Premodern Secularism

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This article argues that secularism is not an exclusively modern phenomenon, but is rather a recurring pattern which arises throughout different periods of premodern and modern history. I begin with a *longue durée* overview of Japanese history as a case study, proposing a regime of such historical cycles over a 1,200-year period. I then focus on changes in religious-political relations which occurred in one specific, important cycle, through the transition from the late medieval into the early modern period. I argue that this period ushered in a new form of political-religious relations where Neo-Confucianism, instead of Buddhism, for the first time represented the religious element in Japanese politics. I demonstrate how this early modern regime of political-religious interaction supported by Neo-Confucianism was particularly stable and functioned to support public discourse. In conclusion, the article notes the destruction of this early modern form of political-religious relations during East Asian modernization, and suggests that the continuing lack of a stable regime of political-religious relations in both contemporary China and Japan can be seen as an ongoing legacy of that destruction.

Keywords: Confucianism, Neo-Confucianism, Buddhism, public sphere, political religion, early modern history, early modernity

[The Master] sacrificed to the dead as if they were present. He sacrificed to the spirits, as if the spirits were present.[1]

For over two thousand years, people in East Asia have thought about religious ritual in these "as if" terms. This reflective, relativizing consideration of the sociality of core ritual practices was identified with Confucius in one of the founding texts of the tradition, and institutionalized within an imperial state-sanctioned canon in the Han Dynasty (206BC–220AD). It has functioned ever since as an established, mainstream way for the East Asian elite to think about what we would today call the nexus between politics and religion. East Asian premodernity thus had at its political, intellectual, and religious heart a relativization of ritual practice which invited interpretation in instrumentalist, agnostic, pluralist, reflexive and reflective terms.

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1 *Confucius Analects*, Bayi (translation in Legge 1983, 3/12).

So much for Charles Taylor's idea of a premodern "era of naïve religious faith."[2] East Asian society, elite society at least, seems to have already had a "reflective" approach to religion well before the common era. Seeing a reflective attitude sits at the heart of Taylor's preferred (third) definition of the secular, and as it is patently clear that East Asian conceptions of belief and ritual were reflective, and even relativist, does this not mean that premodern East Asian society was, at least if we follow Taylor's definition, already "secular"?[3]

Of course, Taylor's vision of premodernity as an "era of naïve religious faith" could just as well be problematized from the perspective of European history, and perhaps make similar claims.[4] Taylor is very open in his book that his theories do not stand for any "world" other than that of "Western civilization."[5] Even in that world, however, one wonders if reality gels with his vision of a "naïve" religiosity which, through the use of a couple of nonrepresentative examples like Hieronymus Bosch, he alleges held for the entire history of a kind of flattened West-European premodernity.[6] I would suggest that Taylor's position is actually only a slight detour from the stereotypical modernist vision of the premodern Western world where a naïve religious vision bereft of all reflectivity and rationality was only brought to an end through one of the twin triumphs of either the Enlightenment or Protestantism, or most often a conflation of the two. Taylor's small amendment to this usual narrative of modernist West-European triumphalism is simply to replace Protestantism with a progressive Catholic-inflected vision of "humanism," which Taylor links historically to the rise of Deism.[7] This vision offered up by Taylor is simply a light progressive Catholic inflection of a familiar modernist Western narrative.

If we accept, however, the view from some intellectual historians of Europe that Deism itself was at least partly the outcome of the Jesuit transmission of Confucian ideas from China to Europe in the seventeenth century, then we can see Confucianism striking back even in the European background to Taylor's Deist-influenced definition of "secularism."[8] The kind of pragmatic and highly relativized vision of religiosity we see in much of Confucianism was not only an earlier manifestation of what Taylor now calls Western secularism, but perhaps even part of its historic origin. It might be interesting to reflect upon whether modernist ideas of secularism, both those of Taylor and the original more obviously politicized sectarian Protestant outlooks he amends, are not all ultimately descended genealogically (through late Deism) from East Asian tradition, and Confucianism in particular. But let us leave that for another article.

