

# Awakening to a Universalist Perspective: The Unitarian Influence on Religious Reform in Japan

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## *Introduction*

WHEN Japan became modernized in the early part of the Meiji period, the government forced the existing religious traditions to reorganize. Shinto became the national religion, as it provided the basis for emperor worship, and Shinto and Buddhist priests were trained to propagate the new State Shinto (*kokka shintō* 国家神道). This period also saw the introduction of various forms of Christian thought and liberal theology from the West, propagated by over 200 Christian societies. It was an age in which religion in Japan faced its greatest challenge.

As the government continued to pressure the Japanese religious establishment to reform and as Christianity rapidly grew in the 1880s, feelings of resentment began to arise, especially among Buddhists. In addition, at about the same time, several opinion leaders created a movement to promote the official acceptance of Christianity, thinking it would contribute to social progress. This endangered the very existence of Buddhism, and Buddhists had no choice but to take the initiative in reacting to Christianity.

As Buddhists learned about Christian thought, they became more familiar with the concept of faith as being a “religion”—a concept they were unfamiliar with prior to the modern period.<sup>1</sup> In their process of reform,

<sup>1</sup> See Inoue 2003, Katō 1944 and Kawata 1957.

progressive Buddhists attempted to make their nationalistic beliefs conform to the universal values that had been shown to them by the Unitarians. Also, Christian leaders like Yokoi Tokio 横井時雄 (1857–1927) and Matsumura Kaiseki 松村介石 (1859–1939) valued their religion as a form of self-cultivation (*shūyō* 修養), rather than a system of dogma. These men were aware of universal values but perplexed with the modern notion of religion.

The introduction of what would be called “New Theology” (*shin shingaku* 新神学)—through such movements as Unitarianism and the participation in the World’s Parliament of Religions—inspired religious debate, fostered a spirit of cooperation between Christianity and Buddhism, and facilitated the establishment of comparative religious studies. Much has already been written about the Unitarian mission in Japan, but the Unitarian influence on religious reform remains neglected. There is still room for further examination.<sup>2</sup>

This paper will focus on the reforms made to Buddhism, giving particular attention to how Unitarian values affected Buddhists and other opinion leaders of the day.<sup>3</sup> In analyzing these reforms, it is enlightening to refer to the evolutionary processes that Christianity underwent. I will focus on the last two decades of the nineteenth century, a period in which religion in Japan underwent many changes and entered into a new age of cooperation.

This article includes five sections. The first section examines the implications of the Meiji Restoration for the religious institutions, particularly Buddhist institutions, and shows how Western ideas presented a challenge to Japanese Buddhism. The second section looks at how leading Buddhists and other thinkers expressed their sympathy with the universalism found in Unitarianism. It will also look at the shift of focus from establishing national unity to establishing national morality. The third and fourth sections explore the reinterpretation of Buddhism and Christianity in the climate of nationalism. The last part looks at the worldwide trend of religious unity, as exemplified by the World’s Parliament of Religions held in 1893.

<sup>2</sup> Note, for example, an article by Tsuchiya Hiromasa (1999), in which he attempts to write a history of the Unitarian Mission in Japan.

<sup>3</sup> In the examination of the Unitarian mission and its influence, primary sources include periodicals of the Unitarian Association, reports on the mission in Japan, and correspondence between the American Unitarian Association and its missionaries. Most of these records are kept in the Andover-Harvard Theological Library, Harvard Divinity School, Cambridge, MA.

*Modernization and Buddhism*

Strengthened by more than two centuries of government support during the Tokugawa period, Buddhism had obtained a great deal of authority in the religious world. The government had required the people to register with Buddhist temples, enabling Buddhism to reach people of every class. After the Meiji Restoration, however, promoting Shinto as the state religion became the policy of the new government, and the separation of Buddhism and Shinto was decreed. In some areas, this policy encouraged movements to abolish Buddhism and resulted in the destruction of many temples, statues, and implements until these movements declined around 1871. Although the government soon realized that its attempt to establish Shinto as the official religion was unpopular, Shinto nevertheless was able to maintain dominance. From this time onward, Buddhist organizations were forced to survive by adjusting to the changes of the modern age. To clarify the effect that modernization had on religion in Japan, we will first look at the government policy surrounding national identity and education.

In 1872, the Ministry of Religious Education (Kyōbushō 教部省) issued an official order to ministry-appointed teachers to propagate the Great Doctrine (*taikyō senpu* 大教宣布).<sup>4</sup> This policy aimed at achieving an educational system that would foster reverence for the emperor and worship of the Shinto gods. Such government policies led to a critical re-examination of the foundations of Buddhist faith.<sup>5</sup>

However, the government eventually abandoned this policy and began to place emphasis on establishing a national system of morality (*kokumin dōtoku* 国民道徳) as an alternative to Shinto. Itō Hirobumi 伊藤博文 (1841–1909), a politician who oversaw the drafting of the Meiji Constitution, remarked that:

The political system in Europe is based on Christianity, which has unified the people over a span of a thousand years. In contrast, the power of religion in Japan is weak and therefore it cannot form the

<sup>4</sup> The essence of the Great Doctrine was defined in three articles: (1) To make veneration of the gods and love of the country the basic principle, (2) To propagate the Rule of Heaven and the Way of Man, (3) To teach reverence for the Emperor and respect for the Imperial instructions. See Sakurai 1971, p. 45.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 26–35, 42–53.

central axle of the modern state. Even though Buddhism once exerted a strong influence, unifying all classes of people, it is on the verge of decline. The basis for the new constitution cannot be found in the traditional religions of Japan—only the Imperial Household can act as the foundation of a modern Japanese nation.<sup>6</sup>

Hence, the government introduced a system of morality based on loyalty to the Imperial Household. Interestingly, this morality was not thought to contradict the teachings of the Christian missionary societies—it was thought to encompass and transcend sectarian, political, and moral differences. In addition to government pressure, Buddhism now was also threatened by the movement to accept Christianity, which gradually began to spread among intellectuals.

