

An Introduction to the Research Topic

In the autumn of 1903, Fujimura Misao took his own life. In a farewell note, the university student explained that he could no longer make sense of things. The idea of suicide motivated by a philosophical crisis was quite a novelty in fin de siècle Japan. Fujimura's spectacular adieu to modernity thus caused quite a stir, revealing to many of his compatriots the spiritual instability of a Japan which, having been thrust onto the international stage, was striving to achieve equality with the Western powers. Even as the nation-state expanded, the Empire's intellectuals were on the quest for something that would give them inner sustenance.

For a time, many were drawn to Christian teachings. The strict moral code and dogmatic rigidity of contemporary Victorian Christianity made it, however, an alienating creed. As the spiritual basis of the West, the Christian faith also met with deep-seated inward resistance on the part of Japan's intellectuals. Nevertheless, the encounter with Christianity provided the impetus for a new understanding of and need for religion, both national and private. Thus, in Japan too, modernity is characterised by two seemingly contradictory aspects: on the one hand, by homage to materialism, the promotion of progress, and the endeavour to advance scientific enlightenment; on the other by the creation of a religious focus, devotion to the search for salvation, and efforts to achieve redemption for the individual within the framework of a new religious consciousness.

Despite modernity's mood of scientific enlightenment and its critical stance towards religion, it also contains, in both the West and Japan, a renaissance of the 'spiritual,' a yearning for 'spiritual tradition'. The fact that we find in Japan, during the decades before and after the turn of the century, considerable discussion about 'Oriental religiousness' or 'Eastern thinking' should be seen not as testimony to an unbroken line of tradition but rather as evidence that pre-modern modes of thinking had collapsed and that they needed to be reestablished.

Relevant here is the particularly striking phenomenon of 'self-orientalism': in the attempt to formulate an indigenous doctrine on a par with Christianity, a picture of 'Oriental religiousness' is constructed as a mirror image of orientalizing frameworks of 'Eastern thinking' in the West, to which Westerners had appealed as a means to escape the evils of mechanical civilisation, rationalism, and individualism.

In this study, I examine how Japanese modernity dealt with religion and philosophy, who was involved in the discourse, and which positions were taken. The focus is on Japanese literary figures and their religious views. Authors such as Natsume Sôseki and Akutagawa Ryûnosuke discussed the question of religion with an unrelenting sense of urgency. Christianity, Zen, spiritism, and vitalism were possible points of reference, a hopeful source for answers to the 'spiritual' crisis.

Religion during this period appears to be both a necessity for 'inner' human life and a means for realising one's own identity, as well as a subject and medium of art. The artist discovers his mission as a 'prophet', passes through a stage of 'occult self-mythologization,' and comes to associate his existence with the life of the saints: Japanese authors carry out an Imitation of Christ, even as they seek to be itinerant monks and hermits in the 'Eastern' tradition. Art, religion, and daily life are woven together, and the realms of aesthetic and religious experience come to a point of convergence, holding within them the potential for the last resistance of Everyman to the hostile kingdom of modernity.