

# Modern Japanese Culture and Moses Mendelssohn

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I'm very honored to be here. First, I'd like to express my gratitude to Michah (Prof. Gottlieb) and his staff. I really appreciate your kind support. Last year, I invited Michah and Prof. Feiner to Japan and we had the opportunity to deepen the networking among scholars.

In Japan, there are three academic societies related to Jewish Studies: the Japanese Society for Jewish Studies, the Kyoto Association of Jewish Thought, and the Japan Society for Jewish Studies in Kobe. (The society in Kobe is not restricted to researchers; it includes the general public. Kobe has the history of helping Jewish refugees escape from Lithuania in WWII.)

I am one of the founders of the Kyoto Association of Jewish Thought. The Kyoto Association of Jewish Thought covers a wide range of themes. Examples of recent symposium themes are: Martin Buber, Judaism in Renaissance and Reformation, and Herman Cohen's 100th memorial, and Targum.

I started my research with Kant's religious philosophy, later became interested in his contemporary, Moses Mendelssohn, and have been working on Modern German Jewish Thought since then.

Today, I'd like to clarify the structural similarities that existed between modern Japanese and modern German Jews, beyond their spatial and temporal gaps. Both were shocked by Western civilization and struggled with their own tradition, and both underwent self-transformation. In this respect, it can be said that they had similar issues.

From 1639, Japan restricted exchange and trade with foreign countries (so-called isolationism). However, after yielding to the diplomacy of US Commodore Matthew Perry, Japanese policy changed to open the country to the western world. In 1854, the Edo shogunate entered into a

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Convention of Peace and Amity between the USA and Japan. After that, Japan rapidly accepted western civilization and invented new words to translate Western terminology. I'd like to consider how the Western words "philosophy" and "religion" were translated and how Japanese culture was influenced by this.

Currently, in Japanese, *philosophy* is translated as "tetsu-gaku 哲学". Amane Nishi 西周 (1829-1897) was the inventor of the word "tetsu-gaku". He was a bureaucrat and had experienced studying abroad in Leiden, the Netherlands in 1862. He translated many Western languages by comparing concepts with the Zhu Xi school of Neo-Confucianism. At first, the word *philosophy* was phonographically translated. However, it was then later translated using Chinese characters as "ki-tetsu-gaku 希哲学", and finally the term "tetsu-gaku" (combining the characters meaning "wisdom" and "learning") was established. In the process of transition from the phonographic translation to creating the new word, Nishi developed his understanding of this Western concept. The word "tetsu-gaku" was firstly used in his book, "*Hyakuitsu Shinron* (百一新論 The New Study of Unifying 100 Theories)" published in 1874. In this book, Nishi uses the word philosophy in the sense of comprehensively understanding the diverse ideas in the East and in the West from a higher viewpoint. According to Nishi, although there is little difference between the East and the West in ethical thought, Western studies in terms of critical and experimental methods. He had the idea that the East should develop its thought by introducing Western academic methods.

I'd like to introduce one more person, Manshi Kiyozawa 清沢満之(1863-1903). In his days, the academic battlefield moved from translation to interpretation. Kiyozawa is known as a reformer of modern Japanese Buddhism. He published the first book of modern Japanese philosophy of religion in 1892, titled *Syukyo Tetsugaku Gaikotsu* (宗教哲学骸骨 The Skelton of a Philosophy of Religion). In his young days in Tokyo, Kiyozawa studied Western Philosophy under Ernest Fenollosa (1853-1908), an American philosopher. Later, Kiyozawa gave the first full-scale lecture on Western philosophy (from ancient Greek to Herbert Spencer) in Japan.

The English translation of *Syukyo Tetsugaku Gaikotsu* was well received at the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893. This book attempted to rationally explain Buddhism (especially the concept of Pure Land or Shin Buddhism) by using Hegel's terminology, and insisted that the Buddhist view of dependent co-arising is different from Hegel's dialectic. In this book, Kiyozawa stated that if faith and reason contradict each other, they should be adjusted by reason. However, in the latter half of his life, through his experience of tuberculosis, he changed his position and emphasized that inner religious conviction cannot be reached by contemplative understanding, such as the understanding he developed in his younger days. Hitoshi Imamura 今村仁司 (1942-2007) interprets this process as the transition from a previous Hegelian position, in which he tries to explain the world totally, to a Levinasian Philosophy of responsibility for the other.

Next, let's consider the case of the translating the word "religion". Currently, in Japanese, "religion" is translated as "syu-kyo 宗教". The word "syu-kyo" itself has been used in Buddhism for a long time, but it has traditionally been used in the meaning of the ultimate truth or sect. It has been used since the 1870s as a term encompassing various religions. The reason behind this was the need to translate the word "religion" in diplomatic documents with other countries.

In Japan, Christianity was banned after 1618. (The Edo shogunate only traded with China and the Netherlands. It traded with the Netherlands because the Netherlands was a Protestant country, and unlike the Catholic countries, it agreed to separate missionary activity from trade. Spinoza mentioned this point in his *Theologico-Political Treaties*.) Diplomatic policy changed in the 1850s and missionaries resumed their activities from 1859, but at that time Christianity was not yet officially recognized. Even in the early Meiji period (since 1868), Christians were oppressed. In this situation, Western countries made efforts to obtain religious freedom for Christians. In the process of exchanging documents with Western countries on this issue, the word "syu-kyo" began to be used as a word encompassing various religions.

