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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.19079/eajp.3.1.25>

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ZORA URL: <https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-260584>

Journal Article

Published Version



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Originally published at:

Steineck, Tomoë I M (2024). Declaring Buddhism dead in the 19th century: the Meiji oligarchy and protestant mission in Japan a foreign religion. Explorations of an unchartered territory. East asian journal of philosophy, 3(1):25-45.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.19079/eajp.3.1.25>

# Declaring Buddhism Dead in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century

## The Meiji Oligarchy and Protestant mission in Japan

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**ABSTRACT** | This paper elaborates the interaction of social ideologies and religion between the Japanese oligarchy of the first half of the Meiji era and the German Liberal Protestant Mission. The Protestant image conflict, the newly emerging science of comparative religion and social consolidation are considered in the context of the interests of both parties. German Protestant ethics and educational ideology were introduced as distinctly attractive nation-building strategies, appropriate for the purposes of the Meiji oligarchy. The parallels with the indigenous national doctrine of the Edo period enabled the ruling class to incorporate the new and Western ethical concepts, which founded their sympathy for the German Liberal Protestant mission. The influence of Liberal Protestant theology on Buddhist reformers is also discussed in relation to the mission's activity in the 1880s and early 1890s.

**KEYWORDS** | Buddhism; Japan; Imperialism; Shinto; Protestant Mission

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Aoki [Shūzō] recounted that the Emperor [Meiji] asked him about the visit of the Russian Crown Prince in Sendai, to which he replied, one could not hinder him from the visit (because of the Russian mission stationed there); but the most suitable means to counter the influence of the Russian church was not the dying Buddhism, but other forms of religion, springing from the same soil as the Russian church, but politically harmless (Protestants). The Emperor had shown acknowledgement by nodding. Position of the state on church cooperation now important. Wants my assessment. Some things I had already developed and promised him more. I emphasised [to him the] necessity of upholding the Mikado idea. (Spinner and Hamer 1997a, 198)<sup>1</sup>

This March 23, 1891, entry taken from the Japan diary of the Swiss theologian and pastor Wilfrid Spinner (1854-1918), accentuates the position he held as a close advisor to Viscount Aoki (1844-1914), then Minister of Foreign Affairs to the Yamagata cabinet, and through him to the Meiji Tennō himself. He was the first missionary of the German-speaking Liberal Protestant Mission AEPM<sup>2</sup> to Tokyo. Although not registered as a hired foreigner *oyatoi gaikokujin*, the ideas he represented had a wider impact on the Japanese ruling class of the late 19th century, including the inner circle of the Meiji oligarchy, mostly comprised of former *bushi*<sup>3</sup> class men. The excerpt draws attention to the oppression of Buddhism already in place in Japan, described as a dying religion. This situation was accelerated, however not initiated, by the presence of the Protestant missions, of which we will focus on the German-speaking mission that had been dispatched from Weimar under the auspices of the Grand-Duke Charles Alexander of Saxe-Weimar-Eisenach (1818-1901). It unified Liberal Protestant supporters across the German-speaking realm, with Friedrich Max Müller (1823-1900), the founding father of comparative religious studies, an integrative discipline in the sciences of Imperialism,<sup>4</sup> as a major endorser.

The period around the Meiji Restoration of 1868 is often addressed under two different issues – the governmental persecution of Buddhism as a foreign cultural element and the animosity towards Christianity are one aspect. The second is the Christianisation of the young samurai elite, who had lost their traditional norms with the fall of the shogunate. The alliance between the German mission and the Japanese oligarchy is at the intersection of these two issues. The German, or legitimately the Swiss-Weimar Mission, has so far received little attention in terms of its influence amongst the ruling circles and partially also

1 All translations in this paper are by the author.

2 Acronym of Allgemeiner Evangelisch-Protestantischer Missionsverein (General Evangelical-Protestant Mission Association). It later developed into the Deutsche Ostasienmission (DOAM), before splitting again into the Deutsche and Schweizerische Ostasienmission (SOAM) in 1952.

3 The Japanese term for the upper class of bureaucratized warriors, also known as samurai.

4 The phrase "Imperial science" or "science of Imperialism" is based on the works of David Chidester (2014).

reflected in the reformist ideas of the Buddhist leaders in Japan. The AEPM's activities represented by Spinner and his stay in Japan (1885-1891) delivers the specific frame on which this case study is based.