During the decade between 1880 and 1890, Japan entered a period of modernization and Westernization. Japanese leaders, driven by a strong desire to “turn to the West,” promoted comprehensive modernization, from industry to economy and education. It was thought that the adoption of Western culture would bring about social change and make Japan recognized as a member of the international community. Accordingly, Christianity saw a rapid growth in this period.<sup>7</sup>

Some leaders realized that Japan needed to respect the religion of Western nations to find common ground for cooperation with the West.<sup>8</sup> Actually, this tolerant attitude toward religion was mostly a political strategy, as many of these intellectuals felt the supernatural ideas of Christian thought to be unacceptable.<sup>9</sup> Also at this time, most leaders denounced the Buddhist priesthood, saying that it lacked genuine morality and failed to contribute to social progress.

<sup>6</sup> Yamaguchi 1999, pp. 149–50.

<sup>7</sup> In this review of the growth of the mission churches, I have relied on Morioka 1970, pp. 174–86.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Mori 1972 and Tsuda 2001. Nakamura Masanao 中村正直 also concluded that the moral foundation of the West’s strength was Christianity. See Nakamura 1967.

<sup>9</sup> Note, for example, Fukuzawa Yukichi 福沢諭吉 (1835–1901) at first denounced Christianity, but in 1884 he published an essay in *Jiji shimpō* 時事新報 on 6–7 June entitled “Shūkyō mo mata seiyōfū ni shitagawazaru o ezu” 宗教もまた西洋風に従わざるを得ず (Religion Must also Conform to the West). In this essay, he insisted that it was necessary for Japan to adopt the same color of Christianity as the West, just like some animals protect themselves from danger by taking on the color of their surroundings. Thus, his argument was not suggesting the adoption of Christianity for benefiting the individual, but for promoting the national interest and social and educational benefits.

Many of the educated began to think that the so-called religious rationalism of the West could lead to social harmony and progress. Unitarianism, endorsed as being the best of modern science and philosophy, was seriously considered by many intellectuals when it was introduced to Japan at that time. The Unitarian movement stood in complete contrast to other Christian and Buddhist movements.

However, as the reaction against indiscriminate acceptance of Western civilization grew, the Christian influence gradually lost its momentum. In 1891, Inoue Tetsujirō 井上哲次郎 (1855–1944), a professor of philosophy at Tokyo Imperial University, pointed out how Christians had opposed the Imperial Rescript when it was issued and how they were not in harmony with the nation's long-held principles of loyalty and filial obedience. In other words, Christians were not willing to follow the moral teachings prescribed by the Rescript on Education.<sup>10</sup> Inoue maintained that Japanese and Western ethical notions differed fundamentally, and he thought there was nothing to be gained by attempting to merge them.

Many Buddhist thinkers strengthened their opposition to Christianity, urging for its proscription.<sup>11</sup> As the calls for modernization increased, they sought to become familiar with the modern science and philosophy of the West. The study of Western thought stimulated progressive Buddhists such as Shimaji Mokurai 島地黙雷 (1838–1911), Ōuchi Seiran 大内青巒 (1845–1918), Akamatsu Renjō 赤松連城 (1841–1919), and others to re-examine themselves and make changes. They adopted the new ideas of religious freedom and separation of religion and state so that they could gain independence from government supervision.<sup>12</sup> We should also note that a number of Buddhists were increasing their knowledge of Christianity by studying the Bible, doctrines, church history, and the various denominations.

<sup>10</sup> See Suzuki 1979, pp. 100–103. Inoue Tetsujirō's criticism of religion (especially Christianity) was clarified in an article entitled "Teishitsu to shūkyō no kankei" 帝室と宗教の關係 (The Relation between the Imperial Household and Religion) and in an interview entitled "Kokka to shūkyō no shōtotsu" 国家と宗教の衝突 (The Conflict between the State and Christianity), published in *Kyōiku jiron* 教育時論, January 1891 and November 1892, respectively. Several Christians responded to his argument, leading to a heated discussion. Another article by Inoue, "Kyōiku to shūkyō no shōtotsu" 教育と宗教の衝突 (The Conflict between Religion and Education), published in January 1893, continued the debate.

<sup>11</sup> A great bulk of anti-Christian literature published by Buddhists is mentioned in Sakurai, pp. 107–49.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 52–53. In 1875, Shin Buddhism left the Daikyōin 大教院 (Academy of the Great Doctrine), and it was not long before the Academy ended in failure.

*The Introduction of the Unitarian Movement*

The more rapid Japan's assimilation of Western civilization, the stronger the reaction against the wholesale adoption of foreign ideas became. In the midst of this confusion, a new framework was needed—the time had come for liberal Christianity to make its voice heard.

Some prominent Japanese thinkers who were familiar with Unitarianism decided to put its ideas into practice. As early as 1886, Yano Fumio 矢野文雄 (1850–1931), a writer and politician who inspired many younger people with his notions of freedom and independence, introduced Unitarianism as a form of Christianity that had been freed from supernatural elements.<sup>13</sup> He was sure that the movement would bring about moral salvation in Japan. Eventually, the American Unitarian Association decided to send representatives. In 1887, Arthur May Knapp (1841–1921) visited Japan and received a favorable welcome from many religious liberals.

At that time, the Unitarian missionaries were wholeheartedly supported by the members of the Meirokusha 明六社, an intellectual society organized to promote Western learning and establish models of ethical behavior for the Japanese. This society included Japan's top educators, bureaucrats, and thinkers—men such as Mori Arinori 森有礼 (1847–89), Nakamura Masanao 中村正直 (1832–91), Katō Hiroyuki 加藤弘之 (1836–1916), and Sugiura Shigetake 杉浦重剛 (1855–1924).

Unitarians are free thinkers and insist on the unity of God. They believe in the authority of the moral and religious teachings of Jesus, but refuse to see Him as a deity. Unitarians regard themselves as being a non-denominational movement and seek the truth with the guidance of science and philosophy. When Knapp delivered speeches to Japanese intellectuals, he emphasized the humanitarian aspects rather than the theological arguments of Unitarianism, such as its theory of Divine Unity. The Unitarians at this time were not interested in speculating about what might happen to them after death—they focused on advancing their idea of the unity of humankind. That they came

<sup>13</sup> See “Shūkyō dōtoku no bu” 宗教道德の部 in *Shūyū zakki*, vol. 2 周遊雜記下 published in *Yūbin hōchi shinbun* 郵便報知新聞 on 7–9 October 1886. This essay can be found in Ōita Kenritsu Sentetsu Shiryōkan 1996, pp. 405–8. *Yūbin hōchi shinbun* was a newspaper founded in 1872 by Maejima Hisoka 前島密 and others, and was published by Hōchisha. It was a prominent voice for the freedom and people's rights movement (*jīyū minken undō* 自由民権運動) in the 1870s and early 1880s.

to Japan—to the farthest side of the world—is a striking example of their belief in the solidarity of humankind.<sup>14</sup>

Unitarian missionaries, devoting themselves to the propagation of their rational system of morality, soon became an influential force. They began to spread their message to the people of Japan through lectures, correspondence, interviews, and the press. Knapp was critical of the methods of other missionaries, and his mission focused on education through publications, rather than through the church. The Unitarians were well prepared for their task in Japan. Immediately after arriving, they began to publish *Yunitarian*, a magazine consisting of articles on religion, ethics, and social science.<sup>15</sup> The First Unitarian Church of Tokyo came into existence in 1890, and numerous groups were organized for promoting public lectures and distributing Unitarian literature.

