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Shinto as a "World Religion": A Muromachi Construct and Its Aftermath

A significant development in the history of Shinto, which occurred in the late Muromachi period and is normally ignored by scholars, is the fact that the recognition of "Shinto" (more specifically, a specific branch thereof) as an autonomous religious tradition was accompanied by its surreptitious elevation as one of the Three Teachings to the detriment of Daoism. This development was important for the subsequent Shinto tradition per se but also, more broadly, for the understanding of "world religions" in Japan. In this article, as a case study of "world religions" in a non-Western context, I focus on the ways in which Shinto was understood within the framework of multiple religious and intellectual discourses in premodern Japan, both before and after Japanese exposure to early modern Western discourses about religion.

Several studies have been published on the origin of the concepts of "religion" and "world religions," and the formation of the academic field of religious studies. Tomoko Masuzawa, in particular, has explored the way in which the concept of "world religions" was constructed in early modern and modern Europe as part of a process of self-definition and self-representation, a process that paralleled the increasing world influence of European colonial powers and resulted in positing a European cultural (civilizational) superiority above other cultures. In this process, the three Western monotheisms (Christianity, Islam, and Judaism) were set aside from the remaining forms of religion, all subsumed under the rubric of Paganism (or Heathenism, Idolatry, or variants thereof). Initially, Western authors addressed not so much "religions" as "nations," people who were members of specific cultural spheres (Christians, Jews, Mahometans, pagans, etc.); only at a later stage, peoples were replaced by abstractly defined "religions" (Masuzawa 2005). Along these lines, Hans Kippenberg (2002) has shown that the study of religious history in Europe is closely related to modernization. Masuzawa joins authors who emphasize that "religion," "world religions," and religious studies are solely Western constructs with no equivalents outside of the Euro-American area. In general, these authors argue that these concepts are based on Christianity and served to carry out Western cultural imperialism.[1]

1. On this subject, see Dubuisson 2003; Asad 1993. More neutral and nuanced are the approaches followed by McCutcheon 1997; Smith 2004; Lincoln 1999, 2012. See also Prakash 1999; King 1999

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A striking feature of these studies is that they tend to exclude the possibility that other cultures could have developed their own discourses about other peoples' (including Westerners') attitudes toward the sacred. It is perhaps not irrelevant that most of these authors have little knowledge of cultural and religious systems outside the three Western monotheisms (Christianity, Islam, and Judaism). As in many aspects of critical theory and postcolonial studies, we can probably see in these approaches a certain tendency to overemphasize the impact of the West and to downplay the agency of other cultures. The resulting reduction of non-Westerners to mere passive subjects of Western descriptions and classifications strikes one as a rather obvious form of ethnocentrism.

In premodern Japan, as in the broader East Asian region, public discussions of what we would call today "world religions" focused primarily on the so-called Three Teachings (*sankyō* 三教), respectively, Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. This term appeared in China around the sixth century and began the paradigm to deal with the dominant religious and intellectual discourses in East Asia.[2]

The Three Teachings were configured primarily as modes (literally "Ways," Ch. *dao* 道, Jp. *dō* or *michi*) of self-cultivation and self-realization; the Buddhists also employed for their own tradition the term "Law" (Ch. *fa* 法, Jp. *hō* or *nori*), a translation of the Sanskrit "dharma." These were discursive systems based on "teachings" (Ch. *jiao* 教, Jp. *kyō* or *oshie* 教え), conceptual formations about various aspects of the world with components about behavior and life-style (social norms and conventions, precepts, injunctions, rules for purity, etc.). This is a striking parallel with the development of ideas on world religion in the modern West, which focused primarily on doctrines and beliefs. Another similarity with Western constructs is the explicit comparativism of discourses on the Three Teachings, focusing on each teaching's peculiarities within the system, but at the same time stressing the existence of a common goal. At times this generated an active quest for common origins through the deployment of a monogenetic model, according to which all East Asian religions originated in one single source or individual (the Buddha for the Buddhists, Laozi for some Daoist lineages). Later, Christianity and, to a much lesser extent, also Islam and Judaism, were added to the discussion, but their importance remained marginal with respect to this central core of East Asian religious discourses. In any case, the Three Teachings were understood as religio-philosophical traditions that were widely practiced in one form or another in East Asia and large parts of the known world; in this respect they can be considered, heuristically at least, as the East Asian equivalent of Western "world religions."

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2. For an overview, see Teiser 1996 (also available online at http://press.princeton.edu/chapters/i5804.pdf)

In this article, I will outline a history of Japanese discourses about world religions, in which "religions" refers to the traditional "ways" (Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism and, later, Shinto) of East Asian spirituality, but also, since the late sixteenth century, Christianity and, to a lesser extent, Islam. In particular, I will trace the developments that led Daoism to be replaced in Japan by Shinto, particularly in the version of it promoted by the Yoshida Shrine in Kyoto (what is commonly known as Yoshida Shinto).[3]

First, I discuss Buddhist visions of the Three Teachings as based on Kūkai's influential works on the subject. Next, I address Yoshida Kanetomo's inclusion of Shinto among the Three Teachings in substitution of Daoism, and the shift toward an ethnocentric understanding of religious values in Japan. Next, I present some aspects of the impact of Christianity on Japanese discourses about religion; most notably, the exclusivist nature of Christianity (as opposed to the combinatory nature of Japanese religiosities) and the early modern European typology of world religions (Christians, Muslims, and the Pagans). Then, I discuss Nativist interpretations of religions, and especially their emphasis on Shinto as the primordial and authentic way of humanity; this is followed by a discussion of the relativistic views of Tominaga Nakamoto, who challenged received understandings of the Three Teachings and proposed an innovative interpretive method that focused on discursive strategies. The article ends with broader considerations on the epistemological grounds of premodern Japanese discourses on the Three Teachings and the influence of broader social and geopolitical concerns on the transformation of these discourses.

Buddhist Interpretations of Other Religions: Kūkai and His Legacy

From a very early period Japan has been the arena of religious encounters, with the arrival and adoption of continental religions and systems of thought from Korea and China (Confucianism, Daoism, systems of divination and magical protection, and especially Buddhism) in the sixth century if not earlier. Religious diversity has been the focus of widespread and explicit analysis. In particular, Buddhism has been understood in Japan, since its official arrival, as a kind of "world" religion—teachings diffused all over the known (and civilized) world.

The memorial from the King Meongseong 明聖 of Baekje 百済 (dated 552 in the *Nihon shoki*, but probably issued in 538), which is the main document of official introduction of Buddhism to Japan, includes the following statement:

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3. On Yoshida Shinto, see Grapard 1992, Scheid 2000, 2001.

> This doctrine [Buddhism] is amongst all doctrines the most excellent. But it is hard to explain, and hard to comprehend. Even the Duke of Chow [Zhou] and Confucius had not attained a knowledge of it. […] From distant India it has extended hither to the three Han [kingdoms, i.e., the Korean peninsula] (*Nihon shoki*, p. X; Aston (trans.), 1956, 2: 66).

