

**Monotheism in the New Religious Movements of Japan:**  
*Historical and Taxonomical Challenges in Western Studies*

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# Plagiarism Declaration

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I, Kegan Alan Chandler, hereby declare that the content of this thesis is based on my original work except where acknowledgments indicate otherwise, and that neither the work nor any part has been, is being, or is to be submitted for another degree in this or any other university.

Kegan A. Chandler

23 June 2023

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Kegan A. Chandler

# Abstract

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The study of Japan's New Religious Movements (NRMs) has long been a preoccupation of Western scholars. However, significant disagreement and confusion have existed in the West over whether some of these movements, exemplified in this study by Kurozumikyō, Tenrikyō, and Konkōkyō, are monotheistic or not. Scholars have alternatively described these NRMs as "polytheistic," "monotheistic," or "pantheistic," while some have attempted to straddle multiple categories at once, or have treated these movements as entirely *sui generis*. This thesis, focusing on Western studies, argues that this long history of Western dissonance is the result of a complex layering of taxonomical, socio-cultural, and academic issues, including too-narrow definitions of monotheism, nationalistic discourse in Japan, scholarly avoidance of "Western" terminology and concepts, essentializing East-West dichotomies which emphasize "Japanese polytheism" and "Western monotheism," and scholarly assumptions about devotional practices. This thesis begins to address this classificatory impasse by first expanding on recent advancements in the taxonomy of religion, including a definition of monotheism that takes into account its nuances and includes new monotheistic subcategories, and then by revisiting the teachings of Kurozumikyō, Tenrikyō, and Konkōkyō through this interpretive lens. In addition to problems of categorization, this thesis also contributes to the resolution of issues related to the historical development of monotheism in the NRMs. On an assumption that premodern Japanese religion offered NRM founders no trace of monotheism, some Western scholars have concluded that the emergence of NRM monotheism must be owed to contact between the founders and Kakure Kirishitan (Hidden Christians). This thesis conducts a new historical investigation in light of the new taxonomy, ultimately revealing several more plausible Japanese, non-Christian sources of monotheism in the history of Japanese religion. These findings indicate the need for a reformation of the image of monotheism in Western studies of Japan.

# Japan's New Religious Movements and the Challenge of a “Japanese” Monotheism

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*“The teaching of the true god is in Japan.”*

— Ōkuni Takamasa (1792–1871)

## 1.1. Introduction

The subject of this thesis, Japan's New Religious Movements and Western analysis of their relationship with monotheism, is a charged and challenging topic. The deceptively simple classificatory question of whether any of these religious groups can be rightly called monotheistic, and the historical question of how such monotheistic phenomena might have come to be in Japanese history, conjure a dense, interconnected layer of scholarly background assumptions, socio-political anxieties, and methodological limitations which has continued to cloud definitive answers. In truth, direct engagement with the subject of monotheism among Japan's New Religious Movements has been surprisingly limited in Western studies. The majority of handbooks and encyclopedias discussing the world's New Religious Movements (NRMs) hardly mention the term “monotheism” in their surveys of Japanese phenomena, and those reports which do mention it are often transient and lacking in conclusiveness (e.g. Pye 2004b; Clarke 2006a, 2006b; Hardacre 2006a; Ambros and Smith 2018). Meanwhile, among the Western inquirers who have fleetingly commented on the subject in the past century-and-a-half, significant disagreement and confusion appear to have been perpetuated over whether some of Japan's NRMs, exemplified in this study by the cases of Kurozumikyō, Tenrikyō, and Konkōkyō, are representative of monotheism at all. Some have concluded that these groups are absolutely not monotheistic, while others have insisted they are as monotheistic as any Abrahamic faith. Still others have unhelpfully implied that these NRMs somehow straddle multiple classifications. Further disagreement has arisen among those who positively identify these NRMs as monotheistic, namely as to whether or not their monotheism severs their link with Japan's religious past. Some scholars find strong connection to historical Shinto, while others insist that the belief in a supreme god excludes them from the category of Shinto or somehow delegitimizes them as expressions of “Japanese” religion. Ultimately, while movements like Kurozumikyō, Tenrikyō, and Konkōkyō are widely known and often discussed by Western scholars, disagreement and hesitation have long flourished regarding their most

central beliefs and their place in Japanese religious history. This unsettled landscape has resulted in similar confusion in popular-level writings in the West about Japan's NRMs, contributing negatively towards the representation and reception of religions.

The present study, fully aware of the difficulties involved, humbly aims to contribute to the resolution of these complex issues of classification and historical development in Western studies of the subject. Here, certain taxonomical advancements will be employed in order to reexamine and attempt to resolve the question of monotheism in Japan's NRMs. It will be revealed that Western disagreement on this subject in the past century-and-a-half, at both the academic and popular levels, is linked to long-standing problems in Western taxonomies of religion, namely problems with the category of "monotheism." Deficient Western taxonomies are therefore also responsible for the widespread disinterest of Western scholars of monotheism, theologians, and philosophers of religion in the monotheism of Japan's NRMs. Secondly, the question of whether the teachings of these movements have any correspondence to Japan's religious history will be addressed by a reexamination of scholarship on the subject and a new investigation into the historical background of these movements' ideas. While the few Western historians who have engaged the question of origins have often looked to Western (Christian) influence for explanation, perhaps best exemplified by J.H. Kamstra's 1994 suggestion that secretly-imported Jesuit literature and Kakure Kirishitan influence might explain the presence of monotheism in the NRMs (112–115), a new study will be undertaken which examines viable Japanese influences on the historical development of ideas within Kurozumikyō, Tenrikyō, and Konkōkyō.

It must be made clear at the outset that the focus of the present research is squarely on problems in Western studies of Japan's NRMs—problems which have their genesis, I suggest, in insufficient definitions of monotheism. However, while these definitional/classificatory issues have originated in and been perpetuated by Western studies, their difficulty has been enhanced by a host of socio-cultural and academic issues not exclusive to Western analysis, and they have ultimately had widespread and arguably negative effects on the study of Japanese religion both inside and outside Japan. Nevertheless, in attempting to resolve these issues, this study of Japan's NRMs will focus primarily on Western sources (the reports of historians, theologians, philosophers of religion, insiders, and translators available to the English-speaking world). Beyond a pragmatic conservation of space, the additional reasoning is related to a desire to generate new interest in the subject among Western scholars of monotheism (presumably those most interested in a problem created by Western definitions of monotheism). There can be little doubt that most philosophers of religion, theologians, and historians interested in the subject of monotheism hail from Western contexts. While a range of Western scholars have investigated Japan's NRMs, hardly any specialists in the study of monotheism have paid them any mind. In fact, I know of only a single monograph published by a Western theologian exploring the "Japanese quest for divinity" which makes mention of the NRMs (Keane 2017), and less than two pages are devoted to the question of the existence of monotheism in these movements (49–50)—a question answered in the negative! As already mentioned, I suggest this stark lack of interest and awareness among Western scholars is owed to both a definitional problem and to the socio-cultural and academic background assumptions which will be introduced below. However, I suggest Western scholars of monotheism have additionally shied from analyzing the doctrines of the NRMs due to a subterranean assumption that resolving doctrinal questions will require extensive experience in reading both contemporary Japanese and classical Japanese sources. As H. Byron Earhart reported in his bibliography of Western-language materials on Japan's

NRMs, while “many [Western] scholars of various disciplines are interested in the new religions, few of them are able to read the Japanese materials on the subject” (1970, vii). The present thesis thus continues in the spirit of Earhart’s project to make Japan’s NRMs and Western-facing analysis of these NRMs more widely known to Western scholars by pointing them to accessible materials. It furthermore challenges the aforementioned assumption by revealing that Western scholars interested in questions about monotheism in Japan, by utilizing both the already-available data in Western-language studies and the official English publications of the Kurozumikyō, Tenrikyō, and Konkōkyō organizations, currently have at their disposal sufficient data for the formation of an accurate picture of these movements’ monotheistic beliefs. In this way, the study aims to encourage further, cross-disciplinary examination of its key findings among both Western scholars of monotheism and Western scholars of Japanese religion, including the proposal that better taxonomical categories will allow us to discern the monotheistic character of Japan’s NRMs and their situation as historical Japanese traditions. It is true that in the second half of this thesis I will investigate a few historical questions which to date have received little Western attention and have therefore not been adequately covered in any Western-language materials. On these few questions only have I cited scholarly publications in Japanese, Japanese-language historical sources, and the private input I have received from Japanese scholars and NRM theologians, and I have done my best to notate these instances.

As mentioned above, before any more can be effectively said about this challenging subject (or family of subjects), several background issues must be introduced. Any classificatory project must first begin by ensuring those religious phenomena placed in the category of “New Religious Movements” (in and of itself a sensitive but carefully-constructed designation) are justifiably framed as such. Second, it is important to explain why the question of Japanese religions and monotheism has been handled with such diffidence by so many Western scholars, and here I will introduce factors within the problem’s socio-cultural and academic backgrounds which I suggest have posed barriers to widespread clarity. The final section of this introduction will provide the specific aims and methodology of this research, including a principled justification of the study’s taxonomic elements.

### **1.1.1. On the Term “New Religious Movements”**

Some explanation should first be offered for the term “New Religious Movement” (NRM) and its application to the cases of Kurozumikyō, Tenrikyō, and Konkōkyō. Prior to the late 1960s, most Western sources discussing NRMs were distinctly polemical works originating in highly-antagonistic Evangelical circles. This body of literature made liberal use of the academic word “cult,” effectively transforming it into a negative, derogatory category for theological rivals (see Chryssides and Zeller 2014a, 3–5; see also Olson 2006). Since the development of NRM scholarship in the late 1960s and 1970s, alternative terminology and definitions have been put forward in order to neutralize the pejorative ways the dominant institutions of society framed these religious phenomena. Interestingly, the academic study of NRMs among Western scholars has been indebted to the study of Japanese religions for its terminological tools. One category widely utilized in Western analysis which owes directly to Japanese studies is the term “New Religions,” a translation of a standard designation used by Japanese scholars since World War II, *shinshūkyō*. The earliest use of this term appears to be in the post-

World War II reports of Japanese journalists, while among the first academics to use the word was scholar of Japanese religions Murakami Shigeoyoshi, notably in his *Research on Contemporary History of Folk Religions* (1958) (see Cavaliere 2015, 15, no. 3). Since the mid-1980s, the term has been widely established among scholars of Japanese religions as a descriptive category in the field (Prohl 2012, 249–250), including in the studies of such significant names as Inoue Nobutaka (1991; 1997) and the widely-respected Shimazono Susumu (1992a; 1992b; 1992c; 2001; 2004).<sup>1</sup>

Recently, this term has lost popularity among Western scholars due to its supposed negative connotations. From one vantage point, this term can be understood to imply a claim that so-called “New Religions” are, in fact, religions which are new, that is, religions which are sharply distinguishable from other “more established” traditions. One problem is that this implied claim of heterogeneity and lateness is one which regularly comes up in inter- and intra-religious disputes, and is a claim which many of these allegedly late and different religions would vociferously deny.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, some of these groups would even claim that their doctrines are in truth the least innovative, most original teachings of a particular religious figure or tradition claimed also by their rivals (e.g. the claims of the Jehovah’s Witnesses or the Latter Day Saint movement regarding the teachings of Jesus vis-à-vis those of the Roman Catholic Church). In the end, talk of “new religions” seems to inexorably summon notions of invention and revolution and then to subordinate the “new” to the “old” via a series of mental contrasts such as primary vs. auxiliary religions, or mainstream vs. alternative religions. In my own view, such language does seem to open the door too widely to the attachment of negative ideas of impurity or inferiority to certain groups, allowing them to be easily juxtaposed against others which are said to be more paradigmatic or quintessential of historical traditions. Naturally, a scholar of religion will be disinterested in the value of claims made within inter- and intra-religious disputes, and her classificatory language should immediately reflect this disinterest.

The more recent term “New Religious Movements,” first developed by missionary scholar Harold W. Turner (1967; 1979; 1988; see Berner 2000, 267–272; Chryssides and Zeller 2014a, 5), seems now more widely preferred among Western commentators, though some have used both terms interchangeably (Saliba 2003, vii-x; Melton 2007, 29–30). While there is at present no universally agreed-upon definition of an NRM, it is now generally understood to be a useful category due to its broader and more nonpartisan connotation (Pokorny and Winter 2018, 8–9). The term’s latitude is found in its exchange of the word “religions” for the more comprehensive word “movements,” a maneuver thought to envelope a wider range of religious communities from highly-organized, hierarchical power structures to relatively small, embryonic human networks, and one which effectively attaches the investigation of

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<sup>1</sup> For Western reflection on Shimazono’s work, see Reader 1993; Hardacre 2006b. Shimazono’s notable classificatory explorations have proposed subdivisions focused on the influence of various religious and philosophical sources, e.g. Shinto-based, Christianity-based, Lotus sutra-based, Buddhist (non-Lotus) based, etc. (see Shimazono 2004, 72–73); such categorizations have not appealed widely in Western studies, especially as scholarly analysis since the 1980s has gravitated less toward the broad classifications typical of Western inquiry in the 1960s (e.g. McFarland 1960; Thomsen 1963) and more toward considerations of individual NRMs (e.g. Hardacre 1986).

<sup>2</sup> As has been suggested, “a necessary test for a religious analysis is whether a religious person of the sort analyzed would affirm the analysis” (Neville 2004, 100, referring to the famed maxim of Wilfred Cantwell Smith).

NRMs to sociological inquiry. This transaction has also allowed for the possibility that a group under this heading might be implied to be a natural outcropping of an original source rather than an entirely distinct religion. In other words, phenomena classed as “movements” might be imagined to grow within the confines of already-established religions, and their doctrinal distinctives or historical pedigree, while necessarily discernable enough to warrant the use of some additional label, may not have ultimately severed their umbilical link to their parent faith. Of course, on the other hand, a “New Religious Movement” might for some readers alternatively invoke an image of a novel pivot away from (and abandonment of) an already-established faith, or it might also suggest a more consciously-independent religious development which makes few or no claims about the past. Thus, NRMs like Kurozumikyō, Tenrikyō, or Konkōkyō might be “movements” which are “*within* Shinto” (Hardacre 2017, 10, emphasis mine), or religious groups which are merely “Shinto-based” (Littleton 2005, 462). The ambiguity of the nomenclature is clearly its strength, and its contemporary popularity among scholars dedicated to the equitable treatment of religious subjects should not surprise.

### 1.1.2. Identifying Japan’s New Religious Movements

What qualifies as an NRM? Some have clearly focused overmuch on “charismatic leadership,” a highly ambiguous and variously interpreted criterion and one which in the end seems to draw too much attention to the skills and traits of the founders of religious groups and depresses the genuinely religious character of their institutions (see Melton 2007, 29–30). The concept of syncretism has sometimes also been forefronted by scholars, often when studying NRMs in colonial situations (Chryssides and Zeller 2014b, 350). It is true that NRMs exhibit both characteristics of more “unconscious” modes of syncretism (or “spontaneous” or “vegetating” syncretism; see Rudolph 2014 [2004], 72–82), as well as the sort of deliberate combinative processes often associated with popular notions of syncretism. There should be little question that NRMs “often incorporate ‘borrowed’ elements from other religious (or secular) sources as a way of legitimating new contemporary values, often disguised as old religious teachings as a means to contest orthodox values” (Leopold and Jensen 2014 [2004], 4; see also Cornille 1994, 94). Syncretism has certainly been emphasized in studies of Japan’s NRMs (see Cornille 1994, 89–91; Thomsen 1963, 29; van Straelen and Offner 1963, 32–33), and Cornille is right that there is some sort of noteworthy “mixing of religions which occurs in the new Japanese religions” (1994, 90). However, in defining NRMs in general our theoretical focus should not linger overlong on syncretism, in and of itself a hotly contested category said by some to have “no taxonomic value” (Droge 2001, 376), and found by others to be a surprisingly resilient analytical category (see Pandian 2006, 229). It may in the end prove unhelpful to emphasize “syncretic” processes as a distinctive trait of NRMs since contemporary scholars (apart from some missionaries and theologians) now understand such processes to be basic to both the invention of religious traditions (see Shaw and Stewart 1994, 1–2; van der Veer 1994, 208) and to “the predicament of culture” in general (see Clifford 1988, 14–15).<sup>3</sup> The blending

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<sup>3</sup> Despite its pejorative, polemical use in Protestant circles, most contemporary scholars of religion seem interested in the preservation of the analytical use of “syncretism” in light of the fact that debates over syncretism constitute basic beliefs in

and borrowing processes by which NRMs often develop their distinctives can be identified within the older religious movements against which they are juxtaposed. It is not surprising that as older religious groups imbibed their socio-political, economic, and cosmopolitan environs, so too have many recently-instituted religious groups demonstrated, for example, scientific and psychological interests. The criteria of innovation has also regularly emerged in discussions of NRM traits. The first challenge posed by this focus is the fact that “[c]riteria of innovation vary between religions and cultures, being centered more on doctrine in certain contexts and on changes in the performance and purposes of ritual and in orientation to the world in others... [these criteria] have a bearing on why a particular movement is considered new” (Clarke 2006b, 3). In this light, since it is so easy for scholars to inappropriately impose connotations of newness and also to inadvertently bypass genuine development, definitions based too-squarely on doctrinal or practical innovation may be unstable. In my view, scholars of religion should avoid this theoretical focus for some of the same reasons the term NRM is to be preferred over “New Religion.” Very often “orthodox” religious establishments deride, exclude, or otherwise act to delegitimize certain groups or people on claims of doctrinal innovation. In common Evangelical, anti-cult parlance, “cults are founded by people who bring forth a new doctrine not found in the old scripture” (Carmody and Brink 2014, 380). For example, one reason Evangelical anti-cult efforts typically exclude Jehovah’s Witnesses from the category of “Christianity” and label them a “cult” or a “different religion” is due to perceived doctrinal innovations in regard to Christology. However, Jehovah’s Witnesses claim their unitarian Christology is in fact the older, more conservative view, while the typically trinitarian outlook of their Evangelical rivals represents a later doctrinal development. Scholars who might ground their definition of NRMs in a criterion of innovation run the risk of contributing disproportionately to one side or the other in such debates.

Are there any traits which can be safely identified between NRMs? Due to the extreme variety of NRM doctrines and practices, it has been suggested that “NRMs do not have any inherent characteristics in common,” and that we should rather attempt to class them by their generally marginal, or even highly-alienated situations in society (Bromley 2007, 5; see Melton 2007, 31–32). Eileen Barker famously proposed, however, that such faiths do have elements in common, and that the majority of these religious groups are described by some sort of innovation and are at least new as organizations (Barker 2004, 88–102). It is their newness, in fact, which contributes directly to the characteristics they display, including their positions at the edge of society (88–89). I largely concur with this line of thinking but jettison Barker’s focus on innovation while leaning heavily into the idea that NRMs must be at least institutionally new, and insisting that any phenomena be so-described on the basis of a simple, temporal grounding. Indeed, the word “new” is obviously relative, and must be firmly anchored in any useful definition to some historical period or another. The difficulty arises when determining precisely where

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religions (see Pandian 2006, 299). While it is true that “syncretism” is a basic function of development in the history of religion, I have proposed elsewhere that “religious syncretism” as a comparative category might be reserved for “those religions which are conscious of and encourage syncretic processes” as opposed to “those which purport to be a closed system, however equally guilty they may be” (Chandler 2021b, 197–198). Cornille also quite pragmatically defines it as “the selective adoption and adaptation of elements belonging to one tradition by another” (1994, 90–91).

our temporal boundaries should fall while maintaining as pragmatically broad a definition of NRM as possible. Barker's suggestion of defining NRMs as those forming after World War II wrongly excluded many groups which scholars have routinely classed as NRMs, including the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Nation of Islam, and many Japanese movements like Kurozumikyō, Tenrikyō, and Konkokyō (see Chryssides and Zeller 2014a, 14). A similar challenge regarding temporal boundaries has long existed within Japanese studies of NRMs, conducted under the heading *shinshūkyō*, where four primary suggestions have been put forward regarding which religions should be considered "new": those religions founded in (1) the beginning of the 19th century; (2) the general period surrounding the Meiji Restoration (1868); (3) the beginning of the 20th century; or (4) following World War II (see Inoue 1991, 4).

In my view, Western scholars can learn from these earnest efforts and at the same time allow for a degree of helpful imprecision by broadly defining an NRM as a religious movement whose organizational founding has occurred *since* the nineteenth century. Scholars may ultimately find other reasons for tethering the emergence of NRMs to the nineteenth century beyond simple pragmatism. Indeed, some scholars of NRMs who also favor definitional grounding in this period have additionally linked the development of NRMs to the nineteenth century's socio-cultural, political, and economic shifts, namely industrialization, colonialism, and incipient "glocalization,"<sup>4</sup> keeping a "temporally more recent and thus contextually demarcated anatomy" squarely in view (Pokorny and Winter 2018, 7). I suggest Robertson's observation of the "great acceleration of the globalization process which had begun in the late nineteenth century" (1992, 18–19) and his suggestion that NRMs belong to what he calls a new universal "search for fundamentals" in the face of the relativizing effects of globalization (164–181)—when paired also with the fact that nineteenth-century Japan experienced an acute transformation away from the conservative and isolationist policies of the Tokugawa shogunate—may offer a clue to the outbreak of NRMs in this specific context (and possibly abroad). Beyond political and economic forces, it may also be worth noting that other scholars have proposed further dimensions of the Japanese situation in the mid-to-late nineteenth century which may have contributed to the founding of NRMs, including massive epidemics which swept the country and ushered in charismatic healing movements like Kurozumikyō (see Storm 2012, 182). While more work must be done to identify what unique, nineteenth-century forces acted upon the Japanese religious landscape, the present study requires no further investigation along these lines. My own uncomplicated usage of NRM as a description of a religious movement which has had its institutional founding since the nineteenth century has merely temporal and institutional axes.

Naturally, the question of when a "new" religious movement stops being "new" can be raised and may be briefly discussed. Some Japanese scholars, beginning with Nishiyama Shigeru in 1979, have adopted yet another term to resolve this particular problem, classifying more recently institutionalized

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<sup>4</sup> Robertson's famed theory of "glocalization" (derived from the Japanese concept of *dochakuka* or "global localization") describes the process in which products are refashioned according to local tastes (see Robertson 1992, 173–174; Roberts and Yamane 2012, 390–391).

groups like Agonshū (founded 1978) and Aum Shinrikyō (founded 1989) as *shinshinshūkyō* (new new religions) (see Reader 1988, 235–261; Baffelli 2016, 12, no. 10; and for significant Japanese perspectives see Inoue 1997, 3–24; Shimazono 2001, 22–27).<sup>5</sup> Barker has similarly suggested the existence of “first,” “second,” and “third generation” NRMs (2004, 101). Clearly this sort of terminological solution will necessarily involve an endless progression of supplemental terms as the new movements inevitably become old. While obviously cumbersome in the long term, an ongoing series of additional terms may end up proving more helpful than not. It may also be, however, that time itself will eventually perform the needed adjustments to the category of NRM. Indeed, at one point in history, Christianity was new; at another, Buddhism was new. As NRMs age and as even newer movements emerge on the scene for novel reasons, the older movements may be rendered no longer “new enough” to qualify, and NRM may reveal itself to be the only category we need, so long as its boundaries are moved forward in history. Indeed, “new religions” may turn out to simply be “young religions” (see Hammer and Rothstein 2012, 3).

In the cases of Kurozumikyō, Tenrikyō, and Konkōkyō, all three movements fit comfortably within our capacious definition of NRM. Each group features a definitive organizational establishment in the nineteenth century (Kurozumikyō was founded by Kurozumi Munetada in 1814 (officially in 1846); Tenrikyō was founded by Nakayama Miki in 1838; and Konkōkyō was founded by Kawate Bunjirō in 1859).<sup>6</sup> Each group has inarguably some relationship to Japan’s Shinto tradition, being variously described in the literature as flatly “Shinto sects” or “Shinto groups” (Breen and Teeuwen 2010, 212),

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<sup>5</sup> As has been observed, in the context of Japanese religion, this label “new new” does not “imply a radical discontinuity between the movements so labeled and the new religions themselves, nor is it chronologically meaningful... It is chiefly the fact that these and other movements labeled ‘new, new’ began to flourish in the 1980s when the new religions had been deemed to have peaked...” (Clarke 1999, 13). See also the usage of Melton (2007), who employs the term in reference to groups formed since 1990. See also Inoue’s classification of “hyper-religions” for newest religious movements (2014).

<sup>6</sup> Partly for the conservation of space, Kurozumikyō, Tenrikyō, and Konkōkyō will be emphasized in this study over other cases of noteworthy and purportedly monotheistic Japanese NRMs such as Nyoraikyō and Ōmotokyō. A Buddhism and Shinto-related NRM, Nyoraikyō boasts an impressively early founding in 1802, anticipating that of Kurozumikyō (1814), and marking arguably the first example of both a Japanese NRM and a monotheistic Japanese NRM. However, Western scholarship, which maintains the focus of this study, has not paid nearly as much attention to this movement or composed even a fraction of the amount of literature which has analyzed the other NRMs’ concepts of divinity and their historical development. For a brief, contemporary treatment of Nyoraikyō, see Ambros 2012, 387–388; for the most extensive Western study, see the unpublished dissertation of Kenneth Parker (1983). See also the summary of the most comprehensive Japanese studies on the question of Nyoraikyō’s monotheism and its relationship to Christianity (and their resulting conclusion of a denial of Christian influence on Nyoraikyō) in Shimazono 2003, 277–294; see also Kanda 1990, 133–135. The neglect of Ōmotokyō in this study may be similarly justified but is excluded also for issues of historical interest, namely the fact of its historical relationship with Konkōkyō and the fact that its founding in 1892 took place after the lifting of the nation’s *sakoku* policy of isolation and its ban on Christianity, distinguishing it from the more curious cases of Kurozumikyō, Tenrikyō, and Konkōkyō (and Nyoraikyō) as NRMs whose alleged monotheism cannot so easily be explained with recourse to the influence of Christianity (a religion which stands with Buddhism as the most widely-referenced tradition in Ōmotokyō writings) (see Shimazono 2003, 290–291). For a recent historical and doctrinal treatment of Ōmotokyō, see Stalker 2018, 52–67. For the Ōmotokyō offshoot Mahikari, famous for its Christian borrowings, see Cornille 1994 and Wilkinson 2018; see also Kamstra 1994, 106; cf. Young 1995, 585.

or, on the other hand, as “Shinto-derived” (Hardacre 2017, 381; Chryssides 2012, 341), “Shinto-related” (Kasulis 2004, 135), or “Shinto-based” (Littleton 2005, 462). While the nature of their relationship with the past be explored in the latter part of this thesis, for now we can recognize how well-suited our more non-partisan category of NRM is for corralling these richly-variegated religious groups, each of which locate their institutional endowments in the nineteenth century and may either represent outcroppings of a pre-existing Shinto tradition or entirely distinct religions which have uniquely relied on Shinto in their developmental histories.

## **1.2. Background to the Problem**

Now that we have introduced the category of NRM and the present study’s application, we must transition to a vital discussion of the subject of monotheism and Japanese religious studies. Below I will introduce several dimensions of the subject’s socio-cultural, political, and academic background which I suggest are responsible for the widespread diffidence, confusion, and disagreement on the subject of monotheism in Japanese religion in general and in Japan’s NRMs in particular. These barriers to clarity include (a) the prominence of East-West dichotomies; (b) the popular image of monotheism in public discourse in Japan; (c) the scholarly avoidance of “Western” terminology; (d) narrow definitions of monotheism at both the academic and public levels; and (e) assumptions regarding devotional practices.

### **1.2.1. Background to the Problem: East-West Dichotomies**

Progress in the Western study of Japanese religions has been promising. Condescending Western scholars in the past century clearly demonstrated a superiority complex toward Japanese religion, especially towards Shinto. Earlier voices spoke of the “strangeness,” the “primitive thought” of Shinto, its lack of “artistic” aesthetic, its “unreasonable, unemotional, unmoral, and incoherent” nature (Eliot 1908, 106–107), its lack of “a great future” among a people who have “a pinch of enlightenment and civilization” (Aston 1908, 349). Layered within these demeaning assessments was a programmatic generalizing of the “East,” a palpably authoritarian impulse to assert Western cultural dominance. After Edward Said’s landmark *Orientalism* (1978) struck a crippling but perhaps not fatal blow to such generalizing portraits of “Eastern” cultures, modern scholars of religion have rightly moved to correct the antagonistic stance of Western scholarship.<sup>7</sup> As we will see in the following chapters, however, vestiges of this condescending posture, chained tightly to the lingering specters of nineteenth-century anthropological assumptions, especially Tylorian and Müllerian “evolutionary” narratives,<sup>8</sup> still seem to

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<sup>7</sup> For a review and example of these modern efforts, see Williams 2005, 7–9.

<sup>8</sup> The work of pioneering anthropologist Sir Edward Burnett Tylor (1832–1917), particularly his famous *Primitive Culture* (1871), described an “animism” which would naturally evolve with the development of human society into an austere deism; see Tylor 1871, 377–453. Renowned philologist Max Müller (1823–1900), chief Western scholar of Indian religions in the nineteenth century, enhanced evolutionary pictures of religious development with the addition of terms like “henotheism” to describe middle-stages in the progress from rudimentary animistic beliefs to more “developed” monotheistic ones. For Müller’s first use of “henotheism” see Müller 1868 [1867], 342–380. Such terms will be discussed in

haunt many Western studies of Japanese religion. Of course, it is also clear that Japanese scholarship has likewise been guilty of a reductive “occidentalizing.”<sup>9</sup> As European-American power structures invented “the Orient,” so Japan has painted a focused picture of “the West” against a backdrop of what Peter Dale (1986) famously called a “myth of Japanese uniqueness.”<sup>10</sup> Ultimately, as Elisabetta Porcu (2008) explains, both Orientalist and Occidentalist theories “are based on a contrastive, monolithic model, i.e. Japan versus the ‘West,’ expressed in various dichotomies,” including the dichotomy “polytheistic animism/monotheistic.” This intense polarization has penetrated all the way down to the level of individual traditions of religion and art, and now forms a series of oppositions which makes a society founded upon harmony (*wa*), a principle so often extolled by Japanese writers, “hardly achievable” (3). These “gratuitous contrasts,” to borrow from Lévi-Strauss (1973, 249), are ultimately methods of distancing constructed between the self (or the group) and the Other.

One byproduct of Japan’s quest for its own spiritual identity, over and against that of Western civilization, has been a widespread tendency to downplay internal diversity, that is, to stress the compatibility of religious traditions which have earned the “Japanese” moniker and to immediately reject perceptibly foreign religious concepts, namely, monotheism.

### 1.2.2. Background to the Problem: Monotheism in Public Discourse

In contemporary Japan, a harmony of Shinto and Buddhism exists in the public consciousness as a singular Japanese “polytheism” (*tashinkyō*), which is able to be juxtaposed against a Western “monotheism” (*issinkyō*). This polytheism has been presented in both popular and academic discourse as inclusive, tolerant, peaceful, and symbiotic with nature. Meanwhile, monotheism is alleged to be exclusivist, intolerant, aggressive (even violent), and disruptive of nature (see Dessì 2020, 54; Kohara 2010, 96). This is by no means an exclusively Japanese perspective on monotheism (various formulations are repeated endlessly in the West<sup>11</sup>), nor is it a recent interpretation in Japan. In the early twentieth century, diplomat Tsuzuki Keiroku (1861–1923) wrote that: “History shows us that the contact of one form of monotheism with another is followed by terrible conflict, and very often by bloodshed. Not only is Christianity more exclusive and narrow-minded towards other religious beliefs, but even one sect of Christians is much more antagonistic to and exclusive of other sects of the same religion than Buddhism is of Christianity” (1909, 484–485). This long-cultivated and lopsided view of monotheistic

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the coming chapters. For a modern summary and critique of Tylor and Müller’s progression narratives, see Strenski 2015, 45–54.

<sup>9</sup> Generalizing representations of the West have certainly been used to assert Japanese dominance, particularly in the area of religion and spirituality, but were also used as a strategy for internal modernization; see, for example, the efforts of the Japanese “Westerniser” Fukuzawa Yukichi (1835–1901) highlighted in Bonnett 2005, 505–525.

<sup>10</sup> Dale focused on the deconstruction of *nihonjinron* (“discourse on the Japanese”), works of Japanese cultural nationalism intended to contrast Japanese identity with that of Europe and North America. Dale’s thesis, that the *nihonjinron* form an essentially mythological construct, has had its detractors among Western scholars (see Marshall 1989, 266–272).

