

Boundary Work in Japanese Religious Studies: Anesaki Masaharu on Religious Freedom and Academic Concealment

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Abstract

Past issues of *Correspondences* have sought to envision non-Western “esoteric” categories, but it remains an open question as to whether esotericism is a generic mode of thought, as opposed to a construction within intellectual history. I demonstrate some difficulties with identifying an esoteric category in modern Japanese culture, suggesting that the problem is one of discursive boundaries within the humanities. Accordingly, I examine boundary work by one of Japan’s founding religious scholars. It appears that Anesaki Masaharu engaged in two types of boundary-making: disputation of the type of authority being used by religious groups, and criticism of concealment within the academic context. Comparing the latter behavior to Western esotericism, I find that it matches up most closely to a different concept of esotericism than that commonly used in this field.

Keywords

Global esotericism; disenchantment of the world; Japanese religion; critical religion; Omoto movement

Introduction

As is typical in the human sciences, a consensus definition of “esotericism” has proven increasingly elusive as the value of the term is debated. What was once seen as a single category of “Western esotericism” is now being split into separate research programs, two of which are especially visible. One camp considers esotericism to be a term constructed and bounded by “strictly historical” origins, linked to other historical constructs such as “science,” “religion,” and “the West.” The other considers esotericism to be a description of a generic kind of thought, which may guide comparative projects.¹

Within the pages of *Correspondences*, a representative of the historicist camp has been Wouter Hanegraaff, who writes that “it would be yet another form of terminological imperialism if we now tried to project this terminology on to the rest of the world.”² In the comparative camp we may place Egil Asprem, who observes a “suspicion against cross-cultural comparative research,” and imagines the history of thought as a kind of cognitive tree of life, where esotericism may or may not represent a “convergent cultural evolution” towards specific, identifiable kinds of thinking such as correspondence and imagination. In Asprem’s opinion, the “Western” boundaries of esoteric studies are too stringent and privilege historicism at the expense of “sociological, psychological, cognitive” and other viable research programs.³

While Asprem is an advocate of cognitive science, his desire to broaden the definition of esotericism is not for the sake of cognitive science alone, but for all kinds of “reflexive modernization”: the desire to reanalyze existing theories of modernity, improve their accuracy, and thereby draw helpful sociological conclusions. Such research may include historical analyses of the modernization process, but it is not defined by historicism.⁴ Hanegraaff, in contrast, emphasizes historicism, not to affirm the “truth of history” (nor the “truth of modernity”) but to emphasize the theological and specific nature of how esotericism was constructed as a category, and to avoid heresy-hunting within objective humanities research.⁵

¹ Julian Strube, “Transgressing Boundaries: Social Reform, Theology, and the Demarcations between Science and Religion,” *Aries* 16 (2016), 1–3, 6–7; Egil Asprem, “Beyond the West: Towards a New Comparativism in the Study of Esotericism,” *Correspondences* 2, no. 1 (2014): 5.

² Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “The Globalization of Esotericism,” *Correspondences* 3 (2015): 86

³ Asprem, “Beyond the West,” 15, 29, 19.

⁴ Asprem, *The Problem of Disenchantment* (Brill, 2014), 554–57; Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens, and Scott Lash, *Reflexive Modernization* (Stanford University Press, 1994).

⁵ Hanegraaff, “Globalization,” 84ff, and *Western Esotericism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London:

There is much at stake, therefore, in the existence or non-existence of non-Western esotericism. If the term *esotericism* can be shown to also characterize some kinds of non-Western thought, then the reflexive modernization that rigorously identifies esotericism is also basic and universally applicable, and its historical forms serve mainly as case studies. If esotericism is specific to the West, on the other hand, then the overarching category is subsumed into historical analysis, and we may reasonably conceive of present-day societies that lack an equivalent concept.

Recent Japanese-language research on the emergence of naturalism, secularism, and academism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries presents us with a non-Western country that has engaged in a particularly good quality of reflexive research. In the first sections of this paper, I will show that while secret practices were rationalized and local cosmologies relativized in Japan, intellectuals did not imagine this as a “disenchantment of the world.”

Building on this literature review, I will attempt to theorize “non-Western esotericism” through a specific case study in Japan. I will show that when a claim to hidden knowledge aroused much popular interest and elite support in Japan, the religious scholar Anesaki Masaharu (1873–1949) was moved to debunk it, but the idea that valuable knowledge can be hidden (or, that hidden knowledge can be valuable) was not central to his critique. Instead, he engaged with this idea in a more specific context, suggesting that it was an act of “boundary work” on his part.

Western Esotericism, Disenchantment, and Japanese Discourse

As part of their methodological projects, both Asprem and Hanegraaff sometimes use “esoteric” simply to mean secret ritual, with “esotericism” being the accompanying tendency towards secrecy or “sociology of secrecy.”⁶ Certainly, the practice of secrecy encourages participants to think of information and its purveyors as privileged and can be used to reinforce trust and authority in various circumstances, including businesses, intelligence agencies, and religious groups.⁷ The real question of whether “esotericism” is a universally valid concept, though, is grounded in whether ritual secrecy comes out of a desire to indicate higher knowledge. Kocku von Stuckrad indicates that because “the

Bloomsbury, 2013), 144–45.

⁶ Asprem, “Beyond the West,” 16; Hanegraaff, “Esotericism Theorized: Major Trends and Approaches to the Study of Esotericism,” in *Religion: Secret Religion* (Farmington Hills, MI: Macmillan, 2016), 155–70.

⁷ David William Mac Gillavry, “Rethinking Secrecy in Religion,” *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* (advance publication).

dialectic of concealment and revelation is a structural element of secretive discourses,” secrecy should imply “the *claim* to a wisdom that is superior to other interpretations of cosmos and history,” in a possibly universal sense.⁸

Secrecy is used in many aspects of modern Japanese ritual. For example, in Shingon Buddhism, the inner meanings of rituals are not revealed to the public. There are also “esoteric” mystery cults in the ancient Greek sense, such as one conducted by Shinto priests on the island of Okinoshima, where participants are forbidden from speaking about what they have witnessed. There is an “esoteric” aspect to some household rites, notably the rituals of the imperial household, which are kept formally private to avoid the accusation that government funds are being spent on religious activities.⁹ Medieval Japanese manuscripts refer to “secret transmissions” about a number of topics such as poetry collections, music, and artisanry. In some instances, these transmissions continue today.¹⁰

Over the course of the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, a discourse of rationalization developed that eliminated many secret teachings. The concept of the secret itself, however, was not erased but reconfigured to match new expectations surrounding public access. During Japan’s rapid Westernization, one school of tea ceremony publicized its formerly secret teachings, but the stated objective of this was to propagate the ceremony and the wordless “true secrets” of its bodily movements more rapidly, not to deny the value of personal transmission.¹¹ Meanwhile, *new* practices of concealment were developed that shrouded the glory of the shogun and (later) the emperor in mystification, culminating in the 1930s purge of intellectuals who attempted to “rationalize” the role of the emperor.¹²

Let us see how this compares to the attempt to universalize “esotericism.” In Asprem’s attempt to disassemble Western esotericism for cognitive analysis, he proposes that “our theoretical ambition must be to explain why we see this clustering of” elements such as heterodoxy, “‘secrecy,’ and claims to ‘abso-

⁸ Kocku von Stuckrad, “Western Esotericism: Towards an Integrative Model of Interpretation,” *Religion* 35 (2005), 88–89; Asprem, “Beyond the West,” 17.