This paper approaches the issue of "Buddhism" in Meiji Japan against the background of the influence of the German Protestant mission and its ties to the Japanese ruling class, respectively in combination with the relevant history of ideas in the German-speaking realm. It analyses the anatomy of anti-Buddhist sentiment in mid-Meiji Japan, which fuelled the narrative of Buddhism as an unauthentic, foreign religion only suited for the uneducated and unworthy, to a new level. This narrative developed in the conflicting field between "religion" and "superstition," which in German-language sources can be clearly identified half a century earlier in Siebold's (1832) *Nippon*. The confluence of the Japanese as well as the European agendas brought new impetus to the process that has been detectable in the Edo period (1603-1868). In this respect, the actions of one party cannot be analysed without understanding the other, especially regarding the marginalisation of Buddhism, or at least part of it, as a "lower" faith. Thus, the issue of why this mission was singled out by the Japanese oligarchy as an ally is important and worthy of attention. The quote at the beginning allows insight into a complex political and social line of thought. On one hand, it illustrates the precarious position of Buddhism. On the other, it also indicates that generally, Christianity was undesired, unless it was a certain kind of Christianity. The analysis of this circumstance leads to the elucidation of the question why Buddhism was declared dead, the key to which lies as much in the nature of the German mission as in the intention of the Japanese oligarchy.

The division of Buddhism into two levels, a higher and lower, mirrors a potent social agenda. I will draw on David Chidester's theory of the imperialist mechanism applying its measures of marginalisation in both regions, the European home and the colonial periphery, i.e., not only along the geographical divide between imperial centre and periphery, but also the social one between upper and lower classes (Chidester 1996, 4).

The issue of causation and correlation central to the discourse surrounding Meiji Japan, Imperialism, European Colonialism, and even more with regard to "religion," needs a careful approach. Recent contributions arrived at a nuanced discourse that also shed light on the imperial conducts of Japan with regard to and by use of Christianity, transcending past, monocausal narrations of Japanese passiveness (Anderson 2014). The increasing marginalization of Buddhism in early modern Japan, while in Europe the rise of Protestantism negated Catholic, Orthodox Christian, and all other prevailing pre-Christian elements, is a historical parallel that allows no space for passive narratives. Even if, as Siebold's writings show, now and then a reciprocal nod underpinned each respective direction. The events of Meiji carve out a picture where Western influence and

Japanese intentions were deeply related to each other, creating a complex web of causation.

With regard to this issue, terminology gain significance. “Religion” is one of the terms that must be addressed here. The term was a neologism in Meiji along with other new terms like “society” or “individual,” and even “love” (Klautau 2014, 246). “Shinto”<sup>5</sup> also borders on our topic. Nevertheless, to remain close to the topic, I would like to refer to several dominant publications that shape the discourse,<sup>6</sup> some more nuanced than others. My critique of the discipline of comparative religion is related to the critique of the Protestant use of the concept of “religion,” especially as the heir to imperialist taxonomy. On this point, I must add that the taxonomic argument, especially with regard to Scripture, is predominant. Proponents of a strict division between modern “religion” and previous forms of “faith” or “devotion” rarely employ the visual and material evidence of faithful/devotional acts.<sup>7</sup> Inclusion of complex negotiations of faith and “religion” in older history contribute a wider angle in this respect.<sup>8</sup> The fundamental contest between the secular and the religious (and the prerequisite of secularity as such) is also problematic (Van der Veer 2001, 14-38).<sup>9</sup> It is my hope to touch on these aspects within the limited space of this paper.

## **1 The *Allgemeiner Evangelisch-Protestantischer Missionsverein* (General Evangelical-Protestant Mission Association) and Liberal Protestantism**

The AEPM’s arrival in Japan lagged behind its Anglo-Saxon and Dutch counterparts, as well as Russian Orthodox and French Catholic missions already working in Japan, when Spinner set foot on the shores of Yokohama in 1885. Nevertheless, contemporaneous voices predicted swift success owing to the Germanophile mood amongst the elite (Iglehart 1960, 78-79; Spinner and Hamer 1997a, 31). The mission was a specific endeavour by and for the Liberal Protestant faction in German-speaking society. Liberal Protestantism in its homelands faced a strong contest against the Lutherans, Reformed, and others, such as the Pietists (all frequently summed up as orthodox). Their faith rooted in liberal The-

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5 For the discourse on the concept and terminology of Shinto, see: Teeuwen (2002); Yoshida (2003); Satō (2007). For an overview of Shinto discourse, see: Teeuwen and Breen (2010); Teeuwen and Rambelli (2003). For in-depth historical and linguistic analysis in Japanese, I recommend Yoshida (1996).

6 Smith (1982, 1998); Maxey (2007, 2014); Isomae (2005, 2012); Josephson (2006, 2012); Shimazono (1998); Shimazono and Tsuruoka (2004); Asad (2008).

7 Schopen (1997, 1998) is a rare and consistent advocate of the material heritage of Buddhism as the proper and authoritative evidence on which to build concepts of its act of faith. Note the contrast to Jonathan Smith’s contribution in the same volume of 1998.