<sup>11</sup> As British scholar Patrick Leigh Fermor once surmised, “It seems at times that strife can no more be separated from monotheism than stripes from a tiger” (Fermor 2005 [1986], 214).

religions has ultimately led to monotheism, as a religious concept, becoming the whipping boy for all manner of cultural problems from terroristic violence to environmental decline (see Kohara 2006, 65). The world would be a better place, it is commonly argued in some circles of the Japanese intelligentsia, if it were more like Japan, that is, if it were more “polytheistic.”<sup>12</sup> Such sentiments in Japan have only strengthened in the past few decades. After the attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 in the United States, which so visibly cast radical Islamic terror onto the world stage (an embodiment of “monotheistic violence”), a noticeable surge has been observed in what Christian scholar Kohara Katsuhiko (2010) views as anti-monotheistic rhetoric (90–91). To this day, the tendency of most modern Japanese people, including the members of some Japanese NRMs, is to view monotheistic faiths through an overwhelmingly negative lens.

In Ugo Dessì’s (2016) analysis of the Risshō Kōseikai, a Buddhism-related NRM, he found that more than half of the respondents surveyed at their headquarters about their perceptions of monotheism felt that monotheistic religions are “exclusivist, dogmatic, aggressive, and inclined to destroy nature, while polytheistic (Japanese) religions are tolerant, inclined to harmony and friendly, and close to nature” (139). In my own interviews with Western Christian missionaries in Japan, I have discovered similar results. Russell Mallon, an Irish missionary living in Tokyo, said that in his experience speaking with Japanese people about monotheism he was initially surprised “at the strong association of monotheism with Euro-American culture... they perceived me as pushing foreign, Western ideas.” The Japanese public, in his experience, views monotheism as “exclusivist, foreign,” whereas “polytheism” is “a welcoming, accommodating and harmonious approach to faith—they absorbed the bodhisattvas of India into their pantheon, but [this] took time...” There is, he reports, an ever present “fear of losing cultural identity.” Ultimately, neither Mallon nor any of the Japanese people he interacted with over many years on the topic of monotheism were aware that “any Japanese religious tradition” was monotheistic.<sup>13</sup>

These negative assessments of monotheism as an inexorably foreign and culturally threatening idea, made by both the secular Japanese public and members of Japanese religions, have reverberated unsurprisingly into the political strata. As Japanese dominance is regularly asserted in public dialogue, monotheistic religions are often caught up in generalizing and damnatory rhetoric about the pitfalls of Western culture—a reflection of the sort of anti-colonial Occidentalism which has worked to define itself among Japanese intelligentsia since at least the 1940s.<sup>14</sup> In another example highlighted by Dessì, Ozawa Ichirō, a Democratic Party secretary general, declared in a 2009 speech to an official meeting of Kōyasan Shingonshū (Shingon Buddhism) that Christianity and Islam are “exclusivist” (*haitateki*), and that Christianity was especially “dogmatic” (*dokuzenteki*) and that this was the reason for the “gridlock”

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<sup>12</sup> So the sentiments of Japanese philosopher Umehara Takeshi: “Polytheism is by far preferable to monotheism if many races are to share this small world” (Umehara 1995, 158).

<sup>13</sup> Personal correspondence with Russell Mallon, December 24<sup>th</sup>, 2020.

<sup>14</sup> In the 1940s, “Japanese intellectuals had strong feelings about what they were against, but had some difficulty defining exactly what that was. Westernization, one opined, was like a disease that had infected the Japanese spirit... The West, to Asians at that time, and to some extent still today, also meant colonialism” (Buruma and Margalit 2004, 2).

characterizing Western societies (Dessi 2016, 37). As Ozawa's political obtuseness was met with criticism from major Japanese news outlets, he attempted to control the damage by explaining that what he was trying to emphasize was the difference between Western civilization, which attempts to subjugate nature, and Eastern civilization, wherein humanity is a part of nature (38). Such sentiments had already resounded in Japanese philosophy, notably in the work of Japan's most prominent philosopher, Umehara Takeshi (1925–2019), who envisioned a deep-rooted (ancient) "civilization of the forest" embodying a philosophy of existence "fundamentally different from the inevitable dead end of European thought" (1995, 40). As one newspaper confessed regarding Ozawa's public comments, "there is nothing strange about this view, which I feel is broadly shared by Japanese people and cannot account for the sense of discomfort caused by his remarks" (38). It seems clear that Western religion (monotheism) has become inextricably linked in the Japanese consciousness with both religious intolerance and environmental dissonance. As Western culture is considered a bull in a china shop, monotheism might as well be the horns. Indeed, despite its arguable presence in some of the NRMs of Japan like Kurozumikyō, Tenrikyō, and Konkokyō, monotheism is still largely viewed as an imposing foreign conquistador, a threatening, domineering force only lately arriving and staking its flag in Japanese soil.

Against such foreign intrigues, as we have already seen, Japanese "polytheism" is routinely presented as not only the more original and authentic foundation for Japanese society, but the best means of preserving human societies in general, and the natural antidote for social discord and violence. Yet not all Japanese voices concur with this message: Murata Koji (2020) is exemplary of those Japanese scholars who argue that "the common myth about the tolerance of polytheism should be easily dispelled" (107). He cites examples of intolerance in pre-war Japan motivated by state Shinto, including the "demonic" portraits of England and America (107). Myanmar also provides Murata an example of a Buddhist majority which persecutes its Rohingya Muslim minority (107). Indeed, "polytheistic" violence is not hard to discover in our modern world. Examples of Hindu violence abound in India (see Brass 2003). Buddhist governments and communities in South and Southeast Asia have engaged in Islamophobic "politics of belonging" (Jerryson 2018, 472). Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka have formed the Buddhist Power Force (Bodu Bala Sena or B.B.S.), inciting violence against Hindus and Muslims (see Ramachandran 2018). And in Japanese history, too, powerful Buddhist monasteries waged war (455), and Zen Buddhism unabashedly supported the Empire of Japan's savage militarism (see Victoria 2006). Indeed, examples abound of Buddhist doctrine being applied towards war, murder, torture, and capital punishment (see Jerryson 2018, 454–474). It is an interesting question whether polytheism, as a religious concept, is inherently more or less tolerant than monotheism, as is the question of where the boundaries of religious tolerance terminate, and whether or not they should include tolerance of religions or religious concepts which are intolerant. In this way, the question of monotheism in Japan provides a novel causeway into a world of socio-cultural and ethical challenges which deserve further investigation.

### 1.2.3. Background to the Problem: The Avoidance of “Western” Terminology

Western scholars of Japanese religions have clearly made an effort to correct the generalizing, demeaning portraits of the past. Nevertheless, I suggest that this history of inaccurate, imposing Western assessments, coupled with the unhelpful East-West generalizations still thriving in international politics and in public discourse, have continued to negatively impact contemporary Western scholars’ ability or willingness to apply the technical category of monotheism to Japanese religions. It is true that during the course of the acute modernization of Japan beginning in the nineteenth century, Western methodology for the study of religion was transplanted into Japanese academics with unfortunate results. Due to the inevitable distortions inherent in such processes, some Japanese scholars hesitated to apply Western approaches; however, most were often “simply employing Western methods without serious critique, as if they were the tools of secular salvation” (Araki 2004, 222). Many modern scholars, Western and Japanese, have been greatly concerned with how Japanese scholars absorbed “without critical reflection the then current Western typological categories such as natural religion, animism, monotheism, polytheism, world religion, etc.” and have insisted that this now “raises enormously important questions for the understanding of new religions in Japan...” (222). The unsurprising effect of this contemporary reflection has been a hesitancy among many scholars to continue to apply perceptibly “Western” (or “Christian”) terminology to Japanese religions, such as “dogma,” “theology,” “metaphysics,” “doctrine,” “liturgy,” and, of course, “monotheism.” In light of the generalizing East-West dichotomies described above, this deliberate avoidance of certain terms may additionally be symptomatic of an impulse to define Japanese religion over and against “Western” traditions, namely Christianity. Galen Amstutz once observed that the Western study of Pure Land Buddhism had become entangled with layers of anti-Christian assumptions perpetuated by “European iconoclasts and post-orientalists,” for whom an interest to locate Buddhism as “an overtly non-Christian phenomenon” has been dominant (1997, xii). Thus, an anti-Orientalist corrective has manifested in an Orientalist pursuit of “exotic” and “non-sectarian” forms of religion, an interest closely intertwined with an impulse toward “counter-Christian” messaging which has outweighed some modern Westerners’ ability to appreciate certain dimensions of Japanese traditions (see also 120–121).

Clearly some spokespersons among the Japanese traditions themselves (including Japan’s NRMs) now also hope to more accurately explain Japanese religions to Western audiences via apophatic descriptions of Japanese phenomena. In an attempt to distance Shinto from “monotheistic” religions, one contemporary Japanese Shintoist publishing in the West has even gone so far as to state that “Shinto has no doctrines” (Yamakage 2006, 39, 43). Likewise Jinja Honchō, the national Association of Shinto Shrines, has stated in a 2013 booklet designed to explain Shinto to foreigners that “Shinto has no dogma, doctrine, or founder” (see Rots 2017, 26). The language of many Western analysts has been remarkably similar: one Western scholar of Japanese religion has even more boldly said that “in the Shinto tradition there are no creeds, no theology, no liturgy... no prayers in a strictly religious sense, for prayers are

petitions raised by man to a transcendent deity” (Caldarola 1982, 652). Claims that Shinto furthermore “has no scriptures” are also ubiquitous in both the academic and popular spheres (Guo 2006, 76). These regular, broad-brushed statements on their own appear to lack the required nuance and run the risk of painting misleading portraits of Shinto for English-speaking audiences who will doubtless be surprised to learn that in the wide, richly-colored world of Shinto there are absolutely no teachings (doctrines), neither are there any texts considered sacred (scriptures), and that the *norito* are not at all “liturgies” or “prayers.” Each of these oft-repeated statements, so long as they omit the proper clarifications, coalesce to resemble a widespread and sympathetic concern to distance Japanese religion from anything resembling Christianity. Such a concern is understandable from one vantage point, but is it possible that some Western studies of Japanese religion have been so keen to avoid the sins of the past, namely the imposition of Western categories and certain theological expectations, that they have inadvertently propped up a new “myth of Japanese uniqueness” (see Dale 1986)? Is the “new Orientalism” an approach which characterizes Japanese religions as unable to be contained, unable to be classified, and which liquifies Japanese religious concepts into an imperceptible “mysticism”? In the end, quests for a “Japanese spirituality” which bypass a serious concern for the particular teachings of Japanese traditions ultimately represent, to borrow from Catherine Cornille, “a type of flight from the concreteness of religions” (Cornille 2018, 9:22).

While the history of Western scholarship and Japanese reception of its methods has certainly done damage, I suggest Western scholarship still has something to offer this field. The late Japanese scholar Araki Michio, student of Joseph Kitagawa at the University of Chicago and a voice among those highly concerned about the negative impact of Western categorical imposition, acknowledged that when we study the religions of Japan, “we must at the same time study and understand what happened through the development of the imperialism and colonialism of the West... [and how] all the concepts and categories of religion were created... received, reconstituted, and deployed” (2004, 223). However, Araki at the same time insisted that:

This is not to say that we historians of religion should give up Western approaches to the study of religion altogether; it is to say, however, that we must perform double or triple critiques of Western approaches and categories as developed in modern studies of religion, Japanese or otherwise, in order to build up a more authentic study of religion. (Araki 2004, 222)

Indeed, in light of this history, heavy critiques of Western methods and terms are more than justified, and great care must especially be taken in the application of the word “monotheism” to Japanese NRMs. However, great care must also be exercised in the other direction. Too much wariness of imposing allegedly culture-bound words on the grounds that they are culture-bound is in truth an

unstable methodological substrate, since culture-bound words are all the words we have. Every study of religion must by necessity represent its subjects in terms which may carry different values in different contexts, or which may come to have unintended values in the future (hence the need for the kinetic development of religious studies). Thus, all terms used in scholarly analysis must be rigorously defined. A discussion of the term “religion” in a 2004 essay by Western scholar of Japanese religions Michael Pye is helpful here. Pye acknowledged that despite globalization, “the major cultural and linguistic regions of the world in many ways remain stubbornly independent and different” (2004a, 77). Nevertheless, he also optimistically envisioned a “contemporary study of religions that is internationally coherent,” is not arbitrary, and is “scientific” (77). While we should take seriously the world’s cultural diversity, “this does not mean that the study of religions cannot be and should not be a coherent undertaking in worldwide perspective, allowing for the collaboration of scholars from within the various cultural regions” (94). An internationally coherent study of religions seems to require in the first place a cohesive study of religions, a united lexical, semantic, framework. Citing Peter Antes’ work on the perpetually embattled term “religion,” Pye points out that “particular terms have all had their history in the particular cultures and yet still require that the term selected to refer to the field under study be defined accordingly for that purpose” (Pye 2004a, 79; see also Antes 1994, 763–768). Serious scholars should ultimately aim for the “stabilization both of descriptive terminology and of theoretical analyses” and in the long term should expect “theoretical coherence” (Pye 2004a, 94).

Is the word “monotheism” already too unstable for the contemporary study of religion? Is it too heavy-laden with cultural baggage to be useful in an internationally coherent framework? In light of the sensitivities around this term in the history of Japanese studies, why should we even try to utilize it as a means of describing Japanese religion? As we will see in chapter three, proposed alternatives to “monotheism” all fail to adequately represent the range of religious phenomena in view. To rid ourselves of negative cultural connotations only to exchange them for less descriptive, less scientific terminology will be entirely inappropriate for scholars concerned with representational accuracy. Furthermore, neither the academy nor the wider world seem ready to stop using “monotheism,” and appeals to pragmatism must always temper scholarly impulses to do away with well-established conventions and should urge them first towards refinement and reform. On this note, one might raise the example of the word “cult” discussed above, and the fact of its wide abandonment by scholars due to its acquired negative connotations. Upon review, the case of “monotheism” is much different than this. “Cult” was once an accepted academic term which was commandeered by a particular religious group (largely Evangelical Christians) who transformed its meaning into something entirely different than its academic usage. Current religious groups that I am aware of do not claim this word and apply it positively to themselves, and the academy seems to have largely shunned its use in favor of more accurate, more descriptive alternatives like “NRM.” In this light, there is hardly a comparison to be made to the case of “monotheism,” which will soon be demonstrated to have no better alternatives, and which is still

claimed by many religions and used to positively describe contemporary religions by scholars. Despite its attachment to “Western” notions of religion in the context of Japanese studies, “monotheism” must be fairly considered as a candidate for lexical rehabilitation. In the end, if careful and principled scholarly analysis reveals that any standard technical term is inadequate for properly and objectively representing religion, then a new term must be developed in its place. On the other hand, if currently-standard language is found to be the best fit, then, in the absence of higher-quality, pragmatic, and agreed-upon replacements, we must work to improve the use and reception of current terminology by sharpening our definitions, and, if necessary, providing subcategories which engage religious subjects with the nuance they deserve.

#### **1.2.4. Background to the Problem: Narrow Definitions of Monotheism**

As will be observed, many if not most of the negative assessments which will be surveyed about the presence of monotheism in Japan’s NRMs suffer from certain taxonomical problems. Of primary interest, here, is a mistaken and too-narrow view of the category “monotheism.” In the early twentieth century, Tsuzuki (1909) wrote that: “Monotheism is an essentially exclusive religion. Oneness is an idea that excludes moreness. Christianity, just as Mohammedanism, recognizes its God as the only true supernatural being—to the exclusion of every other belief in the supernatural” (484–485). This is a highly restrictive interpretation of monotheism, and one which has surprisingly persisted even among scholars of religion. In 1983, scholar of Japanese religions Nakamaki Hirochika made the comment that a “belief in a ‘one and only,’ absolute God... disallows all other god-like beings” (1983, 83). However, such a monotheism would be exceedingly rare. Indeed, there are likely very few religions that would qualify (see Tillich 1951, 225). As Rodney Stark (2001) rightly noted, “In none of the great monotheisms—Judaism, Christianity, Islam—is there only one supernatural entity. In each, God is surrounded with ‘a cloud of beings’” (24). This persistent and fundamental misunderstanding of monotheism, which has long pervaded but is not at all exclusive to comparative religious studies in Japan, must be confronted. Some modern scholars have already moved to correct such attitudes towards monotheism in other fields (see Tuggy 2017), but a thorough revisitation has yet to take place from a vantage point within studies of Japanese religion. Such progress is now possible, as will be demonstrated in chapter three, in light of recent technical achievements in the taxonomy of religious beliefs.

#### **1.2.5. Background to the Problem: Assumptions Regarding Devotional Practices**

As famed scholar of religion Ninian Smart once observed, “Typically, a religion has a belief-aspect and a practice-aspect. The belief-aspect often comprises doctrines... The practice-aspect comprises rituals... such as worship, prayer, sacramental occasions, etc...” (1971, 177). Very often scholars of religion have crossed the boundary between belief and practice, and assumed that this or that belief about a divine being necessarily entails some form of worship of that being, or the denial of worship for any others. This tendency to automatically assign certain devotional practices to religious persons who

hold certain beliefs about divine beings will be evident in the next chapter's survey of Western studies. As we will see, many scholars will on the one hand acknowledge that certain NRMs claim to be monotheistic religions, only to immediately qualify (in truth, cast doubt on) these claims by pointing to their worship of many other figures beside the one god. As will be made increasingly clear in the third chapter, the question of how many gods a religion thinks exist (a question addressed with terms like "monotheism") is in truth entirely distinct from the question of how many figures a religion thinks are able to be worshiped (a question better served by terms like "monolatry"). The failure to make this vital distinction has continued to confuse.

### **1.3. Taxonomies and Religious Studies**

In light of the contemporary hesitation to apply "Western" categories to Japanese traditions, the present classificatory project is likely to raise the question of whether we should be attempting to classify religious phenomena at all. Indeed, some scholars of religion seem to believe that all taxonomical programs represent yet another case of Western imposition. Thus, some justification of the methods of this study will be required before we move any further.

Above we encountered Pye's optimistic vision of a "contemporary study of religions that is internationally coherent" and "scientific" (2004a, 77). One sense in which the academic study of religion may be thought of as "scientific," says Ninian Smart, is that "such a study is *not* theological in intent." Instead, we engage in the high-level "task of classification, of typology" (1971, 175). Clearly distinguishable from theological quests for the truth of religious claims are scientific pursuits for the truthful representation of religious claims, and practically speaking, this seems to inevitably require a systemization of religious information. Smart draws an analogy to the development of botany as a science in which plants were classified according to genera and species, and then to similar systematizations in zoology, ornithology, philology, etc. (175). In this light, "[i]t is not therefore unreasonable to expect that it is possible to construct a typology of religious experience, belief, ritual, etc." (175). Indeed, the orderly classification of phenomena looks like an inescapable part of the human condition, at least according to cognitive scientists. As we read in one handbook, "Categorization is the mental operation by which the brain classifies objects and events. This operation is the basis for the construction of our knowledge of the world" (Cohen and Lefebvre 2005, 2; cited in Cooper 2017, 1). Ultimately, for Smart, typology is bound up with the field of comparative religion. He writes that "the essence of typology is to arrive at cross-cultural classifications, inevitably and truistically entailing comparisons." Smart admits that "there is a limit to such typology, for a given religious tradition is bound to have unique features. Nevertheless, there is no reason why one should not classify, say, Eckhart (c. 1260–1327) and Buddhaghosa (fifth century A.D.) together as mystics, or sketch out a typology of initiation rites, etc." (1971, 175). Thus, Pye's "internationally coherent" study of religions is directly served by Smart's (natural) impulse to taxonomize, a process which finally yields practical, "cross-cultural classifications."

Nevertheless, scholars of religion have long debated the value of taxonomies, and this protracted discussion is worth taking into account. In the analysis of renowned American historian of religions Jonathan Z. Smith (1982), the study of religion clearly houses at its core a determined taxonomic agenda (2–5). Travis Cooper (2017) has recently agreed: “The construction of explanatory categories and data sets, after all, is a necessary and useful tool of the academic trade” (Cooper 2017, 2). Yet Cooper recognizes, directly channeling Smith, that “taxonomy-making and the stipulating of data for study are neither value free nor objective operations,” and that these subjects are intimately related to questions of “power” (2). The spirits of the early twentieth-century scholars Durkheim and Mauss lurk here, for whom constructions of taxonomic systems “inevitably reveal a hierarchized understanding of the entities subsumed within the categorical system” (Cooper 2017, 3). According to this interpretation of categorization, the “function of categories is to dominate and encompass all other concepts” (Durkheim 2001 [1912], 335), and is thus a function of power, and one received from power. Our categories are “pre-established” and “receive[d] from the outside” and “instituted” (Mauss 2005 [1901], 10), even though the “reasons which have led to the establishment of the categories have been forgotten...” (Durkheim and Mauss 1963 [1903], 86–87).

Accepting this reality soon begins to cast doubt on the popular claim that religious studies can be appropriately juxtaposed with disciplines like philosophy and theology across an axis of description vs. evaluation. While religious studies scholarship has been (understandably) wary of the potential intrusion of normative critique, a growing number of scholars have decided that it cannot wholly avoid this original sin. According to Schilbrack (2014), the popular normative/descriptive dichotomy which frames the relationship between practices like theology and religious studies is an oversimplification. While all camps agree that evaluation does not belong in the study of religions, the tasks of evaluation and description are more necessarily intertwined than many would like to admit (142, 147–148). Thomas Lewis (2015) likewise finds that normative claims are “inevitable in the study of religion” (46), and he too rejects the normative/descriptive paradigm. For Robert C. Neville, “[t]he ideal of value-free study of religion... that characterizes some of the leading voices in the study of religion, is an arbitrary bias that distorts the field, however helpful it was at one point as a corrective to the theological dominance of the study of religion” (2004, 101). According to these scholars, researchers of religion might as well be as upfront as possible with their inevitably normative rubric, and even embrace (modified forms of) philosophical and theological inquiry as acceptable subdisciplines. While not going so far, Smith (1982) ultimately saw the taxonomy of religions as an inescapably evaluative and prescriptive practice which (at the very least) tells the world what is and what is not worthy of study (see Cooper 2017, 9). Yet Smith retained a tense optimism about the possibility that a “proper” taxonomy might be constructed so as to at least have some heuristic value, fashioned under the guiding hand of a polythetic rather than monothetic system of inquiry, and he strongly urged scholars towards a hyper-reflexive stance (1982, 7–15; see Cooper 2017, 7–9).

Are all taxonomic projects really doomed by an unconscious normativity? It seems inarguable that the categories commonly used by scholars in the study of religion are inherited and applied. Lévi-Strauss (1973) did raise, however, the possibility of human agency in classificatory processes. Though he agreed

that taxonomies are clearly inherited and instituted (232), he suggested that scholars may independently draw on pre-existing systems, selecting and repurposing bits and pieces to form a *cultural bricoleur* (35). In this view, there are at once conditioned and free dimensions to the religious scholar—positivity and descriptive methodologies remain possible. Putting into practice Smith’s hyper-reflexive stance, and risking the romanticization of the scholar, I admit my attraction to this basic thesis, and also to the possibility that more than heuristic potential exists in taxonomical science. Indeed, simply because some distinctions are clearly inherited does not automatically mean that all inherited interpretive frameworks are wrong (*pace* deconstructionist dialogues), and if not wholly right in light of new data, I see no reason why elements of them may not be preserved or modified in the development of a more descriptive posture. This not to ignore the power of inherited biases or to chase the Quixotic dream of total neutrality; rather, it is to merely leave open the possibility that scholars of religion who aim to embody the ideal are capable of accurately representing the reality of religion. I agree wholeheartedly with Smith that “the student of religion, and most particularly the historian of religion, must be relentlessly self-conscious” (1982, xi), and I readily conjure also the spirit of the helpful volume edited by Jan-Olav Henriksen which advocates for transparency in relation to the normative standards which direct religious research (2011). These clarion calls for transparency imply that a greater taxonomical product, one closer to the ideal, is actually attainable. Whether taxonomies of religion in the end have only heuristic value or are able to adequately capture reality seems to matter very little from a practical standpoint, since the endgame of both interpretations is the same: the more accurate representation of religions. One need not take a stand on the question of the inherent normativity of religious studies to first of all agree with Freiburger that: “While it is rarely put in these terms, the discipline of religious studies has a strong taxonomic interest,” and second of all that those scholars “who are critical of the taxonomic effort, do not even seem to realize that they classify too” (Freiburger 2019, 128). Indeed, taxonomizing “is a necessary and useful tool of the academic trade” (Cooper 2017, 2), and scholars should be as good at it as they can possibly be.

On the other hand, it must be mentioned that some scholars have disagreed entirely: classification is an unnecessary evil, they argue, and scholars should simply “describe” the religious beliefs of their subjects without recourse to such terms as “monotheism,” “polytheism,” “henotheism,” etc. (Heiser 2008, 27). This is, to be sure, a principled and optimistic stance, but it is an awkward, impractical, and ultimately unmanageable one, since taxonomical science will by necessity be employed, consciously or not, in any conversation about a “god.” Without a coherent, universal taxonomy of beliefs, we run the risk of pouring religious claims into a vast, indiscriminate soup, ruining the quest for the accurate representation of religion (which involves, of course, the distinguishing of religions’ constituent claims). I have not used the words “coherent” and “universal” here lightly. Does the desire for coherent classification invite the philosophy of religion, ever the unwelcome guest, to the table of religious studies?

The philosophy of religion has traditionally been viewed as a narrow field, one which interacts with only a few world religions, which has focused too closely on classical theism, is too intellectualist and concentrated on doctrine, and is too insular in that it tends to serve most directly Christian theology and

sometimes biblical studies (see Schilbrack 2014, xi-xii). While recent efforts have mitigated these problems, an understandable suspicion of philosophical modes of religious studies remains (Wildman 2010, 17–18). But I will not be the first to contend that a “relatively unbiased and ideologically neutral” form of philosophical reflection on religion is possible (Wildman 2010, 25). Schilbrack (2014) is also among those who have proposed that the philosophy of religion is capable of evolving “from its primary present focus on the rationality of traditional theism to become a fully global form of critical reflection on religions in all their variety and dimensions, in conversation with other branches of philosophy and other disciplines in the academic study of religions” (xi). Responding to several critics who protested that metaphysics, among other things, has no place in the academic study of religions (Jensen 2016; Gardiner 2016; Rennie 2016; MacKendrick 2016), Schilbrack defended his proposal by pointing out that “metaphysics,” a term he defines as “an inquiry into being-as-such” is indeed “relevant to the study of religion because metaphysics is the best description of an interest displayed by many religious communities themselves... They make claims, for example, like ‘everything that exists is without self’ or ‘all of Creation is the work of God.’ They make claims about the Dao or the Logos or Brahman or Allah that assert that these realities are the source of or an aspect of being-as-such” (2016, 99). As scholar of religion Johannes Laube observed while mediating a Tenrikyō-Catholic summit in 1998:

Comparative religion can and must take up the systematic questions raised by theologians and philosophers, and comparative religion can and must reflect these questions in the light of the plurality of ways of religious experiences proved by history. Mediated by this reflection-with-systematic-ambitions, comparative religion transcends itself into philosophy of religion. (Laube 1999, 17)

Moving forward, I understand the concerns of both sides, and opt for something of a middle ground, a limited presence of metaphysics in religious studies in which its interpretive forms are used as a means of cutting through confusing morphological similarities existing between disparate bodies and realizing what religious beliefs really involve. Indeed, if religious communities themselves can and do entertain metaphysical discussions, and even call them “metaphysical,” then descriptions and interpretations of such discourses, framed in the same illicit terminology, should not be out-of-bounds for the scholar of religion. Indeed, such a scholar owns the solemn charge of accurately representing what it is that the members of religions are really up to, and in doing so the scholar need not assess whether the metaphysics envisioned by a particular community are true or false—this may be a popular task assumed by many philosophers of religion but it is not at all an incumbent one for scholars of religion. Schilbrack rightly concludes that without *evaluating* the metaphysics of religion, “scholars of religion need to have a reasonable way to *interpret* these non-empirical claims” (100, emphasis his). In my view, the incorporation of philosophical tools, so long as they are diligently employed towards a consciously descriptive and not a prescriptive methodology, should cause no more concern than the psychological tools used by scholars to approach religious beliefs. In order to gain the most accurate assessments, I suggest we must be prepared to trust that scholars are capable of distinguishing the

(obvious) distance between the interpretation of religious claims and the evaluation of their truth. Again, whether or not the act of interpretation—the translation or explanation of religious beliefs—is able to be performed apart from the influence of unconscious normative impulses does not change the fact that such acts are a vital part of taxonomizing and that taxonomizing is a vital part of religious studies.

## Western Studies on Monotheism in Japan's NRMs

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*"Scholars never agree about anything."*

— Theodore Zeldin (2011)

### 2.1. The Presence of Monotheism in Japan's NRMs

While there is a clear scarcity of interest in the possibility of a monotheism in premodern Japan, the apparent monotheism of some of Japan's New Religious Movements, some of which are included as major sects of Kyōha Shinto (Sect Shinto), has garnered more attention in Western studies. As we will see, however, the quality, depth, and conclusiveness of this analysis has often been disappointing.

For example, August Karl Reischauer once fleetingly observed that "At least four of the major modern Shinto sects are virtually monotheistic in their conception of the Divine and some of the others are showing trends in that direction" (1966, 77). What is this virtual monotheism? What are monotheistic trends? If something is virtual then it is not actual; if something is trending in a certain direction then it has not yet arrived, though the implication is that it may only be a matter of time. On what grounds, then, has Reischauer concluded that these groups, which include Kurozumikyō, Tenrikyō, and Konkōkyō, are not monotheistic? In what ways have they approximated to monotheism? Much seems assumed and no technical analysis is provided. Janine Anderson Sawada has recently referred to a "monotheistic-type deity" or a "supreme, monotheistic-type god" in the conceptions of NRM founders, a feature of early modern Japanese religion evidently long observed by Japanese specialists (2022, 10, 15). Again, a full embrace of the category of monotheism is avoided. Other Western scholars have been more confident in identifying these groups as monotheisms. However, even this analysis has often been wrought with trepidation, especially with regard to these groups' status as "Japanese" or "Shinto" traditions. John Field Mulholland (1970), for example, concluded that "Konkōkyō and Tenrikyō were classified as major Shinto sects although both were monotheistic" (284). Similarly, another scholar of religion, Robert Ellwood, writes that these NRMs "have Shinto-type worship but are monotheistic" (2007, 231). This suggests that monotheism is a trait which should exclude these groups from the category of "Shinto sect." Thus, we can already observe two layers of potential scholarly disagreement, first over whether or not these groups fit in the category of monotheism, and second over whether or not they fit in the category of Shinto. Another Western

scholar who has famously suggested that some of Japan's NRMs are genuinely monotheistic is J.H. Kamstra, whose oft-cited 1994 chapter on "Japanese Monotheism and New Religions" will continue to receive attention in this thesis. Among Japan's NRMs, Kamstra insisted on the presence of what he called "pluriform monotheism" (112–115), but did not confront the scholars who had for so long doubted the monotheistic quality of the NRMs. He also did not provide any workable definition of "pluriform monotheism." Kamstra only briefly mentions that Tenrikyō's God the Parent can "be defined as what van Baaren calls pluriform monotheism" (105), and he declines to provide this definition and offers no references to van Baaren's idea. In an article on monotheism in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Dutch historian of religion Theodorus P. van Baaren (1912–1989) wrote that in a "pluriform monotheism" the "various gods of the pantheon, without losing their independence, are at the same time considered to be manifestations of one and the same divine substance" (2009). Later we will examine whether or not such a description is adequate for Tenrikyō. Nevertheless, despite Kamstra's neglect of any technical analysis of Japan's NRMs to support his argument, Kamstra boldly asserted that through the spread of the NRMs, "It is clear that Japan's monotheism, though differing from Christian monotheism, became established in more than a third of Japan's population, a figure forty times larger than the total number of Christians in Japan" (1994, 115). In response, Richard Fox Young wrote that while Kamstra "extensively cites an article of mine in confirmation of the existence of pluriform monotheism in Mahikari, I am not certain that I concur with him. What pluriform monotheism in fact is remains a rather ambiguous, although suggestive, notion... I'd need to know a lot more about why he believes that pluriform monotheism is so evident in the New Religions before I'd go along with that" (Young 1995, 585). Carole M. Cusack (2007) reiterated Fox's criticism of the vagueness of Kamstra's "pluriform monotheism" and furthermore concluded that the term is "somewhat contradictory" (323). Kamstra did not respond to requests for clarification of this concept or evidence of its existence within Japan's NRMs, unsurprisingly leaving his "hopeful conclusion [without] widespread scholarly support..." (323).