In a subsequent entry for the year 623, the *Nihon shoki* mentions again Buddhism as having been transmitted from the "western country of Tenjiku" (India) to China and hence to the Korean kingdom of Paekche (*Nihon shoki*, 2: 209; Aston (trans) 1956: 153). As we can see, since its introduction Buddhism has been understood in Japan as an international, literally worldwide religion.

Buddhism soon became the dominant intellectual and religious system in Japan, and Buddhist authors were interested in defining Buddhism's position vis-a-vis other religions and systems of thought. The most brilliant example is Kūkai 空海 (774–835), the founder of the Shingon school of Esoteric Buddhism, and widely respected as a polymath and saint. Kūkai wrote three influential works on the Three Teachings that emphasize the prominent position of Buddhism within them, namely, *Sangō shiiki* (Indications of the Goals of the Three Teachings, 797),[4] the *Himitsu mandara jūjūshinron* (Treatise on the ten stages of the mind of the secret mandala, 830), and a simplified version of the latter, the *Hizō hōyaku* (The precious key to the secret treasure, 830).[5] These three texts continued to be studied by Japanese intellectuals until the end of the Edo period (and indeed, versions and commentaries in modern Japanese are still being written and published today); the *Himitsu mandara jūjūshinron* in particular has been defined as "perhaps the most comprehensive religious work that has come down to us in Japan" (Hakeda 1972: 67; see also Katō 1979–1983, 1: 101–105).

Sangō shiiki is a description of the fundamental tenets of the Three Teachings in the form of three lectures to a spoiled youth given by three experts, one for each tradition. The goal of the book is to show the superiority of Buddhism in epistemology, ethics, and soteriology. Kūkai does not aim at conflict, but emphasizes that all the important tenets of Confucianism and Daoism are encompassed by Buddhism, which also provides better answers and solutions to problems that the other teachings ignore or cannot solve. Indeed, the book ends with a dramatic scene of conversion to Buddhism, first of the youth, unexpectedly followed by the Confucian and the Daoist (Hakeda 1972: 130–139).

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4. A slightly different original draft of this text, dated 797, also exists, entitled *Rōko shiiki* (The Indication of the Goal for the Deaf and Blind); it is classified as a National Treasure of Japan.
5. For the latter, see the English translation in Hakeda 1972: 157–224.

The *Himitsu mandara jūjūshinron* and the *Hizō hōyaku* are more elaborate in scope. In them, Kūkai presents in a systematic and comprehensive way human attitudes toward the sacred and salvation (what we would call religion), exemplified in ten different types or stages of mind (hence the title of the former text). These types are envisioned as successive stages in a broadly defined Buddhist soteriological process. The *Hizō hōyaku* opens with the first stage, "The mind of lowly human beings, goatish in their desires"; a person like this, in Kūkai's words, "in his madness, does not distinguish between good and evil, and who, ignorant like a stupid child, does not believe in the law of cause and effect.... His ignorance, therefore, can be compared to that of a goat" (Hakeda 1972: 164). This intellectual stage is characterized by unbelief, as it posits no divine agency or interventions, and describes positions such as atheism, agnosticism, naturalism, and non-Buddhist theism, through a summary of numerous positions in India at the time of the Buddha (called "external paths" or *gedō* 外道), sometime explicitly comparing them with Daoism (see also *Himitsu mandara jūjūshinron*, pp. 53–61). The second stage, "The mind that is ignorant and childlike, yet abstemious," refers to Confucianism, Daoism, and some forms of popular religiosity (see also *Himitsu mandara jūjūshinron*, pp. 68–70). At this stage, human beings are ignorant of karma, suffering, and Buddhist soteriology, yet they respect ethical norms, social rules, and taboos. This is the beginning of religious awareness; as Kūkai writes, referring to the transition from the previous stage to this one,

> as there is no immutable nature in things, how can a man remain bad always? When favorable conditions are provided, even a fool aspires to the great Way, and while he follows teachings faithfully, he aspires to be equal to a sage. A goatish man has no immutable nature; an ignorant child likewise does not remain ignorant (Hakeda 1972: 167).

The third stage, "The mind that is infantile and fearless," includes forms of Indian theism: "this is the mind of non-Buddhists who loathe the human world and of ordinary men who aspire to be born in Heaven" (Hakeda 1972: 170; see also *Himitsu mandara jūjūshinron*, pp. 110–113). Next, the fourth stage is "The mind that recognizes the existence of psychophysical constituents only, not that of a permanent ego" (Hakeda 1972: 175); in this section too, Kūkai discusses teachings from Indian non-Buddhist schools such as Vaiśeṣika and Sāṃkhya and Chinese classical Confucianism (see also *Himitsu mandara jūjūshinron*, pp. 110–113, esp. p. 111). From the fifth until the tenth stage, Kūkai describes various schools of Buddhism: Hīnayāna, Yogācāra, Sanron, Tendai, Kegon, and Shingon Tantric Buddhism. Kūkai's works are based on Buddhist *panjiao* (Jp. *kyōhan* 教判, "evaluations of the teachings") hermeneutics, which attempted to chart the various and conflicting Buddhist teachings in what was a supposedly historical order of production and

at the same time a hierarchy of significance (from the most provisional to the ultimate).[6] Kūkai, however, also included non-Buddhist teachings, analogously to similar Indian classifications, such as those appearing in the *Sarva Darśana Saṃgraha* (Compendium of all religious views, ca. 1331) (see Cowell and Gough, trans., 1908). The novelty of Kūkai's works lies in the fact that he also includes Chinese doctrines, not only Indian ones, among the non-Buddhist and pre-Buddhist stages. Importantly, however, Kūkai did not discuss, in his overviews of human religiosity, Japanese local cults, including those that would later be known as Shinto. (Indeed, he did not even mention them.) This is somehow surprising, because Kūkai is traditionally believed to be one of the founders of the Shinto-Buddhist syncretism that constituted the dominant form of religiosity in premodern Japan; it is also striking that medieval commentators of Kūkai's works did not mention Shinto either.[7]