When the mission was established, Knapp declared that the main goal was not to propagate a particular Christian doctrine, but to “express the sympathy of the Unitarians of America for progressive religious movements in Japan and give all necessary information to the leaders of religious thought and action in that country.”<sup>16</sup> Unitarian missionaries were willing to cooperate with any church, association, group, or individual—irrespective of their religion, denomination, or personal belief—that wished to know its advanced principles.<sup>17</sup>

While the government sought to establish unity based around their form of national morality, some prominent intellectuals supported the Unitarian belief in achieving unity by encouraging social diversity. Fukuzawa Yukichi, for example, in his *Bunmeiron no gairyaku* 文明論之概略 (An Outline of a Theory of Civilization), defined the nation-state as being a partnership of separate

<sup>14</sup> *The Japan Weekly Mail*, 15 March 1890, p. 272. *The Japan Weekly Mail*, a political, commercial, and literary journal, was published in Yokohama from 1870 to 1917.

<sup>15</sup> A monthly journal published by the Nihon Yunitarian Kyōkai 日本ゆにてりあん協会 (Japanese Unitarian Association).

<sup>16</sup> *Nihon Yunitarian Kōdōkai* 1900, p. 4.

<sup>17</sup> Knapp clearly stated as follows:

The errand of Unitarianism in Japan is based upon the now familiar idea of the “sympathy of religions.” With the conviction that we are messengers of distinctive and valuable truths which have not here been emphasized, and that in return there is much in your faith and life which to our harm we have not emphasized, receive us not as theological propagandists but as messengers of the new gospel of human brotherhood in the religious life of mankind (*ibid.*, p. 5).

individuals. He thus recognized the need to cultivate individuals who could bring about a modern Japan through promoting unity and progress. According to Fukuzawa, personal freedom and diversity were essential to building a unified nation. Using the example of China's Chou Dynasty—a fruitful period when rigorous debate was common among the various schools of Confucius, Mencius, Yang Chu, Mo Tzu, and others—Fukuzawa showed that “the spirit of freedom can exist only in an atmosphere of diversity of ideas”<sup>18</sup> (*tajisōron* 多事争論). He sympathized with Unitarian principles, including ideas about free inquiry (*jiyū tōkyū* 自由討究) and humankind's advancement in knowledge and virtue (人民の智徳の進歩). Furthermore, he found in the philanthropy (*hakuai* 博愛) of Unitarianism a way to harmonize national identity and universal values.<sup>19</sup> Fukuzawa hoped that the Unitarian ideas would help unite the people of Japan.

Ernest F. Fenollosa's (1853–1908) letter to the American Unitarian Association clarified the religious implications of the Meiji Restoration and showed how the liberal Christian thought of Unitarianism was expected to contribute to social development and national unity:

Until recently, the leaders of Japanese thought have been indifferent to the question of religion. To them, Christianity and Buddhism were mere superstition. These leaders were ignorant about the philosophy of Buddhism and the higher possibilities of Christianity. They are just now coming to recognize the futility of attempting to found a nation on pure rationalism. They learned by experience to acknowledge the necessity of religion as a source for their principles. However, they could not go back to relying on Buddhism, as it is associated with ultra-conservatism, and they could not completely accept the teachings of the missionaries. In the midst of this dilemma, Mr. Knapp appeared and offered a new form of religion. His religion was easy to accept—it was based on science and phi-

<sup>18</sup> Fukuzawa 1973, pp. 20–21.

<sup>19</sup> Fukuzawa 1960. This article was contributed to *Yunitarian*, no. 1 in 1890. He says: “Unitarians are coming to Japan for the purpose of raising our human position, offering their liberating knowledge, respecting philanthropy, and improving the relationship of the individual and his or her family. That achievement is the utmost happiness for humankind. Especially, it is urgently necessary for our country to improve the relationship of each individual and his or her family.”



osophy instead of tradition and was universal enough to accommodate people of various outlooks.<sup>20</sup>

Looking at the above argument, we can see how these leaders—realizing the futility of building a modern Japan based solely on Buddhism—began to turn to Unitarianism, a form of Christianity that minimized supernatural elements.<sup>21</sup> As they became more acquainted with the Unitarians, they further recognized the utility of religion for social development and national unity.<sup>22</sup>

These religious movements based on rationalism helped to promote inter-religious unity and the comparative study of religions. The effect was so great that even the Buddhists were encouraged to cooperate in the inquiry into universal truth. Yet, the Unitarians never succeeded in establishing their church in Japan. The Japanese leaders merely used Unitarian ideas to fuel the moral and social progress of Japanese civilization. When they were later swept up in the tide of nationalism, these leaders moved away from their universalistic outlook, and their concerns turned from religion to a system of morality propagated by the government.

### *The Emergence of Nationalism and Progressive Buddhists*

In the face of rapid modernization during the late nineteenth century, the Meiji government struggled to maintain a political order centered around the Imperial Household. In the summer of 1879, the liberal political leader Inoue Kowashi 井上毅 (1843–95) submitted to the government the first draft of his political program, in which he outlined the educational policies that he thought the state should adopt. However, the government, represented by Motoda Nagazane 元田永孚 (1818–91), demanded that revisions be made to incorporate more Confucian ideology into public education. Inoue and Motoda reached agreement and drafted the Imperial Rescript on Education in the same year. The Rescript aimed at national unity, not through emphasizing religion, but by promoting such values as loyalty to the emperor, love of nation, and allegiance to superiors.

