

# Wandering Spirits and Temporary Corpses: Studies in the History of Japanese Religious Tradition

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## PREFACE

In March 1995, just after the Aum Shinrikyō organization staged its sarin nerve gas attack on the Tokyo subways, I received numerous requests for comments on the incident. At that time, almost all of the journalists who contacted me confided, in answer to my query, that they were “atheists.” To a certain extent, this response was predictable. Most of the scholars and intellectuals around me not only routinely conducted their lives as though they were atheist, but seemed to expect that I would be aware of their attitudes and in fact share them. I have long wondered, however, whether most contemporary Japanese are actually “atheists.” While hazy attitudes generally regarded as “atheistic” are quite common, genuine atheism as a considered conviction is surely rare. The theoretical and philosophical atheism found in the West, expressed by such figures as Dostoyevsky and Nietzsche, has not been highly developed in Japan. Rather, the atheism of the modern Japanese might be characterized as practical—a simple lack of concern with religion—and not the kind of radical atheism arrived at after realizing the “death” of Buddha or God.

As I was reflecting on this situation, an English-language publication asked me for an article on the background of the Aum Shinrikyō incident, and I decided to write on this question of the atheistic attitudes of contemporary Japanese.<sup>1</sup> Upon publication of the article, I received a number of unanticipated responses from abroad. One letter that surprised me came from a prisoner in a Utah state penitentiary; another was a request from an American junior college

asking permission to use the article in a class. The letter from the prisoner was somewhat difficult to grasp, but it seems he was a member of a new religious movement identified as “Surdism,” with which I was completely unfamiliar. According to the letter, the word “surd” has the meaning of “mute” or “silent.” Members of the Surdist movement observe silence “as though deaf-mutes,” basing themselves upon a species of anti-rationalism.

According to the letter, the major theme of this religious movement is the choice between the immanence and transcendence of the sacred. It stated that in the Christian world, immanence has often been regarded as pagan or atheistic in orientation. Nevertheless, the notion of a transcendent God loses its attraction in marshland regions. In reality, it is the immanence of paganism that is the truth, and the orientation toward transcendence is delusional. Further, the believer in immanence who keeps the silence of a deaf-mute is not a simple pantheist, much less an atheist, for in the world of immanence, all things in existence possess the luminosity of their own solemn dignity. The letter writer asserted that absorption in profound immanence had nothing in common with atheism or the denial of religion, and that he could therefore respond to my article with a feeling of affinity for Japanese civilization.

I sensed from this letter the difficulty of belief in immanence within a worldview rooted in transcendent monotheism, but at the same time I wondered how this issue might be seen from the perspective of Japan. Viewed historically, the present atheistic attitude of many Japanese represents a distorted self-understanding that is clearly the product of various pressures from outside. Earlier I mentioned the response I received from journalists at the forefront of the media. In Japan, asking, “What is your religion?,” amounts in essence to a question of whether one is monotheistic or polytheistic, or whether one is Christian or Buddhist. It has an aggressive edge reflecting the historical circumstances of either the Christian age during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries or the Meiji period at the end of the nineteenth century. During the former period, the question was put to people in line with the policies of religious persecution and isolationism of the

Tokugawa period. During the nineteenth century, it resounded throughout Japanese society in unison with the footsteps of "the advance of civilization," against the backdrop of the opening of the country to Western civilization and the policies of modernization of the Meiji state. In this question is reflected the conception of religion fostered within modern European civil morality in a form that brooks no refusal.

As mentioned above, in Japan, the question of religion displays an attitude that presses for a clear and mutually exclusive choice between two alternatives in matters of religion or faith. It asks to which religion or denomination one exclusively belongs, and demands a personal decision. Moreover, its origins in Japan lie in Christian thinking, in the civilization introduced from across the seas. How have the Japanese responded to this question put by Western civilization? Reflecting on the traditional New Year's worship or the neighborhood shrine festival, should they answer that their religion is Shinto? Or recalling the visits to the graves of ancestors at the vernal and autumnal equinoxes and during the Obon observances, or the Buddhist funeral services, should they answer that they are Buddhists? At the same time, however, one may be perplexed about whether or not participation in such activities at shrines and temples really constitutes a deliberate choice of faith at all, and conclude that perhaps after all one is basically atheistic.

But even while answering that one is an atheist, one may be inwardly aware of having faith in both kami and buddhas, not in the form of a choice between them, but practically simultaneously. Moreover, one may be conscious that it is precisely here that lies the distinctive characteristic of the religious attitude of the Japanese. The traditional attitude has been one not of an exclusive choice between two alternatives, but of an acceptance of both. The awareness that such an attitude appears chaotic and without clear principles takes the form of self-criticism.