8 See Steineck (2018), Shimazono (1998), and Klautau (2014). I refer to Japan-related discussions only.

9 Van der Veer justifiably opposes the dualism of the secular and the religious, critiquing the notion of the secular in general and the exclusion of religion from the public sphere in particular. This is a relevant argument regarding the influence that German “secularism” exerted, also within, and through the conduit of, the Liberal’s mission ideology.

ology, a form of Christian modernism, and propagated a decidedly anti-dogmatic theology. The denomination's affirmation of science and progress was widely and sharply criticised as a wholesale attack on the Protestant faith from other denominations. The Liberal Protestants saw their ideology and religious conducts in great contrast to the other Protestant denominations, which is consistently expressed in the Manifesto written by their founder Ernst Buss (1843-1928) in 1876, as a blueprint for the mission. While diplomatically drawing a familiarity of origin, Buss characterises other missions as "dogmatically complicit," "ponderous", in nature, who make "the error of narrow-mindedness and intolerance" (Buss 1876, 171). But the manifesto was published to wider acclaim, because he enthused the upper-class followers in the German-speaking realm of the German Empire (notably Saxony) and Switzerland for mission propagated as immensely innovative.

They were part of the movement which grew out of the renewed sense of crisis in the German-speaking realm after the Napoleonic invasions, carrying the seed "of temporal immediacy" (Niebuhr 1959, 26) onto a new level, and a direct responsibility to God, expressed as heightened individual responsibility. Both were characteristics of Protestantism, but the latter surfaced more as a secular morality as it found expression as contributions in the secular, public sphere. The general Protestant elements of rejecting the ecclesiastical and the special emphasis on scripture (*prima scriptura*) and the word were still retained.

The affirmation of scientific knowledge was a unique characteristic, by which the Liberal Protestants dissociated with orthodox denominations. It encompassed a wider array of progressive, modern worldviews that were cause for controversy especially in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Within the twofold experience of time between the religious and the profane (Halbwachs 2012, 259), their strategy located them in the contemporary cultural memory of the profane realm (*saeculum*). It instigated a departure from the eternalisation of time in the religious realm.

## 2 *Bildung* and *Sittlichkeit*

The two concepts are central to the Liberal Confession, however not exclusively. *Bildung* strongly reflected New Humanist ideals. For Humboldt, *Bildung* was an asset that needed to be developed by exposure to and study of the classical disciplines and classical fine arts in order to promote ethics to one's full human capability – their God-given potential. His essay *Über Religion* defines it as follows: "For all *Bildung* has its origin only in the interior of the soul, and can only be induced by external events, never produced" (Humboldt 1995; Sorkin 1983). Its influence is reflected in Schleiermacher's theology following a little later, who defines religion as a concept that "necessarily springs forth of its own accord

from within every better soul, that it has an own territory in the mind” (Schleiermacher 2011, 204). *Bildung* is thus coloured in a religious, or more specifically, Protestant hue. Moses Mendelssohn’s (1729-1786) attempt “to promote the ability of Jews to belong to a universal community by showing their capacity for *Bildung*” (Almog 2019, 86-87) demonstrates the extent to which it was deemed exclusively Protestant and not universal at all.

*Sittlichkeit* is deemed as the sibling of *Bildung*, “actually one and the same” (Humboldt 1995, 563). Humboldt articulates it further as the “voluntary submission to the moral law (*Sitte*) [which is] thus based on the principle of duty” (Humboldt 1995, 562). It emanates a fluid duality combining the nature of a secular, legal codex and a religiously informed moral, in line with Humboldt’s understanding of religion as a tool to serve the state (Petersen 2007, 111). Both uniquely effected the formation of a religiously shaped national consciousness in the 19<sup>th</sup> century German-speaking realm, which gains importance in our context. Their significance was strongly emphasized in the AEPM mission, making the endeavour a religious-ethical elevation of foreign “lesser” cultures, to “provide a ... more accurate insight into God’s educational plan, and the nature of true religion” (Buss 1876, 253-254). Connecting to the notion of religion elaborated here, an account out of Spinner’s diary may be of interest. Spinner had set himself the diplomatic goal to be “religious” first, and less “enlightening” (Spinner and Hamer 1997a, 81), when interacting with other denominations. His understanding of religion between ethics and religiosity shows a fluid boundary. Despite his tenet, his religiosity appeared to have been insufficient to other Protestant denominations. The Japanese orthodox Protestants represented by the *Nihon kirisuto it’chi kyōkai* (the United Church of Christ in Japan) and their leaders, such as Uemura Masahisa (1858 - 1925), frequently and publicly accused him of being “a dangerous rationalist” (Spinner and Hamer 1997a, 168, 179). In late 1890, Spinner just about averted a petition to Weimar prepared by the orthodox Japanese Protestants to have him removed, due to his degenerating influence on young Christian Japanese (Spinner and Hamer 1997b, 260).