⁹ I thank Kondō Mitsuhiro for providing me with this final example. Further examples and analysis can be found in Bernhard Scheid and Mark Teeuwen, eds., *The Culture of Secrecy in Japanese Religion* (London: Routledge, 2006), especially chs. 13–15.

¹⁰ Fabio Rambelli, “Secrecy in Japanese Esoteric Buddhism,” in Scheid and Teeuwen, *Culture of Secrecy*, 121–22; and Maki Isaka Morinaga, *Secrecy in Japanese Arts: “Secret Transmission” as a Mode of Knowledge* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

¹¹ Kumakura Isao, *Kindai sadō shi* (Tokyo: NHK, 1980), 184; Tanaka Hidetaka, *Kindai chadō no rekishi shakaigaku* (Kyoto: Shibunkaku Shuppan, 2007), 359.

¹² John S. Brownlee, *Japanese Historians and the National Myths, 1600–1945: The Age of the Gods and Emperor Jimmu* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1999), chs. 5–13, esp. 134ff.

lute knowledge,” not from a historical perspective of the motivations of past researchers, but from a “bottom-up” perspective of how a concept such as esotericism relates to a generic human’s “information processing”. “Esotericism” could be a function of individual modes of perception such as “schizotypy,” which “detect[s] patterns in ambiguous information or random noise.”¹³

This seems to rely on a desire for secret practice coming out of individual inclination, rather than institutional authority. The institutionalization of modes of thought that are seen in the West as personal inclinations towards esotericism damages the case for non-Western esotericism significantly — unless we are to conclude that entire foreign cultures exhibit more “schizotypy” than the West at an institutional level, a line of thought which would take us down a dangerous road. Furthermore, there is by no means a “clustering” with “heterodoxy” or “claims to ‘absolute knowledge’” in the traditions of secrecy that remain in modern Japan. While some of the secret transmissions in Japan were historically “heterodox,” it is hard to think of anything more *orthodox* to Japanese ritual practice than the Imperial household ritual, which has continued almost uninterrupted for over 1200 years.

Where did such “clustering” come from in the West? Asprem writes that a centuries-long process of “intellectualisation and rationalisation” gave rise to a “problem of disenchantment” perceived at the end of the nineteenth century. An earlier theological concern with *gnosis*, access to higher or perfect knowledge, was subsumed into an “expansion of reason” beyond mainstream scientific understanding. Hence “a specific theological context” produced an understanding of disenchantment, reason, and science, which gave rise to culturally specific applications of what he believes to be a more general concept of esotericism.¹⁴

Japan does not have any referent for the theological problem of *gnosis*. Japanese Buddhists relying on the Yogācāra school have their own concept of perfect knowledge — but this is knowledge of *emptiness* (*śūnyatā*), not of divine content, so no words or actions can circumscribe it.¹⁵ Another influential Buddhist philosophy in Japan has been *prajñāpāramitā* literature, where the Buddha relies on language as an expedient means (*upāya*) meant to be discarded when it achieves its goals: not providing access to truth in itself, but as a means to reveal the shortcomings of language.¹⁶ The concept of *gnosis* remains unfamiliar and unintuitive in Japan today.

¹³ Asprem, “Reverse-engineering ‘Esotericism’: How to Prepare a Complex Cultural Concept for the Cognitive Science of Religion,” *Religion* 46, no. 2 (2016): 158–85.

¹⁴ Asprem, *Problem of Disenchantment*, 431–441, 541–546.

¹⁵ Fabio Rambelli, *A Buddhist Theory of Semiotics* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 19.

¹⁶ Dilip Loundo, “The ‘Two Truths’ Doctrine (*satyadvaya*) and the Nature of *upāya* in Nāgārjuna,” *Kriterion: Revista de Filosofia* 57, no. 133 (2016): 17–41; Steve Oden, “Derrida and the Decentered Universe of Chan/Zen Buddhism,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 17 (1990): 61–86.

Here it is worth noting that Izutsu Toshihiko (1914–1993), a Japanese scholar of Islam who became familiar with Western esoteric epistemological claims through the Eranos conference, ended up referring to the collective production of linguistic meaning not as a pointer to gnosis but as “linguistic storehouse consciousness” (*gen-go-araya-shiki*), from the Buddhist term *ālaya-vijñāna*. This refers to the deepest *impediment* to enlightenment: the mind’s attempt to circumscribe the unnamable ultimate in human language.

Attempting to locate “the problem of disenchantment” in Japan is similarly fraught with difficulties. As Jason Josephson-Storm has recently shown, the phrase “disenchantment of the world” as used by Max Weber is a highly romantic myth, essentially invoking European legends of a lost world of “enchantment.”¹⁷ This romanticism that has no referent in Japanese, and Weber’s idea of disenchantment was mostly ignored in Japan’s prewar period.¹⁸ After World War II, Japanese left-theorists frequently mistranslated it as “liberation from bewitchment” (*jujutsu kara no kaibō*), consistently mistaking it for a simple call to build an irreligious society.¹⁹ It is only recently that more careful Japanese scholars have recognized Weber’s “ambivalence,” observing that Weber is implicitly referring back to Friedrich Schiller’s conceptualization of “the disenchantment of the world” as a loss of cultural innocence.²⁰

The basis for cross-cultural comparison is thus hindered significantly, as the key ideas of “enchantment” and “gnosis” are missing from the Japanese context. However, as Josephson-Storm quite helpfully points out, it is not at all the case that the West is “disenchanted” in the terms of being free of superstition or religion. Self-description of religious belief is not strikingly different in Japan versus the West. Rather, Weber’s “disenchantment” is meant to implicate the modern intellectual, or even more narrowly the humanities scholar, who is fated by an unknown god of disenchantment to perpetrate erudite works of methodological agnosticism or naturalism on the world.²¹

The difference between *prajñā* and gnosis has long been recognized: “la Prajnâ n’est pas une gnose, l’aperception d’une réalité transcendante.” Louis de la Vallée Poussin, *La Morale bouddhique* (Paris: Nouvelle librairie nationale, 1927), 102.

¹⁷ Jason A. Josephson-Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 127ff.

¹⁸ In his survey of Western esotericism, Tsuruoka Yoshio makes a wise choice to use the Latin term *magia* to describe the target of disenchanting narratives, instead of any Japanese term. See “‘Jujutsu’ no miryoku: ‘eien no alternative’ no raireki to kanōsei ni tsuite no shiron,” in *‘Jujutsu’ no jubaku*, ed. Egawa Jun’ichi and Kubota Hiroshi, vol. 2 (Tokyo: Lithon, 2017), 85–118.

¹⁹ Nakamura Yūjirō, *Nakamura Yūjirō chosakushū dai 2-ki*, vol. 8 (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2001), 220.

²⁰ Mita Munetsuke, *Shakaigaku nyūmon* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2006), 62–67. For more on Schiller see Josephson-Storm, *Myth of Disenchantment*, 80ff.

²¹ Josephson-Storm, *Myth of Disenchantment*, 22–40 and 313–4.

This coincides nicely with Hanegraaff’s historicist approach to the definition of esotericism, in which it is defined by Western philosophical trends that render some specific types of thought undesirable *in the academy*.²² Following the arguments of both Hanegraaff and Josephson-Storm, the lack of a “disenchantment” narrative does not point to the nation of Japan being trapped in some Oriental mystification, but rather that the push towards naturalism caused different sorts of problems to arise within Japanese intellectual institutions.

This should compel us to consider the problem of searching for esotericism in Japan from a different perspective. Rather than a popular movement corresponding to a collective disenchantment or search for gnosis, we should be asking ourselves what sort of problems Japanese intellectuals were dealing with at this time, and the boundaries that were set for possible solutions. We can then see how questions of secrecy and concealment arise in this context.