What the above discussion most certainly illustrates is that secularism, secularity, and secularization are all very slippery and highly politicized concepts. There is only one aspect shared by (nearly) all definitions of these: they arise together (sometimes in a causal relationship) with the global rise of a range of new sociopolitical constellations around the world that we now label *modern*. There are plenty of writers who see secularism as a bad thing, but even they criticize it as part of the modern, usually through a religious critique

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2 Taylor 2007, pp. 11, 19.
3 Taylor 2007, pp. 4, 20.
4 For one of many such problematizations from historians of medieval European religion, see Marty 2008.
5 Taylor 2007, p. 15.
6 Again, see Marty 2008.
7 Taylor 2007, p. 19.
8 Whelan 2009, p. 33.

of an imagined secularized (or secularizing) modernity. Both critics and supporters thereby usually describe secularism as a destination somewhere towards the end of a linear narrative of historical developmentalism. Usually it is part of an ultimate modern destination (what was once Fukuyama's end of history); sometimes it is an attribute of a modernity being surpassed in a more religiously reviving postmodern; but it is always modern.

This article posits the possibility of secularism not being only a modern phenomenon, and not coming into being only through linear historical developments. It casts secularism as a recurring pattern that arises during processes of social upheaval. This article firstly presents a *longue durée* overview of Japanese history, proposing a regime of such historical cycles and defending it in general terms. It then focuses on changes in religious-political relations which occurred in one important cycle, through the transition from what historians usually call the late medieval into the early modern period of Japanese history. I conclude the article by considering how an analysis of this history might inform a more creative, useful, and transculturally applicable vision of secularism in relation to modern Japan, East Asia, and the modern world more broadly. The case study presented here involves Japanese history, but I would contend that the historical pattern described here holds also for at least China, and probably also for many other societies.

All definitions of secularism in recent scholarship similarly accept that religion is always present in human society, and always relates to the political in some way or other.[9] Secularism has in recent scholarship thus universally become a term through which the *nature* of that interaction is discussed. Secularism is no longer seen as positing any kind of absence of religion in totality, something I think we all now agree has never occurred at any time in the history of human society.[10] In short, "secularism," for the purposes of this article, is a term used to discuss dynamic changes in the regimes which govern the nature of interaction between the political and religious.

At least for East Asia it seems clear that historical actors on the ground, already from the Han dynasty at the very latest, understood that religious action was a major constitutive part of politics, and discussed it as such. The quote from *Confucius Analects* which opens this article is just one of hundreds of examples available from the classical canons of East Asian religion and politics. These quotes indeed often form part of systematic schemes or regimes for the mediation of the role of religious ritual, belief, and practice in constituting a stable political order in East Asia. Relatively stable regimes of interaction between politics and religion have existed in East Asia since at least the Han dynasty. The formulation of the earliest stable Japanese states was also achieved in large part through borrowings from these same religiously plural, yet structurally deeply Confucian, trans-Asian regimes for the mediation of religious beliefs, affiliations, groups, rites, and practices in imperial statecraft.[11]

The Cycles of Secularism
Organized Japanese states—the political of the political-religion nexus—emerged for the first time in an organized enough form to earn that name sometime in the middle of the first millennium A.D. Mythological, pseudo-historical, and historical records all indicate

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9 Habermas 2008, 2010; Casanova 1994, 2012.
10 Such a consensus is represented in major multi-author works like Calhoun 2011.
11 See Paramore 2016a.

negotiation, controversy, and violence emerging around the settlement of one central question in the formation of these states: how should the political and religious interact? Importantly, these narratives all thereby assumed a conceptual differentiation between political and religious realms, which then in turn provided the basis for dynamic social action (including war) and the understanding of that action through the construction of historical narrative—for instance, in the *Kojiki* 古事記, *Nihon shoki* 日本書紀, and *Shoku Nihongi* 続日本記, all of which narrate war in politico-religious terms.[12]

The important point to make here is that the conceptual separation of the political and religious is clearly not a modern phenomenon.[13] Separation was perceived, institutionalized, and bitter; deadly political conflicts were fought out around the negotiation of a scheme to mediate those separated fields. Wars between the Mononobe and Soga (sixth century), or between Empress Shōtoku and her enemies (eighth century), or much later between radical Nichiren and traditional politico-religious forces did not see each side argue for either the complete abolition of religion from the political, or a complete sacralization of the political. They rather centered upon conflict between *competing regimes* for how those realms should be mediated. The conceptual existence of two realms was never in doubt.