The Kamakura Period saw a dramatic surge in interest toward Confucian texts and ideas, especially after two influential monks, Shunjō 俊芿 (1166–1227) and Enni Ben'en 円爾弁円 (Shōichi Kokushi 聖一国師, 1202–1280) returned to Japan, in 1211 and 1241, respectively, with a wealth of books and new knowledge. Shunjō brought back more than two hundred scrolls of Confucian texts; Enni even lectured Emperor Go-Saga 後嵯峨 about the *Zongjing lu* (Jp. *Sūgyōroku*) by Yonming (904–975), an early Song text about the identity of Chan and Confucian teachings, and the regent of the Shogun Hōjō Tokiyori 北条時頼 about the *Daming lu* (Jp. *Daimeiroku*), a more systematic text about the Three Teachings composed by the Chinese Chan monk Daihui Zonggao (1089–1163). Later, several Chinese Chan monks went to Japan, bringing along their Confucian background. The Gozan temples of the Zen Rinzai sect gave particular importance to the study of Confucianism. While Song Confucianism (known as Neo-Confucianism in the West) was strongly anti-Buddhist, Zen monks studied Confucian texts and adopted some of their teachings in order to counter their criticism of Buddhism. The adoption of Confucian ideas and practices was also a way for Zen monastics to better relate themselves to secular society. In any case, the medieval Japanese discourses on the Three Teachings, while adopting some intellectual developments in Song China, acknowledged the preeminence of Buddhism and served as an instrument to promote the diffusion and understanding of Zen, first among the court aristocrats and later among samurai elites (Wajima 1965: 69–70). The situation changed significantly in the Edo period, when many authors from

6. On *panjiao* hermeneutics, see Lopez, ed., 1988.
7. None of the medieval commentaries I consulted mentioned Shinto: *Hizō hōyakushō* by Fujiwara no Atsumitsu (1063–1144); *Jūjūshinron shūmōshō* and *Hizō hōyaku kanchū* by Raiyu (1226–1304); and *Hizō hōyaku shiki* by Seishuku (1366–1439).

different orientations and backgrounds began to discuss and question the tenets and validity of each of the Three Teachings.[8] It is thus important to note both the critical stance and the unstable balance of the Three Teachings discourse from a Buddhist perspective, in which Buddhism was invariably placed at the top of the system, and authors criticized what they saw as flaws in Confucianism and Daoism.

Shinto as the Origin of the Three Teachings

The situation began to change between the late Kamakura and early Muromachi periods, when Buddhist authors interested in kami matters and shrine priests with a deep knowledge of Buddhism began to conceptualize kami cults ("Shinto") within the framework of the Three Countries (*sangoku*), the contemporaneous global perspective that was employed by medieval Japanese authors to define their culture and religion (see, among others, Rambelli 1996, 2003). In this context, kami were envisioned as coming to Japan from India via China or Korea, along the transmission route of Buddhism; sacred places (especially mountains), ritual implements, and professions were believed to have come to Japan in the same way. Most of medieval Shinto discourses place large importance on Buddhist and Indian elements; however, teachings based on Ise—what are commonly known as Ise Shinto and Ryōbu Shinto, gradually began to emphasize elements from Song Chinese thought (see Rambelli 2009). There are several reasons for this attraction to novel Chinese thought. The most immediate one is the new influx to Japan of Chinese texts and teachings, brought by Chinese Chan/Zen monks and merchants; these new teachings, carried out at Zen temples, were also adopted by the Chinese studies scholars at the imperial court in Kyoto (in particular, the Kiyohara House), and by kami specialists at Ise and elsewhere. Another reason was more intrinsically philosophical. In their pursuit of kami exegesis within the framework of Buddhist teachings of original enlightenment (*hongaku shisō* 本覚思想), kami specialists were faced with the issue of the original condition of beings before the beginning of Buddhism and its distinction between delusion and enlightenment, what they called "primordial ignorance" (*ganpon no mumyō* 元本無明); Song period ontological speculations offered them a new language with which to approach and develop this subject. A third reason is that emphasis on new (Song) Chinese thought allowed kami specialists, especially those related to the Outer Shrine of Ise and, later, the Yoshida family, to differentiate their own teachings from Buddhism on the one hand and previous interpretations of Chinese texts on the other. The leading protagonists in this reconfiguration of kami doctrines were Watarai

8. For an overview of the breadth and tone of these debates, see the primary sources included in Washio, ed., 1969, esp. vol. 5, but also vols. 4 and 1.

Ieyuki 度会家行 (1256? – 1351?), in his *Ruijū jingi hongen* (1320); Kitabatake Chikafusa 北畠親房 (1293–1354), in his *Gengenshū* (ca. 1337) and *Jinnō shōtōki* (1339–1343), and Ichijō Kaneyoshi (or Kanera) 一条兼良 (1402–1481) in his *Nihon shoki sanso* (1455–1457), as well as in texts such as *Reikiki* (early fourteenth century). Overall, this new focus on Chinese thought as a way to interpret ancient kami teachings from *Nihon shoki* as different and separate from traditional Buddhist understandings, marked the beginning of a discourse on Shinto as a separate and autonomous tradition (see Rambelli 2006–2007, 2009).

Once kami-related teachings came to be defined in terms of an amalgam of teachings from India and China, in addition to those from Japan, it became necessary to evaluate its place in the traditional typology of the Three Teachings (along with Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism), and, consequently, among the various religious traditions in the world as the medieval Japanese understood them; this development began in the late fifteenth century.

The first systematic example of this reconfiguration of the Three Teachings is a very influential text, the *Yuiitsu shintō myōbō yōshū* (written around 1485) by Yoshida Kanetomo 吉田兼倶 (1434–1511). In it, Kanetomo presents a threefold typology of Shinto teachings: respectively, *honjaku engi no shintō* 本迹縁起神道 ("[the form of] Shinto [that identifies kami] as traces of [Buddhist] original entities and [produces] narrations on [shrines'] origins"), *ryōbu shūgō no shintō* 兩部習合神道 ("[the form of] Shinto that associates the two [shrines of Ise with the two fundamental mandalas of Esoteric Buddhism]"), and *genpon sōgen no shintō* 元本宗源神道 ("the Shinto of primordial beginning and ancestral source") (*Yuitsu shintō myōbō yōshū*, p. 210; Grapard, trans., 1992: 137; see also Scheid 2000). Whereas the first two types are based on Buddhist teachings, the third type, which Kanetomo also calls Yuiitsu (one and only one) Shinto, is a direct revelation from the first god mentioned in the ancient Japanese myths, Ame no minakanushi no mikoto. Needless to say, Yuiitsu Shinto is a doctrine that Kanetomo himself contributed to create, centered on his own family shrine, Yoshida Shrine in Kyoto. In order to stress the uniqueness and authority of this Shinto tradition (his own), Kanetomo compares it with Buddhism and Confucianism; significantly, in Kanetomo's treatment Shinto replaces Daoism among the Three Teachings. It is important to note, though, that at this stage it is only Yoshida Shinto that is implicitly treated as one of the Three Teachings; the two other types of Shinto are never mentioned, but they were obviously considered part of standard Japanese Buddhism at the time.

The *Yuiitsu shintō myōbō yōshū* includes the following statement, which will become very important in changing the discourse on the Three Teachings and the role of the Japanese tradition in them.