<sup>20</sup> Fenollosa's letter to Batchelor (a member of AUA), 5 June 1889, is in Kiyooka 1983, p. 40. The version here is paraphrased.

<sup>21</sup> An example of this was reflected in remarks by Kaneko Kentarō 金子堅太郎 (1853–1942), Secretary of the Privy Council, in an interview with the American Unitarian Association, which was reported in full in *The Christian Register* 5 September 1889.

<sup>22</sup> For additional discussion on Japanese intellectuals and Unitarianism, see Yamaguchi 2005.

Values of this kind had considerable appeal, as they were based on ideas long held in Japan. The Rescript asserted that Japan's unique national polity (*kokutai* 国体) was based on the historical bonds between the country's benevolent rulers and their loyal subjects. It was suggested that the basis for national unity and morality be found in Japan's own history, rather than in religion. This form of morality was thought to reside everlastingly in the national spirit, which would never be overwhelmed by foreign pressure.

As mentioned above, Inoue Tetsujirō's attack on Christianity was based on his conviction that the Christian doctrines of monotheism and universal love were incompatible with Japanese ideas of loyalty and patriotism. He also directed his criticism at other established religions, rebuking them for their inadequacy to cope with current moral and educational issues. However, he eventually began to conceive of an ideal religion in which Buddhism, Western philosophy, and Christianity were in harmony. Inoue believed that it was Japan's role to link the civilizations of the East and West.<sup>23</sup> He emphasized the unchanging nature of national morality and downplayed religion as being subject to the mood of the times.

Some Buddhists regarded Inoue's ideas as a challenge not only to Christianity but also to Buddhism. Forced to deal with the issue of nationalism, some were able to find a compromise by reasoning that promoting nationalism did not conflict with universal values because the world consists of individual nations. They esteemed and respected the world, therefore they also respected the state.<sup>24</sup>

Although most Buddhists identified themselves with the nationalistic movement, many understood that it was not enough simply to attempt to return to the past—a new way of responding to the rapidly changing society had to be found. To examine the encounter of Buddhism with the modernism of the West and the new self-awareness that this encounter inspired, I will next look at how progressive Buddhist reformers and their movements were affected by exposure to liberal Christian thought.

The progressive Buddhists at this time realized that radical moral and spiritual reform was necessary to restore their vitality. Their quest for reform led to contact with liberal Christian thought such as Unitarianism. The progressive reformers—like Nakanishi Ushio 中西牛郎 (1859–1930), who advocated

<sup>23</sup> See Sueki 2004, pp. 82–85.

<sup>24</sup> *Mitsgon kyōhō* 密言教報 no. 90, 1893, pp. 11–12. A journal published by the Shingon denomination.

“New Buddhism”—were seeking to clarify the significance of Buddhism in the evolutionary history of humankind.<sup>25</sup>

Nakanishi saw the history of religion as a continuous evolutionary process that evolves from polytheism to monotheism to pantheism. He believed that Western thought had reached the pantheistic stage in which God is considered identical with the universe. The religious movements of his time, he insisted, were bringing about a transition from the period of monotheism to that of pantheism. As modern theology attempted to adopt evolutionism and science, it would pave the way for pantheism.<sup>26</sup> Nakanishi felt the need to change the interpretation of religion in order to unify not only Buddhism but also all religions of the world. He declared that “New Buddhism” was not a sectarian movement—rather, it was a movement to unify every religion and denomination.<sup>27</sup> Eventually, he was drawn to Unitarianism and attempted to apply its principles to Buddhist reform. Nakanishi’s spirit of cooperation and the optimistic character of his ideas may have been inspired by Unitarian thought. It is certain that he highly valued “free inquiry,” a Unitarian principle.<sup>28</sup>

Furukawa Rōsen 古河老川 (1871–99) and his associates also supported the Unitarian principles of faith, free inquiry, and moral development.<sup>29</sup> According to him, Christianity was about to enter a period of self-reflection where it would rethink its over-confident dogmatism. In contrast, Buddhism was entering a period of doubt, and this doubt was necessary to reach the stage of self-reflection.<sup>30</sup> Furukawa advocated the affirmation of the present world and rejected dogmatism—in this respect, he was in agreement with Unitarian principles. Yet Nakanishi and Furukawa found it difficult to accept all of the

<sup>25</sup> According to Nakanishi 1889, pp. 170–92, “New Buddhism” was progressive and spiritual; it was social, historical, and based on reason, while traditional Buddhism was conservative, materialistic, scholarly, individualistic, doctrinal, and based on delusions. His movement focused on the Protestant Reformation, which was regarded as the model for Buddhist reform in Japan.

<sup>26</sup> Thelle 1987, p. 202.

<sup>27</sup> Nakanishi 1892, pp. 105–6.

<sup>28</sup> Thelle 1987, p. 203. Nevertheless, Nakanishi eventually abandoned the Unitarian principles, for he realized that his Buddhist interpretation of Unitarianism would never be adopted by the Unitarian missionaries.

<sup>29</sup> Furukawa was among the founders of the Hanseikai 反省会 in 1886, which was one of the most active movements directed against the moral and spiritual decay of Buddhism. He engaged in fervent activity for the reform of Buddhism.

<sup>30</sup> Thelle 1987, pp. 206–8.

ideas of Unitarianism, particularly its view of God and man. Furukawa believed that Japan would become the “great distillation place” where Christianity would be transformed into Unitarianism and eventually adopt Buddhist ideas. This new Christianity, transformed by Buddhism, would spread to the West and unite the world.<sup>31</sup>

Examples of interreligious cooperation of this kind can be seen in movements such as the Bukkyō Seito Dōshikai 仏教清徒同志会 (Association of Buddhist Puritans).<sup>32</sup> This association had a close relationship with Christianity, especially Unitarianism, and these liberal Christian ideas laid the foundation for free inquiry into Buddhism and other religions.<sup>33</sup> The association’s journal, *Shin bukkyō* 新仏教, carried a series of interviews on the future of religion with leading Christians like Ebina Danjō 海老名弾正 (1856–1937), Uchimura Kanzō 内村鑑三 (1861–1930), Kozaki Hiromichi 小崎弘道 (1856–1938), and Uemura Masahisa 植村正久 (1858–1925).<sup>34</sup> However, the progressive Buddhists’ acceptance of the universalist values of liberal Christianity was still limited. From the Buddhist point of view, Unitarianism was seen as merely a tool for re-examining the Buddhist establishment.