For a mission to commence, three strategies had to be established. The first concerned the qualification, or nature, of the missionary. This was a principal issue for all missions in the field (Lovett 1899, 51), yet the AEPM required an unusual level of educatedness, and also trained their candidates accordingly, in theology, several languages, the history of Europe and the mission area, comparative religion, and so on. This formular was in fact remarkably close to Humboldtian model of higher education, yet for the purpose at hand, it is noteworthy to see the strong emphasis on education in a holistic sense, underlining its link to the ethical ideal of *Bildung*. Spinner, in this context, was a model candidate, except he was not a missionary candidate at all, but a full founding member of the mission with several degrees in theology and philosophy, fluent in many languages. The idea of a scientific mission, however, was not particularly new. The

strategy of scientific mission emerged at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century from the pen of Gottfried Leibniz, as the very first mission strategy specifically designed for Protestantism. Some Jesuits like Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) had followed a similar design as missionaries to the Ming court. Both examples were already intricately linked to the study of indigenous culture and its form of religiosity at that time. Suffice it to say that Buss was building on a tradition of ideas and examples, but his statement that this would be the first implemented scientific mission was no deception, for Leibniz's proposal had been too far ahead of its time. The second strategy concerned the choice of the mission target, which was equally a fiercely debated issue between and within any denomination (Warneck 2015, 460). The process highlights a “planetary consciousness” (Chidester 1996, 8) analogous to the colonial expansions. The idea always moved in close proximity to the political interests of a nation, as well as the Imperial sciences of comparative religion and Orientalist studies, acting as a taxonomic classification of the world for the mission. As the AEPM envisioned that they were “preferably suited for cultured peoples and the educated classes” (Buss 1876, 318-319) it chose East Asia based on the analysis of available data. These decisions led, in the next instance, to the choice of method: the salvation of the individual soul, or the “conquest” of the domain for the Grace of God. The latter required the conversion of the ruler or ruling class of a target region, in order to gain the entire territory according to the theocratic tradition of *cuius regio, eius religio*. These three strategies fleshed out as the AEPM's choice to mission top-down, targeting the ruling elite of a “cultured” territory, sending highly educated missionaries. The reality, however, looked less self-governed but all the more advantageous. The mission had changed its target from India to Japan and hurriedly appointed one of its most highly qualified young members at the request of Aoki, who was already a high-ranking diplomat, because the preparation of the actual missionaries was still in progress.

### 3 The AEPM in Japan

Aoki Shūzō actively sought a German-speaking mission and conferred with Bismarck about his desire for a liberal denomination, to eventually find his way to the AEPM (Spinner and Hamer 1997a, 76). Owing to Aoki's own motivation, Spinner was quickly able to gain a foothold amongst the higher circle in Tokyo. He was offered a tutorial position at the German Doitsugaku Kyōkai Gakkō School endorsed by the imperial Prince Arisugawa (1835-1895) and co-funded by Aoki. Spinner's involvement in the community was characterised by a proactive approach to the Japanese population, which was limited to the upper classes for ‘business’ purposes, but much more open in private life. For the mission, he nev-



ertheless specified the “German-educated Japanese” to be his most desirable objects (Spinner and Hamer 1997a, 6).

The intra-German relationship in Japan, especially the professional one between the officials and the mission, was marked by confessional and cultural rivalry between Prussia and Weimar. Having succeeded in gaining permission to live in a Japanese quarter, he set course to establish a German-speaking congregation. Admittedly, the Prussian envoys in Tokyo did not make it easy for him, because despite Bismarck’s blessing, confessional distrust hindered cooperation. This firstly underlines the close connection between denomination (Prussia was mostly orthodox) and geographical affiliation, and secondly the closeness between Western territorial claim and the mission on site. The liberal theology he embodied for the other German-speaking expatriates led to the same conflicts that prevailed at home.

Spinner began to gather first-hand experience and testimonies of Japanese temples and shrines, religious rites, and festivals early on. The observations also extended to economic and social aspects of life. This de facto autonomous study of religions, rites and social constructs bears witness to his self-understanding as a comparativist of religion and culture, as much as a missionary. It resulted in a well-structured, but ultimately unpublished collection of Japanese sacral images on the one hand. On the other hand, his activity as a comparative scholar can be gauged by his participation in numerous conferences and publications of the two major scientific societies that had recently been founded in Tokyo: the Asia Society and the German East Asiatic Society. He quickly became integral to both, taking part in organisational matters and contributing his own research. The sum of both activities connected him to Western and Japanese intellectuals of the progressive group, as well as young students of the former *bushi* class aspiring to governmental, bureaucratic, and other top positions. The contributions, mostly of a Shintoist nature, signal his participation in the prevailing paradigm or scientific code of conduct triggered by German Romantic Orientalism with its focus on 1) the East, 2) the study of culture as a search for identity, and 3) the focus on antiquity. The intensity of the work that went into the academic work, i.e., comparative religion and cultural studies, and the level of results that were achieved, was remarkable despite the relative unfamiliarity of Spinner’s publications in this field. In the process, he interacted with eminent scholars of Japanese studies such as B.H. Chamberlain (1850 – 1935), the translator of *Kojiki* Karl Florenz (1865–1939), or the collector and medical doctor Erwin Baelz (1849–1913).