Fox and Cusack's criticisms of Kamstra's language, and especially Cusack's comment that the term "pluriform monotheism" is itself "somewhat contradictory," exposes the ever-present need for wider and better understanding among scholars of the boundaries of monotheism and also the usefulness of the revised terminology and definitions which will be proposed in the next chapter. While the majority of scholars have indeed flatly concluded that "Shinto" is absolutely "not monotheistic" (Picken 2011, xi; Mason 1935, 99), we will now observe that opinions regarding whether the Shinto-related NRMs are monotheistic have long diverged and continue to diverge in Western studies. On the one hand, scholars like Fox and Cusack have remained skeptical while others, like Nancy K. Stalker, confidently state that all three of these NRMs (Kurozumikyō, Tenrikyō, and Konkōkyō) are examples of "monotheistic new religions" (Stalker 2018, 240). Below, samples from the history of Western studies over the past century-and-a-half will be surveyed on this question of monotheism in the cases of Kurozumikyō, Tenrikyō, and Konkōkyō. In later chapters we will consider in more detail Western opinions on the equally challenging question of where such a monotheism, if it exists in these NRMs, might have come from. After engaging

the question of monotheism in Western sources via the below survey, the third chapter of this thesis will begin the hard work of clarification.

## 2.2. Kurozumikyō and Monotheism in Western Studies

One of the oldest of Japan's NRMs, Kurozumikyō was founded by the Shinto priest Kurozumi Munetada (1780–1850) after receiving revelation from the goddess Amaterasu in 1814, an event he described as “*tenmei jikiju*” (direct reception of heaven's mission). Kurozumi, a priest of the Imamura Shrine, remained in his priestly office and maintained ties with the Yoshida house, but began to teach others what he had learned through his revelatory experience. In the 1840s, Kurozumikyō was formally established, and in 1872 it received official status as a Shinto sect from the Japanese government. By the late twentieth century, Kurozumikyō claimed roughly 200,000 adherents (Hardacre 1986, 3), and today it operates from its headquarters in Okayama City and maintains shrines dedicated to Kurozumi and Amaterasu in both Okayama City and Kyoto.



Fig. 2.1. Entrance to Kaguraoka Munetada Shrine, Kyoto. *Photo by author.*

In later sections of this thesis, Kurozumi's teachings will be explored in light of a critique of Western analysis, but for now it is important only to make the uncontroversial observation that Kurozumi (a) understood Amaterasu to be in some sense the supreme deity of the universe; (b) venerated the *yaoyorozu no kami* (eight million deities) of Shinto tradition; and (c) held human beings to be in some sense kami<sup>15</sup> themselves, or at least potential kami. How have Western sources assessed this situation?

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<sup>15</sup> This prevalent term, long present in English dictionaries (e.g. *Webster's*) and often translated “deity,” “god,” or “spirit,” will not be italicized below in order to minimize distraction.

### 2.2.1. Charles William Hepner on Kurozumikyō and Monotheism

Christian missionary and scholar Charles William Hepner (1887–1958) took special interest in Kurozumikyō during his residence in Japan. Living near the group’s headquarters in Okayama, Hepner devoted himself to a resource-rich study of Kurozumikyō and became a pioneer in Western studies of Japan’s NRMs, publishing his Yale doctoral dissertation on *The Kurozumi Sect of Shinto* in 1935. Japanese Shinto scholar Katō Genchi described Hepner’s work at the time of publication as a presentation which was “entirely free from prejudice or religious bias,” and one which “avoided unreasonable transcendental criticism of Shinto” (Katō 1935, iii). Questions about the possibility of value-free analysis aside, I can at least concur that Hepner worked diligently to provide a fair picture of Kurozumikyō to a widely ignorant English-speaking audience, though several sections do betray a theological bias in the course of metaphysical critique, *pace* Katō’s praise (e.g. Hepner 1935, 147).

Despite his dedication, Hepner appears to have ultimately had difficulty representing Kurozumi’s theological outlook. He embarks on what he describes as a “fundamental study of his conception of deity,” of his view of the universe, and of the relationship between humanity and deity, and here he recognizes that Kurozumi’s “conception [of Amaterasu] is somewhat different [than his pre-revelation outlook] on account of his distinctive experience and enlarged views.” However, Hepner has trouble shedding light on precisely what this “enlargement” involves. He recognizes first that the personal deity Amaterasu is “the source of all existence” (115), and says that Kurozumi “expressed the idea of deity in philosophical language... but he used the religious terminology of his own experience when we came to think of the attributes of deity” (118). Hepner distances Kurozumi’s language regarding Amaterasu’s attributes from the way they are applied to “‘God’ in a Christian sense” (118), but he does not explain or elaborate on this point. He sees that “universal elements are definitely enunciated” but he cannot follow these toward a definitive monotheistic classification. There is in the end only a mere “possibility of a thorough-going monotheism [which] theoretically exists in the teachings of Kurozumi Munetada...” (119). Presumably such diffidence emerges on the heels of an inability to reconcile Kurozumi’s views with Hepner’s apparently limited view of the boundaries of monotheism and monotheistic worship. He finds Kurozumi’s references to deity “idealistic on the one hand, and pantheistic on the other” (121) and suggests his ideas “generally have the appearance of Singularism” (123), that is, a philosophy which explains phenomena from a singular principle. By all of this, it is meant that Kurozumi’s teaching is *not* monotheistic.

Hepner focuses also on Kurozumi’s ideas about the relationship between Amaterasu and humanity. He sees that for Kurozumi, humanity is considered a “separated part” (*bun-shin*) of the divine (126), but that humans are also, in Kurozumi’s words, “one” with Amaterasu, “un-separated, at once Divine” (126). Reflecting on this seeming paradox of the oneness of humanity with Amaterasu (*shin-jin-ittai*) and the claim that human beings are all distinct, begotten children of the deity, Hepner provides one of his more forward assessments: “Clear-cut distinctions [between things separated and unseparated] are impossible in a *pantheistic system* where ‘man’ and ‘god,’ the ‘one and the many’ are identified” (128–129, emphasis mine).

What of the relationship between Amaterasu and the myriad kami of Shinto history? Hepner is able to observe that “the recognition of the Yao-Yorozu-no-Kami alongside of Amaterasu-O-Mi-Kami involved no problem [for Kurozumi]” (124), but he insists that “what relationship exists between them is not clearly stated... and certain statements furnish a basis only for inference” (123). These revealing statements of Kurozumi’s include: “Whether we call them Gods or Buddhas, all are indeed Living things within the Truth of Heaven and Earth” (123, citing Kurozumi’s *Kurozumikyō kyōsho*, Vol. 1, 33; Poem No. 86, published between 1909–1914). From this, Hepner infers that Kurozumi’s Amaterasu is “the One Living-Thing in Heaven and Earth,” and it must be that this “emphasis on the One is to be taken in an inclusive rather than in an exclusive sense...” (124). Somehow Amaterasu is an “all-inclusive deity” (124), but Hepner seems less sure as to exactly how this is so or how it should be categorized. He confesses “that to recognize the existence of numerous deities alongside of Amaterasu-Ō-Mi-Kami after all that has been ascribed to her... is rather confusing” (124), and he ultimately seems to attribute this apparent “confusion” to the peculiar character and “syncretism” of Kurozumi Munetada, who he says was prepared to “recognize truth in any or in all religious systems...” (124).

Hepner is in the end struck by the “difficulty of steering clear of polytheism and the vagaries of pantheism” which are “particularly evident” in Kurozumi’s thought (126). He suggests that if Kurozumi did not solve the theoretical problems in his “pantheistic Idealism,” he was nevertheless a man of extraordinary insight who skillfully wrestled with questions which “the best minds of all countries in all ages have been baffled by... and have failed to arrive at a final solution” (138). While Kurozumi’s views do contain “elements of a Monotheistic religion” (147), these represent for Hepner only a “possibility” of monotheism (119), and “[w]hile a genuine mysticism is evident... the content of faith has been found to be polytheistic and pantheistic” (156). In Hepner’s final analysis, “the pantheistic and polytheistic elements in the teachings of Kurozumi Munetada have vitiated what promised to be a beautiful monotheistic faith centering in Amaterasu-Ō-Mi-Kami... As a consequence, faith has been robbed to a large extent of its definite object, and Amaterasu-Ō-Mi-Kami has been deprived of the glory experimentally ascribed to her by Kurozumi Munetada” (147). In light of the above trepidation, wherein Kurozumi’s Amaterasu-focused doctrine was characterized as definitely not monotheistic but also confusing, syncretistic, plagued by theoretical problems, lacking in clear-cut distinctions, and simultaneously polytheistic and pantheistic, it seems evident that a suitable classificatory rubric may not have been available to Hepner, and this may be the reason his analysis often appears stuck in limbo, hovering in an uncomfortable nexus between “monotheism,” “polytheism,” and “pantheism.”

### **2.2.2. Joseph Kitagawa on Kurozumikyō and Monotheism**

Joseph Kitagawa (1915–1992), famed Japanese-American scholar of Japanese religions at the University of Chicago, provides our next comments on Kurozumikyō. Kitagawa’s scarce assessments are not of the same length or depth as those of Hepner, but they are certainly of a similar character, namely in their reluctance to label Kurozumikyō as a monotheism.

According to Kitagawa, Kurozumikyō “accepts the eight million Shinto kami officially, *but* at the same time insists that Amaterasu Omikami alone is the absolute god and creator of the universe” (1990 [1966], 219, emphasis mine). The sect’s insistence that “a million kami are found in one kami” does not make them “monotheistic,” rather this sort of belief only causes Kurozumikyō to “appear to be *more* ‘monotheistic’ than the rest [of the Sect Shinto denominations]” (219, emphasis mine). Over twenty years later, Kitagawa’s conclusions remained unchanged and were repeated in much the same language (see Kitagawa 1987, 170). On its face, these comments imply the existence of grades of monotheism. However, when it comes to gods there can be no degrees between zero and one, or one and two. Kitagawa’s classificatory scheme seems unhelpful in light of the fact that all parties will agree that any monotheism (*mono-theos-ism*) will necessarily hold that there exists exactly *one god* (however such a thing is defined). A religion is either a monotheism or it is something else. There is no sliding scale.

In the most charitable reading, however, Kitagawa’s comment about Kurozumikyō being “more monotheistic” than other sects might refer to its practical emphasis only, to the fact that Kurozumikyō, which recognizes myriad kami, awards religious devotion to one of these entities more than others. If this is the case, then Kitagawa will have been better served by some other term like “monolatry,” which describes beliefs related to devotional practices and not “monotheism,” which describes beliefs related to the question of how many “gods” exist (these issues will be discussed in detail in the next chapter). Detectable here, as in Hepner, is a clear need of a more nuanced structure.

### 2.2.3. Harry Thomsen on Kurozumikyō and Monotheism

The work of Christian missionary scholar Harry Thomsen (1928–2008) on Japan’s NRMs, featured in his *The New Religions of Japan* (1963), was more than welcome in a field of study scarcely revealed to English readers. However, Thomsen’s text was criticized by some for its evidently unsympathetic view, a burden which sometimes travels with missionary “guidebooks” to religion.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, what are Thomsen’s conclusions regarding Kurozumikyō’s doctrine?

Thomsen writes that Amaterasu is regarded as “the absolute deity of the universe, the creator of heaven and earth” (64). He characterizes this as “a slight deviation from Shinto, which gave supremacy to the Three Gods of Creation” (64), and by Shinto he might mean Jinja Shinto and by the three gods he certainly means the original three kami of the *Kojiki* (712 CE). “Thus,” he concludes, “Kurozumikyō *seems* to be monotheistic. *However*, the Eight Million Gods of Shinto are also recognized, *although* they are said to be only manifestations of Amaterasu-o-mikami and unable to exist apart from her” (64, emphasis mine). Note the word “seems” here, indicating the shyness with which Thomsen feels he must announce Kurozumikyō’s monotheism. Note also how the subsequent words I have emphasized serve to undercut each of their preceding clauses. On the face of it, if these eight million deities are in truth (mere) manifestations of the one supreme god Amaterasu, then Thomsen should be able to assert Kurozumikyō’s monotheism with more confidence. However, closing his chapter, he only speaks

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<sup>16</sup> Thomsen’s book was described by one Japanese critic as a “*Baedecker*” (a guidebook for travelers) (Hino 1964, 75). See also the criticism of Howes 1964, 171–172.

modestly of a “tendency toward monotheism,” and one which might betray the influence of Christianity (67). It is ironic that in a volume received by some scholars as baldly unsympathetic we encounter caution to a fault on this point. Thomsen’s conclusion here is ultimately even more vague than the similarly-phrased comments of August Karl Reischauer, who described Kurozumikyō and other sects as “virtually monotheistic” or “showing trends in that direction” (1966, 77). Thomsen opts to illuminate Kurozumikyō even more dimly than this: this NRM exhibits a “tendency” toward monotheism, in truth, an inclination which might be construed as either realized or unrealized. There seems to be room for more conclusive analysis.

#### **2.2.4. Helen Hardacre on Kurozumikyō and Monotheism**

A professor of Japanese Religions at Harvard, Helen Hardacre is without doubt among the most respected contemporary scholars of Shinto, and has remained perhaps the leading Western scholar of Kurozumikyō since the publication of her *Kurozumikyō and the New Religions of Japan* in 1986, a compelling, comprehensive study based partly on her fieldwork in Kurozumikyō from 1980–1984.

In Hardacre’s assessment, Kurozumi’s Amaterasu is “the one god of the universe” and “the creator of all the universe and hence the parent of all living beings” (53). This being is “a superordinate entity whose vital essence, *yoki*, is the ground principle” (55). Such descriptions might immediately lend to a monotheistic classification, and yet Hardacre downplays Kurozumi’s “worship singling out singular gods” as something which “only rarely played a part in Kurozumi’s postrevelation experience,” and she points out the fact that several deities were enshrined at the Imamura Shrine where Kurozumi continued to serve (53–54). For Hardacre, Kurozumikyō’s “view of Amaterasu Omikami amounts to henotheism in that the existence of myriad kami... the eight million gods, is accepted, and it is said that human beings are kami or become so upon death” (53). It appears that in Hardacre’s view, this “henotheism” describes merely “worship singling out particular gods...” (53). The term “monotheism” is avoided ostensibly because of Kurozumikyō’s belief in and veneration of more than one deity, and “henotheism” is preferred due to its ability to describe the sect’s practical focus on Amaterasu. However, nearly thirty years later, Hardacre refers fleetingly to “functional monotheisms devoted to Amaterasu” produced by NRM founders like Kurozumi (2017, 11), and then very briefly in a separate discussion on Kokugaku scholars, to Kurozumi’s “de facto monotheism” (353). The reference to (merely) “functional monotheisms” and the conclusion that Kurozumi’s teaching is (merely) a “de facto” monotheism indicates the perpetuation of her earlier understanding in which Kurozumi’s view cannot in truth be described by the term “monotheism” though in its practical reality it lends itself to a monotheism-like focus on or devotion to a single deity. As we will see in the coming chapters, a careful revisitation of Kurozumikyō in light of an improved taxonomy will yield good reasons to rethink these negative assessments of the category of monotheism in relation to Kurozumikyō.

### 2.3. Tenrikyō and Monotheism in Western Studies

Tenrikyō is perhaps the most well-known of Japan's NRMs in the West. Its foundress, Nakayama Miki (1798–1887), was born to a farming family and raised within the Pure Land sect of Buddhism (Jodoshū). Nakayama experienced a divine revelation when a deity calling itself the True and Original God announced to her that it desired to save all human beings by possessing her body as its shrine. This grand deity, identified later as Tenri-Ō-no-Mikoto (Lord of Heavenly Wisdom) or Oyagami (God the Parent) and revealed to be the creator of the universe, had been unknown to Nakayama and her family. After a period of resistance, Nakayama and her family consented to the possession on December 12th, 1838, and Nakayama began her career as the instrument (or “vessel” or “shrine”) of God the Parent.<sup>17</sup> Around 1840, Nakayama began to spread her teachings and give away her possessions, descending into poverty. By 1864, the first Tenrikyō meeting place was constructed. After Nakayama's death in 1887, Tenrikyō would go on to found Tenri City near Nara, and from this impressive headquarters launch overseas missions. In 1908, the Japanese government, dividing the religious world into State and Sectarian divisions, assigned Tenrikyō “sectarian independence from Shinto” (Tenrikyō 2017–2018). In the 1970s, the group separated itself again and officially departed the Sect Shinto league (see Breen and Teeuwen 2010, 212). Tenrikyō has an estimated two million members worldwide (Picken 2011, 301; Pye 2004b, 506). These adherents look forward to the day when Tenrikyō becomes the religion of all humankind (see Thomsen 1963, 36). There are approximately 17,000 churches in Japan.



Fig. 2.2. Tenrikyō Church Headquarters, Tenri City, Nara. *Photo by author.*

What of Tenrikyō's concept of divinity? As one Western scholar has observed, both inside and outside the faith, “The discussion whether Tenrikyo is monotheistic or polytheistic is very old” (Marras 1986 [1983], 449). What has Western scholarship had to say about this discussion?

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<sup>17</sup> See *Doctrine of Tenrikyō* (2006), chapters 1, 5.

### 2.3.1. Rufus Benton Peery on Tenrikyō and Monotheism

In 1897, Lutheran scholar and missionary Rufus Benton Peery (1868–1934) produced *The Gist of Japan: The Islands, Their People, and Missions*, one of the first books dedicated to Christian mission work in Japan. Interestingly, already in 1897, Peery’s survey of Japanese religions in his day both distinguishes and elevates Tenrikyō as a unique religious force and also separates it from Shinto entirely: “The religions of contemporary Japan are four,” he writes. “Shinto, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Tenrikyo... Tenrikyo is of recent origin and has not yet the influence and standing of the others” (1897, 122–123).

Of other interest are his statements regarding the movement’s relationship with other traditions in Japan. He observes that during Nakayama’s initial religious experience, she “was visited by a large number of gods, some of them the greatest in the Shinto pantheon... Not wishing to break entirely with the old religions, she represented her revelation as having been received from the Shinto gods, and gave a place in her teaching to some prominent Buddhist elements. By this means she won popular favor and gained an earnest hearing” (139).

With regard to Tenrikyō’s concept of divinity, Peery writes that “Tenrikyo tends much toward monotheism. Omiiki herself accepted polytheism... Since her death the teaching has become more and more monotheistic in tendency, and some of its preachers teach an explicit monotheism” (139). It is easy to discern Peery’s line of thinking in the above passages. In his view, monotheism must involve the acknowledgement of one divine being only, thus Nakayama’s early emphasis on the myriad kami of traditional Shinto makes her a “polytheist.” Peery’s interpretation that Tenrikyō moved away from Nakayama’s “polytheism” and became gradually more focused on Tenri-Ō-no-Mikoto until a genuine monotheism developed in the movement, would become a standard Western assessment (e.g. Clarke 2000, 12).

### 2.3.2 Christopher Noss on Tenrikyō and Monotheism

Worthy of brief consideration are the comments of American Christian missionary Christopher Noss (1869–1934). In his report on Tenrikyō, which he calls a “strong Shintoistic sect,” he ties the group’s rapid spread to its “reputation of having power to heal disease” and its “rooting itself in the old beliefs of the people” (1918, 84). Regarding its concept of divinity, he writes: “The official records claim that it is a monotheistic religion, worshiping one god who has ten chief virtues; but the believers in general worship the 8,000,000 gods and give divine honors to the Emperor” (84). Noss implies, therefore, a discrepancy between what is “on the books” and what is “on the hearts” of the people, and that monotheism is fundamentally incompatible with a Tenrikyō interest in the Shinto pantheon. Thus, he produces a negative assessment of the presence of monotheism in Tenrikyō.

### 2.3.3. Henry van Straelen on Tenrikyō and Monotheism

Next we will review the analysis of one Christian scholar, Henry van Straelen (1903–2004) whose work on Japanese NRMs and especially on Tenrikyō has been important enough to garner responses from Tenrikyō theologians and officials (see for example Moroi 1963). Indeed, van Straelen's major book on the subject, *The Religion of Divine Wisdom: Japan's Most Powerful Religious Movement* (1957), has been "the standard work on Tenrikyō" (Spae 1963, 172). This book, along with his later collaboration with Clark B. Offner, *Modern Japanese Religions* (1963), provides the below observations.

Van Straelen says that he consulted at the time "practically all the existing prominent Tenrikyō publications, [and had] numerous conversations with the professors of Tenri University and with the high priests of the Tenrikyō religion" (1954, 57; see also 50 no. 2), leading him to the conclusion that the central teaching from which all others derive is the group's "doctrine on the origin of the world and of mankind, a highly complicated story, full of allegories, mystical meanings, nay even 'beyond human comprehension and which no language can describe'" (57). At the center of this complex narrative is obviously God the Parent, but this grand figure is supported by a variety of other deities who the god uses in various ways, including various kami mentioned in the Shinto classics. Thus, van Straelen insists that upon immediate inquiry into this story of creation "we are already confronted with the great problem: whether Tenrikyō is a monotheistic or a polytheistic religion" (58). He ultimately observes an "extreme haze" and "inconsistency" on this subject in Tenrikyō official publications, and in Nakayama's own *Ofudesaki* (Tip of the Divine Writing Brush), he can at best recognize an "atmosphere" or an "impression" of "many Gods" (58–59). Here, all "logic" is "blocked out" by "a kind of mysticism" (59). He concludes: "So far I cannot find sufficient evidence that Tenrikyō started as a purely monotheistic religion. On the contrary I am strongly inclined to the opinion that the foundress' idea of God was a polytheistic one or at least that it was not clear in her mind. There is even one text in the foundress writings which admits only a pantheistic interpretation" (58). Shortly afterward, he reifies his position that while "presentday Tenrikyō believes in one original God, the Creator of the universe," original Tenrikyō "did not start as a monotheistic religion" (59). Contemporary adherents now generally accept that "the 10 other so-called deities [of the creation story], are but [God the Parent's] faculties, or His attributes," and this must represent "a unification process, a kind of amalgamation of deities which has taken place in several religions in a certain stage of their development" (59–60, no. 2). While van Straelen has "no doubt" that "post war Tenrikyō is a monotheistic religion," complete with catechisms which are "very clear on the subject," he does admit confusion in his discussions with several professors from Tenri University who seemed to vary on whether or not Tenrikyō is a pantheistic system or whether God the Parent is personal or impersonal (59, no. 2). He ultimately finds an inconsistency between such learned persons and the "simple honest people who are not critically inclined" and who "take easily the teachings for granted" (158). With all of this in view, van Straelen characterizes the arrangement as one in which "everybody believes more or less in his own way. Scores of faithful honestly believe in 10 different kami's, whereas modern Tenrikyō is definitely monotheistic as I have explained before" (158). Presumably, van Straelen would say that those who believe in ten different kami are either merely

confused or are deliberately contradicting their (now) monotheistic religion. Or he might consign the entire situation to ambiguity, as he seems to do in his 1963 book with Offner on Japan's NRMs, where we read that in regard to "Western concepts of monotheism, polytheism, pantheism, etc. we find ourselves in trouble. Japanese thought is simply not amenable to such distinctions" (Offner and van Straelen 1963, 143). Indeed, Tenrikyō's concept of divinity is in this book even more confused and confusing than before, though he does include passages from his earlier book in the footnotes. Here, Tenrikyō is bluntly "a case in point" in inconsistency, in "ambiguous or contradictory" doctrinal statements. Tenrikyō ultimately offers scriptures which "seem to involve both polytheistic and monotheistic conceptions of God. Close examination gives evidence of an added pantheistic element as well" (144–145).

Van Straelen entered into a back-and-forth debate on this subject with Tenrikyō theologian Moroi Yoshinori, who simultaneously denied that Tenrikyō was either polytheistic or monotheistic (146; see Moroi 1959, 12; 1963, 313–316). For Moroi, it is true that "old books" by early Tenrikyō believers featured many deities, but these are to be explained "as a part of the necessary Shintoistic coloring which Tenrikyō required in order to attain religious independence" (Moroi 1959, 12–14; see also 1963, 305–306). He points inquirers not to these "old books" but to Nakayama's own *Ofudesaki* and *Mikagurauta* (The Songs for the Service), composed from 1869–1882 and 1866–1875 respectively, and to the record of her oral teachings, where "there is no trace of polytheism" (1963, 314). Moroi furthermore rejects van Straelen's claim that the early movement was polytheistic because the ten deities are not thought of as separate from God the Parent (Moroi 1959, 12–14). The mention of the ten deities in Nakayama's works should be interpreted as different names for the same god. If this were not the case, there should be ten different shrines for ten different deities (1963, 314–315). In one passage, Moroi expresses how limiting the category of "monotheism" is for expressing his religion's beliefs: "If anyone asks whether Tenrikyō is polytheistic or monotheistic, we cannot but answer that Tenrikyō is monotheistic, but that is not all. The way of thinking which distinguishes all religions with only two concepts of polytheism and monotheism is itself open to criticism." Furthermore, "We must insist upon the fact that our God is God the Parent on the idea of God different from the above two concepts" (1959, 13–14). Later, he continued this same commentary in another response to van Straelen, arguing that "while Tenrikyō is monotheistic, it is not limited to monotheism... God the Parent is a different concept which transcends such limitations... this idea of God in the original teachings has never changed" (1963, 315–316). This effort to expand monotheism or to straddle multiple taxa at once appears to have been picked up by other Tenrikyō theologians. Tadamasu Fukuya (1973), scholar and bishop of Tenrikyō, similarly contended that Tenri-Ō-no-Mikoto was not monotheistic or pantheistic but "*umgreifend*" (encompassing, embracing) (2, 13). Franciscan theologian John J. Keane explains that "[Fukuya thinks] that an *umgreifend* god is both pantheistic (immanent and rational) and theistic (transcendent and irrational)—irrational in the sense of being 'transrational,' or 'beyond the limitation of human thinking'" (2017, 50). Van Straelen and Moroi's discussion was picked up on by Western scholars as well, including Thomas Kitai Hahn, who even borrowed Moroi's same language: "Tenrikyō claims that it is neither monotheistic nor polytheistic, and yet when being asked whether it is polytheistic

or monotheistic it cannot but answer that Tenrikyo is monotheistic” (1974, 63). However, the mounds of apologetic literature produced within contemporary Tenrikyō have worked earnestly to claim the monotheism label; e.g. the official *Teachings and History of Tenrikyō*, which states that: “There is an argument that Tenrikyo is polytheistic [because of the “ten deities”]... [But] Tenrikyo is a monotheistic religion whose members worship God the Parent as the one and only absolute God” (Tenrikyō Overseas Missions Department 1986, 36–37).

Ultimately, it is clear to me that van Straelen and Moroi’s argument was, consciously or not, directly concerned with the lack of a proper taxonomy. On the one hand, van Straelen found that Tenrikyō largely fell into one category or the other at different times in its development; on the other hand, Moroi saw that the religion had definitely embraced some form of monotheism at all times, but a form for which he had no name. In light of his comments, it is obviously not monotheism per se that Moroi wrestles with, rather it was clear to him that his religion’s concept spilled over the borders of the narrow definition of the category of “monotheism” on display in van Straelen’s studies (and in those of many others).

#### **2.2.4. Harry Thomsen on Tenrikyō and Monotheism**

Briefly, I will take note of Harry Thomsen’s observations. Here, Tenri-Ō-no-Mikoto is “the sole deity of all, the creator of all things... the original, true God” (49). He quotes the official publication *The Doctrine of Tenrikyo* (first published 1949), which identifies God the Parent as “the Supreme Being to be worshiped as God... but also our true parent in Whom we can safely trust and confide our joys and sorrows” (Tenrikyō 1958, 14). Thomsen finally mentions that while “the center of Tenrikyo worship is God the Parent, the Creator of the Universe, and the Father of Mankind, a multitude of other gods are mentioned [in Tenrikyō material]. At present, Tenrikyo emphasizes only one deity, but it started within the framework of polytheistic Shinto and still retains part of the Shinto pantheon—for example the Tohashira no Kami (Ten Gods) which play such a dominant part in the creation story of Tenrikyo” (Thomsen 1963, 50). Here is an example of a Western scholar who did not hesitate to apply an unqualified monotheism to modern Tenrikyō, bypassing entirely the scholarly debates about pantheism entertained in van Straelen’s study. Here we also may detect, however, the influence of van Straelen’s bifurcated history of Tenrikyō theology.

#### **2.3.5. Pino Marras on Tenrikyō and Monotheism**

Western scholar of Tenrikyō Pino Marras had his 1983 article on Tenrikyō theology featured in the appendices of the Tenri University publication *The Theological Perspectives of Tenrikyo* (1986) as an example of what the book describes as “Westerners’ view of Tenrikyō” (422). Here, Marras observes that Tenrikyōists honor their god as “the creator of the universe and mankind” (424), and believe that “God creates every human being, loves everyone indiscriminately and leads everyone to salvation which is cosmically fulfilled in the *yokugurashi* (Joyous life)” (Marras 1986 [1983], 428). He writes: “The

discussion whether Tenrikyo is monotheistic or polytheistic is very old” (449), and he indicates that the problem revolves around the issue of whether the “ten deities” in Nakayama’s origin story are actual entities or not, and suggests this issue should be “considered on the hermeneutical level. The mythological expression in Tenrikyo Canons is very strong. This is deeply rooted in Japanese linguistic, religious and cultural tradition. Literal interpretation should be corrected by mythological interpretation. Mythological language demands an adequate hermeneutical code” (449). Apply such care to the issue of the ten deities, he insists, and we will see that “Pluralistic (not plural!) identity necessarily implies plurality (plural!) of attributes and functions. Miki Nakayama often uses metaphorical language. Names and attributes of the divinity have a parenetic purpose” (449). He cites Tenrikyō theologian Nakajima Hideo’s article which explains that in the origin story there are “Not ten deities, but ten attributes, according to the ten different categories” (449; citing Nakajima 1986 [1968], 71–79). However, Marras abruptly abandons the quest for clarity no sooner that he embarks on it, suddenly saying that “[t]he discussion of monotheism and polytheism in Tenrikyo has historical reasons. This question will not be dealt with in this paper” (449). Towards the end of his article, he does offer that “Tenrikyo appears to be a *theistic religion*, which considers God not as a fetich but as a personal and dialogical reality...” (453, emphasis his). In the end, the usual Western hesitation here is evident. He seems to settle for the descriptor “theistic,” apparently not willing to commit to the stronger term “monotheistic,” since there is clearly a fixation on *some god*, but whether this god is the only one that exists from the “theological perspective of Tenrikyō” is a subject with which Marras ostensibly hopes to avoid direct engagement.

### 2.3.6. Jacques Henri Kamstra on Tenrikyō and Monotheism

As mentioned above, the 1994 article of Western scholar of Japanese religion J.H. Kamstra (1926–2008) located a genuine monotheism in Tenrikyō. However, the “monotheistic character” of Tenrikyō’s God the Parent was found to have existed “in spite of the polytheistic atmosphere which also qualifies” this deity (105). Kamstra does not mention the ten deities controversy, and without discussing rival perspectives implies that the ten names mentioned in the *Ofudesaki* are the names of real deities; however, these deities have been reduced to mere manifestations of God the Parent. “[O]ne and the same god appears in many gods” (106). In the end, he says, it is a “special brand of Japanese theism”—a theism which he suggests is also discernable in Shinto history and in the tradition of the Kakure Kirishitan—which has affected “the reduction of myriads of gods to one monotheistic god in Tenrikyō...” (115).

As discussed above, Kamstra briefly mentions that Tenrikyō’s vision can “be defined as what van Baaren calls pluriform monotheism” (105)—apparently a monotheism in which the “various gods of the pantheon, without losing their independence, are at the same time considered to be manifestations of one and the same divine substance” (Van Baaren 2009). In the next chapter, the adequacy of this sort of description will be examined. It will be helpful to note at this stage that Kamstra’s interpretation is different from the view of Western scholars who have seen the “ten deities” as originally distinct and

“polytheistic” deities, and also that Kamstra’s reading is somewhat similar to that of the modern Tenrikyōists who have generally reduced the ten deities into a single deity, God the Parent. Kamstra, thanks to van Baaren, may have in mind a single god who exists in various “manifestations” (language which doubtless gives the impression of the sort of divine self-representation as different personalities made famous by the Hindu monotheisms). However, as will be seen, modern Tenrikyōists generally see these “ten deities” as merely different labels for various impersonal “functions,” “attributes,” “providences,” or “faculties” of God the Parent which were employed during humanity’s creation (see van Straelen 1954, 59–60, no. 2).

### **2.3.7. Roy Tetsuo Forbes on Tenrikyō and Monotheism**

Worthy of brief mention is an interesting Western source in the form of a 2005 Master’s Thesis written by Roy Tetsuo Forbes for the University of Hawai’i. During his research, Forbes consulted not only with his university professors but with various officials belonging to the Tenrikyō Mission Headquarters in Hawai’i, and with Tenrikyō members in Tenri City, who provided access to Tenri Central Library (Forbes 2005, v). In regard to the question of monotheism (which was not the aim of his thesis), he condenses his reflections on the issue to a single footnote. While refusing to attempt to “resolve the theological issue whether Miki and other historical figures viewed their faith to be of a monotheistic or polytheistic variety” (4), he concludes that “both strains [of monotheism and polytheism] have coexisted throughout Tenrikyō’s history and continue to do so today” (4). The above tension is one directly informed by the unresolved disagreements between Western scholars like van Straelen and the Tenrikyō officials who have attempted to reconcile with received Western categories.