### *Moralized Christianity and Self-Cultivation*

Many leading intellectual figures, including Yokoi Tokio and Matsumura Kaiseki, whom I mentioned above, had urged for the reinterpretation of Christianity. They believed that religion, like all other things, needed to advance hand-in-hand with society.<sup>35</sup>

Yokoi suggested that the Christianity of the East be based on “the pedestal of Buddhist and Confucian philosophy.”<sup>36</sup> In *Rikugō zasshi* 六合雜誌, writing

<sup>31</sup> His arguments are gathered in Furukawa 1901.

<sup>32</sup> Bukkyō Seito Dōshikai, founded in 1899, had taken over its role as the main advocate of New Buddhism. It was organized by progressive Buddhists, such as Sakaino Kōyō 境野黄洋, Katō Genchi 加藤玄智, Tanaka Jiroku 田中治六, Watanabe Kaijyoku 渡辺海旭, Takashima Beihō 高島米峯, Andō Hiroshi 安藤弘, Matsumura Jyūō 松村縦横, or Yūki Somei 結城素明. See Sakurai 1971, pp. 352–3.

<sup>33</sup> Sakurai 1971, p. 353.

<sup>34</sup> Thelle 1987, p. 211. The articles were collected in Shin Bukkyōto Dōshikai 1903.

<sup>35</sup> Yokoi was a friend of Inoue Tetsujirō, although he was a Christian. *Rikugō zasshi* was a Christian monthly journal founded in 1880 by Japanese Christian leaders such as Uemura Masahisa, Kozaki Hiromichi, and Tamura Naomi 田村直臣.

<sup>36</sup> See “Nihon shōrai no kirisutokyō” 日本将来の基督教 (The Future Christianity of Japan), *Rikugō zasshi* 114, June 1890, pp. 1–6.

on “The Aim of Japanese Christianity,” he began by remarking that the Christianity preached to the Japanese must be simple and that people must follow Christ as His original disciples had done. He wrote: “We ask the preachers of Christianity to not worry us with formidable articles of faith, with difficult dogmas of theology, and with complicated ceremonies of worship . . . Do not initiate us into the secrets of sectarian strife.”<sup>37</sup> Yokoi thus believed that Japanese Christianity should be free from the dogma that had long grown around the religion.

In Yokoi’s article, we see how he was opposed to the indiscriminate introduction of theology, customs, and denominations that owed their origins and developments to the particular histories of foreign nations. According to Yokoi, the theology and customs of Japanese Christianity should be genuine products of the Japanese mind. He drew attention to the fact that Japan was struggling to find its place among the nations of the world and argued that Christianity should be consistent with the development of the modern Japanese nation.<sup>38</sup>

Matsumura also began to attract attention to a new philosophical movement to integrate the spiritual wisdom of the East and West. This would be called “New Theology,” a more rational and humanitarian form of Christianity introduced from Europe in the middle of the Meiji era by Kanamori Michitomo 金森通倫.<sup>39</sup> Influenced by Kanamori’s ideas, Matsumura began to reinterpret Christianity, combining Confucian elements with it. Matsumura was convinced that this reinterpretation itself would contribute to the integration of the culture and ideas of the East and West.<sup>40</sup>

Matsumura wrote in the Unitarian magazine, *Shūkyō* 宗教, that the future Christianity of Japan must be a product of Japanese minds rather than an import from a foreign culture. He says:

When Christianity came to the Greek and Roman people, it found them dissatisfied with their own religions and seeking for one that was better. The universal nature of Christianity, and its practical

<sup>37</sup> *Rikugō zasshi* 116, August 1890, pp. 10–16; translation in *The Japan Weekly Mail*, 27 September 1890.

<sup>38</sup> Yokoi 1894, pp. 193–202.

<sup>39</sup> Kanamori 1891, pp. 7–10.

<sup>40</sup> Matsumura expressed his individual religious views in the magazine *Michi* 道 (The Way), 7 November 1908. *Michi* was the monthly journal of the Nihon Kyōkai 日本教会 (The Church of Japan), which was organized by Matsumura to create a new Japanese Christianity.

character, caused it to take deep root in those nations. In doing so, it assimilated what was good in Greek and Roman thought and customs. Christianity has certain unchanging principles; but it continuously changes its form . . . Now Christianity comes to Japan. But it comes as a series of sects: Presbyterians, Methodists, Episcopalians, Unitarians, and the rest. Our true policy forbids our accepting these sects, for they are all the result of conditions which have existed in other lands than ours. It is true that the Unitarians are trying to adapt Christianity to present conditions, but this, so far, has been the work of foreigners, and so is not yet what we want. If, now, we try to forecast the future of Christianity, we must realize, first of all, that Christianity will be largely modified by Buddhist and Confucian ideas. Just as Christianity absorbed the Greek philosophy when it entered Greece, so must it absorb the best Japanese thought as it enters Japan.<sup>41</sup>

Indeed, the form of Christianity that would most reflect and conform to Japanese society needed to be a product of Japanese minds. Using the term *michi* 道 (the Way), Matsumura attempted to express universal virtue, which in his definition included traditional ideas of loyalty and patriotism.

Eventually, the focus shifted from trying to establish a Japanese Christianity to promoting the practice of self-cultivation (*shūyō* 修養). After the Russo-Japanese War (1904–5), most religious leaders aligned themselves with the policies of the government and intensified their promotion of national unity. Engaging themselves in a self-cultivation movement that was consistent with the national morality, some leaders began to take up a trans-religious position.

A closer look at the writings of that time reveals that two separate nationalist movements were being promoted among Meiji intellectuals: One was the movement to promote Japan as the place where East and West would be united through their acceptance of new universal values. The other was the movement to unite the people of Japan based on the national polity. Emphasis moved back and forth between these two, but gradually the latter movement became dominant.

As the religious movements began to turn their focus to national morality, Japanese opinion leaders gradually estranged themselves from the Unitarian

<sup>41</sup> Translation of Matsumura's argument is found in *The Japan Weekly Mail*, 2 September 1893, p. 276.

missionaries. Coincidentally, at about the same time (in the winter of 1890), Knapp resigned from his position due to health reasons and left Japan. It was not long before other associates of the mission withdrew, leaving only Clay MacCauley, a missionary who had accompanied Knapp. Thus began the decline of the Unitarian mission.