#### **4 The Japanese Protestants and the Influence of the AEPM**

Spinner also pioneered a Protestant “salon” where he regularly taught theology with regard to the undogmatic analysis of the bible, discussing religious and political matters with active politicians and aristocracy. These salons posed key occasions where he encountered the luminaries, who were or would go on to grace the halls of political history, such as Itō Hirobumi (1841–1909), Inoue Kaoru (1836–1915), Katsura Tarō (1848–1913), Miyoshi Taizō (1845–1908), Wadagaki Kenzō (1860–1919), and Ōkuma Shigenobu (1838–1922). Among the Japanese bourgeoisie, he frequented academics, senior officials – most of whom had studied abroad, medical doctors associated with eminent clinics, lawyers, and active Protestant intellectuals and theologians. Kozaki Hiromichi (1856–1938) is perhaps the most eminent of Protestant scholars in Spinner’s vicinity, considering his scope of influence. Initially, he entered Spinner’s life as the translator for the theological “salon” lectures and remained a close colleague. When Kozaki later delivered his speech at the World Parliament of Religions in 1893 in his capacity as director of the Dōshisha University, its content remarkably mirrored Spinner’s words. Kozaki “already [had] done away with some Christian doctrines ...” (Kozaki 1893, 1013–1014) and stirred controversy by his belief that “the missionaries must either cooperate with us or join native churches and take their place side by side with native workers” (Kozaki 1893, 1014). He was literally torn apart by Haworth (Barrows 1893, 1098) who defended the significance and authority of the Western missionary a few days later, yet, Kozaki was merely repeating Spinner’s own mantra that the goal of the missionary “should be to become superfluous” (Spinner 1892, 70).

Kanamori Michitomo (1857 – 1945), Ukita Kazutami (1860 – 1946), and Morita Kumando (1858 – 1899) were other leading figures at the Dōshisha University in Kyoto, with whom Spinner interacted frequently. Ebina Danjō (1856–1937) also deserves mentioning as one of the most independent Japanese leaders whose vision of a Christian Japan was indeed remarkably close to the contextual strategy propagated by the AEPM. He held sermons in Spinner’s congregation, and on a few occasions taught at their theological academy. Spinner had exerted a verifiable influence on these like-minded Protestants. Two accounts may testify to this in addition to Kozaki’s speech. First, the “locally” (Japanese) trained and ordained pastor of the AEPM, Minami Hajime (1865–1940), pioneered the discourse on Schleiermacher in Japan (Fukai 2014). Secondly, Ebina “evoke[d] ... the giants of German thought he particularly admired, such as Johann Fichte, Gotthold Lessing, Johann Gottfried von Herder, and especially Friedrich Schleiermacher [in his sermons]” (Anderson 2014, 69).

## 5 The Discourse on Educational Reform

Within the course of his mission in Japan, Spinner worked several times with the authorities, conducted research at local institutions such as schools, universities, and hospitals, and inspected infrastructures such as factories and a crematory. While he was invited to schools, e.g., in Kyoto, to give lectures on education, he himself began contemplating the feasibility of a theological academy for the liberal Protestants. Aoki contributed and worked with Spinner for this cause, raising funds and awareness amongst the elite. Spinner considered the Dōshisha University in Kyoto as a model for a Christian higher education institution that he wanted to implement in Tokyo. His interests as well as his popularity as an expert on education is unsurprising, considering the relatively recent success of educational reforms in Prussia through Humboldt. Furthermore, the notion of *Bildung*, which was a cornerstone of this reform, formed the core ideology of the Liberal Protestants. It is feasible that Viscount Aoki had taken interest in the reformatory concepts that had carried Prussia into a new stage of self-formation as a unified German Empire (leading the not so convinced former duchies), which motivated him to invite a mission with the closest ideology. The cooperation and close partnership between the two men is unambiguous evidence of this and the visit of the AEPM to Japan, perhaps even the choice of Spinners as a fully educated theologian and philosopher, must be considered a Japanese agenda. Their encounter in Tokyo was no coincidence.

It is thus understandable that an educational publication is so far Spinner's most widely read contribution. It is included in the volume *Gakumon to chishiki-jin (Science and Intellectuals)* within the *Compendium of Japanese Intellectual History from the Early Modern to the Modern Period*, which ranks highly for the history of philosophy (Katō, Matsumoto, and Yamamuro 1996). Entitled *Gakujutsu to shūkyō (Science and Religion)*, the chapter sums up Liberal Protestant theology by presenting a harmonious combination of science and religion as the ideal state of man. It was originally published by Spinner in a Protestant periodical in Japanese (possibly translated by Minami Hajime). "In order to prove why science and religion are interrelated," Spinner "first look[s] at the various faculties of the human spirit" (Spinner 1996, 287). He consistently advocates the necessity of progressiveness, of scientific thinking for a healthy state of religion. "If religion does not include science (*gakujutsu*) and lacks the virtue of thought (*shikō*), it will become disruptive, superstition and blind persistence will prevail, and it will eventually become corrupt" (Spinner 1996, 288). However, since "science within religion is named theology and forms the basis of philosophy," the basis of human behaviour is necessarily dictated by religion. Science is promoted as a balancing element in the hegemony of religion. Ultimately, the intention of the chapter overlaps completely with the Protestant concept of the Liberals: "alongside clear thoughts, there must also be a warm and gentle sense,

a virtuous and sincere will. The development of thought must be accompanied by the progress of the senses and the will. That is to say, religion must always accompany science" (Spinner 1996, 289).