### **2.3.8. Barbara Rossetti Ambros and Timothy Smith on Tenrikyō and Monotheism**

As mentioned in the introduction, the majority of contemporary scholarly handbooks do not directly discuss the possibility of monotheism in Japan’s NRMs. Michael Pye’s review of Tenrikyō in *The Oxford Handbook of New Religious Movements* (2004b), for example, neglected any mention of monotheism in Tenrikyō, nor did it mention monotheism in any other Japanese NRM. A 2018 chapter on Tenrikyō in Brill’s *Handbook of East Asian New Religious Movements* by a pair of Western scholars of religion represents at least one recent example of a handbook which has actually commented on the subject, albeit scarcely. Here, Barbara Rossetti Ambros and Timothy Smith fleetingly characterize Tenrikyō as a self-described “monotheistic religion” independent from both Shinto and Buddhism (Ambros and Smith 2018, 33). And it was after World War II, the authors suggest, and once the organization was out from under the supervision of State Shinto, that “[t]he Parent God was recast as a monotheistic divinity...” (44). Unfortunately, nothing more is said about this god or about the scholarly disagreements over the nature of Tenrikyō’s central deity. Van Straelen’s bifurcated history is maintained without comment.

### 2.3.9. Popular Western Sources on Tenrikyō and Monotheism

Finally, two popular-level sources will be examined in order to observe how far the disagreement and taxonomical tension in Western (and Japanese) studies has trickled down. Searching the internet for information about Tenrikyō will easily lead one to WorldAtlas.com, a website which, despite the questionable quality of many of its articles, boasts to have entertained over 165 million readers interested in geography, economics, and travel in 2019 alone (WorldAtlas 2020). In the entry titled “What Are the Beliefs of the Tenrikyo Religion?,” we encounter only this terse, apophatic claim: “The religion is neither strictly monotheistic nor pantheistic” (Sangroula 2019). It is reasonable to assume that the writer of this article, faced with the history of confusion surveyed above, simply dared not attempt any positive claim about the religion’s concept of divinity.

Our last popular-level source on Tenrikyō is another online resource, this one operated by the same American graduate student Roy Tetsuo Forbes referred to above, revealed here to be himself a third-generation Tenrikyō practitioner from Hawai’i who once translated Tenrikyō texts professionally and now resides in Tenri City. Forbes’ website, Tenrikyology.com, claims to be the first English website dedicated to the study of Tenrikyō, whose aim is to “enrich the understanding of English-reading followers and non-followers alike” (Tenrikyology, n.d.a). More specifically, the site is designed to be “accessible to people who do not consider themselves the scholarly type” (Tenrikyology, n.d.b). In an article answering a reader’s question (“Is Tenrikyo monotheistic or polytheistic?”), Forbes describes this as a “complicated question, to say the least.” He quotes several passages from Moroi’s response to van Straelen, and concludes that the ten deities of the creation story were merely ten sacred names. “I get the sense,” he writes, “that many of Oyasama’s followers assumed that the ten ‘sacred names’ she taught them were actual deities” (Tenrikyology 2008). However, he confusingly pushes back on Moroi’s insistence that “there is no trace of polytheism” in Tenrikyō’s scriptures, saying that it “would be more accurate to say that it cannot be argued conclusively whether Oyasama regarded God the Parent as ‘ten,’ ‘two,’ or ‘one’... because the Japanese language does not... differentiate between single and plural nouns... it really is difficult to make a case that Oyasama’s understanding of God was truly monotheistic.” He takes up Moroi’s suggestion that regardless of the truth, Tenrikyō has not overly emphasized God the Parent’s “oneness,” and calls this “something that can be an important aspect in Japan, where traditionally, the mainstream religious worldview leans toward a multi-verse populated by a variety of kami and Buddhas.” Ultimately, Forbes ends up denying the existence of compelling evidence for monotheism in Tenrikyō, and reduces the entire subject to one which is, “at the end of the day, not quite an important one to address in the tradition” (Tenrikyology 2008). On the one hand we must consider this writer’s conclusions in their commercial or apologetic context, that is, as a popular writing endeavoring to present the Tenrikyō tradition to Westerners looking for an alternative to “monotheistic religion” (i.e. Christianity). On the other hand, one is immediately sympathetic to the plight of an earnest scholar, and to that of all Western inquirers who will doubtless continue to struggle with the history of Western scholarship on the seemingly straightforward question of whether or not the Tenrikyō movement represents, or has ever represented, a Japanese monotheism.

## 2.4. Konkōkyō and Monotheism in Western Studies

The last Japanese NRM under review, Konkōkyō, was founded in Okayama in 1859 by the farmer Kawate Bunjirō (1814–1883). Kawate had dishonored a kami and as a result was stricken with illness until the deity instructed him to devote his life to teaching. Eventually, Kawate changed his perception of this seemingly tyrannical kami and came to identify him as Tenchi-Kane-No-Kami (the Golden Kami of Heaven and Earth) or Konkō Daijin (Great Kami of Golden Light). Kawate came to understand that Konkō Daijin had taken over his body, and, acting as this deity’s vehicle, he began to teach others to worship this great kami, whose name was not among the traditional deities of Shinto. Eventually, by the time Kawate had founded his first church, he came to understand that he had become one with this god and allowed himself to be addressed as Konkō Daijin. In 1900, the Japanese government recognized Konkōkyō as a Shinto sect. However, in the 1980s, Konkōkyō came to deny the Shinto label (Clarke 2006c, 332). At the end of the twentieth century, the group claimed more than 600,000 members, and operates from its headquarters in Konkō City in Okayama. There are approximately 1,500 churches across Japan.



Fig. 2.3. Konkōkyō Church in Namba, Osaka. *Photo by author.*

Like the other two NRMs discussed above, in the eyes of Western scholars, Konkōkyō has clearly demonstrated universal attributes, but scholars have disagreed as to their significance. Thus the observation of Raymond Hammer in the early 1960s: some scholars were adamant that Konkōkyō was not monotheistic, and at the same time, it was “regarded by some—perhaps questionably—to be a genuine monotheistic faith” (1962, 189).

#### 2.4.1. D.C. Holtom on Konkōkyō and Monotheism

Famed American historian and anthropologist D.C. Holtom (1884–1962), originally sent to Japan by the American Baptist Foreign Mission Society, was a professor at several Japanese universities from 1914–1940 and was one of the foremost Western scholars of Shinto in the first half of the twentieth century. Of special note for this study is his article titled “Konko Kyo: A Modern Japanese Monotheism” (1933).

Holtom reports that Konkōkyō is “reared on a foundation of monotheism” (279) and is an example of a “universalism that declares that God is the loving father of all men” (280). Holtom locates Konkōkyō’s place “within Shinto,” and reminds us of Shinto’s “complicated” nature as a religious movement (279). Holtom emphasizes Kawate’s insistence that he had in some sense become one with Konkō Daijin, comparing this god’s indwelling to the “twofold nature ascribed to Jesus” (291). This divine communion was something which must be pursued by all humans; the “doctrine of the mutuality of God and men means the immediacy of communion between the worship and the Great Parent Spirit of the Universe” (296). Ultimately, Konkōkyō is a faith centered “in a monotheistic conception of God as a loving Parent...” (300). Holtom saw that there was basic agreement between Konkōkyō and Christianity that the “Heavenly Father” of Christians was essentially the same as their supreme god (Offner and van Straelen 1963, 144). Unfortunately, nothing is said by Holtom of Konkōkyō’s appreciation of other deities apart from Konkō Daijin. Neither is anything said about a possible pantheism or panentheism, which will play a part in other scholarly discussions. Indeed, Holtom asserts Konkōkyō’s status as a “modern Japanese monotheism,” but provides limited evidence for a monotheistic interpretation of Kawate and Konkōkyō’s doctrine. Other Western scholars who followed him would be skeptical.

#### 2.4.2. H. Neil McFarland on Konkōkyō and Monotheism

The late H. Neil McFarland (1923–2017) was a Christian historian, scholar of Japanese religions, a visiting professor at Kwansai Gakuin University in Japan, and a laborer in Japan-America relations. He is most well known for his work on Japan’s NRMs, particularly his strikingly-titled *Rush Hour of the Gods: A Study of New Religious Movements in Japan* (1967). McFarland’s conclusions regarding Konkōkyō’s doctrine betray a hesitation typical of Western commentators. In one 1960 article, he writes that “The teachings of this sect are simple but strongly theistic. God is the creator of heaven and earth. All life is sustained by grace... God has called mankind Ujiko (‘children of one family’), thereby proclaiming his paternal love...” (44). However, in another passage on the same page, he undercuts this conclusive analysis: “Now Konkōkyō is virtually monotheistic, although in its tolerance of the worship of other sects it refuses to deny outright the existence of their gods” (McFarland 1960, 44). While the faith’s monotheism is prominently displayed, McFarland’s narrow definition of monotheism causes him to retreat at any sign of more than one divine being. Konkōkyō may not even worship other kami themselves; their mere toleration of or acknowledgement of these other deities is enough to relegate their

teaching to a “virtual monotheism.” We will note how similar McFarland’s comments about Konkōkyō are to those of other Western scholars from the same period, for example August Karl Reischauer, who ruled that “four of the major modern Shinto sects” were “virtually monotheistic...” (1966, 77). McFarland thus appears trapped between two classifications: Konkōkyō is both “strongly [mono]theistic” and also merely “virtually monotheistic.” The classificatory problems here should be obvious.

#### **2.4.3. Delwin B. Schneider on Konkōkyō and Monotheism**

Lutheran scholar Delwin B. Schneider is perhaps most recognized for his doctoral dissertation on Konkōkyō, published as *Konkō-kyō: A Japanese Religion* in 1962. This pioneering book formed the final component of a well-known triad of original monographs in Western studies on the three “old” Japanese NRMs, along with Hepner’s book on Kurozumikyō (1935) and van Straelen’s book on Tenrikyō (1957).

In Schneider’s study, and in a related article published the year prior to his book’s release, Schneider focused on the Konkōkyō religious experience and avoided ontological analysis. His references to “Konkōkyō” sometimes failed to adequately distinguish between the older views of Kawate himself or those of the successive interpreters of the tradition. His approach was critiqued at the time by Christian scholar of Japanese religions Raymond Hammer for not dealing directly with later Konkōkyō doctrine, understood to be “more subtle and metaphysical than anything the founder conceived of,” by way of logical articulation (Hammer 1963, 355). One example of Schneider’s reluctance to enunciate Konkōkyō ideas is found in his 1961 article: “Konkō-kyō has been incongruously and differently... described as a monotheism, an informal pantheism and a polytheism; its Kami has been called an omnipotent creator, an ever-loving god, and there are those who have found in it a tritheism” (1961, 42). The same diversity found in Western analysis of the other NRMs is equally pervasive here. Schneider’s solution is unique and drastic: “With none of these appellations is Konkō-kyō concerned. Konkō-kyō is the way of the Kami particularly, the way of Tenchi Kane no Kami. Konkō-kyō is not concerned with the secondary conceptual derivative experience; it is a religion of function and as such is primary” (1961, 42). Schneider’s impulse to refuse the application of Western comparative categories is on the one hand noble and understandable in light of the history of Western scholarship. However, the scholar of religion is charged with accurately describing not merely the role which religious beliefs and practices play in people’s lives, but the actual religious beliefs themselves. It remains to be seen whether or not Konkōkyō is indeed *sui generis*.

#### **2.4.4. Niels C. Nielsen, Jr. on Konkōkyō and Monotheism**

One book by the late Niels C. Nielsen, Jr. (1921–2018), a professor in Philosophy and Religious Thought at Rice University in Houston, contains the observation that “some Shinto deities are accepted in the religion,” and he emphasizes also a pantheistic-sounding quotation in one of Holtom’s studies by

Ikuni Konkō, a Konkōkyō official (see Holtom 1938, 266). Nielsen vaguely rules that “[s]trictly speaking, the sect is neither theistic nor pantheistic; it may be called a kind of polytheism” (1957, 35). He argues that Kawate was “not well versed” in either Shinto doctrine or in Buddhist thought, though he does not expand on how he thinks this situation might have affected Konkōkyō’s doctrinal development. In Nielsen’s summary of Konkōkyō, “God is not almighty nor to be described as creator, but deity exists for man and man for deity” (35–36). Thus, a negative conclusion is given regarding the presence of monotheism.

#### **2.4.5. Robert S. Ellwood on Konkōkyō and Monotheism**

Against the negative conclusion of Nielsen and many others, Robert S. Ellwood, a professor of religion at the University of Southern California, provides us with a very positive assessment of monotheism in Konkōkyō. He writes: “Although this religion draws substantially from Shinto, it is monotheistic, worshipping one God” (Ellwood 2009, 161). In another book, Ellwood reiterates his position: “Although long registered as a Shinto sect for legal reasons, Konkokyo was and is in effect an independent monotheistic faith of a half-million members...” (Ellwood 2008, 196). Ellwood’s conclusive interpretation has been consistent since at least the 1970s, as observed in his earlier book *The Eagle and the Rising Sun*, in which he explained that “Both Tenrikyo and Konkokyo were founded by individuals of peasant stock who felt themselves called out by a deity who became for them and their faith a monotheistic High God...” (1974, 17).

#### **2.4.6. Popular Sources on Konkōkyō and Monotheism**

One Western website dedicated to Konkōkyō with a strongly opposed interpretation is LivingWithKami.com, a source operated by a Canadian who identifies herself as a “licensed Shinto Priestess of the Konko Faith” (Living With Kami 2017a). She writes:

Tenchi kane no Kami is often mixed up as a monotheistic god—or a singular entity. But actually Konkokyo is pantheistic, panentheistic, and henotheistic. Even syncretic in some aspects. I don’t see Kamisama as a single God that created everything... but is the Universe in everything, including us... (pantheism). As well, we may worship Kamisama primarily, but it’s not to deny other gods (henotheistic). It makes me personally sad when people equate Kamisama to the God in Monotheism or say Konkokyo is strictly monotheist, because that’s extremely limiting and incorrect. I know some ministers and believers may be monotheist-pantheist, but ultimately... the teachings of Konko Daijin is pantheistic and henotheistic. (Living With Kami 2017b)

As was the case with popular-level Western writings from the perspective of Tenrikyō, we may on the one hand see the above conclusions as representative of an effort to market Konkōkyō to Westerners

as an alternative to Christianity. On the other hand, this writing clearly belongs to the Western legacy of categorical disorientation. Claiming that monotheistic interpretations or classifications of Konkōkyō are “extremely limiting,” this individual has in mind a very narrow conception of monotheism in which only one divine being exists and is necessarily completely separate from the world. She resists this classification and prefers “henotheism” and “pantheism” because she believes these categories permit the existence of more than one deity and allow for an immanent god while monotheism does not. Interestingly, she acknowledges that some Konkōkyō officials and practitioners are indeed monotheists, but finds this incompatible with the religion’s original teachings. Here we observe how helpful categorical clarity will be to not only scholars of religion, but the members of Japanese religions who, struggling with Western categories, negatively receive members of their own tradition. It might turn out that the misunderstanding and misuse of certain categories in Western studies has not only done a disservice to the representation of religions to those outside of them, but has also done intra-religious harm which scholars must work diligently to rectify.

## **2.5. Nyoraikyō and Monotheism in Western Studies**

As mentioned above, I have focused on Kurozumikyō, Tenrikyō, and Konkōkyō due to both a lack of space and because Western scholarship (the focus of this study) has not devoted nearly as much ink to Nyoraikyō. Only a handful of secondary articles and one major study have ever been produced by Western scholars, and Nyoraikyō itself has no known publications in Western languages. Nevertheless, Western views of Nyoraikyō deserve at least a brief review, especially because Nyoraikyō represents the earliest example of a Japanese NRM (founded 1802) and at the same time Japan’s earliest monotheistic NRM. The treatment of Nyoraikyō also demonstrates quite poignantly the lack of proper attention which the subject of monotheism in Japan’s NRMs has long required in Western scholarship.

Nyoraikyō is a Buddhism and Shinto-related NRM founded in modern Aichi Prefecture by a peasant woman named Kino (1756–1826). Like the founders Kurozumi, Nakayama, and Kawate who would come after her (and also like the much later Deguchi Nao (1837–1918) of the monotheistic Ōmotokyō), Kino claimed to have received divine revelation from the supreme creator of the universe. This great god was named Nyorai (a popular Buddhist title deprived of its Buddhist significance). Kino also came to know this god’s intermediary, an angelic (i.e. messenger-like) deity named Konpira (a traditional Shinto kami), who transmitted Nyorai’s revelations to Kino. In 1802 the forty-seven-year-old peasant woman was “possessed” by Konpira, who charged her with being a vessel for divine communication and salvation (Parker 1983, 1). The god Nyorai had sent other emissaries in the past, including Gautama Buddha, but now, Nyorai’s plans for universal salvation involved Konpira, the final messenger, and the peasant woman Kino as his vessel. For the next twenty-five years, Konpira revealed the character of the creator god Nyorai through Kino, as well as other mysteries like human origins, demons, karma, and salvation.

Japanese scholarship appears to have performed its due diligence in regard to Nyoraikyō (Ishibashi 1927, 1938; Murakami 1971; Kanda 1988, 1990), and these Japanese assessments of the movement’s

history and development will be briefly raised again the second half of this thesis. German-language scholarship has been rather far behind but has nevertheless appeared (Ishibashi 1928, Ishibashi and Dumoulin 1938; Luz 2016, see also 2009; Gundert 1935). Meanwhile, apart from brief mentions, English-language studies by Western scholars are primarily found in two sources: a short article by Arthur Waley (1933), and the only in-depth Western study ever produced, an unpublished dissertation by Kenneth W. Parker (1983).

Waley writes that “[t]he deity of Kino’s system is called Nyorai, a term borrowed from Buddhism; but since he is omnipotent, omniscient, made the Universe and stands in the relation of a father to mankind, I think one is justified in using the term God” (1933, 106). Waley then draws a parallel to the “fatherhood” of the Christian god (109). Nyorai is also described as the master and creator of human beings and also of other deities. Indeed, “The existence of the Buddhas and Shinto (native Japanese) gods is not denied, but they are represented as being completely subject to Nyorai” (106). While Waley neglects to use the term “monotheism,” his recognition in Kino’s Nyorai of a “God” akin to that of Christianity says as much. Waley is not at all concerned by the existence of myriad (Shinto and Buddhist) deities. Their subordination to Nyorai distinguishes them from the one god, who is exalted above them in his status as creator and in his omnipotence.

Parker’s 1983 dissertation aimed to elucidate Nyoraikyō’s founding document *Okuyōsama* (Teachings) in order “to discern how the first ‘new religion’ in Japan came into being” (ix). Throughout this study, Parker repeatedly identifies Nyorai as “the supreme god/deity” (50–58, 61–62, 79, 90–106, 116, 120–127, 131, 148, 180–182), and also as “the supreme creator god” (59–61, 129). Indeed, Parker recognizes that Nyorai is clearly the creator of both the world and human beings (50–55, 58–61), and that this is “a personal deity, Nyorai, not the impersonal Buddha nature” (129). Like Waley, Parker declines to use the term “monotheism” to describe Kino’s Nyoraikyō. He likewise points repeatedly to its similarities with Christian teaching (49, 59, 60, 111, 129), and strongly implies that Kino’s view of Nyorai owed a debt to Christian theology, specifically to Christian missions in the sixteenth century (59–60, 111).<sup>18</sup> Like Waley, Parker recognizes also a host of other deities subordinate to Nyorai (“kami and Buddhas”), some of which agreed to act as messengers for Nyorai in order to save human beings (61–62). Chief among these messenger deities was Gautama Buddha, who is revealed by Konpira to have visited our world thousands and thousands of times in order to fulfill his service to Nyorai (62–64). Ultimately, it is interesting that both Parker and Waley so aptly describe monotheisms, and even suggest its origin in Christian inspiration, and yet both refrain from even mentioning this (highly stigmatized) term. It is an interesting question why.

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<sup>18</sup> Parker’s historical proposition that “the only such [supreme creator] deity to appear in Japan before Nyorai was the supreme deity introduced in the mid-sixteenth century by Christian missionaries” (1983, 59), will be carefully challenged in later sections of this thesis. Parker’s argument that Nyoraikyō owed Christianity for its doctrine would fall out of favor (see Shimazono 2003, 287–289; Luz 2016, 99; Kanda 1990, 133–135).

## 2.6. Western Studies in Review

Taken as a whole, this modest survey gives one the impression of a vast history of disagreement. Western studies have appeared at best hesitant to apply the term “monotheism” to groups like Kurozumikyō, Tenrikyō, Konkokyō (and Nyoraikyō), and at worst, they have been generally confused. There appear to be just as many Western inquirers who have argued for the presence of monotheism in these groups as those who have argued against it. Scarcely have these arguments involved the sort of careful enunciation required to justify such conclusions. Some have even appeared to abandon the cause of classification entirely, suggesting that Kurozumikyō, Tenrikyō, or Konkokyō are entirely *sui generis* and simply should not or cannot be approached with any sort of classification, and especially not Western ones. However, as the careful reader will have noticed, in the above studies the use of other Western taxa, such as “henotheism,” “polytheism,” and “pantheism” were often preferred, and with hardly any technical justification. The content and applicability of such terms was regularly asserted as swiftly and as uncritically as “monotheism” was rejected. In the following chapter I will suggest, and not lightly, that clearer portraits of these traditions are achievable by means of a revisitation of the category “monotheism” and related taxa. Through this careful reconsideration, employing both recent advances in the study of religion and a hyper-reflexive stance, we will aim to better represent Japan’s NRMs and their relationship with the concept of monotheism.

## 3

# Rehabilitating “Monotheism”

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*“Gods: we sketch them out in bold designs,  
though ill-tempered destiny destroys our work again and again.”*

— Rainer Maria Rilke,  
*Die Sonette an Orpheus* (1922)

*“Some teachings obstinately insist that  
there are no spiritual entities (kami) other than God himself.  
But that is the opinion of those who look at only one side of God.”*

— Deguchi Onisaburō (1871–1948)

### 3.1. Introduction

In the last several decades, historians have come to participate in significant methodological developments in the study of religion, to the end that “a great deal of historical work has become more theoretically sophisticated and a great deal of theory floats less free of history” (Lewis 2015, 2). As argued in earlier chapters, I suggest historians of religion must be licensed to equip themselves with one such sophistication: the use of a “relatively unbiased and ideologically neutral” form of philosophical reflection (Wildman 2010, 25) yielding a careful articulation of the arguments being made by religious subjects. Such enunciation, it is true, must consciously work toward increasing conceptual clarity while at the same time avoiding *a priori* ontological assumptions. This challenging but vital mode of critical reflection is directly served by forefronting the terminological grounding of the study. While each investigation must necessarily define its own terms (see Pye 2004a, 79), one should, in my view, aim to contribute to what Pye optimistically envisioned as a “scientific” and “internationally coherent” study of religions (77). The contribution of the present study toward this end will be in its quest for the rehabilitation of the socially-challenged term “monotheism” in the Western study of Japanese NRMs.

It is true that the category of “monotheism” has yearned for rehabilitation in not only Western studies of Japanese religion but in the study of religion in general. Arguments have long persisted over whether such a term can be rightly used of any religious tradition, even ancient Israelite religion, a phenomenon at least popularly understood to be the paragon of monotheism (see Schaper 2019, 38–51; MacDonald 2003). Participation in discussion along these lines will prove useful for the present study, and I suggest most of the Western scholars of Japanese religion surveyed in the previous chapter,

like many scholars in general, have overlooked the broad applicability of the category of monotheism and thus its charged potential as a means of cross-cultural dialogue. The surprise here will likely be in how starved for nuance I suggest this category actually is. Indeed, “monotheism” emerges, in my view, as a broad genus in need of speciation. While significant work has lately been done on this problem, namely by philosopher Dale Tuggy (2017), below I will provide both a condensed discussion of the inadequacies of recently proposed specifications and alternatives, as well as several new subcategories beneath the genus “monotheism” which I expect will be helpful for the present study (and, hopefully, for the study of monotheism in general). Many past Western inquiries into the content of the word “monotheism” have exhibited strong diachronic concerns and the below chapter, while aiming to keep such analysis brief, will not escape this necessary reflection. Requiring more space will be explanations of my proposed subcategories of monotheism, which will later be applied to the NRMs under review. In the end, I will argue that “monotheism,” when properly nuanced, provides the most accurate classificatory heading available and therefore emerges from controversy unscathed as a persistently useful comparative category.

### **3.1.1. Further Prolegomena: Religion and Monotheism as “Eurocentric” Categories**

As suggested above, a helpful starting point for this project may be found in the similarly-beleaguered term “religion” and in contemporary deconstructive efforts which have clearly impacted the field of religious studies (see Lewis 2015, 3). Indeed, a good deal of theoretical development in the field of religious history has emerged in the course of diachronic, ultra-reflexive (and sometimes captious) scrutiny of the “eurocentric” category of “religion”—once thought to be a “fairly stable and defined” category but one which has for some time had its “fragility and porousness” exposed by postmodern and postcolonial skepticism (Cornille 2012, 2). In the same way that many will doubtless recommend our retraction of “monotheism” in any analysis of Japan’s NRMs, some Western scholars have long requested our abandonment of the term “religion” as an unsalvageable construction of European modernity predicated on a religious/secular distinction not conceived of in premodern or non-European communities (e.g. Asad 1993; McCutcheon 1998; Dubuisson 2003 [1998]). From this critical vantage point, the term “religion” overlaps so directly with Western dominance-narratives, principally with histories of colonial subjugation, that the application of “religion” (and perhaps all other analytic categories) interminably reflects not a benignant, conscientious engagement but more of what Foucault would epitomize as the pressures of power. Observant scholars will note, however, how often theoretical deconstructions along these lines and their proposed alternatives implicate their dissections in an unwittingly prejudicial Occidentalism or Orientalism, and often become self-defeating, namely through their hypocritical embrace of other purportedly Western-centric terms like “history,” “politics,” “art,” and “science” (see for example Carole M. Cusack’s reaction to Dubuisson; 2008, 481–482). Indeed, as I have argued above, rejecting terms on the grounds that they are culture-bound is an unstable methodological substrate, since culture-bound terms are all the words we have. Regarding the contemporary rejection of “monotheism” for describing any Japanese religious phenomena, even in our

cursory survey of Western studies above we can observe a similarly contradictory embrace of other alternative but equally misconceived and contestable Western categories like “pantheism” and “henotheism,” each of which have been preferred and employed, sometimes concurrently, as swiftly as “monotheism” has been rejected. I suggest, however, that the below analysis will reveal the term “monotheism” to be as resilient and widely-suitable a word as “religion” has remained in Western studies, even in Western studies of Japan.

In truth, the present study of the applicability of “monotheism” to Japan’s NRMs might be viewed as the offspring of the long-standing parent discussion regarding the applicability of the word “religion” to Japanese phenomena. As is well known, the term “religion” has had an especially troubled history in analysis of premodern Japan, with some scholars arguing that the concept of religion simply did not exist in this context, and should therefore be jettisoned in light of this supposed fact and the fact of its accumulated “western baggage” (Grapard 2010, 2). Such cases often gesture at the absence of the term “religion” in pre-nineteenth-century sources and subsequently towards Japan’s ultimate “importation” of the “Western” notion of religion during the Meiji period and the eventual “invention” of the term *shūkyō* (religion) (Fitzgerald 2003). However, a counterforce in Western scholarship has been acting in the opposite direction. Scholar of Japanese Buddhism Christoph Kleine has convincingly objected to the claim that the concept of “religion” ought to be avoided on the basis of an alleged absence of a religious/secular divide (2013). First, the Buddhist distinction between this-worldly things (*seken*) and things which transcend this world (*shusseken*) provides a structural analogy to the binary code religious/secular, and the fact that medieval discourses in Japan compartmentalized the world according to this bifurcation demonstrates that a general concept of “religion” did exist in the premodern Japanese consciousness (14–27). The mere lack of an equivalent term in premodern Japan is thus a “rather weak argument against the application of the ‘second-order, generic concept’ of ‘religion’” (3). Additionally, Kleine argues that it is wrong of scholars to project an image of an uninvolved Japan passively receiving the term “religion,” citing Hans Martin Krämer’s argumentation that Japanese intellectuals willingly appropriated *shūkyō* in accordance with their own perspectives (2012, 278ff). In this light, according to Kleine, postcolonial efforts to rescue Japan from the imposition of all “ethnocentric” categories effectively “victimize” those people groups “whom they claim to protect by virtually denying them an active role in the process of cultural and social development” (2013, 2, no. 1). Kleine notes that nearly all terms used in the history of religions are “culturally loaded and carry their ‘western baggage,’ regardless whether we use simple terms such as ‘house’ or ‘bird’ or more complex concepts such as society, politics, ritual, justice, and culture,” and he ultimately charges that scholars must “decide whether we are willing to take an active part in shaping the term [“religion”] and make it a less ‘ethnocentric’ category or just be passive bystanders constantly complaining about the irresponsible usage of the term by others” (2013, 30).

All of this argumentation in support of “religion,” as should be obvious, is readily translatable to the present quest to salvage “monotheism.” Indeed, the lack of equivalent terminology in Japanese religions (whether in the premodern movements or in the NRMs) does not automatically preclude the presence of the concept of monotheism, and postcolonial rescue missions looking to extract a *sui generis* Japanese

phenomena from an imposed European construct of “monotheism” (citing its “Western baggage”) first run the risk of abrogating the scholar’s ability to use any words at all to describe religious values (or even to describe “religions” themselves) and at the same time might risk damaging the ability of the members of Japanese NRMs to self-identify.

### 3.2. A Terminological and Taxonomical Muddle

The first stage of this rehabilitatory excursion for “monotheism” must be a discussion of the religious concept of a “god,” since clarity on this subject will be vital for any inquiry into the alleged monotheists within Japan’s NRMs—those people and people-groups who supposedly believe there exists only one “god.” Indeed, if this taxonomical project is to be successful, the deceptively simple, fundamental, and inescapably “philosophical” questions of “what is a god?” and then “what is monotheism?” must be answered first.

From the standpoint of classical theism, a “god” is an omnipotent, omniscient, and completely good being, an eternal creator. From the standpoint of both theistic and atheistic philosophy, a god is the most perfect being that could exist, and a being who necessarily exists. According to many of the world’s religions, however, a god may be something completely different. The Roman Jupiter, for example, or the Egyptian Horus, seem not at all like the kind of figure imagined by Jewish, Christian, and Islamic theology. Likewise, the Chinese Sun Wukong or the Japanese Susanoo are hardly the “perfect” and “necessary” beings postulated by philosophers. Indeed, the gods of some religions are even said by their worshippers to have come into existence some finite time ago, or to have previously been human beings, or to be guilty of decidedly immoral acts, or even to have died. And yet the same terminology—*god*, *kami*, *theoi*, *deva*, *shén*—is regularly used in both internal and external discussions to refer to both the mischievous Shinto figure Susanoo and the eternal, all-powerful, morally perfect, immortal Yahweh of the Hebrew Bible. Fluid applications of the term “monotheism,” both inside and outside academia, have only made matters more complicated. In both the sacred texts and theological discussions of purportedly “monotheistic” traditions like Judaism or Christianity, we hear about the existence of “many gods” in the world (see Psalm 82:1, 6–7; John 10:34–35; 1 Corinthians 8:5–6). Related terms like “polytheism” and “atheism” are similarly put forward only to be apparently compromised: scholars speak at the same time of Buddhism’s “atheism,” yet at the same time of its “extensive and varied pantheon of gods” (Bhattacharyya 1989, 109).<sup>19</sup> At first glance, terms like “monotheism” (one-god-ism) and “polytheism” (more-than-one-god-ism) and “atheism” (no-god-ism) seem easy to understand, yet even the most rudimentary survey of the world’s religions casts immediate doubt on the entire taxonomy.

As some scholars of monotheism have recognized, despite its wide usage in studies of religion and its *prima facie* morphological impression, “monotheism” is “not an untroubled word with a serene and

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<sup>19</sup> In academic discourse “there is a disagreement among religious scholars over whether Buddhism is atheistic. To be sure, it is not disputed that belief in a god or god is a part of Mahayana Buddhism” (Martin 2006, 224).

self-evident applicability even to those religious traditions most associated with the exclusive worship of and belief in one god or divine reality” (Schneider 2008, 19), and “there is no real consensus as to its content” (Herbener 2013, 616). We have already observed in our introduction to religious discourse in Japan that many scholars have in mind a restrictive definition in which “only one divine being exists.” Nevertheless, as some have recognized, there are a variety of historical and contemporary “monotheisms” whose theological visions spill across the boundaries of that limited convention. According to Peter van Nuffelen (2010), thanks to modern inquiry, monotheism is now “no longer (if it ever has been) a rigid concept but rather a flexible term which can cover traditional monotheisms, and also monotheistic tendencies within polytheist religions... monotheism has, at least among scholars lost its rigidity as a strongly valued term, and has become a general category that needs specification when applied to a historical phenomenon...” (20). Required, then, are coherent subcategories of monotheism which provide the vital nuance for distinguishing how different religious systems relate their “one god” to the other divine beings they acknowledge.