Governmental billboards regarding the ban on Christianity were removed in 1868, but the freedom of religion in the formal sense would need to wait for the Great Japanese Imperial

Constitution in 1889. But here, we have to notice the following point. On the one hand, the Japanese government in the Meiji era, acknowledged religious freedom, in order to be recognized as a modern civilized state by Western countries. On the other hand, the government preferentially treated Shinto as an ideology for bringing the nation together. (Shinto is a complex of various elements consisting of indigenous natural religion and myths that justify the Emperor's rule.) Needless to say, there was a contradiction in this policy, so the government tried to divide Shinto into two parts: State Shinto and Shinto as a denomination. That is, Shinto as a political system that conducts national events, and Shinto as a collective term for Shinto denominations as having a same rank of other religions.

The former Shinto was claimed to be "non-religious" and only the latter Shinto "religious". As a result, even if Shinto events were held in public spaces, it was said that they didn't conflict with religious freedom. After WWII, State Shinto was abolished by the GHQ (US General Headquarters) and Shinto became to be regarded as a religion completely separate from the state. However, problems still remain. For example, regarding the recent coronation of the new Emperor, there is debate about whether the Shintoistic elements of the ceremonies violate this separation of religion and politics. The government's answer is that these elements are merely tradition, and not religion.

Let me give you another example. It is often pointed out that in Japan many people identify themselves as "non-religious (mu-shukyo 無宗教)." By saying "non-religious," people are generally saying that they don't belong to a particular religious group or do not have a strong belief. We assume that they wouldn't feel to be able to express their religious practice using the translated word "shukyo." In Japan, religion tends to be more practice-oriented than belief. Even if Japanese visit ancestors' graves or worship at shrines at New Year, they would generally say that they are non-religious.

The Chinese character "Kyo 教" included in the translation "Shukyo" for "religion" may also be problematic. "Kyo" means "teaching" or "instruction". Today, we use the word "Bukkyo 仏教" to indicate "Buddhism." In this case, Bukkyo means the teaching of Buddha. However, in the past, the expression "Buppo 仏法" or "Butsu-do 仏道" were preferred. "Po" means "the law" and

“Do” signifies “the way.” So, “Buppo” means the law of Buddha and “Butsu-do” signifies the way of Buddha.

The word “Kyo” has the connotation of a forced dogma. We could understand “Do” to mean that we follow the way of Buddha through daily work and practice. “Do” is a well-used Japanese term and can be found in the names of martial arts (for example, Aiki-do and Ju-do) and traditional performing arts (Sa-do - tea ceremony, Ka-do – flower arrangement). We are reminded that Halakha derives from the word meaning “to go” or “to behave.”

In the last part of this presentation, I’d like to consider the case of Moses Mendelssohn, who struggled with the Protestant understanding of religion.

Mendelssohn sought to present the difference in perspective on revelation between Judaism and Christianity. In *Jerusalem*, he describes Judaism as not being a revealed religion in the sense of Christianity but as a revealed legislation. By this sentence, Mendelssohn tried to emphasize the uniqueness of Judaism in contrast to Christianity.

However, such a claim was taken by Prussian scholars as an interpretation that Judaism was not a religion, but only a political unit. For example, Kant, a friend of Mendelssohn, was one such interpreter. Although Kant praised the first part of *Jerusalem* (1783) because of the emphasis on freedom of conscience, he didn’t understand Judaism as a religion but as a political system.

Mendelssohn's ideal was bilateral in German and Hebrew, but he sometimes faced a gap between the two languages and found it a problem that the German terminology of religion could not express Judaism adequately because of its protestant background. For example, Mendelssohn emphasized that “faith” (emunah) in Judaism meant trust, not creed. Mendelssohn criticized religion that forced beliefs as propositions, and praised Judaism as a religion which did not have such a dogma. In spite of that, it seems that Jacobi didn’t understand the intention of what Mendelssohn wanted to say. In the Pantheism Controversy, there was a conflict of interpretation of faith or belief between Jacobi and Mendelssohn.

In this regard, I'd like to briefly introduce the evaluation of Mendelssohn by Samuel Holdheim. He represented radical Reform Judaism in 19th century Germany. In his book *Moses Mendelssohn and Freedom of Thought and Faith in Judaism* (1859), he mentioned Mendelssohn's view of Judaism as a revealed legislation, but not as a revealed religion like Christianity. However, according to Holdheim, this was a misleading statement. It should be stated that Judaism is not a religion in the sense of Christianity, but it is a religion in another Jewish meaning. Holdheim understood the conflict between universality and cultural context in using religious terms. Still today, we cannot solve this conflict.

In the process of translating elements of a foreign culture into our own culture, we struggle with matters that cannot be translated easily. However, through translating the untranslatable, new thoughts are born and our world culture becomes richer.

Following Jacques Derrida's view in his essay *Faith and Knowledge* (1996), there is a possibility of religious thought in the margins and surplus of religious terminology. This insight can be also seen in the comparison of German Jewish thought and modern Japanese Culture.