The chapter comprehensively highlights the temporal presence and the urgency of progress that Protestantism entails, with a particular emphasis on the theology of the Liberals that enables a Christian, "religious" progress in the companionship of science. It delivers the ideal of a reform plan that affirms scientific progress while insisting on a civil ethic based on codes that allow for broad possibility of interpretation and adaptation: *Bildung*. The effect of the concept more or less persists outside of Christianity. The very element that allows for an increasingly secular interpretation of education in historiography today also allows for a complete re-insertion into a foreign cultural context, for such virtues are de facto never the privilege of a single culture.

The reasons why these views, despite coming from a Christian theologian and philosopher (note that for him, philosophy derives from theology), enthused the Japanese oligarchy, lies in the applicability of the ethical concepts into a Japanese context, for instance Shinto.

The ethics applied may be fundamentally religious but would appear secularised. The proposed path avoids conflicts around religion, but still regulates a strong public code, which in addition has a nationalist impulse. The application of it was also already tested in the field, apparently with great success, as far as could be verified in the 1880s. The German-speaking realm with its plural states grew rapidly in strength despite the trauma of the Napoleonic invasion, and it proved to be an advantage that they were not too involved in the colonial race at this time (from the Japanese point of view).

Another advantage of the ethics offered by liberal Protestants is that it aids the marginalisation of superstition against religion along the line of visual symbols. Given that Aoki and his fellow oligarchs were contesting the salvific efficacy not only of Buddhism but also of all other forms of religions merged with it (Shugendō mountain asceticism, Daoism, geomancy, communal religious associations, etc.), it was logical for them to draw the line at the use of visual icons and symbols. In this context, Spinner positioned himself against rituals, visual symbols, and a dogmatic understanding of the superhuman in general, in accordance with the theology of his mission. He accommodated keywords of *Bildung* and *Sittlichkeit* within the superordinate term of *Vernunftsreligion* (religion of reason). However, Spinner's writings displayed some ambiguities between the secular and the religious (Chidester 2014, 14), making a truly clear demarcation difficult for the analysis of religion as a concept. At best, it seems to be a fluid distinction.

## 6 The Marginalisation of Buddhism in Edo Japan

The expulsion of Buddhism from the ritual space of Japan (Antoni 1995, 139), as well as the strategic restriction of its institutional power reached its zenith when the decree of *shinbutsu hanzen rei*, the “determination (of difference) between *kami* and Buddha,” was issued by the Meiji authorities in March 1868. The decree unleashed a wave of destruction described by the term *haibutsu kishaku*, the discarding of Buddhism and the destruction of Shakyamuni, against the visual presence of Buddhism in public spaces. The scale was unprecedented, as far as the written sources allow an assessment, even compared to the eradication of many Buddhist sacred sites from individual feudal territories in the Edo period. Buddhism de facto met with little favour from other thinkers after the government introduced the *Danka* system in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, which used temple communities for political oversight, giving Buddhists a powerful yet questionable standing. Incidents and waves of eradication of the visible presence of certain groups were indeed not uncommon in Japanese history, markedly within Buddhism, such as the persecution of certain groups of *nenbutsu* practitioners, or individual sects within the Nichiren school, which lasted for three centuries (Hisaki 1971, 134-146). Conflicts arose with a growing awareness of Shinto as a public religious entity on par with Buddhism, whilst criticism on Buddhism was also a part of Confucian output, with the polemics mainly aimed against the paradigm of confluent worship. The *kokugaku* scholars, literally the school of national learning, whose development mirrored parallels to German Romanticism, ultimately became the torch bearers of the Meiji Restoration and its ideology. More precisely, their path to reconnect to the ancient “origins” in order to formulate an identity free of foreign influences, bore similar traits to the German-speaking realm. The development of the *kokugaku* under the leadership of notable scholars such as Kamo no Mabuchi (1697-1769), Motoori Norinaga (1730-1801) and Hirata Atsutane (1776-1843) eventually produced theories that, not only were Buddhism and Confucianism un-Japanese, but “the real reason for the decline of Japan” (Antoni 1998, 136). Especially works by Norinaga like the *Naobi no Mitama* (Motor 1825) were attempts at imagining an authentic Japanese culture. The decline of their culture was perceived on both sides of the continent as an inability to defend the country, the consequence of which was submission to foreign influence. However, just as the Napoleonic threat sparked the imagination of an authentic culture in Prussian and other German regions, the *kokugaku* movement had gained momentum under the growing threat of Western presence in Asia around the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The purging of Buddhism along the divide of visual representations was especially successful and had been campaigned for a longer time. An unambiguous source for this marginalisation of Buddhism already in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century is the volume by Philipp Franz von Siebold (1796-1866): *Nippon* (Siebold 1862). It il-

