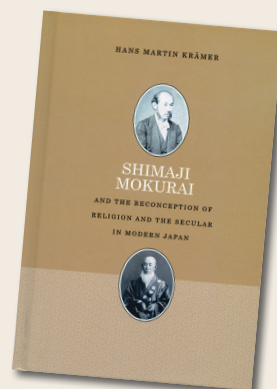


BOOK REVIEW

Shimaji Mokurai and the Reconception of Religion and the Secular in Modern Japan

Hans Martin Krämer

University of Hawai'i Press, 2015
246 pages.

With his new book, Hans Martin Krämer has produced the first monograph in English dedicated to the intellectual legacy of the Japanese True Pure Land Buddhist, Shimaji Mokurai (1838–1911). While Ketelaar (1990) brought the importance of Meiji Buddhism and the role played by Shimaji Mokurai to the attention of non-Japanese historians, Josephson (2012) and Maxey (2014) have recently relaunched the debate on nineteenth-century Buddhist thought, thereby bringing Shimaji back into the picture. When Josephson announced a forthcoming publication on the transnational reinvention of Buddhism, it was only a matter of time before a book on Shimaji would appear.¹ Indeed, Krämer's monograph deals with what he calls "the reconception" of religion, and, by extension, of Buddhism, in modern Japan. He identifies "new forms of knowledge learned in the contact with the West" as one of "the three strands that together determined how religion came to be debated in modern Japan," the other two being "the indigenous tradition" and "the current political agenda." Krämer favors Shimaji, as the one in whom these "three dimensions blend together at a crucial point in time (i.e., the early 1870s)" (pp. 137–38).

In his introduction, Krämer elucidates the central theme of his book, namely "understanding how religion came to be imagined in modern Japan" (p. 3). In seeking to explain why *shūkyō* prevailed as the translation for "religion," Krämer provides valuable insights into the history of the semantics of the term's components *shū* and *kyō* in the first chapter. The following two chapters investigate whether, in early modern Japan, the use of *shū* ("sect") as an umbrella-term for different entities (Buddhism, Christianity) constituted "a first step toward a new category expressing an abstract entity of social and cultural life, similar to what 'religion' eventually came to signify in modern Europe" (p. 41). Chapter 2 more particularly examines how, in early Meiji, not only "changing circumstances in politics and society [were] reflected in changing concepts but also [how] changing concepts [had] an impact on politics and society" (p. 43). In chapter 3, *shūkyō* is studied from the angle of conceptual history. Here, the argument that Shimaji conceived of *shūkyō* not in opposition to "politics" (*sei*) but to "civic teaching" (*jikyō*) is important because, "the differentiation between *shūkyō* and *jikyō* was a purely Japanese affair," closely connected with the Shinto

¹ Josephson 2012, p. 323, n. 147.

problem (p. 86). It thus constitutes a crucial link highlighting the agency of local actors and the impetus of domestic conditions on the development of a modern concept of religion.

Chapter 4 deals with Nishi Honganji's study trip to Europe and Mokurai's role therein. Krämer here offers an in-depth analysis of how Shimaji's encounter with Léon de Rosny, Emil Gustav Lisco, and the writings of August Renan impacted his understanding of "religion." However, contrary to the author's claim to be the first to identify Lisco as the theologian whom Shimaji met in Germany (pp. 97–98), this encounter has already been treated elsewhere.² It is surprising that there is no reference to Shimaji's interactions in London with Meiji statesman Kido Takayoshi and diplomat Aoki Shūzō on the subject of "religion," and their conclusion that Buddhism should become the state creed of Japan with Christianity banned.³ As such, the statement "Shimaji's surprisingly positive image of Christianity, which began to emerge in his writings from December 1872 on" (p. 109) needs to be questioned. An analysis of Shimaji's later works suggests rather that he became increasingly critical of Christianity. Another point that warrants further exploration is the emergence of "religious studies." For example, the role played by Ishikawa Shuntai is overlooked. Ishikawa, a member of the Higashi Honganji mission to Europe, advocated as early as 1875 the development of "science de religion," which he translated as *shūkyōgaku*, thereby perhaps even coining the term.

The final chapter examines the conceptualization of the secular (*sezoku*). It remains somewhat unclear, however, how the semantic history of *sezoku*, *sezokuka*, or *zokka* connects to Shimaji's conceptualization of the secular, or how his thought informed the development of notions of the secular or secularization in other thinkers. Only in the analysis of Muraoka Tsunetsugu and Maruyama Masao's understanding of secularization does the link with Shimaji's construct become more apparent: their theory of the decline of Buddhism in the Tokugawa period implied that Buddhism itself was secularized, something only rendered possible by the fact that Shimaji and others "firmly established Buddhism as a religion in the early 1870s" (p. 134). In the conclusion, the reader is reminded that the conception of "religion" in the nineteenth century was a global endeavor, based on the mutual influence of Western and non-Western thinkers. Although Shimaji "was a crucial actor in these transfers and a pioneer in establishing 'religion' as a category commensurable to the modern age" (p. 144), Krämer's book offers little factual evidence that Shimaji and the True Pure Land school exerted "more influence than anyone else" in discussions of religion (p. 2), or that "Shimaji's activities had a direct impact on national policy in the 1870s" (p. 15).

For a study that employs the methodology of historical semantics, and that explores "religion at the level of the object language of the historical actors" (p. 15) by looking at the components of words "graphically represented by one character each" (p. 17), the omission of characters from the body of the text is rather unfortunate. Finally, a brief reflection is in order on the author's frequent use of the word "reconception," which presupposes the existence of a concept of religion or of the secular. Since the modern concepts of religion and of the secular were only formed in Japan from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, "conception" (or "invention") would seem more adequate at times. Be that as it may, Krämer's approach to history through the analysis of two concepts and their terminology

2 Deneckere 2014.

3 Breen 1998.

will no doubt inspire scholars from different fields and encourage further discussions on the history and translation of religion-related terms in Japan and beyond. The translation of Shimaji's *Critique of the Three Standards of Instruction* in the appendix will enable students and specialists alike to access an important text of Japanese intellectual history. As the author explains, Shimaji "was a prominent member of a Buddhist reform movement that came to embrace all of modern Asia" (p. 15). This thought-provoking statement begs further clarification, and it is to be hoped that this study will prompt further research on this seminal historical figure.

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Reviewed by Mick Deneckere