Two distinct but closely-related issues have thus risen to the surface: first, the need to clarify and justify the use of the term “monotheism” as a broad genus which somehow accommodates the belief in multiple deities, and second, the need for better subcategories beneath this umbrella term.

### **3.2.1. The Inadequacy of Proposed Alternatives to “Monotheism” and other Qualifiers**

Since at least the nineteenth century, scholars of religion have attempted to qualify purportedly monotheistic beliefs by producing various and additional terms in hopes of reconciling monotheism with the belief in the existence of many deities. Intended to be used instead of, alongside of, or in distinction to monotheism, these suggestions have included words such as “henotheism,” “kathenotheism,” “monolatry,” “polymorphic monotheism,” “summodeism,” and “polydeitism/monodeitism.”<sup>20</sup> It will be helpful to briefly review these terms, and their shortcomings, while on the road to other solutions.

#### **a. Henotheism, Kathenotheism, and Monolatry**

“Henotheism” is a category first envisioned by Friedrich Wilhelm von Schelling (1775–1854) and popularized under this name by Max Müller (1823–1900).<sup>21</sup> The term describes the worship of only one deity wherein the existence of other deities is not denied (see Müller 1928 [1899], 466; Rohrbaugh 1927, 62).<sup>22</sup> Müller coined another similar term “kathenotheism,” defined as “the worship of one god after

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<sup>20</sup> For further terms see Davis 2004, 70–71. While I believe much greater precision is now possible, Davis’ basic recognition of diversity beneath the heading “monotheism” is helpful.

<sup>21</sup> For his first usage see Müller 1868 [1867], 342–380. See also van den Bosch 2002, 110.

<sup>22</sup> The index of Müller’s *Six Systems of Indian Philosophy* (1899) defines henotheism as a “phase in which God is addressed as if the only god in existence, with forgetfulness of all others” (Müller 1928 [1899], 466).

another,” which has seen far less usage.<sup>23</sup> While “kathenotheism” implies the serial worship of more than one deity (as opposed to a system in which one never switches their worship from a particular deity), Müller appears to have used this and “henotheism” interchangeably, since both describe a view in which only one deity is acknowledged at any given time. These terms ultimately both appear to speak more to religious practice than to religious belief: the “one god” in view is “the only god for me,” but perhaps not for others. This distinction is most often utilized in modern studies of ancient Israelite religion, where the worship of one god is said to have been prescribed for a single ethnic group (see Malina and Rohrbaugh 2003, 407; Smith 2001, 78). Sometimes “henotheism” is used by specialists in conjunction with “polytheism,” as seen in the analysis of Peter van Nuffelen (see 2010, 19). The weaknesses of “henotheism” for clarifying monotheism or distinguishing types of monotheisms should be clear: while such words imply the existence of more than one deity, and describe the ethical-relational posture of a particular group of human beings to a specific deity, neither “henotheism” nor “kathenotheism,” when juxtaposed with “monotheism,” are helpful for describing whether or not believers think there is something fundamentally different about their deity versus any others, or specifically how their god and the many other deities are related. It is also worth mentioning that in the nineteenth century both “henotheism” and “kathenotheism” were used to indicate transitional stages in then-standard anthropological narratives about the “evolution” of religions from “primitive,” “less-developed” forms of religion into monotheism—considered at that time to be an achievement of more “advanced” cultures. Since the twentieth century there appear to have been gradually fewer mentions of “henotheism”—indeed, it was called at the turn of the twenty-first century “no longer fashionable” (Jaffe 2001, 758, no. 10), though I find that a conceptually Müllerian evolution of polytheism-henotheism-monotheism continues to be assumed in segments of Asiatic religious studies (see Sun 2016, 59), and Hellenistic and Semitic studies (see the primary argument of Versnel 1998 and the follow-up in Versnel 2011, 282–283). The use of “henotheism” in Hindu studies, originally pioneered by Müller, has been roundly criticized, though the search for satisfactory conceptual and terminological revision continues (see Michaels 2004, 18–27, 207, 339).

Definitions of “monolatry,” a word ostensibly first used by German biblical scholar Julius Wellhausen (1844–1918), do not seem to differ much from those suggested for “henotheism.” The root here is the Greek *latreia* (worship), which may denote the ritual aspect of a religion, and also, and perhaps more often, may emphasize a separate form of religious expression which involves a “more permanent worship of only one god, but without denying the existence of other gods” (Herbener 2013, 629). Some scholars do recognize a distinction here, to the end that “monolatrous worship is thus exclusivistic, while henotheistic worship is not” (Yusa 2005, 3013; Herbener 2013, 629). In monolatrous religions, then, only the worship of a single deity is acceptable and its members should not serially switch to the worship of others. Unsurprisingly, the use of this description has emerged in studies of the

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<sup>23</sup> Müller himself preferred “henotheism” to “kathenotheism”; see van den Bosch 2002, 110.

Abrahamic monotheisms, in which a supreme god is said to have demanded unique worship to the exclusion of “other gods” (see Exodus 20:2; Deuteronomy 5:6; Qur’an 29:17). “Monolatry,” like “henotheism,” is also used alongside “polytheism” in modern classifications. It has even been said that “polytheism may be [monolatry], in so far as its worshippers choose one of several deities as their sole object of worship” (Mbiti 2003, 637). Thus, the same focus on religious devotion—and therefore the same inadequacies for understanding first how many “gods” a religion thinks exists and second how a “god” may relate to a host of deities—befall this term as henotheism.

### **b. Pluriform/Polymorphic Monotheism, Summodeism**

As is well known, the Hindu tradition is exasperatingly diverse: some Hindu schools, like Samkhya, are openly atheistic and deny the existence of a supreme being,<sup>24</sup> while others feature many deities, and some even an explicit belief in a supreme god (see Flood 2020, 15–64). In these latter traditions, we see a singular god diffused through a colorful array of deities. In Vaishnavism, Vishnu is Svayam Bhagavan, the supreme personality who can manifest in different ways. Because this one god is the ultimate Truth beyond all limitations, its manifold forms (*ananta-rupa*) are each worthy of worship (see Schweig 2004, 26). As the oldest of the Vedas states, “Truth is one, the wise call it by various names” (*Rigveda* 1.164.46). Modern Hindu theorists have thus employed terms like “pluriform” and “polymorphic monotheism” to describe these varieties of Hindu thought which envision “a single unitary deity who takes many forms and manifests at different levels of reality” (Rosen 2006, 235; see also Schweig 2004, 18–19, 26). As mentioned above, Dutch historian of religion Theodorus P. van Baaren (1912–1989) also promoted the term “pluriform monotheism,” a category which he says “was not recognized by an older generation of scholars,” as a system in which “the various gods of the pantheon, without losing their independence, are at the same time considered to be manifestations of one and the same divine substance” (2009).

Western scholars have proposed other general words for such systems, for example “summodeism.” Coined by historian and philosopher Eric Voegelin (1901–1985) and derived from the Latin *summa* (the sum, the uppermost, totality), “summodeism” was said by him to describe “a manifold of highest local divinities as aspects of the one highest empire god” (Voegelin 1976, 8). In contemporary studies the term is still “sometimes used to designate the conception of a god who is the supreme leader of a group of gods, who are merely different aspects or manifestations of this supreme god” (Herbener 2013, 630). Herbener reveals that the few modern scholars with whom this word has found favor each use it “in slightly different ways,” and ultimately its use “is not very widespread, which is a shame” (19; see Went 2002, 227 cf. Smith 2010, 169). Hoping to “gain some clarity for analysis and discussion,” Smith confesses that he “use[es] these labels only as a short hand way to press closer to various representations

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<sup>24</sup> The earliest extant Samkhya scripture is the *Samkhyakarika* (c. 350–450 CE), which is silent on the question of a supreme god’s existence. However, the *Samkhya Sutra* (c. 14<sup>th</sup> century CE) explicitly argues against such a god.

of deities” (169). Should we settle for merely drawing near to accurate representation? The fact that scholars are using this word in different ways reveals its too-flexible nature, and that this terminology has not supplied us with the necessary species under the genus “monotheism.”

While each of the above terms are generally helpful for indicating the vast diversity of beliefs possible beneath the heading “monotheism,” they nevertheless fall short of the nuance required for first defining monotheism and then sorting the various monotheisms (i.e. the various ways in which religions relate the one god to many deities). In the end, we must be able to clearly distinguish the reduction of entities from the elimination of entities. These terms (“pluriform,” “polymorphic,” “summodeism”) do not adequately clarify whether or not a religion has eliminated a purported array of deities as simply not real (being merely features, acts, or illusions of a single god which humans have mistaken for so many deities), or whether they are real but have been reduced to nothing more than parts of the one god. The fact that scholars have used the same words differently or have used single terms to describe both the elimination and reduction of entities betrays the need for better terms.

### **c. Polydeitism and Monodeitism**

Michael Pye provides an example of one scholar of Japanese religions who has similarly recognized the inadequacies of the dominant terminological paradigm, and one who has suggested we “sanitize and replace” current vocabulary (2013 [2002], 64). Along with some of his colleagues, Pye has experimented with various sets of terms which seek to encompass the range of relationships envisioned between the one and the many and the range of religious attitudes toward these divine beings (perceptions of “multiple agency” and “sole agency,” 64–65), including terminological pairs like “polydeism/monodeism,” and “polydivinism/monodivinism.” At the suggestion of Dr. Kazimiera Mikoś, Pye ultimately settled on “polydeitism/monodeitism,” a set of terms whose peculiarity was not owed to their being “some kind of faith language but technical terms in the study of religions” (66). He defines “monodeitism” as a “system in which only one, sole metaphorical agency is supposed to play any role” (66). He places “Islamic monotheism” and “Vedantic monism” in this category, as well as Buddhism and Daoism, but acknowledges that “different presentations” of these last two religions will be “at one and the same time polydeitist and monodeitist” (67). Ultimately, Pye’s “monodeitism” is “a wider term which includes monotheism, monism, and monodaoism” (67).

Despite Pye’s moderate and in many ways helpful proposal, there are several apparent shortcomings. First, Pye seems to initially want to “replace” the word “monotheism,” but ends up producing merely another umbrella word (“monodeitism”) under which “monotheism” is placed. Second, Pye has suggested that religious systems may straddle both “polydeitism” and “monodeitism” at the same time, severely depressing the usefulness of this particular set of distinctions. Third, merely distinguishing religions on the basis of belief in one agency versus multiple agencies at work in the world may not be helpful in the cases of monotheisms which in addition to a single ultimate agent also see a host of other

powerful spiritual agents at work in the world (e.g. angels, demons, jinn, kami, devas, ghosts, saints, etc.), agents who may even be antagonistic toward the will of an ultimate agent. Furthermore, there is no distinction made here between religions which envision divine beings versus impersonal principles, and neither is there any description of the diverse ways in which religions relate the one god to the many deities. In this light, there seems room for further improvement.

### **3.2.2. Do We Actually Need a Better Definition and Subcategories?**

In light of all of this difficulty and disagreement, the question might be raised as to this project's real value. It is true that some modern specialists believe we should not settle for any particular system, but should instead always use "a number of diverse classifications" and avoid "the exclusive validity of any single taxonomic effort" in order to prevent our limiting of such a rich and multicolored subject as religion (Adams 2018; cf. Herbener 2013, 627). However, it must be recognized that none of the terminological options surveyed above (and these are by far the most popular suggestions), or any clever combination of such terms, have produced a widely accepted standard. Of course, some scholars have thrown up their hands entirely at this daunting situation. Because of the inadequacy of changing definitions, they suggest that we should relinquish the vain quest for neat categorization and should simply describe the religious beliefs of others (Heiser 2008, 27). However, as discussed in earlier chapters, neither academia nor the wider public seem interested in giving up on words like "monotheism." Scholars of religion must resolve to do the hard work, and if current terminology or the use of current terminology is insufficient then it should be revisited, and as many times as necessary.

Still, we will not be able to stop at merely justifying "monotheism" as a broad genus. There are, as will continue to be argued below, real differences between monotheists which demand enunciation (i.e. differences between monotheists regarding how they believe the one god relates to the world and to other deities). The idea that we should allow such important distinctions to be swallowed up by a broad category, or that we should simply "describe" what different religions believe, looks increasingly unacceptable in light of an analogy to biological science. When a new species is discovered, it is not lumped into an older category of the taxonomic order. Neither are earnest "descriptions" scribbled in the margins. Rather, it is given a new branch in the taxonomy, and, if necessary, the entire system is revised. Scholars of religion must have a similar willingness to revise older models on the basis of real distinctions between monotheistic beliefs.

### **3.3. Tuggy's Path Toward Clarity: Distinguishing Between a God and a Mere Deity**

At this stage, we are still in need of a better definition of "monotheism" and better subcategories by which to address the beliefs of different sorts of monotheists. In light of the fact that the English word "god" (and its non-English equivalents) is widely used by religions and scholars of religion to refer to

apparently very different kinds of things, our necessary starting point in getting clear on monotheism will be located in our need to be able to distinguish between such diverse figures as the Yahweh of the Hebrew Bible and the Susanoo of Shinto tradition. Dale Tuggy, in his vital 2017 article, has provided a guiding light in this regard. Tuggy offers “a better set of terms” which both preserves current words and provides “a good fit with common human conceptions” (3). He ultimately proposes we make a distinction between a “god” and a “deity,” and one in which all gods are deities but not all deities are gods (194). Tuggy subsequently replaces the “confused and confusing” trichotomy of *monotheism-polytheism-atheism*, with a new trichotomy of *monotheism-polydeism-atheism* (205–213). Below I will both present and expand upon Tuggy’s useful proposal, developing a useful set of tools for our interpretation and description of Japan’s Kurozumikyō, Tenrikyō, and Konkōkyō.

At a minimum, Tuggy argues that the word “deity” should refer to a very powerful, personal being, a person who has “supernatural” power to do the kinds of things humans care about, like raise the dead, be impervious to physical damage, or know things from far away. Here we bypass the preference of philosophers who have so reduced the meaning of religious words, like the immortal Kant, to the end that “God” is “pure practical reason itself in its personality” (cited in Förster and Rosen 1998 [1993], 202) and “must be represented not as a Being outside me but as the highest moral principle in me” (cited in Dunham 2016, 272). If Kant’s Reason is to be excluded from the category of deity, so too must impersonal forces like the Dao (see Kim 1973, ii).

What makes a deity a god? As Tuggy prudently recommends, a god is not merely a figure which is called “god,” rather the word “god” is a “sortal or kind term, referring to the sort of being that atheists believe there to be no example of” (2017, 194). Tuggy suggests this figure would satisfy both the philosophical search for the most perfect or greatest possible being and the theological requirements of religions which are traditionally said to be “monotheistic.” That being said, if such a being were imagined to exist, there could only be one of these, since this entity must be both omnipotent (and there cannot therefore be *two*), and *a se* (existing on its own without a parent), and must satisfy the biblical and qur’anic images of a solitary, universal, and uncreated creator.<sup>25</sup> This is, as Tuggy puts it, an “ultimate being,” who is “the highest, most basic, most real, or ‘farthest back’ being” (195). This prohibits figures like Zeus, despite his supremacy over the other figures of the Greek pantheon, from being labeled a god—he had a parent, Cronos, and is not the farthest back being. Indeed, an efficient way of determining whether any religious figure is a god or a mere deity is to see what a religion has to say about that figure’s origin. Does it have a parent? Did any other beings exist before it did? It is not a god.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> “Again, consider the uncreated creator of all else, the unique god of Abrahamic monotheism. This being too is ultimate; all else comes from him, but he comes from nothing else. If anything explains his existence, it will only be himself” (Tuggy 2017, 196).

<sup>26</sup> Of course, a religion may not explicitly describe the origins of its deities. Some religious creation myths in history do seem to begin their stories with their deities already on the scene.

In short, all gods are deities but only deities which are also ultimate beings are gods. Again, if this is a god, it is to be distinguished from an “ultimate reality,” that is, an impersonal force, principle, or universal property like Kant’s Reason, or the Dao, or Platonism’s One. Tuggy suggests classifying such beliefs not as monotheism but as “Ultimism” (198).<sup>27</sup> There may be much overlap between historical religions’ concepts of an ultimate reality and a personal god. Many religious traditions have understood the universe to be a self, or that the cosmos is permeated by a self (utilizing such terms as “pantheism” and “panentheism”). As Tuggy notes, if this is a self, this must be a solitary god: “This mighty soul of the world, this divine self of all, is embodied in all the cosmos; it lives in the whole, and in each entity which is part of the whole. No other being, it is assumed, could also be so embodied” (196). Some religions, while ostensibly ascribing personality to such a being, have denied the existence of a “creator” god, since they do not imagine a being like the uncreated creator of traditional biblical and qur’anic interpretation—understood to be progenitors of worlds outside of themselves. Rather, theirs is a god who is itself the universe (pantheism), or which fills and is affected by all living things (panentheism). But as Tuggy rightly explains, “the god whose body is the cosmos is in some sense the creator or source of the cosmos, whether or not it was created *ex nihilo*” (195). Furthermore, he writes:

This being is in some sense prior to the cosmos, and is in some sense the source of it. He may be its creator, or it may be thought of as a transformation of himself, or even a guise he puts on, or an action of his, whether eternally or a long time ago. While the cosmos is real, it is not ultimate, but must be understood in relation to its other aspect or part or ground, the soul which is God. While God and the cosmos are thought to mutually affect one another, in some sense the first is the source of the second, but not vice-versa. (Tuggy 2017, 196)

In other words, if it is monotheism, it must hold that a personal god is the source (creator) of the cosmos, and it cannot be that the cosmos, or some principle, is the preceding cause behind this being’s existence. The fact that monotheism, upon close inspection, proves inclusive of what are typically described as classical theistic, pantheistic, and panentheistic systems will prove especially important for our forthcoming analysis of monotheism in Kurozumikyō, Tenrikyō, and Konkōkyō.

Within Tuggy’s definitional framework we are able to recognize without conflict a simultaneous belief in only one god and many deities, and are therefore able to speak more accurately about religions. However, in order to salvage the term “monotheism,” it is necessary to sacrifice another word: *polytheism*. In Tuggy’s view, a “polytheism” would be a contradiction: there cannot be two gods (*theoi*), two farthest-back beings, two ultimate creators. Tuggy thus suggests a replacement of the long-standing

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<sup>27</sup> “To someone who says ‘I believe in an impersonal God,’ I would say that I would describe their belief as in The Ultimate, that is, an ultimate which is not a self, and so neither a god nor a deity. In my terms, ‘impersonal God’ and ‘impersonal god’ are contradictions in terms” (Tuggy 2017, 198).

trichotomy *monotheism-polytheism-atheism*, with a new trichotomy of *monotheism-polydeism-atheism* (205–213). Just as common references to “polytheism” should be replaced with “polydeism,” so too should references to a religion’s “pantheon” be replaced with “pandeon,” since on Tuggy’s definition there cannot be more than one god (*theos*), though there might exist a range of “deities.”

In this light, a religion which believes in the existence of only one deity would be a monotheism (or a monodeism); a Roman pagan who believes only in a host of deities would be a polydeist; a Christian who believes in the god Yahweh as well as a plurality of angels and demons would be a monotheist (a believer in only one god) but she would also be a polydeist (someone who believes in the existence of more than one deity). The Christian would best be described, according to Tuggy, as a polydeistic monotheist (205, 210).

### **3.4. Subcategories of Monotheism**

We now see two major sub-categories of monotheism coming into view: monodeistic monotheism (only one deity exists; all other deities have in truth been eliminated); and polydeistic monotheism (many deities exist; only one of them is a god). That being said, there remain further degrees to which we might clarify these two subcategories of monotheism, and in ways which will prove helpful in our specific inquiry about monotheism in Japanese NRMs. Below I will propose the following new categories for sorting the varieties of monodeistic and polydeistic monotheisms, in other words, subcategories for describing the various ways which monotheistic religions relate the one god to other deities. Following these descriptions, a visual summary will be included.

#### **3.4.1. Subcategories of Polydeistic Monotheism: Deities as Creatures, Emanations, and Fragments**

##### **a. Transcendent Polydeistic Monotheism (Deities as Creatures)**

*There is one god; all other beings, divine and human, differ in essential kind from the one god and are independent and subordinate creatures.*

The category “transcendent polydeistic monotheism” would include Jewish, Islamic, and some Christian theologies which in addition to a singular, personal god may affirm a host of created deities like angels and demons, all of which are entirely distinct and differ in nature from the one god. The pandeon (an array of “deities”) does not in any way exist “in” the one god; they do not share its stuff or divine essence; there is no part-whole relationship; the one god is wholly beyond the pandeon. By definition, a transcendent polydeistic monotheism is dualistic (non-monistic): while the one god himself is a single entity, he is surrounded by distinct selves of a different kind. This category includes the image

of god proposed by classical theism in the West of a great transcendent self, both far above and entirely responsible for all else outside of its being.

### **b. Emanationistic Polydeistic Monotheism (Deities as Emanations)**

*There is one god; some or all of the world's deities are emanations of the one god who have been brought into existence by the one god projecting or extending some of its stuff or being.*

In this sort of monotheism, the members of the pandeon are thought of as effusions from the undiminished essence or substance of the one god (which may or may not be conceived in materialistic terms). A favored illustration of such views describes the sun and its rays: the projection of the rays in no way diminishes the sun, and while the rays are able to be distinguished, they remain linked to their source. This kind of view clearly differs from a unitary personality who merely looks different to different people, or who serially manifests in different ways (forms of monodeism). Monotheists of this sort might conclude that all the world's deities, even the deities described by different religions, are emanations of the same god, or they might restrict the number of such deities to only a few. Does the fact of multiple divine persons preclude monotheism? In this sort of view, it must be that only the original god (the farthest-back deity) has the property of aseity, while the other deities are subsequent entities who owe their existence to the first. Analogically, we can think of emanationistic polydeistic monotheism like a parent who instead of giving birth in the normal way, one day sprouts another person in such a way that the new person is entirely and forever umbilically linked to and dependent on the body of the original person, but not the reverse.

### **c. Fragmentary Polydeistic Monotheism (Deities as Fragments)**

*There is one god; detached portions of the divine stuff which used to compose the one god now severally compose various other beings. The one god is not a whole made of these distinct selves.*

Elaborating on the emanationism described above, in this sort of monotheism, myriad deities are seen as emanations which have become detached from the one god. While sharing in the one god's substance, these now exist apart from him. The Christian gnostic Ptolemy (fl. late second century CE) wrote that "it is the nature of the good [God] to beget and bring forth that which is similar to it and *homoousios* [of the same substance]," and in his system Ptolemy ultimately distinguished the *aeons* as separate beings, as broken-off divine pieces, now existing apart from the being of the one god.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> See Ptolemy's *Letter to Flora* as recalled by Epiphanius in *Panarion*, 33, 7.8.

#### **d. A Compound View: Emanationistic-Fragmentary Polydeistic Monotheism**

Some polydeistic monotheists might see only some of the world's beings as emanations (wherein the divine stuff of these beings remains connected to the one god) while others might be considered fragments of the one god (wherein some of the divine stuff has been broken off). This hybrid outlook can be observed in Dvaita Vedānta, a school founded by Madhva (1238–1317 CE). The only *svatantra* (independent) entity is the god Vishnu (see Madhvacharya, *Tattvasamkhyānam*, 1; see also Sarma 2007, 358). This one god personally governs the universe, and has manifested in many forms, yet it is not the case that every deity of the world is an emanation or another name for Vishnu. All others are *asvatantra* (dependent) on Vishnu; in other words, Vishnu alone has aseity. Thus, all other divine beings, including *jivatman*, the human soul, are real independent selves who depend on Vishnu for their existence. Yet the human selves, and some members of the Hindu pantheon, do not seem to maintain a substantial link to their parent and are truly detached beings. Meanwhile the one god Vishnu does manifest in this way, namely in several emanations (*vyūhas*) which are found in the higher planes of existence and are only four or five (Vasudeva, Sankarshana, Pradyumna, Aniruddha, and Narayana). Thus, both emanationistic and fragmentary models of the one god's relationship to other beings are present in this tradition. While prevalent in Indian religions, such compound systems have also emerged in other global contexts, for example in the Graeco-Roman philosophical religion of Hermeticism. In *The Asclepius* we discover an emanationistic-fragmentary view of polydeistic monotheism: some of the world's beings (the deities) remain substantially connected to the one god, while others (the humans) represent detached portions (see *The Asclepius*, 5, 14, 19–23, 32; Copenhaver 1995, 69–87). The above analysis will ultimately provide a helpful analogy in our examination of Kurozumikyō and Tenrikyō.

#### **3.4.2. Subcategories of Monodeistic Monotheism: Deities as Modes and Illusions**

##### **a. Pluriform Monodeistic Monotheism (Deities as Modes)**

*There is one god; all apparent deities are merely manifestations of this single person. The various merely apparent deities are in fact different modes of the one god's being (different ways which this unique divine person is), and their names actually all refer to the one god.*

In such a monotheism the one god (by definition a single personal being) has deliberately manifested in different forms, and often for practical or soteriological purposes: this god may have appeared in such a way and at such a time in order to teach or save a particular group of humans. Religions which take such a view in pluralistic contexts may identify the many deities of potentially rival religions as merely different names for the same god, who has compassionately represented himself so diversely. This is much different than the three varieties of polydeistic monotheism described above, which see the many

deities in the world as distinct selves. In contrast, pluriform monodeistic monotheism has the potential to collapse all deities into a single self (monodeism).

Examples of pluriform monodeistic monotheism, clearly distinguished, may be found in historical and contemporary reports on Graeco-Roman religion (see Dio Chrysostom, *Rhodian Oration* 11; MacMullen 1981, 88). The Roman god Sol Invictus, flourishing in the third and fourth centuries CE, is said to have been treated by many Romans as “the one universal Godhead... recognized under a thousand names” (so the famous description of J.N.D. Kelly, cited in Carroll 2001, 180–81). Likewise, the Roman scholar Varro (116–27 BCE) declined to distinguish between Jupiter and the biblical Yahweh on the grounds that it didn’t matter by which name the god was called so long as the same god was intended (see Assmann 2008, 56).

### **b. Illusory Monodeistic Monotheism (Deities as Illusions)**

*All religions have equally very limited access to the one god; most perceived characteristics of this deity assumed by religions and any apparent pantheon are illusions, merely human projections constructed on insufficient knowledge.*

In the preceding category of pluriform monodeistic monotheism, human beings are able to know something about the nature of the one god, namely that it has deliberately represented itself in multiple manifestations or modes which appear to be multiple deities. Often such theologies include additional assessments of the metaphysical or practical reasons for this god’s various modes, or the ethical motivation behind its diverse representation to human beings (e.g. compassion). In an illusory monodeistic monotheism, however, due to human limitations or a lack of divine revelation, no such truths are able to be known. All that is able to be known is that there is only one deity (monodeism); therefore all other views in which more than one deity exists (transcendent polydeistic monotheism; emanationistic polydeistic monotheism; fragmentary polydeistic monotheism), and views in which this one deity deliberately represents itself as various deities (pluriform monodeistic monotheism), are merely flawed human interpretations of the one. Some educated Romans in late antiquity appear to have assumed such a view, and thought that to divide the one divinity into many different personalities was a self-centered foolishness, since god is one and cannot fully be discerned. Pliny the Elder (c. 23 – 79 CE) writes that “whatever God be... all [is] within himself. To believe that there are a number of gods... indicates still greater folly... Human nature... has made these divisions, so that every one might have recourse to that which he supposed himself to stand more particularly in need of. Hence we find different names employed by different nations” (Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, 2.15). It is not that one god has deliberately shown himself in diverse forms to different people-groups; rather, such distinctions are human inventions. While not in truth a monotheist, philosopher John Hick in his *God Has Many Names* (1980) famously advocated similar ideas. He suggested that the Real (a transcendent

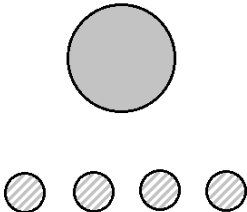
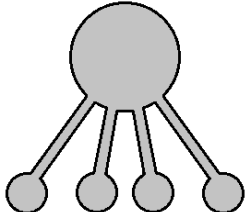
who-knows-what which is neither a personal deity nor an impersonal ultimate) may be so difficult for humans to grasp that the various world religions are in fact worshipping the same thing, but through different overlapping concepts of mental icons of it (Hick 1982 [1980], 66–67). In Hick’s view, the world’s religions are therefore equally right (in truth, equally wrong!) about the Real. However, someone more confident of the Real’s nature as a personal deity might say that all monotheists, being subject to the same limitations, are equally right in addressing this unique deity as such, though they might be wrong to various degrees regarding the nature or existence of a purported pandeon.<sup>29</sup>

Ultimately, both pluriform and illusory monodeistic monotheism are able to neutralize the tension between contrasting images of the divine by affirming monodeism, that is, by eliminating the pandeon. Because of either the one god’s design or human error, both sorts of monodeists would likely nod in agreement with the sentiment of the supreme god of the *Bhagavad-Gita*: “Many are the paths people follow, but they all in the end come to me.”<sup>30</sup>

### 3.4.3. Our Monotheistic Subcategories in Review

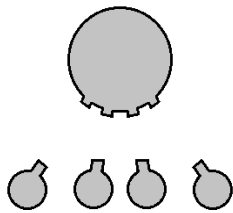
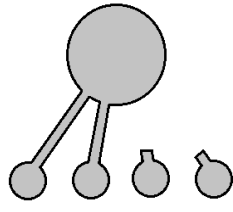
Below I have included a visual guide to these categories for reference.

#### 1. Subcategories of Polydeistic Monotheism

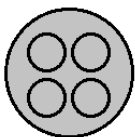
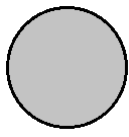
<p><b>(a) Transcendent Polydeistic Monotheism</b></p> <p><i>There is one god; all other beings, divine and human, differ in essential kind from the one god and are independent and subordinate creatures.</i></p>	
<p><b>(b) Emanationistic Polydeistic Monotheism</b></p> <p><i>There is one god; some or all of the world’s deities are emanations of the one god who have been brought into existence by the one god projecting or extending some of its stuff or being.</i></p>	

<sup>29</sup> For a similar view, see the “some-are-equally-right” model of religious pluralism presented (but not endorsed) by philosopher Mikael Stenmark, in which only some of the world’s religions are equally right in tracking the truth but only in some respects; see Stenmark 2009, 21–35.

<sup>30</sup> Krishna, avatar of Vishnu; *Bhagavad-Gita*, 4.11.

<p><b>(c) Fragmentary Polydeistic Monotheism</b></p> <p><i>There is one god; detached portions of the divine stuff which used to compose the one god now severally compose various lesser beings. The one god is not a whole made of these distinct selves.</i></p>	
<p><b>(d) A Compound View: Emanationistic-Fragmentary Polydeistic Monotheism</b></p>	

## 2. Subcategories of Monodeistic Monotheism

<p><b>(a) Pluriform Monodeistic Monotheism</b></p> <p><i>There is one god; all apparent deities are merely manifestations of this single person. The various merely apparent deities are in fact different modes of the one god's being (different ways which this unique divine person is), and their names actually all refer to the one god.</i></p>	
<p><b>(b) Illusory Monodeistic Monotheism</b></p> <p><i>All religions have equally very limited access to the one god, most perceived characteristics of this deity assumed by religions and any apparent pandeon are illusions, merely human projections constructed on insufficient knowledge.</i></p>	

### 3.5. Further Consideration: Pantheism, Panentheism, and Pluriform/Illusory Monodeistic Monotheism

Harada Tasuku (1863–1940), pastor and president of the Christian Doshisha University from 1807–1919, wrote that “It is true that a strict monotheism has never found congenial soil in Japan, yet there is not infrequently to be noticed the idea of a unitary force behind the manifold exhibitions of what are called *kami*...” (1914, 294). By a strict monotheism Harada appears to have meant an austere

monodeism with no other deities (in truth a very rare kind of monotheism). Yet he is right to emphasize that Japanese quests for divinity have more often than not taken place against a backdrop of a grand, singular, and yet diffused spiritual reality which in some sense is responsible for the life of myriad deities and other beings. In this light, a brief excursion into the categories of “pantheism” and “panentheism,” so often employed in the classification of religions, is necessary for our own quest for divinity in Japan’s NRMs. Like the term “monotheism,” even a cursory review of the literature will reveal how widely both of these terms have been misunderstood and abused, and how in need they are of sorting out before their usefulness for this study can emerge (see Zaleha 2009).