*The World's Parliament of Religions and a New Approach to Religious Unity*

In addition to pressure from the government and criticism from intellectuals, the impact of the World's Parliament of Religions gave Japanese Christianity and Buddhism an opportunity to recognize the need for reformation and cooperative relations with other faiths.<sup>42</sup>

The World's Parliament of Religions was held in connection with the 1893 World's Fair in Chicago. According to its statement, the purpose of the Parliament was:

to unite religion against irreligion, making the Golden Rule the basis of this union; to present to the world interreligious unity and the good deeds of the religious life; and to provide a forum in which the common aims of various religions can be set forth, and the marvelous religious progress of the nineteenth century can be reviewed.<sup>43</sup>

The Parliament was held for seventeen days. To examine the aspects of the Parliament that influenced the relations between Buddhists and Christians in Japan, we will next review the presentations of the Japanese delegates.

Hirai Kinza 平井金三 (1859–1916) and Kozaki Hiromichi drew attention to the problematic methods of Christian missionaries in Japan. In his speech entitled “The Real Position of Japan toward Christianity,” Hirai criticized the Christianity in Japan as being a form of “foreign invasion under the guise of religion.” He was cheered when he demonstrated how false Christianity was

<sup>42</sup> The official Buddhist delegates from Japan were Shaku Sōen 釈宗演 and Ashizu Jitsuzen 蘆津実全 of the Rinzaï denomination of Zen Buddhism, Toki Hōryū 土宜法龍 of Shingon Buddhism, and Yabuchi Banryū 八淵蟠龍 of the Honganji branch of Shin Buddhism. The Christian delegate was Kozaki Hiromichi.

<sup>43</sup> The original was reported in Barrows 1983, vol.1, p. 18. Here, I have relied on the summary in *The Japan Weekly Mail*, 4 November 1893, p. 540. “The Golden Rule” refers to Matt. 7:2 “In everything, do to others as you would have them do to you.” New Revised Standard Version.

a harmful seed planted in the Oriental mind and why he advocated a “synthetic religion” in which Buddhism and Christianity were in harmony.<sup>44</sup> Kozaki appealed for the independence of Japanese churches and suggested the need for them to be released from sectarian concepts (*shūhateki kannen* 宗派の觀念).<sup>45</sup>

Indeed, the two forces of religion and nationalist politics were closely related at that time. As the tendency toward nationalism grew stronger, the Christian periodicals said little of politics—they debated questions about how far Christianity would be adopted and what changes it would undergo in taking root in Japan. However, what they said of religion was strongly influenced by the dominant idea of the political world at that time: gaining independence from foreign control. Turning from questions of organization to those about the future of Japanese Christianity, these periodicals expressed the conviction of their authors that Christianity would be a factor in the advancement of the Empire.<sup>46</sup>

At the Parliament, Kishimoto Nobuta 岸本能武太 (1865–1928)<sup>47</sup> urged for the establishment of a Japanese Christianity, lamenting the denouncement of religions by the political and intellectual circles of his time. At that time, Kishimoto was at Harvard Divinity School. Having finished his course in theology at Dōshisha in 1887, he came to feel that his personal difficulties with religion in general and Christianity in particular were also the difficulties many Japanese had. He remarked that a thorough study of these difficulties was the mission to which his life should be devoted.<sup>48</sup> This led him to study religious philosophy and comparative religion at Harvard University.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Barrows 1983, vol. 1, pp. 444–50.

<sup>45</sup> See Ōhara 1893, pp. 58–60. Kozaki’s paper was entitled “Christianity in Japan; its Present Condition and Future.”

<sup>46</sup> Kozaki Hiromichi, for example, thoroughly dealt with these questions in an article entitled “Christianity and Nationalism,” which appeared in the *Rikugō zasshi*. See Kozaki Hiromichi. “Kirisutokyō to kokuminshugi” 基督教と国民主義, *Rikugō zasshi*, no. 109, 1890, pp. 3–8.

<sup>47</sup> Kishimoto graduated from the Faculty of Theology of Dōshisha University in 1887 and entered Harvard’s Divinity School, which was known as a stronghold of Unitarianism. He studied philosophy of religion, comparative religion, Sanskrit, and Pāli. While at the Divinity School, he attended the World’s Parliament of Religions. In the same year, he returned to Japan and began to teach the science of religion at Tōkyō Senmon Gakkō (present-day Waseda University). He further engaged in the establishment of comparative religious studies in Japan.

<sup>48</sup> Nihon Yunitarian Kōdōkai 1900, p. 32.

<sup>49</sup> He writes about the reasons for choosing Harvard: “First, I thought Harvard would be the best place for the investigation of the philosophical aspect of religion. Second, I thought that



Kishimoto was deeply impressed by the non-sectarian sentiment at Harvard. He gradually uncovered an essential unity in Christianity in spite of its denominational differences. He set about the task of distinguishing the essence of Christianity from its form, focusing on the aspect of character-development rather than creed. Kishimoto believed that in Japan—where such religions as Shinto, Buddhism, and Confucianism lived on good terms with one another—Christianity should be presented in a way that makes clear its superiority, if any, and proves its compatibility with science and philosophy.<sup>50</sup>

The following is an excerpt of Kishimoto's paper entitled "The Future of Religion in Japan," which he read at the World's Parliament of Religions:

If Christianity should triumph, which form of Christianity will become the religion of Japan: Catholic Christianity or Protestant Christianity? We do not want either . . . We do not want the Christianity of England nor the Christianity of America; we want the Christianity of Japan. On the whole it is better to have different sects and denominations than to have lifeless monotony . . . We hope for the union of all Christians, at least in spirit if not in form. But we Japanese Christians are hoping more, we are ambitious to present to the world one new and unique interpretation of Christianity as it is presented in the Bible, which knows no sectarian controversy and which knows no heresy hunting.<sup>51</sup>

The delegates from Buddhism all believed that the Parliament would give them an opportunity to promote their mission. Because of the strong impact of the Parliament, however, they were awakened to the worldwide sentiment toward universal values. It is noteworthy that in the last phase of the Parliament, Shaku Sōen read the following paper entitled "Arbitration Instead of War":

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there could be no better place in America for a comparative study of religions. Third, I wanted to investigate what Unitarianism is at its very fountainhead. Fourth, as I read somewhere that Harvard could accommodate "poor men of brain," I wanted to see whether I were one. Lastly, I thought that for my special subjects of investigation, no place could be more healthy and congenial in its general tone than Harvard" (ibid., p. 33).