Stabilization of the Japanese capital both politically and geographically in the Heian period (794–1185) included the establishment of what I would call the first *longue durée* cycle of Japanese secularism. That regime rested on the establishment of institutions and institutional practices which both separated and linked the imperial court and a number of Buddhist monastic institutions. This settled regime of interaction, although sometimes challenged, was relatively stable from the ninth through to the fifteenth century. The regime institutionalized religious-political relations through customs of interaction between a number of Buddhist clerical institutions (*sangha* 僧伽) and the aristocratic networks which constituted (or at least symbolized) the state. These customized, institutionalized regimes of relations included mutual participation in each other's rituals, movement of personnel between them (retirement of nobles into monasteries), and family relations between governing members of institutions. These custom-based institutionalizations of relations both created stable mediation and interaction between the two, but importantly also clearly demarked their differences every time such an interaction occurred.[14] This stable pattern of institutionally, culturally, and often biologically linked realms of *sangha* and aristocratic

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12 This is evident for instance in the conflicts narrated in *Nihon shoki* and *Kojiki* between the Soga and Mononobe (NST 1, NKBT 68, pp. 216–300), or in the eighth century between Empress Shōtoku and her enemies in *Shoku Nihongi* (SNKBT 14, pp. 174–443). Sometimes religious references are drawn directly from Confucian texts like the *Book of Rites*, notably in wars against "barbarian" *emishi* 蝦夷 in Northern Japan (NKBT 68, pp. 330–31). For a related discussion on the use of religion in defining military enemies of the state, see Ooms 2009, p. 168.

13 Kleine 2013. By conceptual, I do not mean linguistic. In this sense I use the word differently from Koselleck, who in my view has confused academic historians' thinking about the relationship between concepts and languages. In a very Indo-European-centric manner, and without much attention to linguistic research, Koselleck's research is based on the incorrect assumption that conceptualization occurs only through language. Psycholinguistic research makes clear that this is simply factually inaccurate (Nuyts and Pederson 1999). Concepts can exist across different linguistic representations, and psychologically are not necessarily initially formed or transferred through language.

14 Adolphson 2000, pp. 21–50.

power can be observed not only in Japan, but also in many other Buddhist-influenced countries through global history.[15]

Intriguingly, the final collapse of court rule and the rise of warrior shogunal governments at the end of the twelfth century barely interrupted this pattern. Rather, the same customs and methods of *sangha*-state integration were incorporated by the new ruling samurai nobility of the Kamakura shogunate, which also then integrated the new Zen clerical institutions along similar lines.[16] The fact that the new political order of shogunate rule, and the new religious movements related to Zen, both fitted themselves into the existent regime of political-religious relations is remarkable proof of its perceived cultural embeddedness and political efficacy.

If we substitute the definite pragmatism of samurai political culture for the alleged rationality of the so-called European "enlightenment," then this kind of stable relationship between the religious and political realms as the fulcrum of social order during the Kamakura shogunate could be said to conform to Habermas's recent definition of secularism as "a two-fold learning process that compels the traditions of the Enlightenment and religious teachings to reflect on each other's limits." [17] Of course, in premodern Japan it was the aristocratic and warrior nobility rather than the enlightenment that formed the rational end of the equation. But surely warrior culture provided a much more concrete historical vehicle for the kind of rational and pragmatic political pluralism Habermas would project than the imagined normative value attached to such a fake historical-ideological construction as "*the* enlightenment."

The Medieval to Early Modern Transition
This long lasting regime of religious-political interaction, however, was finally brought to an end in the late fifteenth century with the rise of new visions of how the political and religious should be integrated. As in the early reformation movements of fifteenth and sixteenth century Europe, so too in Japan these visions often emerged from lay commoner religious affiliates, in concert with hierarchically lower-level religious institutions, who imagined a renewed and broadened vision of religious practice playing a role in challenging both the old religious institutionalism, and its symbiotic relationship with the establishment of worldly power and status.

The most dramatic examples of this kind of movement in Japan were the *Ikkō ikki* 一向 一揆. *Ikkō ikki* were federated peasant states which arose independently of warrior (samurai) lord rule in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and were related to each other through their shared practice of Shin Buddhism. Despite being identified by the word *ikki* 一揆, more usually used to describe short outbreaks of local revolt, *Ikkō ikki* were in many parts of Japan long running, fully functioning, stable units of governance: states that ruled for as long as a century. Parallels with early Protestant reformism include their disengagement (on the ground in the *Ikkō ikki* states themselves) from religious institutionalism, the links to an alternate social class of political leaders (in this case, wealthier peasants instead of samurai nobles), and a more immediate and independent soteriology. The *Ikkō ikki* marked

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15 Strathern 2007; Harris 2007.
16 Collcutt 1981; Bodiford 1993.
17 Habermas 2008, p. 102.