The notion of a mutually exclusive choice between two alternatives with regard to religion became the single mirror within which the Japanese discerned their own interior life. With the idea of a deliberate commitment to either one or the other as the standard, it became

habitual to view their spiritual life as one of subjective effacement in the choice between alternatives. Even though they were not Christian, they examined themselves as though they were by engaging the imposed question. Thus, a pattern of inverted self-awareness came to be established. The attitude of the Japanese might be described as a passive atheism that emerges from the attitude of subjective effacement. If the modern West developed a “hard” atheism, the Japanese version is a soft atheism, an ambiguous feeling. In terms of outlook, it gave rise to an attitude of indifference to religion.

There is one further point regarding the problem of atheism to be noted. There was also a letter from a reader in Ohio, the contents of which may be summarized as follows: In my article, the word “atheist” or “atheism” occurs frequently, and there are references to Buddhism, Christianity, and Shinto. The term “agnostic,” however, is not used at all. Why is this? The term agnostic indicates people who lack interest in religion and are non-religious secularists. Although many Japanese seem to be unfamiliar with the term agnostic, it appears that the “atheists” described in my article are in reality “agnostics”—that is, people who do not know whether or not God or gods exist and who have no particular interest in knowing.

I was somewhat shaken by the question regarding agnosticism raised in this letter from an American reader, for frankly I had not taken the notion into consideration. Agnosticism as a concept is readily comprehensible, but I wondered whether the issue arose in Japan in this form. After some thought, I published the following response:

In Japan, the word “agnosticism” (*fukachiron* 不可知論, literally, “the impossibility of knowing” whether or not divinities exist) is a strictly philosophical term, and most Japanese are unfamiliar with it. By contrast, “atheism” (*mushinron* 無神論, the assertion that there is “no God or gods”) is widely and commonly used. In the Christian world, when there is denial or doubt regarding the existence of God, perhaps it is natural to think that, since proof is impossible, the question is

unknowable and unresolvable. Among the Japanese, however, most of whom are inclined toward what is essentially a polytheism or pantheism, a tradition of theology or religious philosophy which argued or denied the existence of gods was not developed. Rather than in pondering whether or not God exists, the decisive factor has lain in whether or not one is able to apprehend or experience the existence of the divine. For the Japanese, atheism points to the condition of merely sensing that God seems not to exist. It was probably because of this that the Japanese did not feel easy with the term agnosticism either.<sup>2</sup>

Although this hardly seemed adequate regarding the questions about atheism and agnosticism, it was impossible for me to say more. I wished to emphasize, however, that for most Japanese, it was not the question of the existence or nonexistence of the sacred that was important, but rather the question of whether or not one was able to apprehend or experience its existence. In this connection, I am reminded of Terada Torahiko 寺田寅彦 (1878-1935), a physicist and authority on earthquakes who expressed distinctive insights into Japanese thinking about nature.

In the same year of the Aum Shinrikyō attack, the great Hanshin earthquake devastated the Kobe area. When the earthquake struck, my first thoughts were of Terada and his words, born from his long research in earthquakes, that “natural disasters occur about the time that they are forgotten.” In 1935, Terada wrote a long essay on “The View of Nature of the Japanese.” The previous year, he had published a widely discussed article on “natural disasters and national defense,” but the later article attracted little notice. Nevertheless, it is the latter article that grapples with the much more significant issue.<sup>3</sup>

In this essay, Terada notes first of all that while the natural environment in the West is relatively constant, in Japan it is highly unstable, and the people are frequently assailed by the threat of unpredictable forces such as earthquakes, tsunami waves, and typhoons. This experience nurtured a wisdom by which people sought to live in

obedience to the natural world and an attitude of humility that submitted to its forces. Thus, while Western science has often been hostile and domineering toward nature, science in Japan has tended to abandon any impulse of defiance against the often ferocious natural powers and came to be informed by the accumulation of experiential knowledge aimed at accommodating and symptomatic treatments.