> During the reign of the thirty-fourth ruler of our nation [Empress Suiko], Prince Shōtoku made to her the following secret declaration:

> Japan produced the seed, China produced the branches and leaves, India produced the flowers and fruit. Buddhism is the fruit, Confucianism is the leaves, and Shinto is the trunk and the roots. Buddhism and Confucianism are only secondary products of Shinto. Leaves and fruit merely indicate the presence of the trunk and roots; flowers and fruit fall and return to the roots. Buddhism came east only to reveal clearly that our nation is the trunk and the roots of these three nations (Grapard, trans. 1992: 153).

This statement, attributed to Prince Shōtoku (Shōtoku Taishi 聖徳太子, 572–622), traditionally considered the principal protagonists of the early diffusion of Buddhism in Japan, is apocryphal, and serves to voice Kanetomo's own ideas on the subject. These ideas were not completely original, as they appear in some form already in the early fourteenth century in important texts of Buddhist Shinto. An earlier Buddhist text about kami matters, *Bikisho* (1324), states that Japan is the ultimate source of wisdom in the Three Countries (*sangoku*, i.e., India, China, and Japan) and therefore it is the seed; from Japan, its original place, esoteric Buddhism spread first to China and then to India, and "in accordance with the principle that the seed always returns to the root, the secret [teachings of Buddhism] returned to Japan" (*Bikisho*, p. 518; an analogous statement appears on p. 510). Around the same time, the Tendai monk Jihen 慈遍 (ca. 1330), a member of the Yoshida House, wrote:

> Japan is the root of the three countries; if we study the other countries, we find that they are dependent upon Japan. In other words, Japan is like seeds and sprouts…; like a child, it resembles plants in the spring when they are not yet ripe. But from the standpoint of efficacy, the root is in the land of the gods; China holds branches and leaves, and India received flowers and fruits. The flowers fall back to the root (*Kuji hongi gengi*, p 69).

Both *Bikisho* and *Kuji hongi gengi* maintain that Japan is the source of all teachings in China and India; at some point, these teachings were brought back to Japan. Jihen explains this process by arguing that the Japanese had degenerated and were no longer able to follow the way of the kami; therefore, the kami called upon Buddhism to teach them (*Toyoashihara jinpū waki*, pp. 223–224). In other words, the kami asked the Buddha to carry his teachings to Japan as part of the kami's own soteriological project. This idea was a way to legitimize Buddhism's presence and role in Japan; Buddhism was "naturalized" and turned into something essentially Japanese. The emphasis here is not on Buddhism's foreignness, but on its fundamental "Japaneseness." At the same time, though, kami teachings came to be descried as fundamental and primary.

What is original to Kanetomo is the fact that he explicitly re-envisioned Shinto (or his own brand thereof) as one of the Three Teachings, along with Buddhism and

Confucianism. In addition, he used the tree metaphor to outline a clear hierarchy of world civilizations and religions; through that, Kanetomo turned Shinto into the primary and fundamental religion of the entire world: according to him, Yuiitsu Shinto "pervades the universe and does not reside in any one object in particular [...] There is not a single living entity that is not part of the kami" (Grapard, trans., 1992: 158). In Kanetomo's view, Buddhism and Confucianism served the function of "protect[ing] the root of this sacred nation [Japan] and thus implement the fundamental vow of the kami" (Grapard, trans., 1992: 154).

It is worth noting the complex and ambiguous nature of the tree metaphor as it is used in the body of texts that culminates in Kanetomo's work.

Medieval texts wanted to naturalize Buddhism. In *Bikisho* and in Jihen's works, Japan as seeds and sprouts resembles a young plant and a child; however, the root resulting from this seed is the land of the gods and the fundamental source of religious teachings. Kanetomo employs the doctrine of the three fundamental modes of reality (*sandai* 三大), that is, substance (*tai* 体), semiotic systems (*sō* 相) and operations (*yū* 用) to ground his vision of the sacred. He argues that the three modes of reality produce an empowerment (Jp. *kaji* 加持, Sk. *adhisthana*), which generates the spirit; the spirit, in turn, generates the root, out of which everything else springs forth. Indeed, it would be difficult to imagine a similar use of the tree metaphor in China, where civilizations were not envisioned as being organically related to each other. However, in its original context of use, in Chinese classical medicine and pharmacology, this metaphor is employed to emphasize the fundamental role and primacy of the root; as such, it does imply a hierarchical structure.

In any case, Kanetomo's tree metaphor implies that, even though the root (Japan) has preeminence, all its elements are equally necessary and interrelated—as the tree itself is an organism that could not survive without any of its components. Elsewhere, in the same text, Kanetomo writes:

> Fruit and flowers are the product of branches and leaves. Branches and leaves are produced by trunk and roots. Trunk and roots are the product of the nurturing activity of the spirit. That spirit is in turn the empowerment that appears through the triple foundation/subtlety/activity (Grapard, trans., 1992: 148).

Thus, Kanetomo's tree metaphor is not an obvious indication of chauvinistic nationalism. Toward the end of his work, Kanetomo writes:

> One shall not search for the doctrines and teachings of foreign countries. Concerning the above. Yuiitsu-Shinto is a direct transmission by the kami, the one doctrine expounded at the time of the creation of the cosmos… This is why one should not search for the teachings of Confucianism, Buddhism, or Taoism. But, as I have said, there is no objection to deeply studying the meanings of the three teachings as long as the purpose is to increase the

> flavor of Yuiitsu-Shinto, to enrich the beauty and light of Shinto, and to explore the depths of our Way (Grapard, trans., 1992: 160).

In other words, Kanetomo wanted to stress the uniqueness and superiority of the teachings of his own lineage without depriving himself of the possibility to use Buddhist, Confucian, and Daoist elements—which do appear copiously in his doctrines. More than anything else, however, Kanetomo's reformulation of Shinto as an independent tradition, closely related to the core of Japanese values, was one of the grounds for the development, in the Edo period, of the Nativist movement (*kokugaku* 国学), as we shall see below. Thus, although we can still find some nuances in Kanetomo's use of the metaphor, his text is clearly a statement about Shinto as the root of world religions and Japan as the root of world civilizations; here we see the beginning of this new discourse about the role of Shinto in the world. In this discourse, Shinto is no longer Japan's autochthonous religion, but a central element in world religions and civilizations.

These elaborations about the position of kami-related teachings in terms of world religions are an indication of the critical attitudes that some Japanese intellectuals of the Muromachi period had regarding received ideas about various teachings, including Shinto, and their ambivalent attitude toward Chinese thought and culture. For some, at least, Chinese culture was welcome as a mere addition or as a way to clarify Japanese ideas and practices, but was no longer the primary source of meaning. Such critical attitudes about the various teachings also emerge from a number of other texts.