The Impetus for Boundary Work in Japanese Religious Studies

Shimazono Susumu, former senior professor of religious studies at the University of Tokyo and dean of religious studies in Japan, has argued that in place of the Protestant ethic that Weber identified in the early modern West, Japanese capitalism was given its structure during that period by a mercantile “popular morality” or “teaching of the heart” that has been thoroughly described by Robert Bellah and Yasumaru Yoshio. Shimazono describes Yasumaru’s work as “a corrective of the Weberian view of the nature of the popular ethical reform that supported modernization,” emphasizing that it does not require anything like a denial of magic. He offers some examples of the positive contributions of new religions to the growth of modern democracy, suggesting that nothing like a dialectic of “disenchantment” was necessary in Japan. Rather, the Westernization process involved a different and equally complex kind of local boundary work.²³

As Japanese authorities resolved to compete with Western powers following the Meiji Restoration of 1868, responses to the new political reality ran the full gamut, from Mori Arinori (1847–1889), who suggested that Japan should convert to Christianity and make English the national language, to more obscure writers like Taoka Reiun (1879–1912) and Kaiseki Sata (1818–1882),

²² Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 3.

²³ Shimazono Susumu, *From Salvation to Spirituality: Popular Religious Movements in Modern Japan* (Melbourne: Trans Pacific, 2004), 43, referring to Robert Bellah, *Tokugawa Religion* (Chicago: The Free Press, 1957), and Yasumaru Yoshio, *Nihon no kindaiika to minshū shisō* (Tokyo: Aoki Shoten, 1974).

who aired suspicions of all things Western as spiritually deadening or geopolitically dangerous. Beneath their differences, though, all these writers shared a common understanding that Japan was encountering a new and massive kind of foreignness.

As writers like Yasumaru and Sakai Naoki have pointed out, the arrival of the Western philosophical ideal irrevocably relativized Japan's self-perception, geographically, and culturally.²⁴ It was no longer possible for the worldview of previous centuries, with its sinosphere Heaven and Earth, Buddhas, gods, and monsters, to be accepted as universal. The pre-Meiji worldview was now known to be a “pre-modern” “Japanese” production and was forced to stand in contrast to the mechanized worldview produced by “modern” Western knowledge. Hence when the great Westernizer Fukuzawa Yukichi (1835–1901) proclaimed in the 1870s that “it is said that Heaven does not create one person above or below another,” Yasumaru notes that he is using the term “Heaven” in a completely “utilitarian and situational” sense. Rather than representing a direct threat to the universal applicability of Western philosophy as Christian theology would, pre-Meiji Japanese concepts such as Heaven were now recognized as culturally relative and could be played with lightly.²⁵

Around the turn of the twentieth century, the pragmatist rhetoric of the Westernizers and other *lumières* was displaced by a new concern with moral and cultural cultivation (*shūyō*) to create ideal citizens. The discourse on cultivation constructed religion in a somewhat dialectical way, imagining it as a historical process that could be sublimated and improved upon to create a new kind of public space.²⁶ Rather than a “problem of disenchantment,” then, early twentieth-century Japanese intellectual life was occupied with a problem of cultivation impeding the establishment of a secular, pluralistic public

One notable problem in the attempt to balance cultivation and secularity was how religion would be taught. Ejima Naotoshi's research finds that a 1903 law permitted schools to teach religions (both Buddhist and non-Buddhist) only as an object of cultural study, not from the standpoint of encouraging faith.²⁷ As the sociologist Thomas Gieryn has argued, portraying religion and

²⁴ Sakai Naoki, *Nibon shisō to iu mondai: bon'yaku to shutai* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1997), 47–8.

²⁵ Fukuzawa Yukichi, “An Encouragement of Learning (*Gakumon no susume*),” trans. William T. de Bary, in *Sources of East Asian Tradition*, vol. 2 (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 521; Yasumaru, *Yasumaru Yoshio shū*, vol. 3 (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2013), 322. Unless otherwise stated, all translations from Japanese language sources are my own.

²⁶ Kurita Hidehiko, “The Notion of Shūyō and Conceptualizing the Future of Religion at the Turn of the Twentieth Century,” *Religious Studies in Japan* 4 (2018): 65–90.

²⁷ Ejima Naotoshi, “Naze daigaku de shūkyō ga manaberu no ka: Meiji-ki no kyōiku seisaku to shūkyōkei senmon gakkō seisei no katei kara,” *Shūkyō kenkyū* 88, no. 3 (2014), 68.

science as two ideas in competition for “professional authority and resources” has been common among Western scholars as well. Removing some behaviors from the sphere of acceptable educational methods, and insisting that they are instead objects of study, benefits some programs at the expense of others.²⁸

This sort of “boundary work,” to use Gieryn’s term, permitted the establishment of secular religious studies in Japan, but it also silently built up another boundary, which separated officially permitted “religions” from objectionable behaviors such as “superstition,” “deviant religion,” “pseudo-religion,” and so on. Late nineteenth-century Japan was characterized by intense campaigns by modernizing elites against “superstitious” practices such as fortune-telling and possession. In 1908, it was made a criminal offense to read fortunes “without authority.”²⁹ As those words “without authority” imply, these campaigns were not strictly based in materialism: one religious leader was accused by a heresy-debunking newspaper of being possessed, not by a mighty deity as she claimed, but by a lowly fox.³⁰ As Josephson-Storm observes, these crackdowns were often about “authority” in the simplest sense of the word, as the spiritual authority of local religious leaders posed a threat to secular government.³¹

The concept of religious freedom, which delimited some institutions and specialists as free to operate in a private, religious sphere, and the accompanying concept of unacceptable “superstition” were conceived with a careful eye to protecting the overriding interests of the state. However, there was notable resistance against the desire to crack down on “superstition” and other forces from two intellectual directions: the desire to preserve cultural heritage on one hand, and freedom of religious belief on the other. Gerald Figal has already written extensively about how Yanagita Kunio (1875–1962) attempted to rescue “folklore” from the perception of backwards or meaningless superstition.³²

²⁸ Thomas Gieryn, “Boundary-Work and the Demarcation of Science from Non-Science: Strains and Interests in Professional Ideologies of Scientists,” *American Sociological Review* 48, no. 6 (1983): 781–795.

²⁹ Gerald Figal, *Civilization and Monsters: Spirits of Modernity in Meiji Japan* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 199; Jason A. Josephson, *The Invention of Religion in Japan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 164–190.

³⁰ Inoue Nobutaka, *Japanese New Religions in the Age of Mass Media* (Tokyo: Kokugakuin University Institute for Japanese Culture and Classics, 2017), 36. On the reality of fox possession, the newspaper tried to have it both ways. See Nagaoka Takashi, *Shinshūkyō to sōryokusen: kyōso igo o ikiru* (Nagoya: Nagoya Daigaku Shuppankai, 2015), 76.

³¹ Josephson, *The Invention of Religion in Japan*, 176.

³² Figal, *Civilization and Monsters*, 77–104.

Where debunking of “superstition” in the West was often linked to a discourse of religion-state separation, attacks on “superstition” in Japan often came from writers with a background in Jōdo Shinshū (True Pure Land/Shin Buddhism),³³ while, for example, the Nihon Shinrei Gakkai (Japan Spiritualist Association) had nearly all its local branches at Jōdoshū (Pure Land) temples.³⁴ The discourse over the boundaries of knowledge in Meiji Japanese society seems to have involved an unspoken rivalry between different sects of traditional Buddhism.