It is surprising that Terada attained these insights already in the 1930s, at the beginning of the Shōwa era. He had probably acquired them through his experience as a scientist observing the great Kantō earthquake a little more than a decade before. What is of greatest importance in his thinking, however, is that he considered the character of nature in Japan not in terms of ten or fifty years, but over a span of five centuries or a millenium. Further, perhaps because of this perspective, he discerned in the Japanese attitude of submission to nature and accommodation to the environment elements in common with the Buddhist view of impermanence. He states that, having endured innumerable earthquakes and disasters of winds and floods through the ages, the Japanese evolved their own sense of "the impermanence in the world of nature." He states that in contrast to the arid regions that gave birth to monotheistic religions, in an infinitely varied and ever changing environment like Japan's, it was natural for myriads of gods to be born and worshiped, and for each mountain and river and tree to be perceived as a divinity and also human.

Numberless earthquakes and repeated devastations by winds and waters gave rise to a sense of impermanence in the world of nature, and through this sense of impermanence, the apprehension of divinities and humans in the mountains and rivers and trees came to be implanted in people's sensibility. Terada speaks here of humans and well as divinities dwelling in mountains, rivers, and trees, for he has in mind the ancient belief that when people die, they return to the bosom of nature, and gradually, with the passage of time, become gods. The gods and humans are not, of course, evinced logically, but are sensed by people as they kneel before nature. The gods and humans are fused everywhere with the natural environment that envelops our daily life, and though their

figures may be hidden, they are perceived as acquiring the embodiment of flesh and blood within nature itself. According to Terada, this sense of impermanence has “permeated the very organs and senses as a kind of hereditary memory from our distant ancestors.”

In Terada’s notion of a sense of “impermanence in the world of nature,” there emerges a sensitivity that is inseparable from the nebulous “atheistic feelings” noted above. This is the key, I think, for understanding the distinctive “atheism” of the Japanese. Earlier, I stated that this atheism does not have the character of actually denying divine existence. Nor is it an agnosticism that asserts the impossibility of knowing whether or not the divine exists. Once the forces of nature turn violent and frenzied, however, this atheistic attitude is forced into an awareness of impermanence that apprehends the power of divinities in the background of the natural environment. This ambiguous feeling of atheism is fused back to back with a highly sensitive perception of transience that discerns the stirrings of “divinities” in the depths of the natural world. However much it may resemble an atheistic attitude as long as matters are viewed with a consciousness of the everyday, once this everyday consciousness encounters a dangerous situation, it spontaneously and suddenly shifts to an unordinary consciousness that senses or feels the presence of the sacred. If the monotheistic Judeo-Christian traditions may be called religions of faith, perhaps it may be said that Japanese tradition has formed a religion of feeling or apprehension of the sacred.

One of the major themes I have sought to treat in this volume is the character of the perception of nature in Japanese tradition. This continues to be the experience of nature of the modern Japanese and may also be said to reflect their religious awareness. It holds the constant potential of reverting to atheistic tendencies of thought in the sense discussed above, and in cases may be misunderstood or falsely perceived as genuine atheism. In fact, however, it is more accurately grasped in terms of surface and depth strata or dimensions. In other words, the structure of this nebulous religious consciousness may be grasped as an atheistic outlook on the surface and a sense of the impermanence of the natural world in the depths.



The chapters of this volume do not necessarily focus directly on this issue, for they were written at various times and in accord with various concerns and interests. Nevertheless, the problem of a structure of awareness of two strata—surface and depth—has been constantly in mind. The question that arises here is whether or not this religious consciousness—an atheism on the surface and an apprehension of impermanence in the depths—has been a distinctive characteristic of the Japanese from ancient times. It is impossible to answer this question clearly, for there is little evidence that serves as proof. When such a framework of thought is provisionally erected, however, it may serve to highlight the nature of the traditional religious consciousness of the Japanese. In this sense, the articles gathered here may serve as a beginning for testing this theory.

What word should be used for this strange animal we call religion? If we prod it, it immediately withdraws and conceals itself. If we try to draw it out, we suddenly find that it fills heaven and earth and our own field of vision is lost. In the case of Japanese religious tradition, it remains ensconced within the earth, and releases only barely perceptible sounds of its wriggling. We may try frontal assaults and night raids, but still its countenance goes unseen. The usual, straightforward strategies are useless. There is nothing to be done but attempt to establish a bridge-head by guerrilla attack, something that might serve as a base.

The chapters of the present volume have been culled from various collections of articles. Throughout the process of selection I have been aided by the translator, Prof. Dennis Hirota. I would like to record my appreciation for his efforts in actualizing this book. Without his critical acumen and deep learning throughout the work of translation, this volume would not have been possible. Further, the book has greatly benefited from the editorial assistance of Prof. Patricia Fister and Mr. Takahashi Yu 高橋悠 of the International Research Center for Japanese Studies. To them both, I express my gratitude.

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