For example, the Noh drama *Hakurakuten* 白楽天, authored by Zeami 世阿弥, tells the improbable story in which the famous Chinese poet Bai Juyi (Hakurakuten in Japanese) was sent to Japan by the Tang emperor to spy on the Japanese but was intercepted by the god Sumiyoshi 住吉. After a conversation in which the god both displays his erudition in Chinese literature and emphasizes the superiority of Japanese poetry (and, by extension, Japan's cultural achievements), Sumiyoshi helps generate a *kamikaze* divine wind that sends Bai Juyi's ship back to China (*Hakurakuten*; English translation in Waley, transl., 1921, pp. 207–215). Along the same lines, a later Nō drama by Kanze Nagatoshi 観世長俊 (1488?–1541?), *Ikoku taiji* 異国退治 ("the defeat of the foreign aggressors"), centered on the dragon king and Shikanoumi Shrine in Fukuoka, which is more in line with other such pieces on the supernatural protection of Japan against foreign enemies, such as *Hakurakuten*. In contrast, the same Kanze Nagatoshi (possibly with the help of his father Nobumitsu) wrote in 1506 the Nō drama *Rōshi* 老子 (Laozi), which describes Laozi's transmission of the *Daodejing* 道徳経 to a disciple,[9] in what amounts to a didactic and sympathetic exposition of Daoist core teachings.

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9. For a brief synopsis, see Eguchi 2001, esp. pp. 41–43.

Another text, belonging to a very different genre, that also explicitly includes Shinto among the Three Teachings, is the *Tsukumogami ki* 付喪神記 (Record of ghosts of exhausted objects), a popular tale, dating to the late fifteenth century, produced within the Shingon tradition. In this story, which is at the origin of the early modern genre of ghost narratives, objects that had been thrown away unceremoniously, complain about human ingratitude toward their services. One of them, an old Chinese book, tells them that soon they will acquire sentiency and agency, and they decide to become ghosts; only a Buddhist object, a rosary, opposes the plan in the name of non-violence, but is easily outnumbered. Thus, these objects become frightful ghosts and haunt human beings in Kyoto, until Shingon monks defeat them through the performance of an esoteric ritual.[10] In this story we see a transposition of common themes in discussions of the Three Teachings, namely, Chinese knowledge (Confucianism), in itself at the origin of the process by which the objects turned into ghosts, plays the function of anti-social norms; the community of objects, mocking a human custom, turns to "Shinto" for collective rituals and enshrines a "Shinto" god, Henge Daimyōjin 変化大明神, as the symbol of their violent community. Finally, only Buddhism (Shingon) is able to neutralize the danger caused by these objects, which, under the leadership of an object-monk (a rosary) are finally pacified and turn into buddhas. In this text, references to the Three Teachings are used to emphasize the supremacy of Buddhism, but that is done in a satirical way to the detriment of Confucianism and Shinto; "Shinto" in particular plays a minor role as the target of a not so veiled criticism of riotous festivals typical of the time.

In any case, the period in which Shinto was gradually elevated to one of the Three Teachings was also a time in which established intellectual hierarchies, involving Buddhism, Chinese thought in general, and Japanese classical learning (including Shinto texts)—and, more in general, the received framework of cultural geopolitics of the Three Countries (India, China, and Japan)—lost their solidity and became the subjects of scrutiny and open questioning.

Within this context, the disappearance of Daoism from the Three Teachings can be explained in several ways. The first and most obvious one is the lack of a solid interpretive tradition focused exclusively on Daoist texts in Japan. Court specialists in Chinese teachings, Buddhist monks, and Shinto priests did read some Daoist texts, and even incorporated ideas from them in their own works, but their role was always subsidiary. A second reason is that in medieval Japan, Chinese thought was understood as a whole as the philosophical expression of China (one of the

10. For a treatment of this story, see Rambelli 2007, for a translation, see Reider 2009. See also Foster 2008.

Three Countries, along with India and Japan), and few authors were interested in articulating intellectual traditions and schools of thought; this approach continued in the Edo period, especially in the works of National Learning (*kokugaku*) authors. A third reason is that Japanese authors tended to see in Daoism a Chinese local version of Shinto. Jihen, mentioned above, wrote that the teachings of Laozi and Zhuangzi in China "are like Shinto in our own country" (*Toyoashihara jinpū waki*, 222). This sense of affinity could also explain the use of Daoist ideas in early Kokugaku authors such as Kamo no Mabuchi (see below). In a way, Muromachi authors emphasizing the primacy of Shinto were following an important precedent: the Chinese Daoist idea that Laozi's teachings were the source of Buddhism. This idea, the core of the discourse of so-called "conversion of the barbarians" (*huahu* 化胡) formed around the mid-second century and was important in religious controversies until the second half of the thirteenth century, when the Yuan court yielded to Buddhist pressure and ordered the destruction of all *huahu* related texts.[11] Some Japanese authors may have been aware of this recent development in China, but they may also have simply reversed the received Japanese interpretation of the relations between the Three Teachings, according to which Buddhism manifests itself in different country as different religious and intellectual systems: in China as Confucianism and Buddhism, and in Japan as Shinto (or kami cults more generally).[12]

The Japanese Encounter with Christianity and Different Perspectives on World Religions

This new understanding of Shinto as one of the Three Teachings had vast and enduring consequences in Japan, not only in the self-definition of Shinto as an autonomous religious tradition, but also in terms of understanding of world religions and broader geopolitical issues. A telling example of this broader impact can be seen in the letter that Toyotomi Hideyoshi 豊臣秀吉 (1536 or 1537–1598), the eccentric military overlord of Japan during the era of highest Christian influence, addressed to the Portuguese Viceroy of the Indies in 1591 in the midst of growing tensions between European visitors and Japanese authorities. In the letter, Hideyoshi announced his plans for an imminent Japanese conquest of China and India—plans that ended with two ruinous invasions of Korea. Hideyoshi wrote, among other things:

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11. For an overview of *huahu* in China, see Zürcher 2007, especially Chapter Six "The Conversion of the Barbarians," pp. 288–320.
12. For a typical example of this attitude, see Mujū Ichien, *Shasekishū*; English translation in Morrell 1985.

> Our empire is the Land of the Gods […] we say that god is the root and wellspring of all the myriad things. In India, this godlike functioning is called the Law of the Buddhas (Buppō); in China, the Way of the Sages (Judō); in these Precincts of the Sun, it is called the Way of the Gods (Shintō). To know the Way of the Gods is to know the Law of the Buddhas and to know the Way of the Sages as well. […]
> Should you want to learn about the gods and the Buddhas in depth, kindly ask, and I will explain.
> In land like yours, one doctrine is taught to the exclusion of others, and you are unaware of the Way of humanity and rightness. You therefore fail to revere the gods and the Buddhas or to distinguish between the lord and the subject. Instead, you seek to destroy the True Law by means of a pernicious doctrine. Hereafter, stop fabricating wild, barbarous nonsense in ignorance of right and wrong! (from de Bary et al., eds., 2002–2006, vol. 2 tome 1: 147–148).