Amid this fierce debate, Japanese intellectuals turned to the young discipline of religious studies to determine how more “objective” boundaries could be drawn between religion and non-religious delusion. The most prominent figure at the time was the pioneer religious scholar Anesaki Masaharu, a direct disciple of Max Müller who inherited Müller’s entire library. As we will see, Anesaki believed that properly practiced religion was the basis of emotional maturity and morality, making it necessary to reject religious-seeming behaviors that lacked such maturity as “pseudo-religion” or “superstition.”

In the political situation in which Anesaki worked, his choice of boundaries would have been considered uncontroversial. However, considering his social position as a Western-educated humanities scholar attempting to guarantee religious freedom and build the newborn discipline of *Religionswissenschaft*, the way he defends his choices is quite interesting. What I hope to understand through a closer analysis of his writings is why a criticism of hidden knowledge was *not* employed, despite the very prevalent use of hidden knowledge in the religious group in question, and why other types of boundary work were more appropriate for the needs of Japanese society at the time.

The Oomoto Movement and its Controversies

In 1920, Anesaki, then professor of religious studies at the University of Tokyo, contributed an article to a special issue of an academic journal called *Hentai Shinri* (*Abnormal Psychology*). This journal was founded to discuss the “psychic” science of psychology, in opposition to “materialist” medicine. It openly affirmed the value of “psychic” healing (mind cures), the sort of mid-1910s scientific development that had drawn some intellectuals to a new religious movement called Oomoto. But in 1920, its editors and various con-

³³ Josephson, “When Buddhism Became a ‘Religion’: Religion and Superstition in the Writings of Inoue Enryō.” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 33, no. 1 (2006), 163. See also Yasumaru, *Yasumaru Yōshio shū*, vol. 3, 315ff on the role of Jōdo Shinshū in the development of Japan’s capitalist ethic.

³⁴ This topic is currently being researched by Kurita Hidehiko and Ichiyanagi Hirota.

tributors published a special issue that carried various criticisms of Oomoto, which had grown tremendously popular, but had fallen under suspicion of preaching revolution in an oblique, somewhat vague, or hidden manner.³⁵

Oomoto had its origins in the personal religious experiences of an unemployed widow named Deguchi Nao (1837–1918). Nao, who lived in poverty and had no social status to speak of, was an extremely pious woman who regularly visited temples and shrines and had occasionally shown fervent behavior such as automatic writing, although she was illiterate. After two of her daughters went insane and one was imprisoned by her husband, Nao was subjected to multiple psychic “attacks” beginning in early 1892, which caused her to be possessed by various spirits. She was deemed mentally ill by her village and temporarily incarcerated; after her release, she began producing automatic writing which she claimed to be direct revelations from a powerful divinity named Ushitora no Konjin, foretelling the collapse of the modern world of scholarship and greed into an age of darkness, after which Konjin would come to rule the world. Nao eventually attracted the attention of a wandering spiritualist, whom she adopted into her family and renamed Deguchi Onisaburō (1871–1948).³⁶

Onisaburō had a number of complex ideas for promoting Oomoto. He formulated a doctrine that was a mixture of Eastern and Western borrowings as well as his own inventions. Eventually, he hit upon a forgotten Shinto technique called *chinkon-kishin*, which induced spirit possession. Many Japanese people, especially military men and curiosity seekers, came to Oomoto headquarters in rural Kyoto to try this technique for themselves, and it had a rather high rate of success, causing many ordinary visitors to be seized by animal spirits and deities. Dozens of people enjoyed this experience every day, causing stresses within the group as well as criticism and censure from scientific and government authorities.³⁷

The contributors to *Hentai Shinri* in 1920 were generally alarmed by the teachings and practices of Oomoto. Many of them, including the journal’s editor Nakamura Kokyō (1881–1952), hailed from the New Buddhist Movement, which was founded to fight “superstition.”³⁸ They claimed that

³⁵ Hyōdō Akiko, “Taishō-ki no ‘seishin’ gainen: Ōmotokyō to *Hentai shinri* no sōkoku o tsūjite,” *Shūkyō kenkyū* 79, no. 1 (2005): 97–120.

³⁶ See my chapter “The Power of Writing in Deguchi Nao’s Ofudesaki,” in *Female Leaders in New Religious Movements*, ed. Inga Bårdsen Tøllefsen and Christian Giudice (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 165–188.

³⁷ Nancy K. Stalker, *Prophet Motive: Deguchi Onisaburō, Oomoto, and the Rise of New Religions in Imperial Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2008), 89–97; Birgit Staemmler, *Chinkon kishin: Mediated Spirit Possession in Japanese New Religions* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2009), 229–230.

³⁸ Sone Hiroyoshi, “Nakamura Kokyō to ‘Shin Bukkyō,’” in “*Hentai shinri*” to Nakamura Kokyō

no spirits were being called in *chinkon-kishin*, but the phenomenon was only a culturally bound form of hypnotism. They accused the participants of making a cognitive mistake, believing that beings were descending into them, when in fact the appearance of possession was a product of their own “subconscious.”³⁹

In contrast to the rest of the special issue, Anesaki’s article sharply opposed the psychoanalysis of Oomoto believers, saying that even if Oomoto’s thought was “delusion,” it was only an “exaggeration” of the real “ideas of a portion (or a majority) of citizens.”⁴⁰ Anesaki stressed that he was not at all in favor of Oomoto, but as we will see, he believed that there was nothing wrong with participation in religion and the supernatural, and that indeed acknowledging the spiritual was necessary in a healthy society. His critique of Oomoto would therefore have to find different grounds.

Oomoto as “Exoteric” Misuse of National Authority

Instead of identifying Oomoto as inappropriate for the modern age as a typical “modernizer” might have done, Anesaki proposes that it is a craze “suitable for the times.” This phrase repeats itself throughout his argument as he adds more and more evidence that the problem with Oomoto is not about Oomoto itself, but about failures in contemporary Japanese society that drew people to it. Anesaki regrets that some of his own religious studies students have tried out *chinkon-kishin* and converted to Oomoto, dubbing them spiritually weak “pilgrims of superstition” who hop feverishly from one experiment to the next “like a repeat offender.” He argues that an imperfectly liberal society, like the Japan of 1920, will naturally engender fervent beliefs in those seeking spiritual freedom and truth. Therefore, “rather than being an issue of personal psychology, this is an issue of social psychology.”⁴¹

Onisaburō attracted followers to Oomoto by revising Nao’s teaching that Japan would vanquish Western learning with the power of *kami* (divinity). He promised a “restoration” of imperial authority soon to arrive in 1921, which would be on scale with the 1868 Meiji Restoration that had completely rewritten and replaced the basic structure of government. Onisaburō made heavy

(Tokyo: Fuji Shuppan, 2001), 176ff; Yoshinaga, *op. cit.*

³⁹ Hyōdō, “Taishō-ki no ‘seishin’ gainen,” 101–103.

⁴⁰ Anesaki Masaharu, “Ōmotokyō ni tsuite,” *Hentai shinri* 6, no. 3 (1920), 202. Reprinted in *Anesaki Masaharu shū*, vol. 9 (Tokyo: Kress Shuppan, 2002). A clipping found among Anesaki’s papers shows that this article was reprinted in at least one period newspaper.