the end of the old order not so much because they offered a vision of a new regime of political-religious relations—after all, such visions had been presented before. Rather, the *Ikkō ikki* were different as an historical phenomenon because they sustained—sometimes for a century—a competing regime, thereby demonstrating its stability and presenting a persistent challenge to the old regime. That stability was particularly challenging for the old regime because it revealed that the old regime itself, represented both through its constituent orthodox Buddhist religious institutions (monastic, *sangha*), and traditional political centers (court and shogunate), was no longer capable of functioning as the center of either political rule or religious life in Japan.[18]

Despite the *Ikkō ikki* being a real alternate political order which did function and survive for a long period of time, it was never national in scope, nor did it ever establish harmonious patterns of interaction with other powerful interests in society, like the samurai and court nobilities. The *Ikkō ikki* always remained an alternative form, particularly in terms of its radically different organization of social class. A new regime of political-religious relations could not be realized under the *Ikkō ikki* ultimately because the *Ikkō ikki* were defeated in the military battles which finally unified Japan politically in the late 1500s. Protestantism in Europe prevailed in establishing new dynamics of political-religious interaction primarily because Protestants were militarily victorious on a large enough scale and in many cases with armies led and funded by the new rising social classes that associated with the religious movement. In Japan, the peasant-led *Ikkō ikki* states were instead crushed by newly hegemonic military overlords, who reasserted a samurai dominated order, but in a new, much more hegemonic and centralized structure. This also led to the establishment of a new regime of political-religious interaction, one perhaps triggered by the challenge of movements like the *Ikkō ikki*, but not realized through them.

In an outcome very different to what happened in many parts of early modern Europe, the religious reform movements and their class allies did not win the military conflict in Japan. Reformist religious movements, the religious side of the religious-political equation, did not lead to the creation of a new regime of interaction; rather, the reverse occurred. They were instead crushed by new samurai hegemons who represented a strengthening of the political power in relation to the traditional religious institutions. All three of the unifying hegemons of Japan—Oda Nobunaga, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, and Tokugawa Ieyasu—each more than the other looked to bring the traditional *sangha* institutions under stricter state control, just as they harnessed other organized social groups like merchant guilds, the imperial court aristocrats, and outcaste associations. This then was a complete change of the regime of interaction, but one carried out in reverse of what happened in Europe. Instead of the religious reformers originating a new settlement, the new settlement was imposed by those political leaders who militarily defeated the reformers. This is what Maruyama Masao has referred to as Japan's process of early modern secularization, which he saw leading to complete state domination of the religious realm:

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18 Souyri 2001.

This process gave birth to early modern systems of control, bringing religious power in general into confrontation with secular authority, religious influence in the end becoming completely subordinated to the latter in one of history's great moments of change.[19]

Note that the European historiography that describes the triumph of Protestant reform in the political field in Europe, and the Japanese historiography that describes the total annihilation of religious-led reform in Japan, both characterize these very different outcomes as processes of early modern "secularization." This is because both changes involved a process through which the interaction between the political and religious was totally changed. One "secularization" represented the transformation of political authority by a religious reform movement; the other represented the crushing of religious reform by resurgent political authority. While in Europe the narrative has secularization arising from religious reform impacting on the political, in Japan the narrative casts secularization as the act of political hegemons harnessing the religious.

Early Modern Secularism

So what was the new regime of religious-political interaction that marked out early modernity in Japan? Was the long-term early modern settlement really what Maruyama implied—absolute state domination of religion, which fed into and underlay the (in his view, distorted) processes of Japanese political modernization in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries? I would suggest that even Maruyama's own work demonstrates that not to be true. Maruyama's first book, *Studies in the Intellectual History of Tokugawa Japan*, made clear the religious and political dynamism of the early modern period in this field of religious and political interaction.[20] Crucially, however, he discussed this interaction mainly through reference to Confucian political thought, not Buddhism. I would suggest, therefore, that this complete state domination articulated by Maruyama only lasted through a transitional period of a few decades at most. Thereafter, and slowly arising throughout the course of the seventeenth century, there emerged a new but familiar reflective relationship between the two separate but socially interconnected fields of religiosity and politics, and this relationship was relatively stable for nearly two centuries thereafter. The reason this new regime is often overlooked is that it was no longer realized through Buddhism, but rather primarily (although not at all exclusively) through Confucian religiosity. This was mainly because, while Buddhism was targeted for heavy regulation and state integration, Confucianism, despite a few half-hearted attempts at suppression in the early 1600s, was left comparatively unhindered by the state for most of the Tokugawa period. Maruyama's view that religion was shackled during the early modern period holds only if you equate religion in Japan with Buddhism, something many scholars unconsciously do. But if we expand our vision of religion to include Neo-Confucianism, then the picture looks very different.