We see in this document, in addition to Hideyoshi's deranged hubris, a clear sense of the new concept we just highlighted of Shinto as one of the three central religions of the world, as indicated earlier by Yoshida Kanetomo. In particular, Hideyoshi claims that Shinto is in fact the primary religion of the world, which takes different forms in different countries: thus, the Indian version of Shinto is Buddhism, and the Chinese version is Confucianism. On the basis of this, Hideyoshi is able to criticize the Christian exclusion of other beliefs as a pernicious form of ignorance. Hideyoshi even hints at the possibility of Japanese proselytism in Christian lands—in a stunning reversal of roles, which implies Hideyoshi's internalization and adaptation of European understanding of the place of Christianity in the world and its replacement with Shinto.[13]

Christianity (mostly Catholicism) was introduced to Japan toward the mid-sixteenth century primarily by Jesuit missionaries, and contributed to shaping the intellectual landscape there for several generations. One intriguing aspect of the Japanese encounter with Christianity is the fact that a number of religious and cultural discussions took place among Christian missionaries and Japanese intellectuals (mostly, Buddhist monks); some of these discussions were recorded in pro-Christian and anti-Christian texts.

Through the encounter with Christianity the Japanese were alerted to the existence of a radically different religious tradition, with its own cosmogony, theology, ideas of sin and righteous behavior, and different vocabulary and images.

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13. It is interesting to note that the medieval Japanese were not interested in spreading Buddhism or Shinto among non-Japanese neighbors such as the Ainu territories in the north (Ezo) and the Ryukyu; there are some examples of Buddhist preaching to the Ainu in the Edo period; see Sasaki 2004.

Christians attempted to show the superiority of their doctrines through a systematic critique of the Three Teachings, which has, we have seen, constituted the common religion and the basis for a shared worldview for many Japanese. However, the Christians' simplistic and reductive arguments were easy targets for rebuttal by Japanese intellectuals. At times, debates between the Jesuits and the Buddhists turned into heated discussions animated by mutual contempt and ending in reciprocal insults.[14]

A representative author of this debate world is Habian (Fabian) Fucan, probably a former Zen monk, who converted to Christianity (Catholicism) and became the most prominent Japanese Christian intellectual of the time. He wrote a comparative text, the *Myōtei mondō*, in which, in order to show the superiority of Christianity, he compared it to Buddhism, Confucianism, and Shinto. Later, however, Fucan apostatized and became one of Christianity's loudest critics; he wrote *Ha Daiusu* (God Destroyed), a scathing criticism of Christianity based on an unfavorable comparison with the same East Asian teachings he had criticized in his previous work. Fucan's texts are also the first written works in which Shinto (Yoshida Shinto) was explicitly part of a more general discourse about world religions including Christianity.[15]

Contacts with the Europeans—which continued in a strictly controlled form after the ban against Christianity and the official closure of the country (1640) through a small Dutch mission in Nagasaki—also allowed the Japanese to acquire reliable and up-to-date information on the rest of the world, including religious traditions. For example, it is at this time that the Japanese entered into contact with Islam and the Muslim world. The earliest Japanese texts about Islam, produced between the early eighteenth and the mid-nineteenth centuries, outline the life of Muhammad and the basic tenets of Islam. The information found in these texts derives from Chinese and, to a larger extent, European sources—primarily, Dutch geography books and interviews with a few foreign visitors. These texts also include brief descriptions of the major Muslim lands, their products, and their customs (see Rambelli 2014).

A momentous consequence of this sustained interaction with early modern Western systems of knowledge was the introduction to Japan of European indigenous ideas of world religions. For example, the Confucian scholar and officer Arai Hakuseki 新井白石 (1657–1725) recorded the information he acquired in long

14. As an example, see the end of a debate between Fabian Fucan and the Zen lay intellectual Hakuō described in "Kirishitan monogatari," in Elison 1973: 338–348 (esp. 347–348).
15. See John Breen's article in this special issue. Jesuit documents also mention aspects of Shinto in a sporadic way, but Fucan's treatment is far more detailed than anything written by Christian authors until the end of the nineteenth century.

conversations he had with the Italian Jesuit Giovanni Battista Sidotti (1668–1714).[16] Hakuseki wrote that "broadly speaking, there are three main religions (*kyōhō* 教法) in the world, namely, the Christians, the Heathen, and the Mahometans" (Arai Hakuseki, *Sairan igen* (1713), p. 834). Note that the transliterated terms refer not to "religions" as discursive formations and institutions, but rather to peoples following those teachings, in accordance with the usage common in seventeenth century Europe. In another text he wrote around 1715, titled *Seiyō kibun* (Record of things heard about the West), the direct result of his interviews with Father Sidotti, Hakuseki reports that the "heathens" (in his transliteration, *heiden*, from the Dutch *Heiden*, and *zentira*, from the Latin *gentiles*), that is Buddhism in India, are now in decline; and in China there is another kind of Heathenism, called *Jukyō* (Confucianism) or *ateien* (from the Dutch *Atheien*, "atheists") (*Seiyō kibun*, pp. 42–43).[17] It is interesting to note that here Hakuseki was trying to process the new information provided by Sidotti in relation to his own knowledge; most certainly, Sidotti did not mention Buddhism in India, because at that time the Europeans had no information about Indian Buddhism; in the same way, Hakuseki rendered Confucianism as the teachings of the *ju* (literati).

Nativism and Relativism in Early Moderns Constructs of World Religions

In the eighteenth century, some Japanese intellectuals began to focus on what they perceived as the fundamental characteristics of their country and its culture. They studied texts that had been long neglected, such as *Man'yōshū* (*waka* poetry), *Kojiki* (historical records and mythology), and *Genji monogatari* (narrative representation of emotions), looking for clues to what they envisioned as the original and authentic Japanese tradition. Their endeavor was obviously highly ideological, and involved a strong criticism of foreign thought and religious systems, above all Buddhism and Confucianism. This intellectual tradition, known as *kokugaku* (national learning or nativism), tended to stress the difference and separation of Shinto from Confucianism and Buddhism, rather than their contiguity, as Kanetomo and Hideyoshi previosuly did. Indeed, Nativists criticized Yoshida Shinto for being too syncretic and Buddhist.

16. Giovanni Battista Sidotti entered Japan illegally in 1708; he was imprisoned in Edo where he died. Hakuseki met with him several times in order to gather intelligence on European plans about Japan and information on the contemporary geopolitical situation.
17. Judaism is also sporadically mentioned in Japanese sources, but was not considered a world religion.

Kamo no Mabuchi 賀茂真淵 (1697–1769) was among the first to praise the Japanese teachings of the kami—which he defined as the ancient Japanese way or *kodō* 古道—and contrast them negatively against Confucianism and Buddhism. He wrote in a text entitled *Kokui kō* ("Reflections on the Meaning of Our Country"):

> The merit of appearing simple is that those below, observing the simplicity of those above, are filled with awe and, seeking to follow this example, come to live simply. Living simply, they have few desires; having few desires, they have few worries, and having few worries, they are at peace (in Heisig et al., eds., 2011: 470).