<sup>50</sup> See Kishimoto, "How I Came into Christianity"; *New World* (quarterly review of religion, ethics, and theology), June 1892, and Kishimoto, "Mada yunitarian o yamenu ka" まだユニテリアンをやめぬか, *Rikugō zasshi*, no. 400, 1914, p. 105.

<sup>51</sup> Barrows 1983, vol. 2, p. 1283.

I am a Buddhist, but please do not be so narrow-minded as to refuse my opinion on account of its expression on the tongue of one who belongs to a different nation, different creed, and different civilization. Why? Because the truth is only one. There must be no distinction, and all must be equal before the light of truth . . . Not only Buddha alone, but Jesus Christ, as well as Confucius, taught about universal love and fraternity. We also acknowledge the glory of universal brotherhood. Then let us—the true followers of Buddha, the true followers of Jesus Christ, the true followers of Confucius, and the followers of truth—unite ourselves for the sake of helping the helpless and live glorious lives of brotherhood under the control of truth.<sup>52</sup>

Shaku Sōen insisted that “the religion of truth” would help end war and establish a peaceful society (although he was not always consistent with this declaration). Attending the Parliament, he saw that Buddhism and other religions shared the same truth; thus, cooperative relations among religions would bring all people the “everlasting gloriously bright sunshine of peace and love” instead of the stormy weather of antagonism.

Nakanishi Ushio’s reflections in his paper, the “Influence of the World’s Religious Parliament,” are worthy of attention. He stated that while the object of Buddhism and Christianity was to promote brotherhood among all people, it regrettably had produced so much strife. He remarked, “Far-sighted men from ancient times have longed for the day when all forms of religion would be united under the name ‘Religion,’ thus bringing peace to all mankind.”<sup>53</sup> Nakanishi believed that the movement toward unity had begun with the World’s Parliament of Religions. According to him, the Parliament was the result of the progress of mankind, yet there were some special circumstances leading up to it. First, material progress had increased spiritual need, and every religion sought to respond to this. Religions were therefore able to lay aside their hostilities toward one another to deal with the spiritual dangers of materialism. Second, the advancement of liberal thought had encouraged religious believers to see that all religions contain more or less the same truths—this enabled people to see the value in the comparative study of religions. Thus, the Parliament had enabled both Buddhists and Christians to discover that the

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 1285.

<sup>53</sup> Nakanishi’s account can be found in the summary of his “Influence of the World’s Religious Congress” in *The Japan Weekly Mail*, 3 February 1894, p. 146.

source of all religions is the same. Nakanishi came away from the Parliament feeling that Buddhism had many redeeming features:

Hitherto, as studied in the West, Buddhism has been much distorted. The works of Oldenburg, Burnouf, Max Müller, and Rhys Davids treat only of the Hinayana, or Southern Buddhism. But in the Chicago Conference, the Mahayana, or Northern Buddhism, was first explained to the world. It must have broken down many prejudices. The people of the West learned that Buddhism is not necessarily pessimism, atheism, mere philosophical speculation, or an obstacle to progress. It also became clear that Buddhism may contain all other religions; that its profound theories do not conflict with science and philosophy. Yet, while in Chicago there was no fault found with Buddhist principles, many practical defects in the workings of the faith were pointed out . . . In the great Congress there was sympathy for the Eastern religion and even some antagonism to Christianity.<sup>54</sup>

Thus, Nakanishi concluded that the effects of the Parliament on the religious world were as follows: it manifested the power of religion to the non-religious; it opened dialogue between all religions; it took religious sovereignty away from Christianity, encouraging other religions to make their views heard; it laid the foundation for future religious unity; and it was a great impetus to the study of comparative religion.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. Friedrich Max Müller (1823–1900) was a German-born British philologist and Orientalist, and one of the founders of Indian Studies. He wrote important essays on Buddhism and distinguished himself as the editor of the monumental work *The Sacred Books of the East*. He also virtually created the discipline of comparative religion in such books as *Introduction to the Science of Religion* (1873), and *The Origin and Growth of Religions* (1878). Thomas William Rhys Davids (1843–1922) was a British scholar of the Pāli language who contributed to Buddhist Studies. He published his *Manual of Buddhism* in 1878 and founded the Pali Text Society in 1881, which introduced Buddhist Pāli texts and translations to the West. Hermann Oldenberg (1854–1920) was a German Sanskrit and Buddhist scholar and a historian of religions. His 1881 study *Buddha: His Life, his Doctrine, his Order* (in English translation, 1882), based on Pāli texts, popularized Buddhism. With T. W. Rhys Davids, he edited and translated into English three volumes of Vinaya texts, two volumes of the Grihya-sutras, and two volumes of Vedic Hymns, in the monumental *The Sacred Books of the East* series. Eugène Burnouf (1801–52) was a French Orientalist and the founder of Buddhist Studies in the West. From 1833 to 1835, he published his *Commentaire sur le Yaçna, l'un des livres liturgiques des Parses*; he also published the Sanskrit text and French translation of the *Bhagavata Purana ou histoire poétique de Krichna* in three folio volumes (1840–7).

As Eastern religions began to be seriously studied in the latter half of the nineteenth century, Buddhism gradually came to be appreciated in the West. At first, Japanese Buddhists felt that the comparative approach of Western scholars was a biased attempt to estimate the worth of other religions using Christianity as a yardstick. However, as Buddhists became more acquainted with Western scholarship, they began to show greater interest in comparative religious studies.<sup>55</sup> Among progressive Buddhists, this new approach was valued as a tool for re-examining and reforming Buddhism.<sup>56</sup>

As comparative religious studies began to gain support, Kishimoto realized the important role Japan could play in creating a unique religion that combined the various traditions of other cultures. He believed that the religious harmony that existed in Japan was a result of its superior ability to integrate different traditions. Since the various religious traditions of Asia had been preserved in Japan, it was the place most suited for the study of comparative religion.<sup>57</sup> The chief aim of this form of study would be to unify the people under a common national spirit or ideal rather than under the creeds and ceremonies of religions. It was thought that comparative religious studies would help religions move away from their exclusivity so that they could contribute more effectively to the enlightenment of the nation.