Yes, Buddhist institutions were shackled as never before and integrated under state power through a new regulatory scheme that involved policies like compulsory temple registration. But there was another religious movement. In social and political history terms,

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19 Maruyama 2000, p. 120.
20 Maruyama 1952, 1974.

from the Song dynasty onwards across East Asia, Neo-Confucianism had increasingly become the new Buddhism, or as Liang Qichao 梁啓超 endearingly called it over a hundred years ago, "Buddhism in Confucian clothes."[21] Maruyama was right that the Tokugawa state, through its systems of regulation following closely on the heels of violent suppression, had shackled Buddhism. But he did not realize that in early modern East Asia the religion playing Buddhism's traditional role was no longer Buddhism, but actually Neo-Confucianism. In Tokugawa Japan, as in Song and Ming China, religiosity was seen increasingly not through Buddhist institutions, but through a very different kind of less institutionalized social integration of Confucianism and related traditions. This social integration resonates with patterns of early modernity throughout global history, being based in *bürgerlich*, socially integrated but relatively loose urban middle-class institutions like reading circles, discussion groups, and informal schools, rather than in the traditional, premodern, more heavily institutionalized monasteries and temples of traditional Buddhism.

The new way that Neo-Confucianism was perceived in religious terms in the early Tokugawa period is most clearly demonstrated by the suppression of Confucianism that prevailed under the early Tokugawa state. Arai Hakuseki 新井白石, a major mid-Tokugawa Confucian, described it in the following way:

> Under the previous [first four] shoguns, even superior persons mistook those who spoke about Confucianism for followers of Christianity. This was the situation until I first began to study.[22]

As Bodart-Bailey has used this quote from Arai Hakuseki to explain, and as I have discussed using earlier examples, serious suppression of religion during the first decades of Tokugawa rule focused to a large extent on Neo-Confucianism.[23] It was a suppression which clearly perceived Neo-Confucianism as similar to such traditions as Catholicism, as well as militarist and way of heaven thought and populist trends in Buddhism. It is quite clear that members of the elite in early Tokugawa Japan saw Neo-Confucianism primarily as a form of religiosity, in parallel with Buddhism and Christianity. In identifying Neo-Confucianism in religious terms, suppressors of religion clearly saw similarities with both Catholicism and state-proscribed forms of populist Buddhism.

Importantly, the Confucianism that emerged from this brief period of suppression, and continued virtually unhindered by political forces until the Meiji Restoration, was also highly religious in nature. This has been emphasized in much recent Japanese scholarship on the early modern period. Over the last three decades, Japanese scholars of seventeenth-century history have described it as arising out of a general milieu of religious activity that actually emphasized "the individual's way of living in real society," "the nature of the subject's individual morals, rather than aspects of social system, organization or structure."[24] In other words, Confucianism's sociality in the very early Tokugawa period, when it first emerged into popular culture, is currently seen in mainstream Japanese scholarship as the

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21 Liang 1985, p. 7.
22 Arai 1907, p. 550; Bodart-Bailey 1993, p. 300.
23 Bodart-Bailey 1993; Paramore 2009, pp. 78–102.
24 Bitō 1993, pp. 32–35.

product of a tension between Neo-Confucianism's regimes of individualized practice on the one hand, and the reality of the Tokugawa political order on the other.

Ōkuwa Hitoshi 大桑斉, one of the most important contemporary writers on medieval and early modern Japanese religion, recently argued that the rise of Confucianism in seventeenth-century Japan should be explained in terms of popular demand for the kind of religiosity that Neo-Confucianism was able to provide. Rather than being an imposition by the state, seventeenth century Japanese forms of Confucianism and Confucian-indigenous syncretism responded to the norms of the general population, whose "daily lives relied on religion."[25] In this narrative, the embracing of Neo-Confucian religious sensibilities was key to the sudden and meteoric rise of Confucianism in early Tokugawa Japan. Neo-Confucianism afforded a new kind of individual-centric moral religious practice in Japan where an inherently political (although usually not governing) character often obtained. In this political, as well as religious sense, it came to fill the spaces left by the *Ikkō ikki* insurgencies, Catholicism, other supressed popular religious traditions, and even the traditional Buddhist sects now shackled by Tokugawa regulation.

