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Evolutionary Theory and Religion in Modern
Japan By G. Clinton Godart

著者	HENDRY Joy
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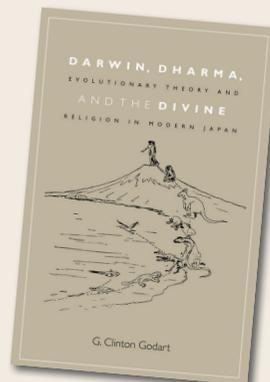
BOOK REVIEW

***Darwin, Dharma, and the Divine:
Evolutionary Theory and Religion
in Modern Japan***

By G. Clinton Godart

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x + 301 pages.

Reviewed by Joy HENDRY



When I first went to Japan in 1971, I was studying Japan and the Japanese language, reading and attending classes, and by a series of serendipitous encounters, I found myself living among a group of young Japanese people who were as interested in me and my background as I was in theirs. We discussed many aspects of our differing cultural heritage, and although I had yet to start my formal training I was already very much the anthropologist. I thereby absorbed a huge amount of initial understanding that I could draw upon for years, but there was one subject which I found immensely frustrating, and it was only through agreeing to write this review of Godart's wonderful intellectual history of the introduction of evolutionary theory to Japan that I feel I can finally fill that niggling gap.

The subject was philosophy, and as an Oxford training in anthropology includes a fair smattering of Western philosophy, as background if not read in firsthand detail, I wanted to know what kind of philosophical ideas were current among nonspecialists in Japan. I drew a blank with my otherwise intellectually informed friends, and Godart's clear and comprehensive exegesis of the debates and discussions that surrounded the introduction of many Western ideas, with a focus on Darwin and Herbert Spencer, at last explains why. Godart lays out the arguments more or less chronologically, with appropriate themes relating to his subtext of religious reactions, always linking them to the wider context of political and eventually militaristic activities.

The first couple of chapters were the most fascinating for me in that they introduce a range of intellectual debates that have hardly emerged before in the English language. These mostly took place in the Meiji period, and the first chapter addresses the way the contrasting views of evolutionary theorists were read, digested, and then discussed among Japanese scholars, some of whom had embraced Christianity. There were also foreign scholars living and teaching in Japan at the time, and they espoused a range of different views. Some of this debate would have been wonderful if it had entered into Western discourse beyond a small group of specialists, especially as it raised interesting questions way beyond the evolution versus creationist dichotomy, but on the whole Europeans ploughed on with the Enlightenment project that inspired them to claim a superiority that has only recently begun to be seriously questioned.

Meanwhile in Japan questions were raised through the eyes of those espousing a fast reforming and nationalising Shinto view of the world, as discussed in chapter 2, and later by Buddhists who form the focus of chapter 3. Essentially (and this is an essentialist view, but I think it worth airing), objections centered around the idea that a society with a strong ethic of harmony and cooperation could possibly have been formed through a struggle for survival between *individuals* competing with each other for their very survival. Unlike the common association in Western thought between evolution and secularism, in Japan there were much stronger efforts made for more than a century to find a way to reconcile evolution with a spiritual worldview, or a “reenchanted” view of nature.

These arguments were initially being made in a country completely immersed in all manner of manifestations of “modernity,” and another common objection was to the inevitable concomitant idea of continual *progress*, a *sine qua non* of the capitalist world that characterized America. *Materialism* was another issue, and a common Buddhist argument was that the matter out of which human beings have evolved must have a space for “life,” for the “mind.” Godart suggests that Buddhists adapted their approach to evolutionary theory to include this idea, partly to distinguish Buddhism from the Christian rejection of Darwin’s arguments about human origins.

Of course there are many complex arguments to be considered in subsequent chapters, which cover issues such as a promise of Utopia as well as an association of superstition with modernity. Godart makes powerful links between Western ideas of evolution and the reactionary rationale for the build-up of nationalism (*kokutai*), the rejection of evolutionary ideas previously taught in Japanese schools, and Japanese ideas of superiority that led to the disastrous World War II effort. He introduces many important Japanese scholars too numerous to mention here, but the one who not only became popular in Japan but did actually impress at least primatologists in the outside world, is Imanishi Kinji whose quite comprehensive alternative to Darwin’s work forms a sort of conclusive pinnacle of Japanese resistance over the years.

For me, one of the most exciting aspects of this cornucopia of interesting debates lies in the argument put by several Japanese scholars in different times and situations about the misplaced arrogance of Western scientists in thinking that they can shake off their spiritual inheritance and not only see the world objectively, rather than relationally, but ultimately find ways to control it. This is an argument shared by indigenous peoples in many parts of the world, who protest that their own scientific understanding of the environment, gained through millennia of observation, testing, and experience in their own local situations has been totally ignored, if not destroyed, by settlers from Eurocentric “enlightened” scientific countries.¹

Godart ultimately dismisses Imanishi’s alternative view of evolution, but he concedes that it did make a profound difference in the wider field of primatology, and he leaves us with the intriguing idea of broadening the perspective of evolutionary (and other scientific) theory by considering the reactions of a multiplicity of religions worldwide. Only this way will we move on from the limited dichotomy between religion and creationism on the one hand and science and evolution on the other, he argues. We might also learn more about how we can bring meaning and ethics into an otherwise rather sterile materialism.

¹ See Cajete 1999 and Hendry 2014.

REFERENCES

Cajete 1999

Gregory Cajete. *Native Science: Natural Laws of Interdependence*. Clear Light Publications, 1999.

Hendry 2014

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