Broadly speaking, “pantheism” (all-god-ism; Japanese: *ban'yūshinron*) is usually intended to refer to a religious belief which identifies the universe with a god. Sometimes this kind of view is described by scholars as one in which the universe is in some sense a god’s “body” (see Smart 1981, 51–59). The word probably was first used by the Christian philosopher John Toland (1670–1722), who used it to refer to the “opinion of those who believe in no other eternal being but the universe” (Toland 1726 [1710], 394). Today the term “pantheism” has become irrevocably muddled in the study of religion, to the end that it can be difficult to know precisely what scholars mean when they refer to this or that person as a pantheist. Originally, “pantheism” was developed to refine “theism,” like the words “monotheism” and “henotheism” currently do. Now, unfortunately, the term “pantheism” is very often used in both philosophical and religious studies circles to describe a negation of theism, that is, an atheism (see Meixner 2020, 205). Indeed, the word is regularly applied to what is in truth an atheistic ultimism (wherein there exists an ultimate or fundamental world-principle, but there is no personal, powerful, farthest-back creator), and is even confusingly declared “a non-theistic concept of deity” (see Levine 1994). Spinoza (1632–1677), with his “impersonal god” (in truth, a unity of all substance which he called “god”), is today regarded as pantheism’s greatest champion, and to this day, many who would describe themselves as pantheists would identify the denial of a personal god as the defining characteristic of their view.<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, the question which the term “pantheism” was first made to answer was not whether a god exists, but what a god’s relationship is to the world. Thus, by its original definition, “pantheism” describes a form of theism, one distinguished by an additional, monistic claim that “[d]own deep, below the level of perception, all things are only one thing. That one thing is the divine reality” (Peters 2007, 281). Pantheistic views hold this grounding to be a single great person, a self who is embodied by the entire universe, and is therefore the cause or the source of the universe. While

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<sup>31</sup> Schopenhauer once described “pantheism” as “a superfluous synonym for the word world” (1851, 99). Dawkins calls it “sexed-up Atheism” (Dawkins 2008, 40). The labeling of systems which envision an “impersonal god” as pantheism—again the regular treatment of Spinoza comes to mind—unfortunately continues. See, for example, Bennett’s investigation of Spinoza, who he calls a pantheist, and says his position is “a kind of theism rather than of atheism.” Bennett says this primarily because Spinoza was able to have great awe and reverence for the grandeur and complexity of nature, and so nature was the best subject for theistic descriptions and the best object for theistic attitudes; see Bennet 1984, 322–35. But there is no reason why belief in an impersonal ultimate could not involve a sense of awe or even reverence. For example, Daoists certainly appear to be in awe of and revere the Dao, yet theirs is no “god,” on our definition.

many have applied the pantheism label to non-theistic views, there continue to be a great many scholars who both recognize and strongly emphasize the *-theism* in pantheism, and even speak of the god in view in traditional terms, like omniscience, perfection, eternity, omnipotence, etc. (see Mander 2000, 204; Leslie 2001; see also Francks 1979, 395–399). Ultimately, if any view posits that a god is embodied in the universe, this is without question a monotheistic view, since, as Tuggy notes, no other person but one could be so embodied (2017, 196).

A pantheism is therefore a kind of monodeistic monotheism, specifically one in which a god is identical to the world and all things within it. If all other divine selves within this world-god end up being illusions of human design, this would be a pantheistic form of illusory monodeistic monotheism. It might be, however, that the world-god has also deliberately represented itself to human beings (some of its own elements) as many deities, and therefore pluriform monodeistic monotheism would more accurately describe this pantheistic view. Any Japanese NRM which might be accurately identified with this additional label of “pantheism” will need to be a monotheistic one which ultimately eliminates the self. If any NRM is a monodeistic monotheism because it eliminates only some selves or things in the world (e.g. the deities) but a god is not identical to everything in the world (e.g. human beings), then the qualifier “pantheism” should not be used in addition to monodeistic monotheism.

How does this category of “pantheism” (all-god-ism) differ from “panentheism” (all-in-god-ism), a term sometimes used by Western scholars to describe Japanese religious concepts? Do panentheistic religions eliminate or preserve human individuality? Broadly speaking, advocates for the use of the category “panentheism” (Japanese: *ban'yūzaishinron*) aim for a *via media* between classical theism and pantheism, describing a model in which the world is *in* a god, but this god is in some sense more than the world. This sort of distinction seems to have first emerged in the work of post-Kantian philosopher Karl Friedrich Krause (1781–1832), and under the German word *Allingottlehre* (lit. “the doctrine that all is in God”), which he clearly used in order to differentiate his doctrine from classical theism and pantheism.<sup>32</sup> While it is still difficult to know precisely what Krause meant, in John Cooper’s (2006) view, Krause believed that “the distinction between God and the world is that of whole and part” (122). The world belongs to god’s being, but god’s being contains more than is manifest in the world (see Gregerson 2004, 28). In this sort of view, the significance of the things in the world, including other deities and human beings, is maintained. However, scholars describing panentheism have explained the precise relationship between these elements in the world differently, creating a challenge for definitions (see Culp 2020). In the traditional sense, however, panentheism describes a belief in which a god is so interconnected with the elements of the world that they could not exist independently. In the well-known usage of Alfred North Whitehead, responsible for the boom in “process theology” in the twentieth century (see Fiddes 1993, 472–476; see also Epperly 2011), the interdependence of god and creation is stressed: “It is as true to say that God is one and the World many, as that the World is one and

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<sup>32</sup> See Cooper 2006, 26. For his development and relationship with Schelling and Hegel, see Hartshorne 1987, 165–171.

God many... It is as true to say that God creates the World, as that the World creates God” (Whitehead 1978, 348). Here, a god cannot exist without generating some world. Charles Hartshorne and William Reese (1953) thus define panentheism as any theology which denies creation *ex nihilo*, and in which “To be himself [a god] does not need *this* universe, but only *a* universe” (22–23). However, it must be said that this category of panentheism has remained a hotly debated one. While some scholars have claimed that panentheism represents an ancient concept present in many of the world’s ancient religions (see Biernacki, Clayton 2013; Lataster and Bilimoria 2018), precisely how this category offers a coherent alternative to classical theism and pantheism has been the subject of rigorous debate (see Mullins 2016; cf. Lataster and Bilimoria 2018, 49–64; cf. Mullins 2019 204–207). Indeed, if a religion says that everything in the world is in a god, then this god in view seems to ultimately be identical to the world, and it is difficult to see how such a religion differs from a pantheistic one (see Meixner 2020, 206–207; Mullins 2016, 325–346). Proponents of the category of panentheism have attempted to evade this problem by asserting that panentheism is a form of pantheism (Lataster and Bilimoria 2018, 53–58), which seems, in truth, to not so decisively separate the two categories, since a subcategory necessarily belongs to its parent. Given the wide diversity of beliefs which have recently been counted as panentheism, even some advocates have suggested that the wish for a definitive concept might never be fulfilled (Lataster 2014, 390). Easily detected here, even in this positive account, is a potential problem of meaning. To draw this out is only to demand the best, most accurate categories for interpreting and cataloguing the religious beliefs of our subjects.

As we will see, earlier Western scholars were prone to applying the category of pantheism to Shinto beliefs (and to the beliefs of Shinto-related NRMs), while more recent scholarship has felt more inclined to paint Shinto in general as closer to panentheism. In the recent observation of Darren Middleton (2020), for example, we read that “process panentheism is not simply a Western wonder. Rather its history reaches back into an ancient and diverse (i.e. non-Western) religious past, as studies show, and, more specifically, this intricate worldview is not alien or foreign to Japan” (246). In the coming chapters, I will argue that while some Japanese NRMs’ teachings are able to accurately be described as pantheism, some which have traditionally been described as either pantheistic or panentheistic will be better served by my monotheistic sub-categories. In these categories, much (but not all) of what proponents of panentheism want to say seems able to be satisfied (a god is immanent in the things of the world, but is more than the world) though what is sacrificed here is the claim that absolutely everything in the world is identical to a god. Some things in such monotheisms will ultimately differ from the one god, a claim which will truly move a religion away from a monistic view (pantheism).

Ultimately, while the cause of accurate representation will be directly served by the ongoing controversy around the categories of pantheism and panentheism, namely the debate over whether there is any real difference between the two, the most important revelation for the present study is the fact that both categories, in their original inception, were designed to describe, and are still often used to

describe, types of monotheistic belief. In this study, “pantheism” may be used to refer to a monodeistic monotheism in which not only a purported pandeon but everything in the universe is in fact identical to the one god. “Panentheism” will be avoided as a tenuous category and, where applicable, pantheism or one of the other subcategories of monotheism will be preferred.

### **3.6. Conclusion**

In light of all of this, it is easy to see how both the confines of religious and scholarly tradition, and the nuance required to overcome them, have continued to make monotheism a challenging topic of conversation. What’s more, monotheism—at least modern perceptions of it—has continued to boast a remarkable ability to electrify both social, political, and anthropological arguments. None of the contemporary discussions of monotheism, including the present investigation of Japan’s NRMs, will be served by maintaining inadequate categories. It is only once the tools by which we hope to describe religious beliefs have themselves been assessed (and if necessary, upgraded) that we can feel confident about engaging religion in a simultaneously scientific and sympathetic way. Being freshly armed with a more nuanced taxonomical lens, including a better definition of monotheism and more helpful subcategories, the twin questions of the presence of monotheism and of which sort of monotheism, can be properly asked of Kurozumikyō, Tenrikyō, and Konkōkyō.

# Revisiting Japan’s New Religious Movements

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*“The true and real God in the universe is Tsukibi.  
The others are all instruments.”*

— *Ofudesaki* VI, 50

## 4.1. Introduction

Now that we have been equipped with the proper means for distinguishing the religious concept of monotheism and its several varieties, we must begin the challenging work of applying these tools toward the clarification of Japan’s NRMs. Here I will stay true to our objective of producing a study to the benefit and interest of Western scholars by utilizing both the already-available data in the aforementioned Western studies and also official English-language publications by the Kurozumikyō, Tenrikyō, and Konkōkyō organizations themselves. Here it will be observed that Western scholars interested in questions about monotheism in Japan currently have at their disposal sufficient data for a more accurate picture of the monotheistic beliefs of these NRMs.

## 4.2. Revisiting Kurozumikyō

### 4.2.1. Western Studies on Kurozumikyō in Review

Reviewing our survey of Western scholarship on Kurozumikyō’s relationship with monotheism, we recall that Hepner (1935) had recognized only the “possibility” of monotheism, and a doctrine which was “confused” by the “existence of numerous deities alongside of Amaterasu-Ō-Mi-Kami,” and a monotheistic potential that was ultimately crushed by the “pantheistic and polytheistic elements” in Kurozumi’s teachings (119, 124). Thomsen (1963) was only willing to say, quite vaguely, that it “tended” in a monotheistic direction (77); likewise, Kitagawa (1990 [1966], 1987) ultimately denied Kurozumikyō was a monotheism. More recently Hardacre (1986, 2017), has also denied the category of monotheism and chose “henotheism” on the grounds that more than one divine being was

acknowledged. I suggest that it is this latter fact which has been crucial in the analysis of most Westerners. While the ambiguity surrounding the question of whether or not Tenrikyō acknowledges more than one deity has allowed at least some Western scholars to recognize a Tenrikyō monotheism, the unambiguous acceptance of multiple deities in Kurozumikyō is what has tipped the scales more strongly against monotheism in the majority of Western studies.

#### 4.2.2. Kurozumikyō's Amaterasu Revisited

How have Kurozumikyō theologians explained their doctrine in the face of Western analysis? Reverend Kurozumi Muneharu (b. 1937), sixth Chief Patriarch of Kurozumikyō, expressed the following in several lectures published in *Kurozumi Shinto: An American Dialogue* (1989a; 1989b; 1989c). There are, he says, three sorts of kami worshiped by Kurozumikyō: “(1) the *yaoyorōzu no kami* (8 million kami), (2) Amaterasu Ōmikami as the leading kami, and (3) the Teacher Munetada as kami” (1989a, 50). If Kurozumi Muneharu had simply stated that his religion venerates many kami, one might resonate with the confusion or denial of monotheism expressed by Western analysts. However, Kurozumi pointedly distinguishes Amaterasu from the rest of this pandeon: she is “the leading kami,” and in what sense she is dominant is made quite clear. Amaterasu is “the High Kami of the universe, of heaven and earth... Amaterasu Ōmikami is the kami who created the world. She is Almighty Kami. She is a universal kami, the Kami for everybody” (50). Indeed, “Amaterasu Ōmikami created all that exists” (Kurozumi, *Gobun* 249, quoted in Kurozumi 1994, 21). So long as we take seriously Kurozumikyō's claims about Amaterasu (which must be the solemn charge of the scholar of religion) we find here a god amidst mere deities. Despite Western assessments to the contrary, Kurozumikyō is a monotheism, and specifically a polydeistic monotheism. The hesitation observed in Hardacre's 1986 assessment over “monotheism” due to Kurozumikyō's myriad deities, and her resulting preference of “henotheism,” can be revised in light of the fact that the vast majority of the world's monotheisms involve a great god surrounded by “a cloud of [divine] beings” (see Swanson 1960, 55). Can we specify the relationship between Amaterasu and this cloud of kami even further?

Looking to Amaterasu's relationship to both the world and humanity will prove helpful. Kurozumi Muneharu says that all human beings are “a part of the Kami [Amaterasu]” (1989a, 50). In older views of Shinto kami, he says, they were “existence[s] apart from people, interpreted as a supernatural presence... [But] Humanity should not forget that Kami exists inside of them and they are one part (*bunshin*) of Kami. The mind of human beings is but a portion of Amaterasu Ōmikami. This mind of human beings *is* Amaterasu Ōmikami” (52, emphasis his).<sup>33</sup> A detailed metaphysical explanation is then provided for how this god's being is related to human bodies: when a woman becomes pregnant, a distinct portion of Amaterasu “come[s] into the core of the cell at the moment when the condition is

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<sup>33</sup> The *bunshin* is the “small soul,” referring to a divided portion of a deity; also called *wake-mitama*.

met that the two cells from the two parents have become one” (1989b, 83). In this light, Kurozumi speaks regularly of “humanity’s divinity” (1989a, 60). It is not, however, that all things are identical to Amaterasu; it is specifically “the center of [the human] mind” which is a distinct “portion of Amaterasu Ōmikami” (1989b, 72). Indeed, humans are “children of Kami” (72). Other elements of the world are similarly identified: “[s]ome people think that Kurozumi-kyō regards Amaterasu Ōmikami as the sun itself, and that it worships the sun as kami. However, Munetada says ‘The sun, the moon and myself come from Amaterasu Ōmikami.’ We should see that she is the source from which these come” (1989a, 52). These teachings have remained consistent, as demonstrated by a lecture at the 2004 Parliament of the World’s Religions in Barcelona by the group’s current Chief Patriarch, Kurozumi Munemichi (b. 1962): Amaterasu is “the greatest *kami*, that is the parent *kami* of the universe... the fountainhead of all lives in the world” (2004, 15). While there are myriad “deities called *kami* in all existences on earth... we are convinced of the existence of the parent *kami* that gives birth to and nurtures all lives as a source of vital power” (33). Affirming the words of the founder, he explains: “‘Human beings are the children of the *kami*, beings who have been apportioned with the spirit of Amaterasu.’ This apportioning of *kami* is called *bunshin*... [there is an] apportioned spirit of Amaterasu dwelling within the minds of all people” (15–16).

Kurozumikyō’s doctrine may thus be classed as an emanationistic polydeistic monotheism.<sup>34</sup> First, this monotheism is polydeistic (recognizing many deities); second, it is emanationistic (and not “fragmentary” or “transcendent”) since the distinct portions of the creator Amaterasu are not severed but remain connected to their source. Kurozumi Muneharu explains this clearly: “We can get water by turning a faucet. This is because the faucet is directly connected to the source of water supply... we are directly connected with Kami through our inner spirit just as fresh water flows in torrents from a source to each faucet” (1989b, 72). Some humans are “far away” from the heart of Amaterasu, and “the less water and the less water pressure you will get... the less divine virtue can be provided, in turn causing more problems” (72–73). But some humans, like the founder, have their hearts so in tune with the one god, and have so cultivated their *bunshin* that they are considered to be more full of Amaterasu’s spirit than others. Muneharu prays this for himself and his students: “‘Give me a larger inner spirit. Let me be as close as the Divine Founder is. Let me communicate a greater virtue of Kami’” (75). Second, the doctrine is to be classed an emanationistic polydeistic monotheism since despite the connection between Amaterasu and the other beings in the world, these are, in fact, distinct personalities. Muneharu describes the many divine objects of worship thus: “I shall compare this to a tree. Amaterasu Ōmikami is the thick trunk of the tree. All the numerous branches are the myriads of kami, and the thickest bough among them is Munetada, our Divine Founder. This is the trinity of our religion, and this is how they relate to each other. None of them is the same, just as any two human beings are different from each

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<sup>34</sup> *Emanationistic polydeistic monotheism*: There is one god; some or all of the world’s deities are emanations of the one god who have been brought into existence by the one god projecting or extending some of its stuff or being.

other and have their own roles in society” (82–83). Kurozumi Muneharu even uses the same analogy which I expressed in my definition of emanationistic polydeistic monotheism above: “Figuratively speaking, the relationship is like that of a baby in its mother’s womb, connected with the mother by the umbilical cord” (1989c, 98). Human functions which sustain life are only made possible by this metaphysical connection to the one god; humans “are alive because we are enabled to live. This is the philosophy of life in Kurozumi-kyō and in Shinto” (99). Thus, all of these foundational Kurozumikyō statements are true: “I am always with Kami,” “I am a child of Kami,” and “Kami lives in my mind” (1989b, 74). While every human is distinct from Amaterasu as her child, each has within them a connected portion of the one god in their mind, a portion which must be “developed” to be “as large” as it can possibly be (75; 1989c, 100).

What of the charge of “pantheism” which might be leveled at Kurozumikyō? It seems to me that in Kurozumikyō, the predominant view is that only certain things, like the mind of human beings, are able to be distinguished as uniquely divine among the things of the world. If this is correct, then the system does represent an emanationistic polydeistic monotheism. However, if it is right to say that Kurozumikyō is entirely non-dual and not only in Amaterasu’s relationship with humans and the sun—if all of reality is ultimately indistinguishable from the one god—then this doctrine is best described as either a pantheistic monotheism, or perhaps more specifically as a pantheistic form of pluriform monodeistic monotheism.<sup>35</sup> Here, the world-god has merely represented itself in myriad personalities, all of which are ultimately the same as Amaterasu. However, I will emphasize that at least in the interpretation of Kurozumi Muneharu, the group’s sixth Chief Patriarch, there seems to clearly be an emanationistic polydeistic monotheism. For him, “None of [the myriad kami or humans] is the same, just as any two human beings are different from each other...” (1989b, 82–83).

### 4.3. Revisiting Tenrikyō

#### 4.3.1. Westerners on Tenrikyō in Review

Briefly reviewing Western analysis of Tenrikyō, we recall that Peery (1897) ruled that the foundress Nakayama, being initially visited by “a large number of gods, some of them the greatest in the Shinto pantheon” (139), was clearly a “polytheist,” though her later followers gradually “tended” more towards monotheism, and to the end that “some” of its teachers came to have “an explicit monotheism” (139–142). Noss (1918) was much more negative in his assessment, implying a discrepancy between the “official records” which “claim that it is a monotheistic religion” and the general believers who acknowledge and worship the eight million deities of Shinto (84). Van Straelen (1954, 1963) ruled that

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<sup>35</sup> *Pluriform monodeistic monotheism*: There is one god; all apparent deities are merely manifestations of this single person. The various merely apparent deities are in fact different modes of the one god’s being (different ways which this unique divine person is), and their names actually all refer to the one god.

Tenrikyō's scriptures were contradictory and involved both "polytheistic and monotheistic conceptions of God. Close examination gives evidence of an added pantheistic element as well" (1963, 144–145). Furthermore, he insisted, Nakayama herself was something of a polytheist, but all "logic" was "blocked out" by a "kind of mysticism" (1954, 59), though later, post-war Tenrikyō developed into a definite monotheism (59–60; 1963, 158). Van Straelen suggested that Tenrikyō, and all "Japanese thought," is "simply not amenable to such distinctions [as monotheism, polytheism, and pantheism]" (143). Thomsen (1963) agreed with the bifurcated history presented by Peery and van Straelen: Tenrikyō began as polytheism and still acknowledges other deities in its creation story but it is now largely monotheistic (49–50). Marras (1983) saw something of a "pluralistic identity" in Tenrikyō's one god, but found here a "theistic" (but perhaps not "monotheistic") focus, and ultimately seemed to want to avoid the discussion. Kamstra saw in Tenrikyō a "pluriform monotheism," which for him (following the meaning of historian T.P. van Baaren) meant that God the Parent manifests in various forms (1994, 104–105, 115). The Tenrikyōist scholar Roy Tetsuo Forbes (2005) acknowledged the existence of genuine "polytheistic" and "monotheistic" strains in Tenrikyō history (4), but in his 2008 popular-level work insisted that Nakayama and her original followers were polytheists, and cast doubt on the existence of any solid evidence that Tenrikyō has ever been monotheistic. Ambros and Smith (2018) implied that Tenrikyō was originally not monotheistic, but after World War II, a recast image of God the Parent transformed it into a "monotheistic religion" (33).

All of this Western study has contributed to the establishment in both the popular and academic spheres of a majority view in the West in which early Tenrikyō adherents, including Nakayama herself, were polytheists at best and confused at worst; additionally, modern Tenrikyō is said to have evolved beyond its original doctrines and now exists as a monotheism. However, among at least some Western Tenrikyō practitioners (e.g. Forbes 2005) there have been mixed-to-negative feelings as to whether or not the religion is now genuinely monotheistic. Among Japanese Tenrikyō scholars dealing with Western analysis, some have insisted or implied some relationship with the category of "pantheism," but they have generally insisted that the faith is now, and always has been, monotheistic, and that any polytheistic interpretations of Tenrikyō scriptures were very early and are to be considered mistaken and marginal readings.

In this section, we will consider both the content of these Western studies as well as official English-language discussions of Tenrikyō doctrine published by Tenri University, most of which have been composed as responses to Western studies. Each of these Western sources mean to interact in some way with the received categories of monotheism, polytheism, and/or pantheism, and the content of these sources, when paired with our sharper taxonomic tools gained in the previous chapter, will allow us to make more accurate, more definitive assessments of Tenrikyō doctrine as well as its historical development.

### 4.3.2. Rectifying Tenrikyō's Ten Deities Controversy

I will first work to clarify what I call the ten deities controversy in Tenrikyō by considering several Western-facing publications from Tenrikyō representatives on this issue. In a series of writings composed between 1962–1967, republished by Tenri University in 1986 as “The Theory of Doctrine and the Practice of Faith,” Tenrikyō theologian Nakayama Shozen pushed back on the standard Western assessment (see also 1962 [1954–1960]). Hoping to “correct distortions occurring in the forms of faith,” he begins by acknowledging that in both internal discussions as well as Western studies “there has been a great deal of theological discussion concerning the ten sacred names...” (1986 [1962–1967], 7). He writes: “When one hears the ‘ten sacred names,’ one is in danger of understanding them as the distinct entities of ten deities. God the Parent... is never the representative of ten separate gods having different functions. Rather, these ten sacred names are given to ten different workings of only one God, God the Parent” (Nakayama 1986 [1962–1967], 4; see also Tenrikyo Overseas Department 2010 [1997], 183–185). Therefore, he concludes, “worship should not be directed to these ten deities, but instead exclusively to one God, called Tenri-Ō-no-Mikoto” (7). Nakayama Shozen says that in the days when Tenrikyo was first established, the term “kami” was used to refer to a “vague object of worship,” and was not understood in the sense of an “omniscient and omnipotent” god; the “concept of monotheism, had not yet been fully understood” (4). There were a variety of “ordinary gods [who] were widely accepted among the populace of those times” (5). Thus, terms were added to the word “kami” to help the Japanese people better understand the nature of this deity, terms describing God the Parent as the god “of Origin,” “in Truth,” and the one “who created human beings,” thus, “it was repeatedly declared that God the Parent was not just one of the ordinary, common gods of conjuring oracles or idolatry” (4–5). He acknowledges that the 1903 version of *The Doctrine of Tenrikyo* “enumerated the names of these deities and concluded that ‘Great Tenri-O is a collective name for these ten deities,’ as if the name stood for independent, separate deities.” And “it seems very likely that the followers in those days believed in the separation of the ten deities. But, as I have discussed before, there is no evidence that they overtly worshiped these ten deities separately. In the practice of faith, we find that the followers believed in only one God, God the Parent” (7).

Another Tenrikyō theologian, Nakajima Hideo, confronts directly the 1954 book of Henry van Straelen and its claims of a bifurcated polytheistic-monotheistic history. “This criticism,” he claims, “is wide of the mark, for his wrong idea that Tenrikyo is polytheistic came from the fact that he understood the teachings given in the Scriptures in the very superficial phase of their expression” (1986 [1968], 72). Like Nakayama Shozen, he acknowledges that monotheism did not “find its way to the hearts of people in those [early] days” (77). However, contrary to those who would suggest the multiple names for the one god indicate the foundress’ original belief in multiple deities, the foundress had only communicated to people in metaphors to make divine truths easier to comprehend (72–74; see also Sawai 1986 [1985], 106). The reading of Western scholars which sees them as multiple deities is an interpretation of “its

literal sense” (76). Nakajima also points out in a footnote that the older edition of *The Doctrine of Tenrikyo* (1903) says that: “The Ten Deities are collectively called by the name of Tenri-Okami,” but that this may be “understood that the system of this doctrine was adapted to the religious policy of the government of those days, but [Tenrikyō] expounded the doctrine of Ten Deities rather conversely... the belief in God the Parent, who is the only God, has been kept consistently since the beginning” (Nakajima 1986 [1968], 76, no. 6). Nakajima recalls an interesting episode brought up by those who would call the foundress polytheistic: once there was a man who was disappointed in the many kami and Buddhas he had prayed to, and upon finding Nakayama and her faith, she reportedly said to him: “You have gone along way around before you came here. You will find any and every [deity] here” (77). Nakajima explains: “Her remark must not be taken literally; it does not mean that there were many gods assembled there” (77). He closes by laying the blame for all of the confusion at the feet of God the Parent’s use of metaphors in Tenrikyō teaching, a technique which has “caused a double bottleneck in communication on this point... the problems concerning the conception of God which I have mentioned above resulted from a misunderstanding caused by interpreting metaphorical (or so-called ‘conversational’) expressions on a level with general conceptions” (78). I suggest, however, that God the Parent is not entirely to blame for this situation, what is in truth a significant “problem in the history of Tenrikyō” (Nishiyama 1981, 52). The widespread “misunderstanding” of how one should class Tenrikyō doctrine and understand its development is, in my view, primarily caused by the presence of limited definitions of monotheism and related terms in discussion between Western scholars and Tenrikyōists attempting to reconcile with these received categories.

In light of our previous clarifications, Tenrikyō’s monotheism cannot be denied on the basis of any view of the ten deities controversy surveyed above. In the standard Western view, the ten deities are understood to be ten deities in the earliest readings of the creation story—real, personal beings, mostly derived from Shinto tradition—and so long as Tenrikyō’s widely-published claims about God the Parent are taken seriously (like those on Tenrikyo’s official English-language website which claim that this god is the creator of the universe and of human beings; Tenrikyō 2018), these ten additional figures are found to be mere “deities.” The status of the one god, the creator of all things, is not impugned by these subordinate entities which he has put to work as his “instruments” in the development of humanity. This interpretation reflects a polydeistic monotheism. Depending on how Tenrikyō theologians or interested scholars prefer to interpret the metaphysical relationship between these many deities and the one god, it may be described by a few of the subcategories of monotheism I have proposed: transcendent polydeistic monotheism, emanationistic polydeistic monotheism, or fragmentary polydeistic monotheism. Ultimately, the majority of Western scholars, following in Peery and van Straelen’s bifurcated history, have wrongfully denied Tenrikyō’s monotheism via a claim that the ten deities are in fact real, individual personalities. This revelation becomes rather ironic in light of the fact that this particular theological feature (the presence of myriad “deities”) is found to characterize

the majority of the world's monotheisms, including the Abrahamic and Hindu monotheisms. While it might be the case that Nakayama Miki and some of her early followers understood the ten deities as such, this matters not at all for the old problem of monotheism vs. polytheism in Tenrikyō, again, so long as we engage earnestly with the religion's own view of God the Parent—a task to which scholars of religion must be unswervingly dedicated.

On the other hand, in the standard view of modern Tenrikyō theologians, the so-called ten deities are not real entities, not even in Nakayama Miki's original conception, and are reduced to merely references to the same one god, Tenri-Ō-no-Mikoto. Here it is said that the foundress had only tried to communicate something about God to the ignorant masses of the time—an explanation which persists in apologetic and educational literature today (e.g. *Questions and Answers about Tenrikyo*, 2016 [2006], 15). In this view, some ignorant or confused Tenrikyōists are said to have mistaken these names for so many deities, and the official statements of *The Doctrine of Tenrikyo* (1903) in which Tenri-Ō-no-Mikoto is the corporate name of a collection of deities is understood as a product of necessity reflecting the harsh times in which Tenrikyō struggled for survival beneath the government's anti-monotheistic supervision prior to the latitude of the postwar period. Certainly this interpretation of the creation myth and Tenrikyō's early interpretive history are of an inarguably monotheistic character, reflecting my subcategory of pluriform monodeistic monotheism, wherein merely apparent deities are in truth different names for the same divine person or different modes of the one god's being.

Ultimately, we need not take sides as to which exegetical interpretation of the *Ofudesaki*'s ten deities is correct or even which from a historical standpoint was the earliest reading; either interpretation is compatible with the category of monotheism. Some Western scholars have so limited monotheism as to deny Tenrikyō its monotheistic claim regarding its early days. On the other hand, Japanese respondents to these narrow classifications have perhaps needlessly shied away from a particular exegesis which in the end may prove more historically tenable. Philosopher and scholar of Japanese religions Carl B. Becker already saw in 1979 that if Tenrikyō theologians allowed Nakayama Miki to conceive of multiple deities (so long as they are not on par with the one God), this would avoid the dilemma of having to explain “why other passages about the place of creation are to be taken literally when these are to be considered metaphorically” (1986 [1979], 481–482).

#### 4.3.3. Clarifying Tenrikyō's “Pantheism”

What of the suggestion of some Tenrikyō scholars that the religion's doctrine has something to do with the category of “pantheism”? What is the real significance of the Tenrikyō statements regarding God the Parent's relationship to the world and to human beings which have contributed to this adoption of this Western term, even among some Japanese Tenrikyō theologians?

A central statement of the *Ofudesaki* is oft-repeated by Tenrikyō commentators: “This whole universe is the body of Tsukihi” (*Ofudesaki* VI, 120). How has this philosophical claim been interpreted

by Tenrikyō in light of its other claims that the universe is also a thing created by the one god, and that the one god has in some sense been present in human beings like Nakayama Miki?

First, the question of God the Parent's relationship to the world. Iida Teruaki's comments are emblematic of Tenrikyō theological responses to this question: "[The] universe is represented as the body of God, thus a way of existence of God..." (Iida 1986 [1968], 175); likewise Sasada emphasizes that Nakayama herself taught that "this world is the body of God" (Sasada 1986 [1982], 149). In a 1983 article, Tenrikyō theologian Fukaya Tadamasa furthermore characterized God the Parent as "invisible and intangible" (Fukaya 1986 [1983], 44); God the Parent is the creator of the world and of human beings (49) and is also "absolute Nothingness which makes what exists existing... Oyagami is an infinite or infinitesimal quality... the root of everything, can comprehend and yet transcend everything" (44). Furthermore: "Oyagami transcends this world, which lies in Oyagami's bosom. In this sense, Oyagami is transcending and comprehensive as the absolute being" (44); "Everything has its reason of being because it is made to be by Oyagami. Everything has its own meaning, and there is a distinction of good and evil..." (45). Adding to this, Nakajima writes that: "If we are allowed to give a definition in terms of philosophy of religion, God in Tenrikyo is the only and absolutely transcendental God... The oneness of God and the absolute transcendency of His existence are emphasized on the ground that He is the First Cause of the Creation of the human world" (Nakajima 1986 [1968], 71). This god is "the only and ultimate Cause of all existence... He protects any and everything on earth, allowing it to exist (See *Ofudesaki* VI, 50, 102)" (Nakajima 1986 [1968], 72). The more recent translation of *Questions and Answers about Tenrikyo* also says "God the Parent is transcendent and personal... [a] being who far transcends the world and humans... [but he is a] transcendent and immanent God, who created and constantly sustains humankind and the world" (Tenrikyo Overseas Department 2016 [2006], 16–17, 20).