The development of Confucianism through the Tokugawa period, and notably the way it interacted with politics, exhibited a strong religious character. Its most powerful and persistent religious elements were the various regimes for the practice of Neo-Confucian self-cultivation, which were emphasized in nearly every different Confucian tendency in this period.[26] Self-cultivation also provided a framework for thinking about the nature of political-religious relations or, put simply, the relationship between Confucian practitioners and the feudal state. As Watanabe Hiroshi 渡辺浩 has pointed out, Neo-Confucian self-cultivation seems to have facilitated Confucian influence upon politics, while also highlighting moral separation from it. He sees both being established and maintained through a regime of religious-political relations ordered through acts of self-discipline and social compartmentalization, carried out by Confucians themselves as part of a Neo-Confucian religious practice. Watanabe contrasts this to the actions of later Sorai school 徂徠学 Confucians, attributing their relative political disengagement and weakness after Ogyū Sorai's 荻生徂徠 own death in 1728 to their lack of self-cultivation practice.[27] Western-language literature often overlooked the fact that during the late Tokugawa period Neo-Confucianism, or Song learning, was not only increasingly popular, but also much more politically activist, radical, and effective than Sorai Confucianism, but this has recently been reemphasized in scholarly writings by both Watanabe and Maeda Tsutomu 前田勉.[28]

As Maeda has pointed out, however, Sorai Confucianism also created other important *practices* which would increasingly affect politics in the late Tokugawa period. The practice of "social reading" (*kaidoku* 会読), although seemingly established in Sorai's school, was most ardently taken up by Neo-Confucians in the latter half of the eighteenth century, and was also very popular as a pedagogically, socially, and politically central form of critical

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25 Ōkuwa 2012, p. 114.

26 Paramore 2016b, pp. 41–65; Sawada 1993, 2004; De Bary 1981, 1989.

27 Watanabe 2012, p. 185.

28 Watanabe 2010, 2012; Maeda 2009, 2012; Makabe 2007.

practice among many other forms of Tokugawa learning, notably in Dutch studies and nativism.[29]

Ogyū Sorai's critical stance towards Neo-Confucianism is usually emphasized in scholarly considerations of his impact on Tokugawa society. However, the main new scholarly practice he implemented was social reading, which was perhaps even more influential. For Ogyū himself it was a core method of reaching the religious truth of the Confucian way. Ogyū mentioned social reading in his instructions for students, *Master Sorai's Responsals* (*Sorai sensei tōmonsho* 徂徠先生答問書), a pamphlet published in 1726. Following his overall methodology of recovery of the ancient way, Ogyū described pedagogy here as a kind of ritualized attempt to recreate the scholarly practice of idealized ancient times.

> In ancient times they used the word "friend-master [master *and* friend]." Through the cultivation of friendship they spread knowledge and advanced learning.… A school atmosphere permeated by friendly exchange was the most important element [in the ideal educational practices of the ancients].[30]

Social reading is mentioned fairly shortly after this in another passage discussing the method through which texts should be read.

> When one meets with people from the same town and carries out social reading amongst a group of friends, then sometimes East will be mentioned and East will be understood. In far-flung places, where one lacks the support of friends, scholarship cannot be undertaken very easily.[31]

Here Ogyū is talking about how to approach a text, but his key point is that the participant in social reading should not seek to use the group dynamic simply to push earlier views, but rather through cooperation and discussion to arrive at *new* understandings. This is what underlay the technique's capacity to facilitate political discussion within scholarly communities in Japan through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[32] Social reading, both in practice and in its original conception by Ogyū, thus resonates with more contemporary ideas of reasonable discussion we can see in works on the public sphere by much more recent political philosophers like Habermas.[33]

Later state institutionalization of social reading further demonstrated the relationship between the openness to interpretation inherent in this practice, and the political potential of public sphere discourse that some Confucians saw as inherent within it. Although first launched in Sorai's schools, social reading was institutionalized most powerfully by Neo-Confucian scholars who competed *against* the Sorai school during the late-eighteenth

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29 Maeda 2009, pp. 13–25.

30 NKBT 94, p. 171.

31 NKBT 94, p. 173; Ogyū and Yamashita 1994, p. 93.

32 See also Janine Sawada's connection of Sorai's invention of social reading to Jinsai's earlier use of *sakumon* 策問 (the posing of problems) and Ishida Baigan's 石田梅岩 later organization of "support meetings" (Sawada 1993, pp. 91–94).

