

## Letter to the Editor

It makes sense to me that Walter Skya would take issue with my book. His main work, *Japan's Holy War: The Ideology of Radical Shinto Ultrationalism*, is an attempt to explain the ideological origins of Japanese fascism. This is an important issue and one that essentially gave birth to the discipline of Japanese Studies. Skya's answer — that Japanese extremism was the product of a form of Shinto, understood as a form of extreme religious nationalism — is also the answer that the field has produced on and off since the 1940s (see, e.g., Holtom, Daniel. 1943. *Modern Japan and Shinto Nationalism*). Skya updates this argument within the context of the study of comparative fascism and innovatively illustrates the radicalization of Shinto in the pre-War period. He also makes explicit comparisons between Shinto “terrorism” and Islamic “radicals,” basically bringing Shinto studies, by way of Kamikaze pilots, into the post-September 11, 2001 world.

My book is about how Japanese intellectuals and policymakers of the Tokugawa-Meiji periods (1600–1912), encountering Euro-American concepts of “religion,” “science,” the “secular,” and “superstition” for the first time, extensively reclassified and reassembled indigenous cultural systems. Chapters 4 and 5 take as a starting problem the assertion, by 19th century Japanese intellectuals (both Shinto-affiliated and not), that whatever the term “religion” meant, Shinto was not a religion. I show how Shinto was invented in the early modern period via comparison to European natural philosophy and politics. This meant that by the 1860s, Japanese thinkers were able to position Shinto as a form of statecraft compatible with religious freedom and analogous to the political rites of the period's putatively “secular” monarchies. In sum, I show that Shinto had a complex and uneasy relationship to the category of “religion.”

My book is likely a problem for Skya because it undercuts the assumption that Shinto is necessarily religious, and hence problematizes the argument that fascism (and terrorism) primarily result from an *excess* of religiosity. I take his review to be challenging the points where I demonstrate influences on what came to be known as “Shinto,” particularly those influences that are European and not strictly religious. I also take him to be

aggrieved by my claims that Shinto had to be invented (not from whole cloth but in a *bricolage* sense) in the early modern period. But I think he is wrong in consequential points of detail.

Skya claims that, because of the importance of the emperor in a pair of 8th-century texts (*Kojiki*, *Nihongi*), there must have been a continuous Shinto religion from ancient times. But I show that in the medieval period the *Nihongi* was read as a Buddhist text and that for philological reasons the *Kojiki* was almost completely ignored until the 17th century (98–102). Moreover, the emperor was believed to be descended from *Amaterasu*, usually translated as “Sun goddess,” but then read *Tenshō Daijin* and largely understood to be male and an incarnation of the Cosmic Buddha. Prior to the 19th century, the emperor was dominantly situated in a Buddhist discourse. Indeed as late as 1860 most Japanese subjects did not think of the emperor as a political figure or a representative of Shinto, but as a kind of Buddhist deity (see Miyata Noboru, *Ikigami Shinkō*, 42ff).

We have other points of disagreement: I’m not arguing that Kokugaku was a science in the modern sense, but that it *presented itself as a science* in the early modern period. Skya overlooks the fact that, in that epoch, European natural philosophers like Newton had explicit places for God in their systems, and hence would have fit his definition of “creation scientists.” I actually argue that Hirata Atsutane and company were reproducing the structures of European deism by claiming to patch together different scientific and ethical discourses. Then I look at how this movement grew and captured the name “Shinto” in the process. I’m not arguing that Shinto was *apolitical* or that Japanese fascism might not have drawn partially on Shinto politics, but instead that Shinto’s modern construction was often precisely as a kind of politics, admittedly one that underwent significant changes (e.g. from aiming to renovate the Shogunate to “restoring” the emperor).

Our biggest point of disagreement concerns Chapter 8, which locates the 1889 Japanese Constitution in relation to the period’s norms. I show that the Japanese Constitution was actually more liberal in regard to religion than many European Constitutions and even many American state constitutions. I argue that Article 1, although expressed in Kokugaku terms, could be construed within European absolutist legitimations of Christian sovereignty (229–230). Based on an internal memo of the Japanese Privy Council, I also show that Article 3 was intended to translate the 1876 Spanish Constitution that reads “*La persona del Rey es sagrada e inviolable.*” (230). This is a problem for Skya, because he

uses endorsement of these claims about the emperor as one of the litmus tests to define his subjects as Shintoist or not. Showing that this language appeared earlier in Spanish destabilizes this argument.

Perhaps the main source of discord between my work and the older historiography is that I problematize the categories “religion” and “secularism” and resist ahistorical readings of Shinto. To outsiders it might sound like Skya and I are in the same business, but he is an historian of 1920–1945, and whatever the merits of his work on that period, his review rests on anachronistic assertions that don’t hold for earlier periods.

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Note: Professor Walter Skya has declined to respond to this letter.