly a corner of Japanese society that was not subjected to critical scrutiny. The war hates themselves, however, seemed to have disappeared overnight — so quickly, in fact, that they are easily forgotten now." Students growing up in my generation were able to benefit from a more balanced view of Japan's long history, although by the 1970's a very powerful, centrist image of Japan was presented and uncritically consumed in the West. Japan was imagined again to be a unified sphere, unified now under a notion of aesthetics and "Zen" culture. I discuss these issues below.
3. Both of these narratives have been translated into English with accessible commentary. See Donald Philippi, trans. *Kojiki: Record of Ancient Matters* (Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 1968) and W.G. Aston, trans. *Nihongi, Chronicles of Japan from the Earliest Times to A.D. 697* (Rutland, VT: Tuttle, 1972).
4. For discussions in English of this ritual purity system, see Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney, *Illness and Culture in Contemporary Japan: An Anthropological View* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1984) and *Monkey as Mirror: Symbolic Transformation in Japanese History and Ritual* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987). See also, the second chapter of my book, *Puppets of Nostalgia: The Life, Death and Rebirth of the Japanese Awaji Ningyō Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997). For a broader discussion of the category of ritual purity systems, a good start is the seminal work of Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966).
5. See, for example, the opening pages of the unreflective primer on Shintō for non-Japanese, Ono Sokyo's *Shinto: The Kami Way* (Rutland, VT: Tuttle, 1962). On page one, he writes:

Shinto, *the indigenous faith of the Japanese people*, is relatively unknown among the religions of the world. . . . *From time immemorial* the Japanese people have believed in and worshipped kami *as an expression of their native racial faith* which arose in the mystic days of remote antiquity. To be sure, foreign influences are evident. This kami faith cannot be fully understood without some reference to them. *Yet it is as indigenous as the people that brought the Japanese nation into existence and ushered in its new civilization*; and like that civilization, the kami-faith has progressively developed throughout the centuries and still continues to do so in modern times. (italics mine)
6. The dates of 538 or 552 CE are usually used to pinpoint the arrival of Buddhism in Japan. These dates indicate the time in which the religion was recognized at a state level,

and do not account for the influx of Buddhists into Japan over a several century period in non-official capacities.

7. Hane Mikiso, *Studies in the Intellectual History of Tokugawa Japan*, trans. Maruyama Masao (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), 5.

8. *Ibid.*, with special attention to Chapter 1.

9. It can be suggested that the latter two of these dynamics are, in part, created out of the very nativist ideology I will discuss briefly below.

10. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York: Verso, 1991), 5–6.

11. For a discussion of the challenges to this separation by the religious right in the United States, and the implications for society of such a collapsed distinction, see Isaac Kramnick and R. Laurence Moore, *The Godless Constitution: The Case Against Religious Correctness* (New York: Norton, 1996).

12. See Dower, 187, and discussion on pages 52–53. Dower notes that this image of the Japanese as inherently immune to psychological transformation or even surrender led many in the United States military to begin to call for a complete annihilation of all Japanese people. His cartoon of the Japanese as a louse to be exterminated (on p. 185) indicates this sentiment.

13. The character does not necessarily have the connotation of “nation” but can be used to refer to a province. It does, in Benedict Anderson’s sense, however, refer to an imagined unified place.

14. See Mikiso, 333–334, and footnotes concerning the Siebold incident.

15. Cited in Robert Bellah, *Tokugawa Religion: The Cultural Roots of Modern Japan* (New York: Free Press, 1985), 90. For a concise discussion of the bushidō ethic, see pages 90 – 98.

16. Mikiso, 332–333.

17. H. D. Harootunian, *Things Seen and Unseen: Discourse and Ideology in Tokugawa Nativism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

18. *Ibid.*, 206.

19. *Ibid.*, 29.

20. A clear discussion of the Meiji Constitution is in Helen Hardacre, *Shinto and the State: 1868–1988* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 115–121.

21. *Ibid.*, 116.

22. *Ibid.*, 119.

23. *Ibid.*, 120.