This idealized version of ancient Japanese history and culture, characterized by simplicity and peace, echoes several passages in the *Daodejing*, even though Mabuchi does not mention Daoism explicitly.

In contrast, Mabuchi did not restrain from a scathing criticism of Confucianism: "It is unquestionably Confucianism that has not only brought about disorder in China, but has also done the same in this country" (in Heisig et al., eds., 2011: 467–468). He was also dismissive of Buddhism: "Some people say that Buddhism is bad, but it simply makes people's hearts stupid, and the ruler will not flourish if the people's heart are not stupid. Therefore, Buddhism is not so harmful [as Confucianism]" (in Heisig et al., eds., 2011: 467).

A generation later, Motoori Norinaga 本居宣長 (1730–1801) wrote: "The True Way of the Gods [Shinto] is totally different, dissociated from the teachings of Confucianism, Buddhism, or any other doctrine, having nothing whatsoever in common with them." (from de Bary et al., eds., 2002–2006, vol. 2 tome 1, p. 413). This sense of radical difference in religious terms is combined with a sense of cultural (if not yet national) superiority: "Because of the special dispensation of our imperial land, the ancient tradition of the Divine Age has been correctly and clearly transmitted in our country […] Thus our country is the source and fountainhead of all other countries, and in all matters it excels all the others" (from de Bary et al., eds., 2002–2006, vol. 2 tome 1, p. 411). In this passage, Norinaga echoes Yoshida Shinto arguments about the primeval nature of Japan, which he explicitly associates with superiority.

Another very influential Nativist scholar and activist, Hirata Atsutane 平田篤胤 (1776–1843), seems to draw on Kanetomo's tree metaphor when he writes that ancient Shinto principles were transmitted to India, where the Brahmins preserved them in some form, whereas in Japan they were lost because of the evil influence of Buddhism (*Indozōshi*, pp. 277–280). In Atsutane, the multicultural dimension that framed this type of arguments in medieval Shinto and Yoshida Shinto in particular, is lost. Atsutane also expanded Norinaga's idea of Japan's world superiority (again, based on medieval ideas). He wrote: "the heavenly gods... gave birth to our country, and thus there is so immense a difference between Japan and all the other countries

of the world as to defy comparison. [...] Japanese … are superior to the peoples of … all other countries in the world" (in de Bary et al., eds., 2002–2006, vol. 2 tome 1, p. 424–425). At the basis of statements such as this, there is the idea that Japan is the first country created by the kami on earth—an idea that lies at the basis of the "ancient way" (*kodō*) which Atsutane and the other Nativists before him envisions as being the root of the Three Teachings and indeed of all other religions of the world.

After Atsutane, the idea of Japan's moral and religious superiority was developed also in terms of international relations by authors such as Ōkuni Takamasa 大国隆正 (1792–1871) and Satō Nobuhiro 佐藤信淵 (1769–1850).[18] These ideas were subsequently developed by radical nationalist and right-wing authors, and became a common staple of modern Shinto discourse, in which Shinto imperial worship (Mikadoism) and Japanese supremacy were closely intertwined.

Nativist ideas, combined with a Confucian sense of cultural superiority toward other nations, were very influential, but by no means hegemonic. In fact, the Edo period is well-known for its intense intellectual debates, and the discourse of the Three Teachings is no exception. Thus, we also encounter other visions, infused with a spirit of cultural relativism as in the case of Tominaga Nakamoto's works, which had an impact on subsequent intellectual developments in Japan. Tominaga Nakamoto 富永仲基 (1715–1746) is a unique figure in Japanese intellectual history. Born in a merchant family in Osaka, he studied at the famed Confucian academy Kaitokudō (see Katō 1967). He developed a strongly independent and critical attitude toward the Three Teachings, which he referred to as *dō* or *michi* (ways); specifically, he mentions the "Ways of the kami, the mandarins, and the buddha" (*shinjubutsu no michi*) (translation by Michael Pye in Tominaga 1990: 53). His work *Shutsujō kōgo* (a title which has been translated into English as "Emerging from Meditation," but which has the critical nuance of "Discourse [uttered] after emerging from a trance"), written in 1745, became very influential (Tominaga 1990).

Tominaga's treatment of the Three Teachings is keenly attentive to discursive strategies and shows strong awareness of cultural relativism and historical change. For Tominaga each of the Three Teachings is based on features of the national character of the country in which it arose. Thus, Buddhism, "the way of India," is deeply influenced by Indian passion for magic; Confucianism, "the way of China," is burdened by Chinese pompous eloquence; and Shinto is marred by its emphasis on secrecy and on archaic Japanese customs "because it is of a different age it is not the way of today's world" (Tominaga 1990: 53). Tominaga calls each Way's dominant features "propensities" (Ibid., p. 68). "The propensity of Buddhism is magic… Indian people like it"; all references in the scriptures about marvels and magic "were

18. See, by Ōkuni Takamasa, *Shinshin kōhōron* (1867) in Breen, trans., 1994: 233–245.

clever devices to make the people believe." However, Tominaga notes, "This was the way of guiding people in India and it is not so necessary in Japan" (Ibid.). Next, "the propensity of Confucianism is high-flown language… China is a country which likes this" (Ibid., p. 69); Confucian teachings "were simple matters set forth with mountainous rhetoric, clever devices to make people think it interesting and make them follow" (Ibid., pp. 69–70). However, "China's high-flown language, just like India's magic, is not so necessary in Japan" (Ibid., p. 70).

Finally, the propensity of Shinto is "mysteriousness, esotericism, and secret transmission, the bad habit of simply concealing things" (Ibid.). Here Tominaga proposes a harsh indictment of contemporary Yoshida Shinto. He writes: "Concealing everything is the root of lying and stealing, so that while magic is interesting to see and high-flown language is pleasant to hear, and therefore more or less forgivable, just this habit of concealment is very much worse"; moreover, "ways which are kept hidden, difficult to transmit, and passed on for a fixed price, are none of the true way" (Ibid.).

Tominaga saw each of the Three Teachings in terms of cultural relativism based on time and place. As a consequence, Ways are related to specific cultural practices that cannot be imitated—or, if imitated, they appear strange if not ridiculous. Tominaga wrote: "The Buddhists [in Japan] copy Indian manners to discipline themselves and save others, but nobody can be found who speaks Sanskrit, nor listeners who understand it. Still less is it conceivable to make everything from household articles to buildings just like in India" (Ibid., p. 54). In the same way, Confucianists should eat meat cooked based on recipes from the Book of Rites, wear Chinese clothes, reads Chinese characters as they were pronounced in the state of Lu in the Zhou period (Ibid., pp. 54–55). Again, Shintoists should also model their everyday behavior upon the ancient and archaic ways they praise so much (Ibid., p. 56).