33 Habermas 1989.

century state reforms led by Matsudaira Sadanobu 松平定信. Bitō Jishū 尾藤二洲, a Confucian scholar originally based in the Kansai, and later one of Matsudaira's key professorial appointees at the Shogunal Confucian Academy (Shōheizaka Gakumonjo 昌平坂学問所) in Edo, linked the practice of social reading to the Neo-Confucian Zhu Xi 朱熹 idea of the "impartial mind" (Jp. *kyoshin*; Ch. *xuxin* 虚心).[34] This was picked up in the way domainal school ordinances (which, in comparison to most private school ordinances, have been better preserved in state archives) described social reading.

> When one is carrying out social reading, one must maintain an impartial mind and a balanced mood so that this practice benefits you. You should not emphasize convincing others of a previously held position or adopt an argumentative tone of voice.[35]

This example from the regulations of the Kōbe domain school Kyōrindō 杏林堂 shows "social reading" being deployed by Neo-Confucians not only as an intellectual, pedagogical, and communicative technique, but also as a form of self-cultivation. Many other references of this kind indicate that, at least by the turn of the nineteenth century, social reading was the standard approach to education in the resurgent network of Neo-Confucian schools in Japan. The adoption of this practice by Neo-Confucian schools is important, not only because the new state institutions and examinations were all run by Neo-Confucians, but also because the domainal and private Neo-Confucian schools in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries experienced a resurgence of popularity at the expense of Sorai school institutions.[36]

The later social interpretations of social reading thus also led to a combination of educative public practice with individual religious practice in mid to late Tokugawa Neo-Confucianism. The combination provided a robust basis for individual engagement with the public sphere in the Tokugawa order. The same figures who were central in institutionalizing "social reading" practice into state schools also cut down on practices like "lecturing," which were more hierarchical and only facilitated one-way communication. As Shibano Ritsuzan 柴野栗山, another Shogunal Confucian Academy professor put it, "they [samurai] don't listen to lectures, no matter what you are saying."[37] In this sense, Matsudaira Sadanobu can be seen to have played a role in further spreading and strengthening practices associated with the growth of a public sphere discourse around Confucianism, or in the construction of what we might call a Confucian public sphere.

Bitō Jishū, defining the way around the turn of the nineteenth century, used the word that is now used in modern Japanese to refer to "publicness."[38]

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34 Maeda 2009, pp. 26–27.
35 Monbusho 1903, p. 110.
36 Ishikawa 1977, pp. 256–58.
37 Shibano, in Takimoto 1914, p. 143.
38 Bitō uses the character *kō* 公, which at the time most often signified the state (domain or lord, shogunate or shogun). The context of its use here, however, demonstrates that the term was already moving towards the modern meaning of "public," as is indicated by Bitō linking it directly, together with Heaven and Earth, to the universal and normative value of (inherently good) human nature (*sei* 性).

The way is the Principle of Heaven, Earth, and the Public. People receive this through human nature. The sages made learning to cultivate this.… Without the impartial mind, the way cannot be elucidated. Without a balanced mood, it cannot be related to substantial issues. You cannot construct the way with [just] impartiality and balance. But in order to advance the way one must most definitely begin with impartiality and balance.[39]

It was clear his idea of an "impartial mind," and its relationship to discussion of controversial issues, was central to his conception of the political way, which for him was intimately related to Confucian education.[40] The openness and reasonableness inherent in this approach resonates with contemporary theories of thinkers like Habermas or Rawls, who rely on "reasonableness" in public debate as one of the core preconditions necessary for a functional public sphere.[41]

An example of how robust political criticism had become by the late eighteenth century is provided by a widely distributed memorial written by Koga Seiri 古賀精里 to his feudal lord. Koga was at the time head of the Saga domain's academy, and very soon after was appointed one of the leaders of the shogunal academy in Edo.