illustrates how the teachings of Buddha got “lost [in the] picture halls ... calculated for the sensuous” (Siebold 1832, 38). The phrase links Buddhism to the ‘threat of sensuality’ that the ‘female Orient’ posed for rationalist German men (Germana 2017, 33), steeped in Kantian and Hegelian thought. “According to Japanese scholars,” Siebold writes, “the dogmas and the cult of Buddhism as it exists in Japan can be divided into two classes, the higher and the lower. The latter makes up the popular religion and expresses itself in a sensual cult, in idol worship ...” (Siebold 1832, 36). Since he admits to being “indebted to the communications of several Japanese scholars for some clarification on this matter” (Siebold 1832, 36) the Japanese domestic view must be considered as a relatively autonomous drive in providing this divide.

## 7 The Influence of Liberal Protestantism on Buddhist Reformists

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Prominent Buddhist leaders such as Nanjō Bunyū (1849-1927), Inoue Enryō (1858-1919), and Shimaji Mokurai (1838-1911), to name a few, responded by transforming their schools both structurally and doctrinally. Bunyū was the first, and most renowned, overseas student to engage with the rising discipline of comparative religion directly under the tutelage of Max Müller. He even arrived in Oxford far earlier than Spinner and his later publications were widely read also amongst German Protestant (Schmiedel 1889). Inoue sought to establish the sustainability of Buddhism through comparisons with German philosophy and a cleansing of its teachings from “superstition.” With his anti-government petition, Mokurai paradoxically had a profound influence on the shaping of the imperial state and its position towards the concept of “Shinto,” by advocating the separation of state and religion (Krämer 2017, 239). The philosopher Inoue Tetsujirō (1856-1944), albeit not a Buddhist cleric, should also be mentioned due to his connection to Inoue Enryō and his role in the development of a religiously influenced concept of education, represented in his *Commentary on the Imperial Rescript on Education* (*Chokugo engi*, 1895) (Antoni 1990, 104). Nationalism in Imperial Germany between 1884 and 1890 was formative for Inoue and accelerated his interpretation of the *Imperial Rescript on Education* in the direction of religious veneration, which also places him in the realm of German (Prussian) influence (Shimazono 1998, 64). Despite his residence in Europe, Inoue was a lifelong opponent of Christianity. However, this did not hinder him from adopting *Sittlichkeit* and replacing Christianity with Shinto. In other words, Inoue’s experience cemented his and his fellow official’s belief in the effectiveness of the Imperial German politics and public education to heighten the national feeling, with a fluid perception of where the secular ended, and veneration began.

Two Buddhist reformers are of special interest regarding the influence of German-realm Liberal Protestantism. One is Inoue Enryō, the other being Sakaino Kōyō (1871-1933). Both Enryō and Kōyō elaborated new strategies to pave a way for Buddhism out of the accusation of disseminating irrational and superstitious teachings. Both argue strongly in favour of a rational cleansing of Buddhist religiosity. But, whilst Enryō conducts research of common beliefs of the demonic and refutes them in light of modern science, Kōyō adopts the undogmatic reading of holy scripture to depart from a literal understanding, which he terms 'poetic Buddhism' (*shiteki bukkyō*) (Wu 2022). Enryō's strategy superficially creates a clear division, which is however, as Josephson elaborates, not quite as simple as affirming scientific evidence and discarding all things that cannot be proven by it (Josephson 2006, 156). Rather, he limits himself to rationalising "shadows," in terms of demonic or penalizing symbols of faith, in accordance with the teachings of European Enlightenment. This strategy aimed at educating the public to adopt ethics, not by the threat of superhuman wrath, but through reason. The primary concern to eliminate superstition and to disengage from a literal, dogmatic understanding of scripture and ritual (in the sense of faith) is common to both Buddhist reformers, in both cases a response to the new wave of demarcation of religion.

It is most interesting that in connection with Kōyō, Wu comes across the second missionary of the AEPM, Otto Schmiedel (1858-1926). She focuses on a public exchange of opinions between Kōyō and a reader of his publication on "poetic reading," who recalls a lecture by Schmiedel on a similar concept called "poetic expression" within Liberal Theology. Kōyō agrees with this comparison, replying that he "cannot help but be grateful for this deep understanding" (Wu 2022, 135). Although Wu does not find direct evidence for the AEPM to have served as a blueprint for Kōyō's strategy, such an influence is nevertheless possible and would place the AEPM in the proximity of Buddhist reformists, too. To gain a better understanding, I shall take a closer look at the content. The book by Schmiedel on the "poetic reading" of miracles, *Kiseki shōron*, was translated and published by Minami Hajime in 1891. Schmiedel begins his investigation by denying the reader the distinction between religion as a whole and the part of religion within the whole, namely miracles (Schmiedel 1891, 20), which is a rhetoric of mediation between miracle belief (superstition) and religion (rationality), rather than a frontal polemic against the former. He follows up with rather complex assessments, listing theories of Protestant theology such as *Vermittlungstheologie* (Schmiedel 1891, 213; Dierken 2001, 373). However, the theology of *Vernunft* (reason) remains the highest standard in the trajectory of religious development. The fact that Schmiedel takes up a long series of examples of religions, cultures and regions points to comparative religion as a fundamental compass. With this equation, any reader was naturally inclined to adopt the most effective and progressive strategy towards "belief in miracles," which