Here Tominaga questions the limits of acculturation and religious acceptance; he asks, how far should people go in following religious rules and prescriptions? What are the limits of flexibility and accommodation? When is a Way, once adapted to a new place, no longer the same Way? Isn't it better to have a generic, and thus general, way, which because of its broadly conceived features is appropriate to each specific time and place? A way that is not divine but made by human beings for their life here and now (Ibid., p. 58). Indeed, as a consequence of his critique of the Three Teachings, Tominaga envisioned a new Way (the Way of Ways, the real way, *makoto no michi* (Ibid., pp. 49, 53), a "way of today" (Ibid., p. 52) as opposed to established ways based on obsolete ideas), simple, straightforward, and more appropriate to his time and place.

Because of his relativistic and historicist stance, Tominaga rejects received ideas of the harmony among the Three Teachings and emphasizes instead their cultural and historical differences. He also wrote that "the way diverges" because "language [has its] conditions" and "countries have their customs" (Ibid., p. 164). In addition, Tominaga made clear that the various ways were not founded by their reputed founder, but by later followers who established someone from a specific historical period as their founder. Thus, "Buddhism and Confucianism were made up by people on purpose in later times"; in the same way, "Shinto too could not have existed in an ancient age of the gods" (Ibid., p. 67).

Final Remarks

Discourses on the Three Teachings in medieval Japan existed within an episteme of correlations and similarities. Many Japanese medieval texts present correlated series of disparate entities and claim that these entities are essentially identical to each other. These correlations and combinations are based on a rich and complex semiotic discourse, related to ontology, epistemology, and soteriology, typical of medieval Esoteric Buddhism. This episteme presupposes a pansemiotic universe (a cosmic mandala) in which everything is organized in a systematic way and endowed with meaning. Within a pansemiotic universe every thing is a multiple entity, with different aspects, and related to other things. In this way, Confucian morality, Buddhist precepts, and Shinto ethical norms, for example, were treated as different in terms of their signifiers but at the same time as deeply related in their signification. More generally, Indian, Chinese, and Japanese entities came to be considered all alternative forms of each other. The Three Teachings, in this sense, were also discursive representations of this configuration of the universe.[19]

Thus, different conceptual systems were placed in mutual relations and correlated to each other; the result was the formation of a larger conglomerate incorporating all items involved; while essential identity was emphasized, the system also acknowledged the existence of hierarchy. Furthermore, the system was flexible enough to allow for the possibility of different interpretive approaches so as to emphasize either similarity and unity or difference and hierarchy, either foreign or autochthonous components.

In Japan, discussions on the Three Teachings were carried out primarily by Buddhist authors. Their goal was to harmonize Buddhism within established Japanese religious systems, while at the same time claiming for it (Buddhism) a

19. For a more extensive treatment of the Japanese correlative semiotic system, see Rambelli 2013.

spiritual and intellectual preeminence. They did that by arguing that their own specific tradition encompassed other traditions' fundamental tenets, but also contained additional elements that provided deeper, more accurate, and more elevated explanations of reality, social models, and modes of behavior. However, authors tended to place their own tradition at the top and did not refrain from emphasizing rival traditions' shortcomings. Confucians and Shinto/Nativists also referred to the Three Teachings as a basic discursive formation, but their interventions consisted primarily in dismantling Buddhist claims to harmony and unity by pointing out the faults of their respective opponents.

In other words, we could say that the medieval idea of harmony of the Three Teachings, based on a widespread perception of the interconnected nature of the universe, gave way in the early modern period to discourses that emphasized difference, conflict, and hierarchy. Thus, the Three Teachings, far from being a discursive arena for the elimination of dissent and the production of harmoniously shared ideas in a unified religions and ethical field, were an open field of discussion, contestation, and dissent.

Differentiation began to take place under the impulse of Nativist movements in Japan, which privileged simplified ideas of autochthony and authenticity against the complex flexibility of the medieval system; Nativist ideas became the basis for exclusion and persecution. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the Nativist discourse intersected with Western prejudices about religious truth and related superiority; in a sense, Western representations of religion were also part of a Western form of Nativism, which emphasized the spiritual and moral value of things European above non-European elements (products, objects, ideas, people, etc.) that were flooding European countries from their outlying colonial empires.

To sum up, we encounter a growing awareness of religious and cultural differences in the Edo period. This is due to a number of factors, but here I would like single out epistemological, social, and geopolitical reasons. In the medieval episteme of correlations and multiple identities, everything was both intrinsically different and unique and at the same time part of an undifferentiated totality; this episteme allowed for emphasis on the unity of the Three Teachings. The collapse of the medieval world and the establishment of a new order in Tokugawa Japan resulted in an important epistemic change; the focus was no longer on complex, multicultural entities, but on simpler facets of everyday life. Tokugawa society institutionalized differences (social classes, hierarchies, sects, guilds, etc.) and it became difficult to stress the ultimate identity of different phenomena. Shinto, Confucianism, and Buddhism were no longer unanimously envisioned as three aspects of a single way, but

as three different, and increasingly competing, ways. Authors may still have chosen to emphasize similarities, but institutionally and discursively, they were growing more and more apart. Geopolitically, Japan's increased awareness of international developments in the East Asian scenario, together with contacts with the West, made the Japanese more and more aware of cultural differences and hierarchies of prestige. Discourses begin to proliferate about the nature of Japanese culture and its position in Asia and the world. Shinto, as the primary and primordial form of religiosity—according to ideas that began to circulate in the Muromachi period, as we have seen—came to be envisioned as the source of Japanese culture and its ontological superiority vis-a-vis other countries.

In this article, we have seen that in the premodern period, Japanese intellectuals discussed international religious systems in original ways and attempted to integrate new information in their representations of world religions—at times, they even challenged their own received assumptions. The Muromachi period was a crucial moment in this process of rethinking world religions as they were known to contemporary Japanese; they included Shinto within the Three Teachings, and it gradually came to be envisioned as the source of all forms of human religion. This represented the reverse of Western claims about Christianity—which they saw not as the source of human religion but as its ultimate and most perfect form.

The general reformulation of the religious field and the establishment of religious studies in the late nineteenth century with the adoption of a Western interpretive paradigm was not an abrupt transformation as a consequence of Western cultural imperialism, but followed Japanese internal trajectories of thought which intersected with shifting ideas about religion and geopolitical concerns that had lasted for at least three centuries.[20]

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20. For recent work on the formation of the concept of "religion" (*shūkyō*) in Japan, see Isomae 2003; Josephson 2012; Maxey 2014; and Rots and Teeuwen, eds., 2017. For a brief survey of the history of the study of religion in Japan, see Fujiwara 2008; on religion in modern Japan, see Hayashi 2006.

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