As our country is under a regime of generals, the path of selection/election is closed. Particularly in domains such as ours [Saga], the damage of the hereditary system is not to be avoided. Those with hereditary status are negligent, and those without do not serve. This is why the spirit of the gentleman/samurai cannot be enacted, and why custom can so degenerate.[42]

Orthodox state Neo-Confucians of the mid and late Tokugawa period, like Koga, were a far cry from fawning lackeys like Hayashi Razan 林羅山. There had been a clear change in the nature of discourse, so that even state-aligned scholars were now in a position to criticize trenchantly the underlying structures of the polity in certain circumstances and media. But they were also capable, usually, of tempering their opinions, of withdrawing to a reasonable, sustainable position of engagement with the reality of the polity. As Maeda Tsutomu and Watanabe Hiroshi have both recently pointed out, this tempering allowed late Tokugawa Neo-Confucians to sustain their social critique over a long period. Mid to late Tokugawa period Neo-Confucianism in particular, more so than other intellectual streams or forms of Confucianism in Japan, developed a robust capacity to sustain public debate over a range of issues, including issues in tension with Tokugawa state policy.[43]

Neo-Confucian figures in the Japanese Confucian world of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as diverse as Rai Shunsui 頼春水, Rai San'yō 頼山陽, Koga Seiri, Koga Tōan 古賀侗庵, Bitō Jishū, and Shibano Ritsuzan all managed to combine

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39 NST 47, pp. 261–67.
40 On the difference between the meaning of publicness in the late Tokugawa period and today, see Watanabe 2012, pp. 51–52.
41 Rawls's linkage of rationality and goodness in *A Theory of Justice* resonates with the particular articulation of Neo-Confucianism we see in the late Tokugawa shogunate (Rawls 1999, pp. 347–90).
42 Koga in Takimoto 1914, p. 160.
43 Maeda 2009, pp. 24–25; Watanabe 2012, pp. 181–95.

Confucian activity and later often high office in the emerging state academic institutions with sometimes trenchant critiques of the status quo. This required a combination of reasonableness and practicality, which Watanabe relates to their practice of self-cultivation, entailing as it did self-discipline and also the hope of attaining a state of grace on an individual level, even if activity in the social world (externalized political activity) was not working out.[44]

In short, through the early modern period, Japan increasingly evolved into a stable regime where Neo-Confucianism functioned as the religious element in an increasingly institutionalized stable interrelation between the religious and the political. This regime of course came to an abrupt end with the overthrow of the Tokugawa state, and most notably with the deliberate and targeted attacks on Confucianism and Confucian institutions that followed quickly on its heels. The early Meiji state's disestablishment of Confucian institutions, its appropriation of Confucian sites and spaces, and then its deliberate undermining of the tradition in a variety of ways thereafter followed the general antireligious program carried out against Buddhist and other religious groups.[45] This is again proof that Confucianism at the end of the Tokugawa period, just as at its beginning, was clearly perceived by actors on the ground as similar to other religious traditions, and targeted accordingly. As I have argued elsewhere, the damage to Confucianism was much worse than that done to Buddhism, mainly because the Meiji state displaced Confucianism more comprehensively both from its traditional spaces of practice, and from its traditionally key role in education.[46]

Epilogue

For the story of political-religious relations after Meiji, and the emergence of new regimes, I refer the reader to other articles in this special issue. One simple observation I would make is that once Confucianism was gone, no happy balance ever seems to have been found again. Instead the religious sphere represented, and continues to represent, a politically unstable and potentially disruptive element in general society. Intriguingly, this is the case not only in Japan, but also in other East Asian countries, most notably in China. I see this as a direct result of the crushing of the mutually supportive regime of religious-political interaction facilitated by Confucianism. Buddhism, having been displaced from that role already four hundred years earlier, could not play that role in modern Japan and does not today. Meanwhile, no replacement has been found for Confucianism. The modern conceptualization of religion in East Asia inherently excludes rationalism and politics—an important reason why Confucianism itself is often excluded from the category of religion in East Asia, and also why East Asian states tend to be so ambivalent toward religion in general. The modern conception of religion in East Asia is thereby almost inherently designed to exclude a harmonious political-religious integrative regime. But again, that is another topic.

What was missing after modernization was the mediation of the political by the religious, previously carried out through activist Confucianism. This meant that the

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44 Watanabe 2012, p. 185.
45 Makabe 2007, pp. 23–27; Ketelaar 1990.
46 Paramore 2016b, pp. 141–49.

religious side of the political-religious interaction, and the social and political reflectiveness this represented, died as its institutional bases in education were monopolistically occupied by the new modern state. This occupation was what created the kind of secularism Maruyama was referring to, which I would characterize not as state domination of the religious, but rather as state monopolization of the fields of critical political expression and education that Confucianism had previously occupied. This destruction of a stable regime of political-religious relations, and the continuing vacuum it has created, contributed to the collapse of the public sphere in the modern period, and continues its impoverishment in the contemporary period.

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