was nevertheless a rationalisation with a conciliatory note. But it is indeed feasible for Buddhist reformers to gain insight into rationalisation through a volume rich in theological content such as this, moreover available in Japanese.

## **8 The Superstition Debate as Image Conflict and Prognosis of Social Conflict**

In textual analysis, superstition was understood as phenomena and effects on life that could not be explained scientifically, or an action that even thwarted a desired outcome (praying instead of taking medicine). The reforms of the Buddhist schools attempting to cooperate with governmental intentions, ultimately launched a new understanding of Buddhism that systematically subjected the lower classes (poor and uneducated) or the naïve (children, women, elderly) to re-education through official governmental campaigns.

In practice, these beliefs were always linked to actions, such as rituals. Hardly without exception, they involved a material component. As the most visible part of the category of superstition, the material component generally involved the purchase of apotropaic objects, offerings, necessity for certain food, adornments, or the like. They belong to the fundamental actions of common life. The social differentiation between the educated, the rational and progressive, and the uneducated, the superstitious, to whom religiosity had to be conveyed through images and rituals, inevitably led to a contempt of the way of life of the lower classes. These were classifications that grew from the same soil as 'secularised' ethics, whose vocabulary already oscillated between theological and social discourses. The division along this use of images surfaces in texts on comparative religion, for example by Max Müller (1874, 56; 1897, 7). He famously made the distinction between a worthy religion and the "vulgars and nondescript crowd of bookless or illiterate religions" (Müller 1897, 7; 1897, 52-53) by the evidence of, well, books, as opposed to pictures. Neither did Siebold's quite educated, and scientifically versed rhetoric eradicate his dislike against the worship of images, in which "sensuous" is a key term already hinting at its antonym: educated – *gebildet*.

## **9 Conclusion**

As I have demonstrated, Japan's nationalist narrative encountered a concept similar to the one it had long nurtured itself through its discovery of the Liberal Protestant worldview. While the concepts of legitimisation for the Meiji government were strongly influenced by Edo period nationalist ideologies, there was room for the consolidation of the status of the ruling class by aid of Protes-



tantism. The need to accelerate technological progress is certainly one element of this equation to protect against invasive powers. But the notion of progress came after the notion of a nation-building ideology. The concept of *Bildung* and *Sittlichkeit* had made Protestant values available for the progressive mind, at least in the German-speaking realm. In addition, the constructed moral superiority of the educated man (*Gebildete*) was of decisive advantage for the marginalisation of all classes below the *bushi* in accordance with the old caste system (or rather a mirror image of the old status in a new system). Therein lies the seed for the concept of *wakon yōsai* (Japanese spirit, Western knowledge), the combination of the Japanese spirit with Western science propagated by *kokugaku* fractions. Regarding the time of mid-Meiji, there was an element of Western spirit present in the *wakon*. Yet the idea that was fused to *Bildung* was expressed through comparative religion in the age of imperialism. As in the case of Mendelssohn, the concept remained discriminatory. The component of comparative religion in the luggage of the AEPM accelerated the marginalisation of Buddhism and all forms of worship related to icons. However, the fact that this science was applied in Europe as well as in the periphery and led to social Imperialism (Chidester 1996, 4) is less often addressed in discourses on decolonisation.

An inherent desire for political and social consolidation of the German Protestants decided for the Japanese side their preference over Russian Orthodoxy. This is rooted in the Liberal Protestant fabric to reject social instability. Their class consciousness is poignantly described by Hübinger in his volume on the German Liberal Protestants: “They always aimed at reform in the state, not emancipation from the state” (Hübinger 1994, 8). Fittingly, Spinner promotes the authority of the Meiji oligarchy in every way, specifically emphasising his support in upholding “the Mikado idea,” the monarchy centred around the Tennō. Regardless of the Western domination imposed on Japan at this time, the Japanese clearly made their own decisions and strategically implemented them as it suited their needs. They moved at a high political level to implement the close observation of global politics to their advantage. They saw the opportunity of the Protestant liberal ideology with its concepts of ethics and education, which they separated from their connection to the Christian faith. Spinner and his colleagues were exemplary refiners of political systems who did not envisage an overturning of social structures, but offered a progressive, competitive formula that could bring Japan on par with the Western empires. The skilful strategy the AEPM had prepared was only one side of a game with two very astute protagonists.

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