At this time, some Buddhists and Christians began to interact more closely. In 1896, this new climate of interreligious sympathy brought about an unprecedented conference convened by liberal Buddhists and Christians. The meeting was officially called the Shūkyōka Kondankai 宗教家懇談会 (Round Table Conference of Religious Leaders). It was organized as a social gathering for exchanging opinions concerning the future of religion in Japan. Not content to confine themselves to only two religions, some religious intellectuals even appealed for a synthesis beyond Buddhism and Christianity. The

<sup>55</sup> Higashi Honganji sent promising students to the West from an early stage. In 1876, Nanjō Bunyū 南条文雄 (1849–1927) and Kasahara Kenju 笠原研寿 (1852–83), as students under Max Müller, became acquainted with what would be called the science of religion (Suzuki 1979, pp. 18–19). In the academic field, lectures in comparative religion were introduced in Japan as early as 1887, in the Faculty of Theology at Dōshisha and in the Buddhist Tetsugakkan, founded by Inoue Enryō. At Tokyo Imperial University, Inoue Tetsujirō started his lectures on comparative religion and Oriental philosophy in 1891 (Isomae 2003, p. 50).

<sup>56</sup> For example, Nakanishi Ushio (1893) attempted to find common values in different religions using a comparative approach; he further demonstrated how Buddhism could be compared with Christianity.

<sup>57</sup> Kishimoto 1895, pp. 27–31.

cooperative relations between these two further led to the establishment of the Nihon Shūkyōka Kyōwakai 日本宗教家協和会 (Concord Association of Japanese Religious Leaders), Sankyō Kaidō 三教会同 (Conference of the Three Religions), and others. All of these groups supported a national morality based on the Imperial Way (*kōdō* 皇道) rather than on universal values.<sup>58</sup>

### *Conclusion*

Throughout Japan's history, there have been two opposing forces: one is the force of conservatism, ethnocentrism, and nationalism; the other is that of liberalism, universalism, and affability toward foreign culture. Indeed, history could be seen as the interplay of these two as they went through a process of conflict, compromise, and reconciliation with one another. In this way, modern Japan has struggled to achieve national unity.

The Japanese were thrust into a tumultuous age in the latter half of the nineteenth century, awakening to the far more advanced civilization and imperialism of the West, including its notion of "religion," which seemed to the Japanese an essential part of the modern nation-state. Yet, the government eventually abandoned the policy of national education promoted by the Ministry of Religious Education and began to promote a national morality based on the Imperial Way.

Under these circumstances, American Unitarian missionaries attempted to build relations by emphasizing not a limited creed or denomination, but a rational system of morality. Unitarianism and other forms of "New Theology" exerted a strong influence on Christian churches and Buddhist movements as they struggled for survival and revival. Unitarians introduced American liberal ideas and showed Japanese intellectuals and religious leaders a form of liberal Christianity that was willing to cooperate with any religious association or group, regardless of denomination or belief. As they promoted their ideals of interreligious cooperation and the comparative study of religion, their movement further aroused sympathy for progressive religious movements in Japan.

<sup>58</sup> Nihon Shūkyōka Kyōwakai was founded by influential religious leaders in 1906, to provide moral leadership in conditions of disorder after the Russo-Japanese War and to promote the prosperity of the state. Sankyō Kaidō—calling upon Buddhists, Shintoists, and Christians—was sponsored by the government in 1912. Tokonami Takejirō 床次竹二郎 (1866–1935), Vice-Minister for Home Affairs, suggested the promotion of national morality in cooperation with religionists (Sakurai, pp. 441–3, 444–9).

As we saw above, intellectuals of the early half of the Meiji period (1880s to 1890s) appreciated the Unitarian values of tolerance, religious diversity, and unity beyond sectarian differences. They saw the American Unitarians as a model for integrating the modern values of rationality and morality. It was believed that these values would help Japan find its place among the nations of the world. As long as they supported “free inquiry” in an atmosphere of diversity of ideas, the Meiji intellectuals were free to develop a vision of universal humanism rather than a view that emphasized nationalism and exclusivity. Unitarian ideas were merely expected to fuel the moral and social progress of Japanese civilization.

The World’s Parliament of Religions held at this time was an attempt to demonstrate the truths that various religions have in common and to promote a spirit of brotherhood among peoples of diverse faiths.<sup>59</sup> The delegates from Japan also apparently shared in the Parliament’s goal to unite against the common problems of materialism and irreligion. The growing trend of inter-religious cooperation led to the re-examination of Christian and Buddhist establishments and to a new approach to comparative religion that extended beyond Buddhism and Christianity. Various forms of universalist thought can even be found in the movements that reacted against a pursuit of Western civilization that was inconsistent with nationalist ideas.

Yet the universalist ideals never completely took root. The government absorbed the intellectuals’ interest in universalism into its moral and educational policy. What the government conceived of as social evolution was mostly based on an ethnocentric idea of supporting the Imperial Household. It could be argued that its advocacy of universalist values was closely related to justifying a kind of ecumenism in which Japan would play a central role. The universalist movement apparently supported the government’s principle that Shinto should not be regarded as a “religion.” Further, the study of religion supported this principle academically and theoretically, playing an important role in demonstrating its validity. In the end, the establishment of national morality as laid down in the Imperial Rescript on Education proved to be a turning point when the universalistic view changed into national unity based on virtues such as loyalty to the emperor, love of nation, and allegiance to ancestors. Eventually, the Meiji leaders began to see the difficulty in reconciling nationalist ideas and the Unitarian type of universalism. The honeymoon was short-lived, and soon the Japanese government opted for its own nationalist and imperialist path.

<sup>59</sup> Barrows 1983, p. 18.

As our world becomes more diverse, the need for close relations among religions can be keenly felt. Through mutual understanding, religious traditions are deepening and enriching the understanding of the world and its history. However, when attempts at interreligious unity have been made from the standpoint of “religion,” as it is defined in the rationalistic system of the modern West, the results are often biased and have a tendency to be based on fundamentalist doctrines. This is exemplified by the fact that one religious outlook has often been used as a yardstick by which to measure other religions. This biased standpoint has put religious traditions in a critical situation.

Re-examination of the possibilities and limitations Japan encountered at the beginning of the modern era when struggling to balance universal values and national identity can make us conscious of the parameters of our modern concept of religion. The previous attempt of the Japanese at such reconciliation invites us to look at the world again with fresh eyes.

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