⁴¹ Anesaki, “Ōmotokyō ni tsuite,” 201, 206.

reference to the nativist movement that had leaned on Shinto as a basis for authority during the Meiji Restoration, but which had lost out to Westernization in successive reforms. The nativist movement served as a sort of lost dream of the nation for many former samurai and shrine priests, and the promise of its resurrection attracted spiritual seekers and military men to Oomoto.⁴²

Essentially, Oomoto employed national symbols in an unofficial but intriguing way that attracted many people to a specific group and a stated mission. Onisaburō produced a very large body of text, which he invited believers to study and contemplate. For this reason, Tsushiro Hirofumi refers to it as an “exoteric” attempt at “public religion.” As opposed to the cult of the emperor, a public religion which was grounded in “esoteric” vagaries rather than any specific code of law, Oomoto had openly published sacred texts and doctrines, including new interpretations of the national myths, which aimed to become the basis of public, civil authority.⁴³

This formed the basis of one of Anesaki’s two prongs of attack, in the pages of *Hentai Shinri* and his other major publications. Oomoto’s mission sought public authority and was available for all to observe, but reading what was available showed that it was misusing national symbols to make grand, world-historical promises, such as a new restoration, apocalypse, and world unification under the Emperor. These were the type of teachings that Yasumaru Yoshio would decades later classify as “heresy” against the state. These “exaggerated delusions,” as Anesaki put it, were damaging to the common good and powered by an unhealthy “fear” of war against Japan, and attracted the interest of military men and other spiritual seekers for all the wrong reasons.

Furthermore, undereducated believers were unable to recognize that these symbols were being misused because of a lack of religious education. Rather than Oomoto itself being at fault, the Japanese state, failing to recognize the “innate disposition to the religious mindset in society and in the individual,” had denigrated religion as outdated and worthless in its education programs, leading to a growing interest in movements like Oomoto that were willing to repel this anti-religious ideology. Similarly, authoritative restrictions on freedom of speech, including newspaper censorship and inspections of university programs for unorthodox religious or political education, made it only natural that people’s minds would be unable to mature and rise to the modern challenge, and that reactionary movements like Oomoto would arise instead.⁴⁴

⁴² Stalker, *Prophet Motive*, 48–49.

⁴³ Tsushiro Hirofumi, “*Kōkyō shūkyō no hikari to yami*” (Tokyo: Shunjūsha, 2005), 237–8.

⁴⁴ Anesaki, “*Ōmotokyō ni tsuite*,” 206.

Oomoto as “Irrational” Misuse of Supernatural Authority

At the same time, Oomoto left a fairly large gap in its grand scheme. How exactly would the new “restoration” come about? How could believers bring about heaven on earth? Deguchi Nao, paralleling the activity of the gods in the world to a “jack-in-the-box,” had emphasized the uselessness of Western learning and the ability of divine reality to constantly surprise humans, and simply entrusted the gods to carry out the “remaking of the world” while using her as an agent.⁴⁵

Anesaki became exhausted with this intense faith. He even made up a new word for it, “ruckus-faith [*sōshin*],” to describe the “exaggerations” and “impulsiveness” that he felt gave it an anti-intellectual character. “They call the world a ‘jack-in-the-box,’” he wrote, signifying that “the causes and effects behind the changes of the world are large and distant from each other.” The use of relative terms should be noted here. For Anesaki, these teachings were not completely *without* reason, but rather adopted a worldview where large gaps were accepted without question: “the ties of reason are loosened.” This reflected the increasing pace of change that rewarded capitalists and quick thinkers who could anticipate the direction of society. Hence, Oomoto was not an opponent of the age, *but was, again, “suitable for the times”*. The problem was that it ignored the value of economic or sociological “research” to discover patterns in human behavior, and instead perverted this modern call to mercantilism into an overly intense faith in impending radical, world-transforming changes.⁴⁶ The deficiencies of “jack-in-the-box” thinking formed the other prong of his attack.

Anesaki did not attack Oomoto simply for invoking the supernatural, because he had no prejudices against the supernatural at all, and in fact believed it could even be included in academic research if it was used *rationally*. His interest in supernatural affairs can be traced back to his first trip abroad. In January 1902, his advisor Karl Robert Eduard von Hartmann warned him about becoming too involved in Spiritualism. While in England in October 1902, he joined the Society for Psychical Research and remained a member for 7 years. That month, he also visited the library of St. John’s College, Oxford, which was said to be haunted by a ghost; his diary records that “some people are said to have seen it and some to have heard its footsteps.”⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Morrow, “Power of Writing,” 167–171.

⁴⁶ Anesaki, *Shakai no dōyō to seishinteki kakusei* (Tokyo: Hakubunkan, 1920), 76–81 (reprinted as *Anesaki Masabaru shū*, vol. 8); “Ōmotokyō ni tsuite,” 203.

⁴⁷ Anesaki, *Hito wa fumi nari* (Tokyo: Hakubunkan, 1918), 429 (reprinted as *Anesaki Masabaru shū*, vol. 4); “New Members,” *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 192 (October 1902), 273; Anesaki, *Wandering Clouds*, trans. Susanna Fessler (Fukuoka: Kurodahan Press, 2014), 9.

When Anesaki returned to the University of Tokyo in 1903, he taught a class on mysticism that included “theosophy, occultism, and psychical research.”⁴⁸ In 1908 he reported favorably on the Society for Psychical Research in one of Japan’s major newspapers, comparing its findings to cutting-edge nuclear physics.⁴⁹

Perhaps taking von Hartmann’s advice, Anesaki did not make spiritual research central to his work. The main body of his writing shows that he considered the developed traditions of established religions to be more valuable than new experiments. Perhaps he was seeking to avoid becoming a “pilgrim of superstition” himself. His mature writing often fell back on his own Buddhist beliefs, which are discussed in another section below.

However, Anesaki remained a believer that the spirit world was at least somewhat accessible to non-religious experimenters, and in 1918, he gave the literary public a review of developments in Western spiritual research. Offering his personal theory, akin to William James, that the individual human soul arises out of the “great spiritual flow” of the universe as an expression of a specific “ideal, the content of consciousness,” he summarizes:

I deny the existence of separate souls. Rather, *the flow of spirit develops into personalities. This is called the immortality of spirit.* (Emphasis in original) [...] Regarding so-called “spiritual research,” many books have been published recently, but among them Myers’ *Human Personality [and Its Survival of Bodily Death]*, 1903] should be called a masterpiece. Sir Oliver Lodge’s book *Raymond* [1916], a record of his conversations with the spirit of his son Raymond who died on the battlefield, contains some flaws.⁵⁰

Josephson-Storm shows that the attitude Anesaki displays here was broadly shared among period intellectuals. For example, Sigmund Freud was also a member of the Society for Psychical Research and spoke openly about his belief in spiritualism and the occult, upsetting British psychiatrists who thought this would damage the reputation of psychiatry.⁵¹ As Anesaki’s published work

⁴⁸ Fukasawa Hidetaka, “Ikai no ‘jitsuzai mondai’: Asano/Anesaki ronsō to sono context,” *Bungaku*, November, 2001. For two accounts of the contents of this class, see the blog post “Anesaki Masaharu no kōgi ‘Shinpushugi’ o kiteita Takebayashi Musōsan,” *Jinbochō otaota nikki*. September 3, 2010. Accessed May 25, 2018. <http://d.hatena.ne.jp/jyunku/20100903>.

⁴⁹ Anesaki, “Hisomeru ishiki no kenkyū,” *Yomiuri shinbun*, November 18 and 19, 1908, page 5 of both issues.

⁵⁰ Anesaki, *Shinjidai no shūkyō* (Tokyo: Hakubunkan, 1918), 94–5. Reprinted as *Anesaki Masaharu shū*, vol. 6. Lodge’s *Raymond* was very popular in Japan, but there may have been some distaste for its overly literal spiritualist message in intellectual circles. See Masato Nihei, “Spiritualism and Modernism in the Work of Kawabata Yasunari,” *Japan Forum* 30.1 (2018): 69–84.