Detectable in some of these statements is a concerted effort to recognize Tenrikyō's god as in some sense identified with the world but at the same time as more than the world. How this reality might be so is sometimes treated as a divine mystery: "As Oyagami says, 'there is Tsukihi, and there is the world,' the existence of Oyagami surpasses the wonder of the world. It must be said a mystery" (Fukaya 1986 [1983], 49). No effort is made to explain how God is both the universe and more than the universe (the problem of the category of pantheism vs. panentheism discussed previously), and it seems that there should be no such efforts from the perspective of at least some Tenrikyō theologians. However, some of the literature takes a different stance. The aforementioned *Questions and Answers about Tenrikyo* suggests that "Identifying God with nature—which would be a pantheistic view—may not help us understand..." (2016 [2006], 202). That Tenrikyō's god is not identified with absolutely everything—and is indeed not pantheistic—does seem to be implied by propositions by Iburi Izo (1833–1907), Tenrikyō's second spiritual leader after Nakayama Miki. In Iburi's authoritative *Osashizu* (Divine Instructions), one of the group's three main texts composed between 1887–1907, we discover that while

human bodies belong to God, the mind alone belongs to humanity (e.g. *Osashizu*, June 1, 1889; February 14, 1889). We will now engage the question of God the Parent's relationship to human beings.

Fukaya clarifies that "The universe is the body of Oyagami. In this body grows everything, and man is no exception" (Fukaya 1986 [1983], 48). But what does this mean? Do humans contain substantial parts of Oyagami or are they emanations? Or do they merely inhabit a divine world-body as separated entities? When Nakajima talks about the one god's connection to humanity, he says that:

He is not an absolute Being separated from human beings, ever looking down on the human world from His supreme height proper to Him in order to rule over them with authority. On the contrary, He comes down, so to say, close to each one of them to watch them making a daily living out of His sheer parental solicitude with which He loves His dear children (humankind) and in His fervent desire to make them realize their ideal life, the life proper to humankind. (Nakajima 1986 [1968], 75).

It seems that in Nakajima's insistence that this god is not separated, he is reacting not against the metaphysical proposition that humans are not fundamentally linked to the one; rather, he is rejecting the idea of a "transcendent" god only in the sense that the one is relationally, ethically, or epistemically separated from humanity. Tenrikyō's god is not aloof, but is personally concerned and involved with our development as a parent to a child. If this is all there is to humanity's connection to God the Parent, then humans are not considered divine by nature in Tenrikyō. Some theologians, like Fukaya, have been more than clear on this point:

Though [man] is not a beast, it is sheer nonsense to suppose that he is divine. However, this dementedness is prevalent among modern thinkers and philosophers who believe that man is fundamentally the same with god and that man's reason is that of god. Man is created by Oyagami after all, and he cannot be a god. Oyagami is the Parent and man a child. A child is a child, not a parent. Man passes away for rebirth as man, not as god. Traditional Japanese Shintoism enshrines man as god when he is dead, but Tenrikyo is fundamentally different in this point. Oyagami and man do not intercross eternally. (Fukaya 1986 [1983], 55)

On the face of it, this sounds like a transcendent polydeistic monotheism. As we have seen, the language about "transcendence" is used frequently in the literature. Some might be reinforced in this classification in light of the fact that the one god is said to have "entered into" Nakayama Miki, or the prevalence of the Tenrikyō injunction to invite this god to enter into one's own heart. To some, this

may imply that God the Parent is transcendent in the sense that he is entirely beyond humans and the world, and is not to be understood in a pantheistic sense. How is this to be reconciled with the ubiquitous claim that the world is God the Parent's body, and that humans exist as (or in?) this body? We must return to the propositions in Ihuri's authoritative *Osashizu* (June 1, 1889; February 14, 1889) that human bodies belong to God the Parent's body, but the mind belongs to human beings. This implies that human beings are distinct selves, separated from God the Parent in personality and experience, but one in terms of their physical stuff. This begins to resemble a sort of pantheism when it comes to the stuff of the world, but some sort of polydeistic monotheism when it comes to the many beings in the world. However, if God the Parent is not identical to human persons, and if only the stuff of the human body is divine, then how are we to understand the frequent Tenrikyō sayings about humanity's oneness with God the Parent?

Sasada Katsuyuki explains that to say "that God entered into [Nakayama] does not mean God outside of Oyasama entered into Oyasama. For it presupposes that man can stand outside of God. Such God is an idol objectified" (Sasada 1986 [1982], 149). Rather, Sasada insists, one should think of this as Nakayama "experiencing unity" with this god, and coming to an awareness of her oneness with him. Her desires became those of the god; his heart was represented on earth. The phrase "God entered into Oyasama" is to be interpreted as meaning that what Oyasama said was the absolute truth and is to be treated as if it were God the Parent who said it. "It is thus not true that each time God who is outside of Oyasama entered into the body of Oyasama" (150). The emphasis is placed on Nakayama as God's representative and model for humanity, who speaks his words and thus reveals his mind to the world. She is, as Westerners have also realized, "the model par excellence... not only... [an] example in the moral sense but also as an image, a kind of 'imago Dei', where God reflects Himself and man can find a mediator" (Marras 1986 [1983], 451). Tenrikyōists, following after this exemplar, are able to "understand what Oyasama is" only when they themselves achieve and experience the oneness which Nakayama enjoyed, that is, when their heart, mind, and words draw near to those of God the Parent (Sasada 1986 [1982], 153). Thus, while Nakayama Miki is an "embodiment of God," it is "also not unreasonable to interpret that Miki's oft-repeated oneness with God was not a physical oneness as much as a mental, spiritual, inspirational identification" (Becker 1986 [1979], 495).

The *Ofudesaki's* instructions to "exchange" our heart-minds with God's heart thus "means that our heart should be cleared of all egocentric motions and filled with parental love for the others—just like God's heart is full of love for His family, humankind" (Laube 1999, 28). It is true, however, that the *Ofudesaki* seeks to describe some sort of difference between the way or the degree to which Nakayama Miki has had her heart-mind exchanged and the experience of other humans, but "the essence of this difference is not made clear enough" (Laube 1999, 28). Sawai Yoshitsugu offered some clarity, however, saying that "[i]n Tenrikyo, it is only Oyasama, the Foundress, to whom the expression of the 'Shrine of God' is applied" (1999, 94; see also Nishiyama 1981, 43–44), a teaching to be distinguished sharply from

the Christian doctrine that God's spirit can come to dwell in every human (94–95). While Nakayama alone experienced a unique, mental indwelling of God the Parent, Sawai clarifies that it is only “in our bodies [that] we humans are related to God the Parent” (95). In the end, despite the fundamental relationship between all human bodies, the world, and God the Parent, Sawai ultimately rules that Tenrikyō's teaching “never implies a pantheistic world view. Rather, it signifies that this world is filled with the working of God the Parent” (86). While the world is God's “body” in a sense, “God the Parent stands transcendent of the world and protects it. This expresses that not only human beings, but also all living things live in the ‘body’ of God the Parent, and that their lives are sustained by the blessings of God” (86).

#### **4.3.4. Conclusions Regarding Tenrikyō and Monotheism**

It is not difficult to see why many Westerners and some Tenrikyōists have understood there to exist multiple deities in Nakayama's original cosmological narrative. On their face, and in their “literal sense” (Nakajima 1986 [1968], 76), there are passages in the *Ofudesaki* which portray other entities interacting in interpersonal ways with God the Parent, and as being involved in creative acts as the one god's instruments or collaborators (e.g. *Ofudesaki* VI, 31, 50–52, 80–85; XI, 70–74; XII, 142–147; XVI, 12). However one chooses to interpret these statements ultimately matters little for our central question, since it is incumbent on us to take seriously the Tenrikyōists' theological claims about God the Parent. Definitively resolving what this great god's particular metaphysical relationship is to the world and to human beings may ultimately require resolving the problem of whether there is any meaningful difference between the concepts of pantheism and panentheism, a task clearly outside the scope of this project. Indeed, it is not up to scholars of religion to demand that all philosophical problems be resolved within a particular religious tradition, nor to expect that there must exist only one unified doctrine. It is our charge only to provide the most accurate classifications that we can while at the same time being aware of a need for capaciousness in light of doctrinal diversity. In this light, if the “ten deities” are conceived of as distinct and created/subordinate beings, Tenrikyō can be said to be a polydeistic monotheism (either of the “transcendent,” “fragmentary,” or “emanationistic” sort, depending on the interpretation of the Tenrikyōist). If the “ten deities” are conceived of as merely different names or modes of the same god (the perspective of most contemporary Tenrikyō theologians), then this will qualify as a pluriform monodeistic monotheism. In the end, if from the standpoint of history we conclude that in the original *Ofudesaki* the “ten deities” were originally conceived of as ten distinct but subordinate deities (the “instruments” of God the Parent), and that later Tenrikyō theology has in fact reinterpreted its founding texts in such a way that this pandeon has been eliminated, this has only represented a transition from one sort of monotheism to another—a movement from a type of polydeistic monotheism to a pluriform monodeistic monotheism. The Tenrikyō claim to a long-

standing monotheism in their tradition is therefore not impugned. What of God the Parent's relationship to the world and Tenrikyō's relationship to the concept of pantheism?

As we have seen, while the stuff of the world and the stuff of human bodies may indeed be interpreted as belonging to the being of the one god, the human mind (or self) explicitly does not. Tenrikyō does not consider human beings to be deities and the human mind is the creation of a discrete God the Parent. Quite clearly, the self is not eliminated here, thus not all can be identified with the one god. The category of pantheism (all-is-god-ism) ultimately does not apply as neatly as one might initially expect after hearing statements like "the universe is God's body," etc. Despite the physical stuff of humanity possibly belonging in some sense to the being or essence of God the Parent, the one god is ultimately a transcendent deity entirely distinct from the core reality of human beings. Thus, Fukaya's explanation that this god is the "creator of the world and human beings" (1986 [1983], 49) and is "transcending and comprehensive" at the same time (44); God the Parent comprehends most of the world, including the bodies of human beings, but transcends some things in the world, like the minds of human beings. Rather than pantheism, the categories of emanationistic/fragmentary polydeistic monotheism or pluriform monodeistic monotheism will suit this theology better.

Ultimately, the standard Western assessment that Tenrikyō was originally polytheistic and only later became monotheistic (or perhaps even non-theistic) can be revised. Likewise, we should insist that any pantheistic (or panentheistic) interpretations of God the Parent be exchanged for one of our more accurate monotheistic classifications.

#### **4.4. Revisiting Konkōkyō**

##### **4.4.1. Western Studies on Konkōkyō and Monotheism**

Moving on to Konkōkyō, we recall that in Holtom's study, the religion's view of the god Tenchi Kane No Kami represents "a monotheistic conception of God as a loving Parent..." (1933, 300). However, Holtom did not justify this view. On the other hand, McFarland denied the movement's monotheism and reduced Konkōkyō to only a "virtual" monotheism, since it refuses to "deny outright the existence of [other sects'] gods" (1960, 44). Schneider denied that any Western category could be applied to Konkōkyō (1961, 42). Due to its acceptance of myriad deities and some pantheistic-sounding quotations by Ikuni Konkō, Nielsen Jr. ruled that "the sect is neither theistic nor pantheistic; it may be called a kind of polytheism" (1957, 35). Ellwood on the other hand found it "monotheistic, worshipping one God" (2009, 161). Popular Konkōkyō sources in the West have found monotheism extremely limiting and incompatible with the religion (e.g. *Living With Kami* 2017b). Taken as a whole, there has been vast disagreement in Western scholarship on the question of monotheism.

#### 4.4.2. Konkōkyō and the Question of Other Gods

In its official, English-language publications, Konkōkyō has long taught that Tenchi Kane No Kami is the “Parent-God of the Universe” and that “all that is in the universe is created by God and given to us, His children” (Konkōkyō 1958, 1). Additionally, in the widely-used book *Voice of the Universe*, featuring selections from a range of Konkōkyō texts, we read that “Izanagi and Izanami-no-Mikoto, Amaterasu-O-Mikami... are called kami but they got their bodies from Tenchi Kane No Kami... [who] is a rank above all other kamis: the kami of kamis (II *Ichimura Mitsugoro* 2–2, 3)” (Konkōkyō 1996, 4). As we have already seen above, the fact that this great creator god may be thought by some Konkōkyōists to coexist with other deities who live in the universe (even those deities emphasized by potentially rival religious movements) does not preclude monotheism. I trust that at this stage little more justification for this ruling need be provided.

#### 4.4.3. Konkōkyō and the Question of Pantheism

In its Western-facing publication *Shine From Within: An Introduction to the Konko Faith* (2005), we read a translation of the founder’s statement: “‘Heaven and earth [the universe] continue to live. Because Heaven and Earth are alive, all people are able to live’ (GIII: *Jinkyū Kyogoroku*, 104)” (2005, 17; brackets theirs). How it is that the universe, created by Tenchi Kane No Kami, is “alive” is explained thus: “As everything is made from particles in the universe, so everything is a part of Kami. A drop of water taken from the ocean may have its own shape, yet it is still part of the ocean” (24). The official English version of Konkōkyō’s website further explains: “In normal language, the word ‘universe’ refers to the cosmos, Earth, outer space, nature, etc. ... The Founder saw this universe as a deity named Tenchi Kane No Kami. The universe is this deity’s body” (Konkōkyō 2012). Thus, this god is the creator of the universe through a pantheistic body-generation. Certainly, as argued previously, we may find in this view a monotheism, so long as Tenchi Kane No Kami is in truth a personal entity. At first glance, some official statements can be misleading on this point, for example: “We believe that Kami is the universe—the spirit and energy that flows through galaxies, planets, air, earth, and life. Our Founder, Konko Daijin, referred to this spirit and energy as ‘Tenchi Kane No Kami’ (the god of heaven and earth)...” (Konkōkyō 2005, 11). This initially seems compatible with an atheistic ultimism. However, immediately after these statements, this god is revealed to also be a personal being. Indeed, this is a great parent who “loves,” “cares,” “gives,” “forgives,” “pleads,” and “wishes” good things for its children, and even “punishes” wrongdoers (Konkōkyō 2005, 11, 26). But what is the nature of the metaphysical relationship between humans and this parent?

Konkōkyō’s website says that “Konkokyo believes that Tenchi Kane No Kami is the parent of all people. All people are allotted both physical bodies and a piece of Tenchi Kane No Kami’s heart and spirit upon birth. People are therefore all children of Tenchi Kane No Kami who, as the parent, strives

to support and protect us” (Konkōkyō 2012). The 2005 publication likewise says that “When we are born, a ‘drop’ of Kami is given a physical body made from the earth, much like a sandcastle... If water is taken out of the sandcastle, the individual grains will crumble and return to be part of the beach. If the sand is taken away, the remaining water will return to the ocean or evaporate into air. Only in the moments both sand and water combined does the sandcastle exist... we become one with Kami once more when we die...” (Konkōkyō 2005, 24, 27). However, it seems that both the “drop” of Kami’s spirit and the body itself belong to the being of the same one god, though they seem to differ in “shape.” While the religion speaks of “Our Founder’s return to Kami” (Konkōkyō 2005, 35), and Kawate himself spoke of dying and leaving the body to “go to where I am requested...” (*Karabi Tsunezo*, 4:2, cited in Konkōkyō 2005, 35; see also Konkōkyō 2020, 131), humans are not truly separated from Tenchi Kane No Kami, since all the universe, including humans, are contained in this one god. A Konkōkyō book of “contemporary explanations” says that “Our relationship with Kami is constant and eternal” and “even after death, we continue to live eternally within the divine presence of the Universe” (1996, 82–83). In a private meeting with Konkōkyō leaders I was told quite emphatically that there is not literally a “piece” of Kami within us, since the truth is that everything is Kami. Yet there is an acknowledged tension here. One minister reported to me the group’s traditional position: “The fifth Konko-sama said, ‘We live in the universe—or live in Kami-sama—but also, Kami-sama resides within us.’”<sup>36</sup> This is indeed consistent with a Konkōkyō sermon related also by Schneider in 1962:

God abides in your heart, that is, God is immanent in us. [But] the founder clearly states that God transcends man, that is, he exists outside of us... God is ‘inside of us’ and at the same time ‘outside of us.’ You may think it is logically impossible to accept the idea of God existing within us, and at the same time believing that he is outside of us. But in the actual life of faith, it is possible to harmonize these two ideas and to arrive at a unified idea of the real God.” (Konkōkyō 1956; see Schneider 1962, 123–124)

While one may feel inclined to apply the troubled term “panentheism” here, a less problematic description may be our pluriform monodeistic monotheism, or, more broadly (and perhaps more accurately), a type of pantheistic monodeistic monotheism. If other selves end up being distinct from Tenchi Kane no Kami, emanationistic polydeistic monotheism may fit better. However, there is reason to believe that in Konkōkyō, selves distinct from Kami, while differentiated to some limited degree, have indeed been eliminated. On the surface, some of its language seems to imply our separation from Kami (e.g. talk of our “becoming one” with the god). However, to “become one with Kami” is equated to our hearts being “reformed” and becoming “as broad and accepting as Kami’s heart” (Konkōkyō 2005, 13).

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<sup>36</sup> Private meeting with Rev. Koichi Konkō, January 31, 2023.

Konkōkyōists are always “Keeping Kami in our hearts at all times bring us closer to Kami. Our Founder, Konko Daijin, in his practice of faith, broadened his heart and became one with Kami... each one of us is capable of becoming a living kami,” and this is described as developing “a heart that embraces everything and everyone unconditionally...” (Konkōkyō 2005, 13). In truth, all human beings are already divine by nature, but some have suffocated the knowledge of their own divinity, disallowing the realization of their spiritual potential. The transformation to be achieved is epistemological and ethical, not metaphysical. To become a living kami, one must “scrub away the dirt and grime we have accumulated, and let our true selves shine through” (Konkōkyō 2005, 15).

A final note must be made in regard to the Konkōkyō doctrine of Interdependence (*aiyo kakeyo*), which at first glance seems to be evidence for a pantheism. Here, “[t]here is a mutually dependent relationship between Tenchi Kane No Kami and people. People cannot exist without Tenchi Kane No Kami, and Tenchi Kane No Kami cannot exist without people” (Konkōkyō 2012). The Konkōkyō organization calls this “a unique aspect of its doctrine” (15). “In many religions,” it says, “Kami is perceived as almighty, all-knowing, and above all. However, we believe Kami is closer to us than this, in that Kami must work with us and we with Kami in order for Kami’s desire—for all people to be freed from hardships—to be fulfilled...” The one god “cannot be realized by us, cannot be a god to us, without our cooperation. Kami is patiently waiting for each of us to fulfill our part by recognizing and embracing Kami’s guidance” (15). In the aforementioned discussions, I was able to clarify with Konkōkyō ministers that *aiyo kakeyo* does not mean that Kami could not literally exist without human beings (or that Kami did not exist before human beings were produced—an event shrouded in mystery in Konkōkyō); rather, Kami cannot exist *as a parent* apart from human beings. Konkōkyō’s pantheism, while demonstrable, should not be established on the basis of these sayings.

#### **4.4.4. Conclusions on Konkōkyō and Monotheism**

Because all parts of the human beings within the world are included in the one god, and because human beings have some semblance of distinction from this god (albeit a surface-level distinction) Konkōkyō seems best described as a pluriform monodeistic monotheism, wherein the various personalities are in fact differentiated modes of the one god’s being. It may also be accurately classed as a pantheism, so long as this is understood to be a form of monotheism. It is true that the movement’s doctrines were progressively revealed, and that the early teachers of Konkōkyō were not “interested in a systematic formulation,” and therefore that a “certain amount of variation in the concept of Kami continues on the part of contemporary interpreters of Konkō” (Schneider 1962, 124). It is not surprising then, that “The deity of Konkōkyō has been variously described, some finding in it a monotheism, others a pantheism, a polytheism, and even a tritheism” (124). Schneider was willing to locate a “monotheistic kernel” in “a deity who works through the universe and supports it, but who, nevertheless, exists apart from it” (125). However, we may now reframe the situation. Regardless of

whether or not Tenchi Kane no Kami “exists apart” from the world, is identified with the world, or somehow is both outside and inside the world—this figure, so long as it remains a personal kami, is a monotheistic god. Thus, despite the longstanding oscillation, and despite Schneider’s imposed limitation, Konkōkyō represents a monotheism.

#### **4.5. Conclusions on the Presence of Monotheism in the Three NRMs**

In the final analysis, Kurozumikyō, Tenrikyō, and Konkōkyō do, in fact, represent monotheistic movements. However, in the above classifications I do not imagine that I have definitively or inarguably resolved the question of speciation amongst these three NRMs. I am more confident in my attempt to at the very least address the question of the presence of monotheism. I expect that further analysis by those more skilled may elucidate the doctrines of these NRMs further than what I have accomplished here.

Additionally, I would like to draw attention to my qualifications of the above classifications. We must be ever vigilant of the danger of assuming that one religion equals one doctrine. As Cornille reminds us, “[g]eneral religious categories such as ‘Christian’ or ‘Buddhist’ have often obscured the reality of internal diversity and dissonance within religions...” (Cornille 2008, 68). Kurozumikyō, Tenrikyō, and Konkōkyō are indeed to be *generally* understood in these ways, and we must prepare to make room for some degree of doctrinal diversity. In another context, Baptist Christians, Oneness Pentecostals, and Christadelphians all fall under the category of “Christianity,” yet all feature vastly different versions of monotheism (trinitarianism, modalism/Sabellianism, and unitarianism respectively), and even within these subcategories of Christianity we may find diverging views (e.g. social trinitarianism, one-self trinitarianism, etc.). It is fair to say, however, that Christianity is generally trinitarian in its doctrinal outlook, as this appears to represent the majority umbrella view. In a similar way, we may say that Kurozumikyō, for example, is generally an emanationistic polydeistic monotheism, leaving room for the fact that there is very often wide-ranging theological diversity to be found within singular religious traditions, even within purportedly monotheistic traditions.

In the end, we should expect that all of this doctrinal elucidation should produce helpful results for both the public perception and reception of Kurozumikyō, Tenrikyō, and Konkōkyō, and of the religious concept of monotheism. Additionally, this classification is directly useful for resolving challenges associated with the internal perception of doctrinal distinctives within these religious movements and how they relate to the broader spectrum of Japanese religion and to perceptibly “Western” traditions and concepts. It may turn out that the subcategories of monotheism employed above also prove useful in expanding our interpretations of the ritual, social, and psychological dimensions of these NRMs. I will leave these explorations for another study. Likewise, analysis of the doctrines of other historically proximate NRMs with apparently similar theological foci as the above movements must also be saved for the future, e.g. the doctrines of Nyoraikyō, founded by Kino (1756–

1826); the Amaterasu-focused teachings of Misogikyō, founded by Inoue Masakane (1790–1849) (see Holtom 1938, 240–244), Uden Shinto, founded by Umetsuji Norikiyo (1798–1861) (see Hardacre 2017, 315–322); and the Konkōkyō-derived movement Ōmotokyō, founded by Deguchi Nao (1837–1918) (see Clarke 1999, 187–193).

At this stage in our investigation, now that we have addressed the taxonomical question as to whether or not Kurozumikyō, Tenrikyō, and Konkōkyō qualify as monotheisms, we may turn our attention toward the historical question of what relationship, if any, the evident monotheisms of these three NRMs have with Japan’s religious history.

## Western Studies on the Source of NRM Monotheism

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*“God cannot alter the past, though historians can.”*  
— Samuel Butler (1835–1902)

### 5.1. Introduction

Now that we have established the presence of monotheism in Kurozumikyō, Tenrikyō, and Konkōkyō, the question may now be raised as to its historical development. Indeed, where did the basic belief in a supreme god come from? Should we view this monotheism as a decidedly Western import, the byproduct of Japanese contact with Christian missionaries? Or does it have something to do with the premodern development of Japanese religion apart from Western influence? As will be seen, this will prove a difficult question to answer, but one which loudly begs for scholarly investigation, especially in light of the ongoing negative reception of monotheistic religions and the concept of monotheism in Japanese public discourse and scholarship. As will be seen, negative answers to the question of monotheism in Japan’s NRMs in Western studies have been both preceded and reinforced by parallel negative assessments about Japanese history in general. In this brief chapter, I first intend to canvass Western studies on the source of NRM monotheism, an examination which will ultimately take us down a variety of interrelated avenues, including Western studies on the possibility of monotheistic beliefs in premodern Japanese traditions, the relationship between the NRMs and historical Christian sources (including Japan’s Kakure Kirishitan), and the early modern interpretations of the nationalistic school of Japanese scholarship known as Kokugaku (National Learning). In the following chapters, my aim will be to support this proposal by locating within Japanese history evidence of the decidedly Japanese religious ideas which I suggest have contributed toward the positive development of monotheism in Kurozumikyō, Tenrikyō, and Konkōkyō.

## 5.2. The General State of Western Studies

As will be canvassed in detail below, among those several Western scholars who have successfully identified monotheism in the NRMs there have emerged a variety of hypotheses in regard to its origin which can be arranged into roughly three general categories.

The first kind of proposal involves a direct Christian influence on NRM founders like Kurozumi Munetada (1780–1850), Nakayama Miki (1798–1887), and Kawate Bunjirō (1814–1883). Since their respective movements were founded between 1814–1859, and since the nation's *sakoku* period of isolation was not lifted until 1868 (and Christianity unbanned in 1873), direct contact with Western Christian missionaries has proven difficult to substantiate. Thus, most who posit direct Christian influence have gestured at the possibility of subterranean contact between NRM founders and Japanese Kakure Kirishitan (Hidden Christians) who had been in hiding since Christianity's prohibition and persecution beginning in the late sixteenth century.

The second kind of proposal involves indirect Christian influence on NRM founders by way of Kokugaku scholars like Hirata Atsutane (1776–1843). Hirata especially, it is claimed, was directly inspired by Western Christian sources, including Jesuit missionary literature. Since it is well known that Kokugaku scholarship exerted strong influence in the development of Japan's Shinto-related NRMs, allegedly Christianity-dependent scholars like Hirata have made an attractive candidate for an NRM source of monotheism in the eyes of some Western analysts.

The third kind of proposal, apparently something of a minority view, suggests some Japanese influences on the NRM founders. However, specificity is almost always lacking in such suggestions; a variety of premodern Japanese sources are often presented but few are adequately pursued or seem to be maintained with much confidence.

At a fundamental level, all three of these general positions are concerned with the broader question of the existence of monotheism in premodern Japan. In this light, it will be helpful to consider first the general attitude of Western scholarship on the subject, with some recourse to important Japanese studies, before pursuing the avenues described above.

## 5.3. Western (and Japanese) Views on the Question of Monotheism in Premodern Japan

The lack of Western interest in the possibility of monotheism in premodern Japanese traditions is pervasive. Several of the premiere Western scholars of Shinto have composed histories featuring absolutely no discussion of any Japanese monotheism (see Hardacre 2017; Teeuwen and Breen 2010; Earhart 2013). One assumes the great non-theistic legacy of Buddhism has likewise made a Buddhist monotheism in Japan look like an impossibility. Indeed, the question of a Buddhist monotheism is not even raised, though the relationship between monotheism and the primordial Ādibuddha of esoteric traditions like Shingon is sometimes briefly discussed and quickly abandoned (Harvey 2019, 50–51). The question of monotheism in Japan's Confucian tradition appears to have been similarly neglected, as the most common assessments of Confucianism have struggled to even characterize it as a religion,

and define it more often as a “political philosophy” which requires little or nothing in the way of divine beings, much less a supreme god (see Paramore 2016, 8). While there have been very few inquiries into the general question of monotheism in premodern Japanese history, enough discussion has taken place over the past century that several views have coalesced in this neglected field.

### **5.3.1. First View of Premodern Japan: Merely Monotheistic “Tendencies”**

In Japanese scholarship I have discerned at least three diverging responses toward the possibility of a premodern Japanese belief in a supreme god. The first view is exemplified by leading Meiji scholar Anesaki Masaharu (1873–1949), a Nichiren Buddhist often described as the father of Japanese religious studies, who spoke of “monotheistic tendencies” in premodern Japan (1969 [1930], 199–200, 212–213). Anesaki considered the way that national/imperial interests elevated Amaterasu above the Shinto pantheon, in contrast with the “tribal cults and the communal life of the clans.” Thus, there were two forces “of religious ideas tending alternately to unity and plurality, or monotheistic and polytheistic tendencies; these two phases are indicated by the tenacious persistence of the tribal and local cults beside the national cult of the Sun-goddess, while the simple pure faith of the people often led them to a monotheistic worship of the supreme deity” (199–200). Anesaki’s imprecise use of “monotheism” seems related to Amaterasu’s devotional emphasis among the Japanese people and her senior rank among the Shinto kami, and not to any claims of her having generated the universe (a necessary component of monotheism).

Similar characterizations of “monotheistic tendency” are also represented in contemporary scholarship by a late professor from Kokugakuin University, Japan’s epicenter for Shinto studies. Professor Hirai Naofusa (1922–2013), who studied with the influential Christian philosopher-theologian Paul Tillich, looked to the “historic experiences and insights of the Japanese people” and found glimpses of monotheistic tendencies even in Jinja Shinto (Shrine Shinto), assumed by many to be the closest to the traditional pattern of pre-historic Japan. He identified certain monotheistic ideas in the pre-Meiji sources which lie directly in Jinja Shinto’s pedigree, namely the tendency for Shinto and Buddhist movements in the medieval period to point to an ultimate reality, a unifying, supreme source of nature. Hirai thought the grounding for this basic impulse could be located in the Shinto myths themselves: he pointed to the famous story in the *Kojiki* (712 CE) in which the entire Shinto pantheon gathers for a council in the bed of the Heavenly River, working together to achieve a single goal (the extraction of Amaterasu from a cave). This proves, Hirai observed, that “the Shinto kami are beings moving toward the definite ideal and exhibiting qualities of harmony and cooperation” (Hirai 1960, 42). Frequently in Shinto sources, the life of humans and animals is endowed by the kami, and is a portion of a great divine life, each of which finally dissolves into “the original Great Life” (43). Thus, pre-Meiji schools gravitated towards an awareness of an ultimate reality. But these were merely “tendencies,” and not full-grown monotheism.

Summarizing Hirai, Western Catholic scholar Stuart Picken (2004) called Hirai's observations "possible openings to monotheism." He agreed that Hirai had located some "monotheistic trends" and "tendencies," but these were "mostly short-lived and had little influence. The most that can be said about them is that Shinto presents certain openings for monotheism" (301–303).

### 5.3.2. Second View of Premodern Japan: No Trace of Monotheism

The second view in Japanese scholarship, far less amicable towards the possibility of a Shinto monotheism (and representative of the predominant opinion in both Japan and the West), is exemplified by leading post-war Shinto scholar Ueda Kenji (1927–2003). He insisted that Japanese religion has never had anything to do with monotheism. The opening passage of the *Kojiki* does describe the primordial deity Amenominkanushi-no-kami as the first kami, as has been widely noticed, but "even in this case, Shinto has multiple gods, who continue to exist in light of the deity existing as the supreme being. [Shinto theorists interested in this god] do not accept Ameno as the one God and that the others don't exist, instead he works as part of the group of gods" (1984, 20).<sup>37</sup> If any historical Shinto theorists did fall into such thinking, Ueda argues, it was only after the eighteenth century, and only because of the undue influence of Western (Christian) theology on certain speculators who had misunderstood their own religion. "During the Meiji period," he writes, "the Japanese tried to translate scriptural texts from Christianity and were confused by a lot of the ideas. However, they grasped a concept of a singular god that they then applied to Shinto. Anyway, Japan doesn't have any history to believe in a single God, since the beginning of our traditions. So from the beginning we did not have a concept of the one god" (21).<sup>38</sup> Such a view has long been standard in Japanese scholarship, influencing a variety of fields towards the distancing of Japanese religious concepts from Western (Christian) intrusions, with famed Japanese psychologist and then director of the International Research Center for Japanese Studies, Kawai Hayao, likewise announcing at the beginning of the twenty-first century that in premodern Japan "there was no concept of a creator God" (2000, 52).

The Western response to the question of monotheistic ideas in premodern Japan has long been equally negative. In the early twentieth century, Shinto scholar W.G. Aston declared that "Monotheism was an impossibility in ancient Japan" (1905, 53), and contemporary Western scholars like Bernhard Scheid have also made the comment that "there is no trace of monotheism in the case of Shinto or Buddhism" (2006–2007, 327). Meanwhile, John Parratt has even juxtaposed monotheistic theologies which recognize a single god, even those whose god manifests in different forms, with a Japanese religious world which directly challenges monism and monotheism (2012, 63).

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<sup>37</sup> From Ueda's 1984 paper "The Universal and the Particular in Shinto," translation in Tighe 2016, 337.