⁵¹ Josephson-Storm, *Myth of Disenchantment*, 179–208.

only rarely refers to occult research, it can be said that he was less invested in the subject than Freud.⁵²

One might wonder, however, why Anesaki was not interested in avoiding the subject altogether to portray himself as a neutral observer of religions. In the context of the book being quoted, there is an obvious answer: he was attempting to provide evidence to Japanese readers that a specific kind of spiritual practice should be the object of public sympathy and respect. This was the act of prayer at Yasukuni Jinja, a government-run shrine to war dead. He explains:

It was spring, just after the Russian war. At a ceremony at Yasukuni Jinja [...] I saw a single woman, her outfit unadorned but in a tidy style, holding the hand of a boy of about five or six and offering her respects fervently. [...] She was not merely grieving, and when I saw her address the child, I could see an expression like a smile, whether of joy, or of some kind of satisfaction. [...] There could be no doubt that this was the widow of a soldier who had passed away in the war, and that this child was the son of that late man. And for an instant, although I was not thinking of anything so significant that I would be aware of it the next day, I thought that I saw her, not so much mourning and praying at the shrine for her lost husband, but actually feeling that she was talking together with him. And, moved by her ardor and total sincerity, I myself, too, felt myself contacting some spirit, although I did not know whose spirit it was, and I felt as if my own heart was connected with the heart of the woman speaking together with her son to the spirit of her deceased husband.

[...] It is not my intention here to raise the question of whether Yasukuni Jinja is related to religion, or whether the faith of the woman I described here is based in true reality. What I would like to say, in a word, is that for human beings, there are temperaments which affect us, even if we cannot see, hear, or touch them.⁵³

There is an interesting logic being applied here. At least in theory, an American observing Memorial Day at Arlington National Cemetery might be moved to sympathy seeing a war widow at her husband's grave. But Anesaki goes slightly

⁵² It should be noted, however, that Anesaki's fervent belief in the power of the classical period sage Prince Shōtoku bordered on the occult. He spent long periods of time clipping letters from photocopies of manuscripts attributed to Shōtoku and reordering them into collages of varied lengths. He represented this to the public as a way to bring Shōtoku into the present day, and offered to get some of it published, but the sheer number of collages in his files shows that this was more like an occult practice or an obsession on his part. See Nishimura Akira, "Anesaki Masaharu Taishō kōki, Shōwa shoki no risō: Anesaki Masaharu 'Shōtoku Taishi onjikihitsu shashin,'" *Kikan Nihon shisōshi* 59 (2001): 101–20.

⁵³ Anesaki, *Shinjū dai no shūkyō*, 33–35.

beyond that: he sees that feeling of sympathy as a spiritual, almost mystical experience, which is not merely a personal mental state but transcends the individual and becomes key to *public* goodwill. This basis for moral order is probably related to the early modern “philosophy of the heart” described by Yasumaru and Bellah (mentioned above), which in Anesaki’s day had developed into various theories about the nature of Shinto.

Before the 1940s, Yasukuni Jinja was hardly ever visited by intellectuals. In fact, other than on New Year’s holidays when ordinary Japanese flock to shrines, it was almost exclusively patronized by people with a personal connection to Japan’s armed forces.⁵⁴ And yet Anesaki apparently took a day out to visit it, as early as 1905, and what he saw there was fresh in his mind over a decade later. It is possible that he came in connection with his religious studies research, since he believed, contrary to most Japanese intellectuals of his time, that Yasukuni was not merely a place of civil ceremony but was grounded in a common religious feeling. But rather than discovering some sectarian ritual or dogma, he discovered the simple, pure emotions of a war widow, which he found it impossible to observe as a neutral bystander.

As alluded to above, Anesaki was a critic of unrestrained nationalism. While he celebrated the Russo-Japanese War as a struggle of liberation against European dominance, he also felt that true morality could only come from “awareness of the divine,” and that institutional religions were needed to “purify” to the emotional excesses of the patriotism seen at places like Yasukuni Jinja.⁵⁵ But the example of Yasukuni demonstrated to Anesaki that there are basic temperaments which *all* people ought to acknowledge; to do otherwise would be an insult to the families of the war dead, and to advocate for “disenchantment” would be *detrimental* to society.

For Anesaki, then, spiritual authority is real and has at least some proper uses. This contrasts quite strongly with Weber’s contemporary insistence that “nobody can doubt in his heart of hearts that science is irreligious” and that “life in communion with the divine” requires some rejection of rationality and scientific intellect.⁵⁶ From Anesaki’s viewpoint, the rational modern must acknowledge otherworldly “temperaments,” not reject them. From this core argument, he develops a discus-

⁵⁴ Kawamura Kunimitsu, *Tomurai-ron* (Tokyo: Seikyūsha, 2013), 142. This is also mentioned in William P. Woodard, “Yasukuni Shrine,” *Japan Christian Quarterly* 37, no. 2 (1971), 72.

⁵⁵ Isomae Jun’ichi, *Religious Discourse in Modern Japan: Religion, State, and Shintō* (Boston: Brill, 2014), 121–46, 169ff.

⁵⁶ Weber, “The Vocation of Science” (1917), quoted in *The Essential Weber: A Reader*, ed. Sam Whimster (New York: Routledge, 2003), 277.

sion, with many examples from European literature, of the emotional response we have towards other living beings, how that response continues after death, and finally how these issues are handled in English spiritual research.⁵⁷

In this respect, Anesaki's ideal of how spiritual attitudes could be used to unite the nation is threatened by Oomoto. Anesaki builds up an argument from a simple emotional experience to a "rational" basis for discussing spiritual matters. In Anesaki's conception, a proper, rational deployment of religious thought provides a solution to the "problem of cultivation" discussed above, contributing in a nonsectarian way to a common, pluralistic conception of the nation. But Oomoto's appeal to divine revelation replaces more ordinary concepts of the nation with visionary images and radical teachings handed down from charismatic founders. This constitutes an "irrational" rejection of liberal, pluralist discourse, again demonstrating not a flaw on Oomoto's part, but the deficiencies of a society that would produce such a movement.

While Anesaki's opinion of Oomoto is clearly quite low, he believes the best method to overcome this "timely" aberration is further encouragement of knowledge and intellectualism. His optimism may be compared to his mentor Max Müller, who believed that his own work publicizing the true teachings of Buddhism would "render such aberrations as Madame Blavatsky's Esoteric Buddhism impossible."⁵⁸ Anesaki's books push for further liberalization of speech laws and closer research into social psychology, including the works of Gabriel Tarde and William McDougall, so that society might better accommodate religious feeling and unrest. Otherwise, he warns, new charismatic movements like Oomoto will appear in future years (as they indeed did).⁵⁹

This socially grounded critique differed from the pathologizing of the other contributors to the special issue of *Hentai Shinri*, but it would have been applauded by period society as liberal and farsighted. It endorses in spirit the idea of individual freedom of religious belief, while in practice advocating that government authorities and elites suppress Oomoto's dangerous nationalist fervor for the time being, then adjust their education and censorship programs to prevent Japan from becoming a breeding ground of ultranationalists, a subject already of concern to many in 1920. There was no need to outlaw Oomoto's specific spiritual practices or claims, Anesaki insisted, because in a healthy liberal society, such claims would not catch on or pose a real political danger.

⁵⁷ Isomae Jun'ichi and Fukasawa Hidetaka, *Kindai Nihon ni okeru chishikijin to shūkyō* (Tokyo: Tōkyōdō Shuppan, 2002), 181.

⁵⁸ Max Müller, "Esoteric Buddhism." *The Nineteenth Century* 33 (1893): 767–88.

⁵⁹ Anesaki, *Shakai no dōyō*, 79; "Ōmotokyō ni tsuite," 205.

Oomoto as “Esoteric” Misuse of Academic Authority

Although Oomoto is described as an essentially “exoteric” doctrine above, much of its appeal lay in its reliance on the unexplained, and in this sense, it is also appropriate to say that it deploys “esotericism” (i.e. purposefully hidden revelations). Onisaburō recognized the appeal of Nao’s “jack in the box” defense against human reason, and employed it to full effect, using wordplay, anagrams, and unexplained metaphors to offer hints of what Heaven had in store.⁶⁰ He also edited Nao’s automatic writing to remove statements that were directly injurious to the Emperor, but purposefully left in blank spaces to create mysterious lines like “_____ will soon bow to the true God,” letting readers make up their own minds about what name had been omitted.⁶¹ Yasumaru Yoshio observes that these blank spaces were “convenient for esotericism [*hikyō*]-infused interpretations,”⁶² and undercover investigations by police claimed to show that anti-monarchist readings of the text were indeed circulating secretly among believers.

Anesaki was aware of Oomoto’s secret political message and criticized its duplicity,⁶³ but this did not figure in his *Hentai Shinri* article. There, he stressed the necessity of laying a liberal, rational groundwork for boundaries to divide “religion” from “superstition” or “pseudo-religion.” His argument does not require any critique of secrecy. However, in a different kind of forum, he *does* end up criticizing a specific academic for endorsing Oomoto’s secrecy. This more private debate is not one Anesaki was involved in by choice: he was pulled into it by an accident involving his personal religious convictions, born from his closest and most tragic friendship.

While mourning the premature death of his friend Takayama Chogyū (1871–1902), Anesaki came to terms with the medieval Buddhist figure Nichiren, whose teachings Chogyū had embraced in his final years. At first, Anesaki openly denigrated Nichiren’s Buddhism as “chauvinistic” and obsessive and contrasted him negatively with Jesus and St. Francis. But eventually, after many years of participating in memorials for Chogyū, Anesaki declared himself a fellow believer, articulating a unique vision of Nichirenism that emphasized openness and liberality.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Tsushiro, “*Kōkyō shūkyō*,” 224–5.

⁶¹ For details on Onisaburō’s editing, see Morrow, “Power of Writing,” 186n1, as well as Kawamura Kunimitsu, *Deguchi Nao/Onisaburō: sekai o suishō no yo ni itasu zo yo* (Kyoto: Minerva Shobō, 2017), 6–10.

⁶² Yasumaru Yoshio, *Ikei — kangoku — cosmology: shūensei no rekishigaku* (Tokyo: Mainichi Shinbun-sha, 1999), 208.

⁶³ See his interview, “Bōkoku to shinsei o kakushin suru Ōmotokyō no kikensei,” in *Asahi shinbun*, May 12, 1921, morning edition, 5.

⁶⁴ Terada Yoshiro, “Takayama Chogyū to Anesaki Masaharu no Nichiren-ron: Meiji-ki academism

In 1916, Anesaki and fellow friends of Chogyū founded a small magazine called *Jinbun* (*Humanities*) that endeavored to cover all topics relating to the humanities. However, many of the articles were about Buddhism, Nichiren, or Chogyū himself. For unknown reasons, while Anesaki was away on another foreign trip, the other editors of this magazine accepted an article from Asano Wasaburō (1874–1937), a University of Tokyo literature professor who had recently quit his job and converted to Oomoto.⁶⁵

Asano's article promoted Oomoto's doctrines and worldview, inviting disbelieving intellectuals to come experience *chinkon-kishin* possession for themselves. When Anesaki returned from his trip, he must have been aghast that a magazine he had founded in beloved memory of his Nichirenist friend had somehow printed an article promoting another religion entirely. There were obviously harsh complaints from readers, one of which was printed in the following issue. Anesaki was also obliged to respond himself and defend the mission of Chogyū, but now he had to walk a delicate line: it would have been highly inconvenient to cast doubt on his neutrality as a scholar of religion, not to mention the stated purpose of the magazine to honor the liberal arts. This is how he chose to handle it:

This magazine is of course a free forum, and it cannot be denied that we offer to the public the differing opinions of various people. However, Mr. Asano's confession of faith is concealing various matters besides the confession. [...] He tells us that "now is not the time to make this public," or that there are matters that "even a rain of blood falling on your heads will not convince you of", in other words concealing various matters by saying that they cannot be revealed to those who are not on this path.⁶⁶

Of Anesaki's three reasons for critiquing Oomoto, it appears that this is the only one that should properly be described as a critique of esotericism. In fact, this has already been argued by the Japanese scholar Fukasawa Hidetaka, who, analyzing the fascinating tension of this argument, observes that Anesaki is accusing Asano of "*mystification* and *esoterism*" (both written as English loanwords).⁶⁷

no Nichiren rikai," in *Kingendai no bokke undō to zaikai kyōdan* (Tokyo: Shunjūsha, 2014), 164–193.

⁶⁵ For details on Asano's conversion, see Helen Hardacre, "Asano Wasaburō and Japanese Spiritualism in Early Twentieth Century Japan," in *Japan's Competing Modernities: Issues in Culture and Democracy 1900–1930*, ed. Sharon Minichiello (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1998): 133–153.

⁶⁶ Anesaki, "Asano-kun no shinkō kokuhaku ni tsuite," *Jinbun* 1, no. 11 (1916).

⁶⁷ Fukasawa, "Jitsuzai mondai," 14.

But here, the scholar cannot but be flummoxed. Anesaki's other critiques were of Oomoto's effect on the Japanese public. They accused Oomoto of misusing public symbolism and spiritual authority and suggested a political remedy. In contrast, this more private announcement regrets that Asano's statements are not befitting the position of a liberal arts scholar. The esotericism being critiqued here is not a proposition about the world, but a proposition about how scholarly writing should be conducted. Elsewhere, Anesaki was critical of intellectuals who fail to disclose their entire program. He wrote that a failure to present the full facts of one's plan to the public "brings about a dulling of conscience" and prevents the public debate necessary for democratic societies to thrive. In this context he critiqued the collaboration between scholars and the state that he had witnessed in the German Empire during the buildup to the Great War.⁶⁸

Such boundary work bears politically valuable fruit: in this case, it provides a justification for disqualifying Asano as a scholar and denying him the right of reply in the pages of *Jinbun*.⁶⁹ But the context in which this critique of Asano appears makes it intensely ironic. For Asano's "confession of faith" had been completely open, while Anesaki, in response, must word his reply very carefully so that he cannot be accused of excluding Asano's viewpoint based on mere religious differences — even though it is very hard to imagine anyone could possibly read the article without being aware of Anesaki's own religious convictions. Furthermore, the real reason Asano's right of reply was revoked was obviously because he had angered the journal's Nichirenist readership. Anesaki is accusing Asano of "concealment" as a pretext that superficially conceals his own concealment.

This is not to accuse Anesaki of hypocrisy *per se*, as it is a reasonable question whether any writer can avoid the act of concealment.⁷⁰ Indeed, Asano was consciously concealing much more than Anesaki: in 1920 he secretly circulated a manifesto that modeled Oomoto after the global conspiracy of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, claiming that Oomoto was not a mere religion but the "true" conspiracy against the world.⁷¹ However, we cannot avoid recognizing that the way in which Anesaki treats this strategy of concealment, secrecy, and conspiracy is unusual and revealing. He is not concerned with claims to higher

⁶⁸ Anesaki, *Shakai no dōyō*, 234.

⁶⁹ Asano's desire to reply to Anesaki directly can be seen in his contribution to the following issue of the Oomoto in-house organ *Shinreikai* (January 1, 1917), 12–16; reprinted in *Shinreikai*, vol. 1 (Tokyo: Hachiman Shoten, 1986), 20–24.

⁷⁰ Jacques Derrida, *La dissémination* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1972), 79.

⁷¹ Reproduced in Ikeda Akira, ed., *Ōmoto shiryō shūsei*, vol. 2 (Tokyo: San'ichi Shobō, 1981), 195–210.

or more spiritual knowledge, nor with use of the power of correspondences or of imagination, as he finds that such claims, in the form of “mysticism” and “religions,” can cultivate citizens to meet needs of the state in a healthy way.⁷² In other words, Anesaki is not concerned with the aspects of esotericism as defined by Antoine Faivre.⁷³

Rather, the target of Anesaki’s criticism appears to be the type of esoteric writing identified by Leo Strauss, in which philosophers rendered their public writing ambiguous by simultaneously advertising and concealing cryptic hidden motives.⁷⁴ While both Faivre and Strauss use the term “esoteric” to denote strategies of concealment, Strauss was addressing much different questions, which are rarely taken up in studies that build on or reply to Faivre. Rather than a “waste-basket” of unorthodox epistemologies which built itself into “the polemical ‘Other’” of the “academy,”⁷⁵ Strauss claimed that esotericism, as a specific *rhetorical* method for making epistemological claims, had permeated Western thought since the days of the original Academy of Plato. He further claimed that the split between the ancient Academy and our modern academy originated with Spinoza, who denounced concealment in writing and called for a “disenchanted” naturalist epistemology.⁷⁶

Anesaki does not share the “disenchanted” epistemology of Spinoza, but he does share the modern academy’s distaste for concealment. He is concerned that for Asano and Oomoto, writing serves different rhetorical functions from the way it ought to work in an open society. Although Anesaki is unable to completely keep concealment out of his own writing, he is suspicious of how Asano *embraces* the privileged knowledge implied through esoteric writing and aims to derive authority from it — what Fukasawa calls “mystification.” Anesaki cannot go after the heart of the epistemological claim, but he can and does respond by constructing boundaries for his “free forum.”

Conclusion: Esotericism in the Academy

I have described three critiques Anesaki made of Oomoto: the first two being that its misuse of national and spiritual authority reflects the deficiencies of an

⁷² Isomae, *Religious Discourse*, 166–175.

⁷³ Antoine Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 3–35.

⁷⁴ Daniel Tanguay, *Leo Strauss: An Intellectual Biography* (Yale University Press, 2007), 83.

⁷⁵ Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 146, 254.

⁷⁶ Tanguay, *Leo Strauss*, 11, 28–29.

illiberal religious policy, and the third that its leaders summons up the authority of secrecy in an inappropriate way. Of these three criticisms, the first two are offered in a scientific journal and appeal to the public for a more liberal attitude towards speech and belief. The final criticism, however, reveals a fascinating, deeper fear about what sort of speech might emerge from such liberalism. Asano's desire for secrecy in his writing threatens to upset the delicate balance of the journal *Jimbun*, necessitating careful boundary work on Anesaki's part.

The identification of Anesaki's reply as a critique of "mystification" or esoteric writing in the Straussian sense, a point on which I concur with Fukasawa, could certainly be claimed to lay the groundwork for Asprem's class of analogical research projects relating the history of Western thought to non-Western applications, which he articulates as follows:

Looking beyond the particular to see how similar "forms of thought," secretive organisations, or claims to higher knowledge play out in contexts beyond the West [...] may even help uncover selection pressures and environmental factors that can help explaining the emergence of esotericism in "the West," and formulate more precise and theoretically refined definitions. [...] What can the cognitive science of religion tell us about the generation and transmission of "forms of thought" or "cognitive styles" considered unique to Western esotericism? Is there a dynamic of "convergent cultural evolution" that sheds light on the formation of "esoteric-like" groups, movements, discourses, experiences, or idea-structures?⁷⁷

Certainly, we may identify the "pressures," the "environmental factors", and even the "cognitive styles" that propel Anesaki through a maze of logical quandaries so that he can develop a critique of esoteric writing. We may furthermore see that Anesaki's boundary work is helping to produce a modern academy free of esoteric writing, an act of "convergent" institutional construction. However, how do we know, firstly, that such boundary work is "cultural evolution" rather than political manipulation or something else, and secondly, that the accusation of esoteric writing is itself enough to label Oomoto as an "esoteric-like" group or movement?

As I have emphasized, Anesaki not only believed in cultural progress, he also believed that through this progress groups like Oomoto would naturally decline. Yet, in his *Hentai Shinri* article he is not pressed through "environmental factors" or "cognitive styles" to come up with a concept of "esotericism." Instead, he was led to this concept specifically to exclude Asano from an academic forum. This suggests that his critique was not an "evolution" but was

⁷⁷ Asprem, "Beyond the West," 29.

subjective and served a pragmatic goal. Indeed, such an interpretation can be buttressed by much of twentieth-century philosophy.

In Strauss's historiography, the rejection of esoteric writing eventually led to a redefinition of what philosophy was and how it was accomplished, with close reading to uncover secret meanings being replaced by proclamations of openness. However, because deconstructive reading is always possible, we cannot say that this new breed of philosophers was truly able to accomplish openness, nor that the act of writing can avoid concealment. Where Asprem analogizes "esoteric-like" ideas to the wing structure on a bat or a bird to make the case for "convergent evolution," I would object that this is only the case if we are to claim that all animals have wings when we look closely enough.

Instead of constructing the "disenchantment of the world" as a problem that emerged organically out of deeper *objective knowledge* of the universe, we should acknowledge that it is a *myth* created through countless acts of *human subjectivity*.⁷⁸ Anesaki excluded Asano because the type of project he was engaging in was dangerous, not because it was necessarily false. Boundary work is not about what the world *actually is*, and acknowledging this means rejecting the narcissistic projection of the sociologist's own ideals onto society at large, and returning to the more serious question of what those ideals ought to be.

If this does not bode well for the characterization of esotericism as a type of mental functioning separable from the ordinary, it should be recognized that it does not necessarily lend credence to the characterization of esotericism as a mere historical construction either. Historicist awareness of hidden theological biases behind the category of "esotericism" attempts to reflect upon the shortcomings of Enlightenment rationalism, but of course there is nothing more Enlightened or rationalist than to discover and reject a hidden theological bias.⁷⁹

Both of these methods privilege reflexive research programs over non-reflexive programs as a way to "dig our way out of" esotericism. This is extremely common in the human sciences these days, and yet there is no unambiguous indication that reflexive programs can create a position of privilege from which non-reflexive programs can be critiqued.⁸⁰ To discover uses for factual knowledge in an era that has moved beyond "absolute knowledge," academism cannot merely refine the boundaries of its existing research programs through reflexive study: we must find the cleavage points at which these boundaries can be disrupted entirely.

⁷⁸ Asprem, *Problem of Disenchantment*, 30–31; Josephson-Storm, *Myth of Disenchantment*, 314.

⁷⁹ As Josephson-Storm acknowledges: *Myth of Disenchantment*, 316.

⁸⁰ Michael Lynch, "Against Reflexivity as an Academic Virtue and Source of Privileged Knowledge," *Theory, Culture, and Society* 17, no. 3 (2000): 26–54.

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