<sup>38</sup> See Tighe 2016, 338.

### 5.3.3. Third View of Premodern Japan: A “Primitive Monotheism” in Japan

We will do well to mention one alternative (and at this stage unpopular) response to this question about premodern Japan, one which detected a genuine albeit faint trace of monotheism in Japanese history—a “primitive monotheism” which was in prehistoric times lost and never recovered. In the early twentieth century, Shinto scholar Katō Genchi (1873–1965), whose important 1926 book on Shinto history was one of the first of its kind available to English readers, made the claim, channeling anthropologist Andrew Lang (1844–1912), that in the opening passages of the Shinto classics like the *Kojiki* and the *Nihon shoki* (720 CE) one could detect the remains of a “primitive monotheism” (1908, 142–162; 1926, 62–66). Katō pointed to the peculiar presentation of the first deity of the *Kojiki*, Amenominakanushi-no-kami, as evidence of a primeval belief which was eventually lost as the Japanese began to prefer other deities and to ascribe to these others Amenominakanushi-no-kami’s creative qualities.<sup>39</sup> Katō’s theory was first announced in his paper presented in the *Transactions of the Asiatic Society of Japan* (1908) and was presented again nearly two decades later in summary form in *A Study of Shinto: The Religion of the Japanese Nation* (1926), where he concluded emphatically that “We have very good reason to believe from the standpoint of a comparative study of religion that Ame-no-Minakanushi-no-Kami is really the Deity of Japanese primitive monotheism” (Katō 1926, 63). As we will see, Katō’s focus on the first kami of the *Kojiki* was by no means a novel reading in the history of Japanese scholarship. However, Katō did not connect his evidence to any larger historical narrative about the development of monotheistic ideas in Japan and did not pursue the question of monotheism any further than Japan’s murky pre-history. In his view, whatever “Shinto” may have once been, it eventually became “animistic,” “polytheistic,” and incompatible with monotheism.

Pockets of Western and Japanese scholarship have occasionally picked up, however briefly, on Katō’s fundamental thesis about an ancient Japanese monotheism. Japanese Christian scholar Kadowaki Kakichi (1993) is an example of one investigator who continued to pull (rather gently) at a monotheistic thread in both premodern Shinto and in the NRMs. For him, the presence of Amenominakanushi-no-kami in the *Kojiki* facilitated the “openings” to monotheism observed by Hirai and Picken. Kadowaki saw that far from being inherently opposed to monotheism, Shinto “contains within itself the germ of monotheism. In fact, among NRMs related to Shinto, some (e.g. Shoroku Shinto) actually are monotheistic” (75). He emphasized the Shinto religious awakening wherein “the believer realizes that men and the world are ‘things’ born of the life of Kami, that god is the origin of the life of all ‘things.’ In Christianity [this] is the moment when one realizes that God created the entire universe” (74). Is this presentation of Shinto by a Christian scholar related to an agenda to promote Christianity? Richard Tighe (2016), in a recent dissertation which exemplifies the dominant paradigm,

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<sup>39</sup> Kamstra once made the remark that “It is obvious that the creative qualities of Ame-no-minaka-nushi also became ascribed to other divinities” (1994, 112).

criticized Kadowaki for “assum[ing] a major deity that is the founder of life” and for “us[ing] the singular, in an attempt to associate monotheism with Shinto and so create a common deity with Christianity” (224). While Kadowaki found some justification for a Shinto monotheism in the dim record of the *Kojiki*, Tighe declares that “There is nothing in the creation myths of Shinto to imply that a single divine source was responsible for creation” (224). It is, concludes Tighe, “a large leap to claim that [the world] emanated from a single source or divinity that can be considered on par with the Christian concept of God” (224–225). Of course, historians of religion must keep in mind that our own interpretations of any religious text matters not at all for the study of religion. Whatever we may privately think of the viability of, say, monotheistic interpretations of the *Kojiki*, this has nothing to do with the existence of monotheistic interpretations in history.

Ultimately, and broadly speaking, the vast majority of both Western and Japanese scholars have continued to prove either uninterested in, or perhaps unaware of, the possibility of belief in a supreme god in premodern Japan. As Japanese scholar Sasaki Kiyoshi (2015) observed, while Amenominkanushi-no-kami is called the great god of heaven in the opening passages of the *Kojiki*, and while this kami was once discussed in shrines across the Shinto world, he became a figure rarely spoken of, and his veneration “has completely disappeared.” The attitude of Shinto scholarship has also been mostly one of “indifference,” as if no one wants to touch the subject. Sasaki therefore asks of his fellow scholars: “when did this indifference begin?” (Sasaki 2015, introduction, translation mine). We will return to this question in due time.

#### **5.4. Western Views on Monotheism in Hirata Atsutane and other Kokugaku Scholars**

Kokugaku (lit. “national learning” or “native study”), was an ethnocentric movement of Japanese philology and philosophy in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Kokugaku scholars poured over ancient Shinto texts, questing for the purest, most original Japanese religious traditions. Hirata Atsutane (1776–1843), one of the most significant Shinto thinkers of this period, is one such scholar who has been widely recognized as having located a supreme god in the *Kojiki*’s Amenominakanushi-no-kami. Given the widespread assumption about the animistic/polytheistic (non-monotheistic) nature of Shinto and its history, Hirata has understandably generated an animated discussion about possible influences. East and West, there have been significantly conflicting positions which either accept or deny the influence of Christianity (Sasaki 2015, ch. 1, sec. 1).

##### **5.4.1. First View on Hirata: Direct Christian Influence**

The first response of Western scholars recognizes that Hirata was definitely a monotheist himself, but argues that he was something of an innovator within Shinto studies, and was directly influenced by works of Christian theology. J.H. Kamstra (1994) blamed the monotheism of Hirata and others on Jesuit literature which had been translated into Chinese and found its way into Japan (107–115). He

concluded, quite emphatically, that there was no basis for reading Shinto myths like the *Kojiki* in terms of theism, and that the primordial Shinto deity Amenominakanushi-no-kami featured in that text, despite the interpretation of Kokugaku scholars, was by no means a monotheistic god (110). Japanese scholars like Ishida Ichirō have likewise viewed Hirata’s work as the product of Christian influence. He calls Hirata’s doctrine “*shin ki shu go shinto*” (Shinto-Christian Syncretist Shinto); Hirata has modeled his deity on the God of Christianity as a creator and sovereign and moralistic judge (see Lande 2008, 4). Another Japanese scholar, Tahara Tsuguo (1973), has pointed confidently to the “definite influence of Christian writings in the cosmological formulations of Hirata’s thought [which] cannot be ignored.” This is, in his view, “a matter of fact, although the depth of that influence is, of course, always open to question” (593). However, Sasaki Kiyoshi, who has performed the most comprehensive studies of the subject, has argued that scholars have long “mistaken” Hirata’s views for Christianity, which were actually part of a Japanese trend (2015, ch. 1, translation mine).

#### 5.4.2. Second View on Hirata: Possible Japanese Influences

The second response of Western scholars has been to challenge these pervasive claims of Christian influence. Richard Devine and David C. Lewis are among the few Western investigators who have been bold enough to question this assumption, though each have provided slightly different responses. Devine (1981) concluded that Hirata was indeed a monotheist, and that he did, in fact, utilize the work of Jesuit scholars in China in his own writings. However, comparing Hirata’s radically different conceptions with Christianity reveals that no substantial borrowing from Christian theology had actually taken place. Hirata “was eclectic in his approach” and “selected only what was useful for his own ideas” (54).

David C. Lewis’ (2018) more recent treatment, however brief, looked further backwards into Japanese history for sources for Hirata’s monotheistic doctrine. Lewis questioned the still-influential Tylorian anthropological narrative about the development of religion from animism to monotheism, and very briefly discussed the idea of “primitive monotheism” envisioned by anthropologists Andrew Lang and Wilhelm Schmidt (52–53)—the theory taken up by Katō Genchi (1908, 142–162; 1926, 59–66). While Katō was entirely convinced of the presence of a “primitive” monotheism in Japan, now entirely lost, Lewis mentioned but did not pursue this idea. Lewis’ contribution is primarily in how he, supported by the work of Japanese scholar Sasaki Kiyoshi, pushed back against the long-standing assumption of Christian influence on Hirata Atsutane, producing four other potential sources by which Hirata could have developed his monotheistic ideas.<sup>40</sup> While Lewis certainly opened the right questions and made significant progress beyond other investigators, there remains work yet to be done. In my view, no Western study has yet dedicated the necessary space or demonstrated the doctrinal nuance required to properly frame the various beliefs and their potential historical links.

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<sup>40</sup> (1) Personal spiritual experiences or revelation; (2) old monotheistic traditions not found in the *Kojiki* or the classical writings, and possibly the influence of Deguchi Nobuyoshi in “mainstream” Shinto; (3) Chinese influence in the form of the monotheistic deity Shangdi (上帝); (4) the influence of Lao Zi (Lewis 2018, 52–53).

Sasaki Kiyoshi (1998 [1994], 2015), whose work has had exposure in the West through an important English translation of a 1994 article on the kami Amenominakanushi in Kokugaku thought, has engaged more extensively with the claims of Christian influence on Hirata and other Kokugaku thinkers than the Western scholars mentioned above. According to Sasaki, the *Kojiki's* first deity, Amenominakanushi-no-kami, was the basis for the Kokugaku scholars' philosophical development, which is to be viewed as independent from Christian theology. While Sasaki successfully distinguished the Shinto thought of these scholars from orthodox Christian theology, and has effectively absolved Kokugaku scholars of their supposed reliance on such theological sources for the content of their doctrines (as will be argued further below), Sasaki did not well-enough utilize the broad applicability of the category monotheism in order to make the proper distinctions. He concluded that the Shinto theorists of the late Tokugawa period were not only not Christian monotheists, they were not monotheists at all, and were in fact "pantheists" who mostly believed in "impersonal" deities. Ultimately, "the most we can do," he says, "is admit resemblances along the lines of [these Shinto scholars'] use of Confucian concepts in explanation, or to note that their promotion of pantheism may have bolstered monotheistic trains of thought" (1998). While these conclusions will be challenged in this study, Western scholars like Lewis (2018), as well as the present writer, are indebted to Sasaki's insight into the Kokugaku minds and his significant analysis is worth expanding on.

### **5.5. Western Scholars on History and NRM Monotheism**

As we have seen, some Western scholars, however limited in their comments, have already concluded that some of Japan's NRMs are monotheistic. Yet the provenance of this monotheism, if the subject is ever engaged, is widely said to be owed not to Japan's own religious traditions but to some external, foreign influence like Christianity. Peter B. Clarke (2013a), for example, in his chapter on theism in the world's NRMs, devotes two pages to the NRMs of Japan, but his analysis is somewhat inconclusive and largely dismissive: monotheism in Japan's NRMs is probably the byproduct of some subterranean Christian (foreign) influence (119–123). For this conclusion he relied directly on the work of one Japanese scholar and two Westerners already discussed above: Anesaki (1930), Thomsen (1963), and Kamstra (1994). Anesaki, after analyzing several NRMs, wrote in 1930 about the growth of "Popular Theism" in early modern Japan which featured "a strong theistic doctrine with prophetic utterances" (1930, 311). This probably emerged, he thought, thanks to some influence of Japan's hidden Kirishitan. He also suspected perhaps some limited and doctrinally superficial influence of Shingon Buddhism, at least in Tenrikyō (311–312). Anesaki thought that the doctrine of Kurozumi Munetada (the founder of Kurozumikyō) "verged on monotheism pure and simple" (315). Thus, this was still not a genuine monotheism, and even if it was, it probably wasn't a *Japanese* monotheism but the result of some infiltrating Western force. Ultimately, for Kamstra, it was "not difficult to trace [the monotheism of the NRMs] back to Kirishitan influences since Japan's religious traditions are polytheistic rather than monotheistic" (1994, 107). Similarly, Kenneth W. Parker, in his study on Nyoraikyō, implied that this early monotheistic NRM must have been influenced by Christians since "the only such [creator] deity

to appear in Japan before Nyorai was the supreme deity introduced in the mid-sixteenth century by Christian missionaries” (1983, 59). These conclusions have since languished, in need of critique.

### **5.6. A Historical Proposal: A Development of Contributive Layers**

In light of the above Western (and Japanese) perspectives on the relationship between the monotheism of Japan’s NRMs and Japanese history, my own historical proposal will fall into a few of the above categories. First, I adopt the third of the general positions described at the beginning of the chapter, and the second view of Kokugaku influence as the most probable. In other words, I suggest the monotheistic inclination of the NRMs founders is more likely owed to the influence of Japanese sources rather than external Christian sources, and largely to Japanese concepts transmitted through Kokugaku scholarship (as opposed to Kakure Kirishitan influence or to Western Christian influence transmitted through Kokugaku scholars like Hirata Atsutane).

In short, my proposal is that sufficient developments had already occurred in Japanese history prior to the emergence of the NRMs in the nineteenth century so as not to require Christian influence to explain the presence of monotheism. These developments, centered on progressive and even esoteric interpretations of the Shinto classics and enabled by an interpretive lens energized by historical developments in various and influential Shinto and Neo-Confucian schools, were ultimately adopted and adapted by influential Kokugaku theorists and were thus already “in the water” by the time of the founding of Kurozumikyō, Tenrikyō, and Konkōkyō. This is not to say that the NRM founders were exclusively influenced by Kokugaku, nor that they adopted any particular monotheistic theory from any particular Kokugaku source whole-cloth, and certainly they would not characterize the provenance of their own doctrines in this way, each being the product of divine revelation. However, I will argue that the line of conceptual development which I will trace via a comprehensive assessment of Western historical analysis is strong enough to imply a genetic relationship.

In terms of a roadmap, I will work backwards from an investigation of Western studies of Kakure Kirishitan history and the question of a Kirishitan monotheism—an unsurprisingly contentious subject among Western scholars. From there I will conduct a brief exploration of standard Western accounts of relevant medieval Shinto and Neo-Confucian history, challenging them at several vital intersections, in hopes of substantiating a historical picture of Japanese sources which contributed to the development of the belief in a supreme god in the NRMs. Next, I will reconsider the history and doctrinal content of the late Tokugawa Kokugaku scholarship which clearly saturated the religious landscape in which our NRMs emerged (see Inoue 2002, 418, 425)—read through the lens of both Western studies as well as some of the vital Japanese scholarship which has empowered it, beginning first with the possibility of conceptual overlap with Kurozumikyō, Tenrikyō, and Konkōkyō, and finally focusing on the historical exposure of our NRMs’ founders to this content. This will accomplish both a review of Western studies and their potential shortcomings, and provide an avenue towards a stronger historical solution.

## 6

# The Kakure Kirishitan as NRM Source

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*“Accept as understood the things you can understand,  
admit you do not fathom the things you cannot fathom.”*

—Fabian Fukan (c. 1565–1621)

*“We have the same heart as you!”*

—The Kakure Kirishitan  
to Bernard Petitjean, c. 1865

### 6.1. Introduction

As discussed in the previous chapter, within the pocket of Western scholarship which has affirmed the presence of monotheism in the NRMs, at least three general explanations have developed regarding the source of their theological inspiration. In this chapter, we will consider the first of these theories, which focuses on the possibility of undocumented direct contact between Japan’s Kakure Kirishitan (or, alternatively, clandestine Jesuit missionary literature in the country) and NRM founders like Kurozumi Munetada, Nakayama Miki, and Kawate Bunjirō. In order to determine whether or not Japan’s Kakure Kirishitan represent the most viable theological source for NRM monotheism, it will first be necessary to investigate the monotheistic nature of Kakure theology and its similarities or differences with the teachings of Kurozumikyō, Tenrikyō, and Konkōkyō. Second of all, the situation of Kakure theology in history must be determined in order to assess and contrast its viability with other historical propositions.

### 6.2. The Kakure Kirishitan and Their Views

As is well known, Christianity was outlawed and programmatically suppressed by the Tokugawa shogunate, driving Western missionaries out of the country and forcing their Japanese converts underground. A 1614 anti-Christian edict penned at the request of Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543–1616) by the Zen Rinzaï monk Sūden Ishin (1569–1633) declared that “Japan is the land of gods and the land of Buddhas: we revere the gods here, we venerate the Buddhas... This crew of Christian missionaries deviate

from these above-mentioned laws” (Sūden Ishin, translation in Kouamé 2020, sec. 52–55). These foreign intruders, “enemies of the kami and Buddhas,” taught both the non-existence of Japan’s deities and aggressively prohibited their veneration, redirecting their converts toward a single god, Deusu (Deus), touted as not only the sole deity who could be rightly worshipped but the only deity in existence. In the eyes of the shogunate and its religious advisors, the cessation of kami and Buddha worship among the Japanese people could only spell disaster for the state. But how neatly did Japan’s converts—those who Tokugawa’s edict transformed into Japan’s Kakure Kirishitan—follow in the restrictive pattern of worship handed down to them by their Jesuit padres? And what effects did the Japanese religious world—a world which Japanese Catholic author Endō Shūsaku famously described as a “swamp”—have on the Jesuit doctrine of God? (1980 [1969], 147–150). Are some Western scholars right in agreeing with Endō’s Ferreira that “the God whom those Japanese believed in was not the God of Christian teaching”? (147).

### 6.2.1. The Trinity in the *Tenchi*

Our concern in this section is as to how the Kakure Kirishitan interpreted the Jesuit doctrine of God, that is, the Catholic doctrine of the Trinity. When French Catholic missionary Bernard Petitjean (1829–1884) traveled to Japan in 1864, he “rediscovered” the Kakure who had been isolated from the rest of the Christian world for nearly two and a half centuries.<sup>41</sup> Petitjean and his colleagues were handed a secret book by the Kakure called the *Tenchi no hajimari no koto* (The Beginning of Heaven and Earth), and discovered a Catholic doctrine transformed. In 1931, professor Tagita Koya traveled to Kurosaki village to investigate the Kirishitan community and later obtained nine written copies of this information, the oldest of which was dated to 1827 (see Tagita 1954).<sup>42</sup> Before heaven and earth were created, says the *Tenchi*, “God had 200 forms... which were dark and with the aid of 42 forms, he in the beginning with one beam of light separated these forms.”<sup>43</sup> This Deusu also creates tens of thousands of angelic beings. However, at the beginning of the narrative, Deusu, in order to save the human race, decisively splits his body into two, producing the Son (see Whelan 1996, 45). In the narrative, Deusu, originally a singular entity, feels pity for humanity and receives advice from one of his angels: “Divide your body, that is a sure way to save them.” And so, “Deusu split into two, and became also the divine son Hiiryō-sama” (45). Whelan says that the Kakure god is therefore “not ‘three persons in one substance.’ It is dualistic and instead shows God splitting into two autonomous divine persons—Father

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<sup>41</sup> For an account of French missions in the country, see Lehmann 1979, 377–400.

<sup>42</sup> See Tagita’s *Shōwa jidai no senpuku kirishitan* [Hidden Christians in the Shōwa era] (1954). Tagita’s version was translated into German by Alfred Bohner (1938, 465–514). For an English translation see Whelan 1996, 39–67. Whelan suggests that this text was probably not originally intended to be a dogmatic text but was a story meant for the pleasure of the community which later became a sacred scripture; see 22–23.

<sup>43</sup> Tagita’s text, quoted in Kamstra 1994, 113; compare with Whelan’s version: “Deusu had two hundred ranks and forty-two forms...” (1996, 39).

and Son” (87). In light of this data, Whelan believes the Kakure never understood orthodox trinitarianism. Furthermore, they were predisposed to misunderstand. The orthodox Christian concept that there is “one God in three persons” was, argues Whelan, doomed by a cultural pre-conditioning which stifled Japanese reception of a supreme creator and a triune god (33). I will return to this idea shortly.

In a later chapter, the *Tenchi* describes the ascension of Jesus and Mary into heaven. By some mysterious process, this resulted in a Deusu with three bodies: “Deusu became three bodies although they were originally one” (63). J.H. Kamstra’s translation from Tagita’s rendering of this passage reads: “*Mioya Deusu as pa-teru, hiryo and suberu*, spirit, became *Tenteisantai*: the heaven emperor in three bodies. Even if God is called three bodies, *santai*, yet there is only one body” (Kamstra 1994, 114–115).<sup>44</sup> The key latter part of this doctrinal statement (“Even if God is called three bodies, *yet there is only one body*”) is rendered similarly by Dutch scholar Ernest Piryns, on whom Kamstra also relied.<sup>45</sup> This version suggests an apparent or outward distinction between the Father, Son, and Spirit, but an inward unity; the three figures in some way represent a single god despite appearances—a sentiment which approximates to trinitarian theology.<sup>46</sup> However, other Western presentations read differently. Bohner’s German translation reads: “aber obwohl man Dreileib sagt, so ist es doch *ursprünglich* ein Leib” (1938, 197, emphasis mine). Similarly, Whelan’s 1996 reconstruction from the Zen (1818–1830) and Hatakeda (1827) manuscripts reads: “Deusu became three bodies although they were *originally* one” (63, emphasis mine). While the statement in Kamstra’s version conjures a more perceptibly orthodox pattern, in Bohner and Whelan we encounter a starkly novel theology: the one god has in fact divided his body not once but twice, producing bodies for both the Son and Maruya. The twin facts of Maruya’s ascension and her adoption of a divine body split off from Deusu implies that the human Maruya has not merely been exalted into heaven and taken a seat within a heavenly triad, but that she was either transplanted into Deusu’s new fragment or perhaps was first absorbed into the one Deusu only to ultimately emerge as a distinct being with a divine body. Technically speaking, there is no explicit reference to a substantial severance between the three bodies of Deusu, and while it remains possible that someone holding to these facts about Deusu, the Son, and Maruya might have in mind an emanationistic organic unity despite the triad’s temporal generation, it is out of the question that the Kakure writers of the *Tenchi* were so philosophically predisposed. Still, the Kakure writers would have at the very least recalled the teaching of the padres that the “three bodies” of the one god were supposed

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<sup>44</sup> See Tagita 1954, 152 cf. Whelan 1996, 62–63. Whelan notes that the “Kirinto (Lat. *Credo*) is a prayer that expresses the Catholic articles of faith. It is found in the sixth chapter of the *Doctrina Christiana*. In Gotō this prayer is called Kerendo” (107, no. 87). Whelan includes notice of a variant from the village of Obayashi (see 107, no. 87).

<sup>45</sup> Piryns: “Hoewel men echter spreekt van drie-lichaam, *toch is er maar een lichaam*” (Piryns 1971, 160, emphasis mine).

<sup>46</sup> Interestingly, the rendition “Even if God is called three bodies, yet there is only one body” (Kamstra 1994, 115) seems evocative of orthodox Christian statements like the Athanasian creed (c. 500 CE): “And yet they are not three Gods; but one God.”

to be closely related in some way. By assigning Jesus and Maruya not merely a place in a triad, but two of the divided bodies of Deusu, there is a deliberate attempt to represent an identity of substance between the three. Indeed, Deusu is called “the heavenly emperor in three bodies” by the Kakure precisely because of their recollection of the creedal stipulation that Deusu is “one in three,” even if in their version the one Deusu has in truth become a heavenly emperor attended by two other distinct beings. Ultimately, if the above representation is an accurate conceptual reconstruction, it goes without saying that the Kakure have strayed quite far from their Catholic doctrinal inheritance, most notably in the temporal generation of the triad (i.e. the lack of co-eternality between its members) and the interjection of Mary into the role of the Holy Spirit.

When Petitjean traveled to Japan 1864, he was approached by several Kirishitan who whispered to him that they shared the same god. After this “rediscovery” of Japan’s Christians, Petitjean gave a positive review of the Kirishitan’s knowledge of the Trinity and Incarnation (see Cary 1909, 287). This was likely the result of his sensitivity to the condition and spirit of a people he admired. The copy of the *Tenchi* which Petitjean was given by these Kirishitan is tragically not available for review and seems to have been caught up in the 1874 fire that destroyed the French mission house in Yokohama. However, it will not be surprising if varying degrees of emphasis on the Trinity are located among Kirishitan documents and communities, as well as varying degrees of trinitarian orthodoxy, since the same occurs even in modern Christian denominations who all claim trinitarianism (see Lindgren and Lee 2018). One record seems to confirm as much, in which we locate a Japanese Kirishitan confession to a padre: “Deus is in three as you said... When they say ‘three,’ they mean the *persona* of Deus, but when they say ‘one body,’ they mean the *divinidad* of Deus, his divine body. All the Kirishitan know that” (cited in Higashibaba 2001, 94). Some Kakure communities, it should also be noted, evidently have no tradition of the *Tenchi* document.<sup>47</sup> It is true that the popular Kirishitan critique of Japanese tradition called the *Myōtei mondō* (Myōtei Dialogues), written by convert and later apostate Fabian Fukun (c. 1565–1621), rarely mentions the Trinity.<sup>48</sup> On the other hand, the 1591 version of the widespread Jesuit missionary text *Dochirina kirishitan* (Catechism of Christianity) centralizes trinitarianism, and the stress on the Trinity in this document, which would become one of the most popular Japanese or Chinese-language Christian texts in the early seventeenth century, appears to have left an obvious (but ultimately ephemeral) imprint on Kakure theology.

It must be noted that the Kakure conception of the Trinity is not the only unorthodox theological development which would have disappointed their Jesuit progenitors. In addition to the three personalities of the Kakure Trinity, the Kakure in general continued to venerate other beings, including their ancestors who joined the world of spirits upon death, and even objects which spirits have entered (see Turnbull 1998, 212–213). What Western studies have made of all of this will soon be discovered.

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<sup>47</sup> For example, the Ikitsuki Kakure; see Whelan 1996, 73. For a survey of this community see Pella 2013.

<sup>48</sup> For a contemporary English translation, see Baskind and Bowring 2016.

### 6.2.3. Catholic Reception of Kakure Theology

In the nineteenth century, when Catholic missionaries were able to return to Japan, they convinced most Kakure Kirishitan to renounce many of their idiosyncratic, unorthodox practices and to rejoin the Church. Not all agreed to rejoin, however, and some have continued to remain separate.<sup>49</sup> In 2019, Roger Mushi's analysis of the modern Kakure ritual of *Obatsuboage* (a communal meal which replaces or is equivalent to Christian Communion) revealed an invocation of the Trinity: "Deus Padre, filho, Spiritu Santo persona sustancia. Deus, sancta cruz, Amen Jesus' [God the Father, the Son (Jesus Christ), and the Holy Spirit, 'one God in three Divine Persons. God, Holy Cross, Amen Jesus']" (see Mushi 2019, 30). It is not difficult to imagine that renewed contact with the Catholic world has reestablished a more orthodox trinitarian image in this community, though it remains possible, as we have seen, that such an image may have somehow survived from Japan's first Christian century. Ultimately, the reception of Kakure theology among contemporary Catholic theologians has been unsurprisingly negative. Diego Yuuki (1922–2008), a Jesuit leader in Nagasaki, described Kakure-Kirishitan theology as "a mélange of Buddhism, Shintōism, animism, and what Kakure think is Catholicism. They have no Bible. The meaning of the Trinity is lost on them."<sup>50</sup> It is of course an interesting question whether access to the Bible would have helped the Kakure's sixteenth-century ancestors grasp the meaning of the Trinity, a doctrine which from its inception in the mid-to-late fourth century CE has continued to challenge Christians in every age and culture, and a theological proposition which continues to be positively cast as an impenetrable mystery by orthodox theologians (see Ware 1995 [1979], 31). In my view, the history of the doctrine of the Trinity itself should prevent the essentialized, culturalist, and one-sided portraits of Japanese non-comprehension sometimes found in Western studies.<sup>51</sup> More on this below.

### 6.3. Western Studies on Kakure Theology

In a similar way that Western studies have disagreed as to the monotheism in the NRMs, Western scholars have likewise been divided on the monotheistic status of Kakure theology. In the first camp, Western analysts have ruled that these Japanese Christians, despite their missionary progenitors, had either never managed to acquire or had ultimately failed to maintain monotheism. In the other camp,

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<sup>49</sup> Most of these Hanare Kirishitan (separated Christians) appear to have died out. Their remnants have been expertly documented by Christal Whelan (1992, 369–387); see also the work of Harrington (1980, 318–336).

<sup>50</sup> Yuuki's comments appeared in "Japan's Crypto-Christians," *Time Magazine* 119 (January 11, 1982), 81, quoted in Takao 2018, 32.

<sup>51</sup> As I have noted in my analysis of Japanese non-trinitarian Christians in the Meiji period, "If Japanese rejection of the Trinity, as a unique cultural phenomenon, is to be reduced to a byproduct of misunderstanding, it will need to be determined in what ways these [Japanese] Christians have misunderstood the Trinity, and how this misunderstanding differs from other global contexts which have likewise struggled with this basic doctrine" (Chandler 2021a, 115).

Kakure doctrine is indeed a kind of monotheism, though in its historical development it ultimately strayed widely from Catholic formulations.

### 6.3.1. Negative Western Assessments

Representative of the former persuasion is British historian John Dougill, who summarizes Kakure theology thus: “Its constituent elements can be described as polytheistic, syncretic and this-worldly, rooted in reverence for ancestors and emphasizing ritual over doctrine. As such, it’s at odds with a monotheistic dogma like Christianity” (2012, 223). After extensive fieldwork, scholar Dorothea Filus concluded that:

Kakure Kirishitanism makes no pretense of being monotheistic. The 16th-century Catholicism with its concept of the Holy Trinity and its multitude of saints was most likely not conceived of as monotheistic by the Japanese. Presently Jesus, the Virgin Mary, the saints, the Japanese martyrs, and one’s distant ancestors (those who died long ago) are all venerated as kami. (Filus 2009, 18)

Japanese scholars publishing in the West have likewise considered the Kakure tendency to hold kami as real beings and have ruled that “[i]n this there is no trace of a Christian monotheistic worldview, but it reveals that a very Japanese and deep-rooted concept of spiritual beings continues to exist” (Miyazaki 2003, 31). Below I will focus on the similarly negative assessment of historian Stephen Turnbull, who in 1998 composed a robust investigation of Kakure development and beliefs.

Turnbull characterizes Kakure theology, exemplified by the content of their *kamiyose* prayers (prayers to summon the kami), as stretching “beyond” the limits of “the definition of monotheism” (1998, 153). He concludes that a “very important characteristic of the Kakure faith, stressed in almost every chapter, has been its polytheistic nature” (212). Turnbull focused his interpretive energies on Kakure prayers with a strong interest in the question of “to whom are the Kakure praying” (149). These prayers often include, he reveals, other entities apart from the one god. For example, following Catholic trends of praying to the Virgin Mary and human saints, Kakure adopted both Mary and Christian martyrs as “kami” who could be prayed to, welcoming them into “an enlarged pantheon” after the missionaries left Japan (136, 154). Sacred objects or *gozensama* (honorable presence) were also developed into kami (136). Ultimately, there emerged a “dynamic tradition” of prayer “addressed to a huge pantheon of *kamisama* for a wide range of intentions” (155). In Turnbull’s estimation, there is a “close correspondence between, if not total identification with, Kakure *kamisama* and Shintō kami” (85). In addition to these new “Christian” deities who were apparently understood in a similar way as traditional Shinto deities, the traditional Shinto deities themselves were also made objects of veneration and supplication. The famous stories of Japanese converts continuing to be fearful of negative consequences to their lives if their veneration of traditional kami ceased reassures us as to the ongoing nature of their belief in such divine beings post-conversion (see 135). In the end, for Turnbull, the

Kakure faith is not monotheistic but polytheistic. He points repeatedly to its relationship to the “polytheistic tendencies of popular Catholicism, with its devotion to saints, relics and holy images, and beliefs in the efficacy of holy water” (109). However, he concludes that Kakure beliefs and practices stretch any derivation from this Catholic tradition to its “breaking point” (109); again, pushing their teaching “beyond” the “definition of monotheism” (153).

It is apparent that Turnbull’s definition of monotheism is limited to the veneration of a single divine being. But it is interesting that the Kakure are disqualified as monotheists even as Catholicism’s historical veneration of heavenly saints is not, in his view, a monotheistic practice—or it is at least not the habit of *good* monotheists, as he repeatedly labels it a “polytheistic tendency,” perhaps out of charity. I am not as persuaded as Turnbull that Catholic veneration practices should be allowed to pass as mere “tendencies” in a non-monotheistic direction while similar Kakure practices absolutely “break” monotheism. At one point, Turnbull notices that a pagan writer of late antiquity, Eunapius of Sardis (c. 345–c. 414 CE), once summarized the early Christian practice of collecting the bones of martyrs and transforming them into “gods” in such a way that it could have easily been written by the Nagasaki Magistrates about the Christians in Japan (136). At the same time, however, he distances Kakure worship practices from Catholicism. The tipping point for Turnbull seems to be the fact that the Kakure have included in their worship not only Mary and Christian martyrs, but also non-Christian deities, Japanese mythological figures, and physical objects (the *gozensama*). It is implied, therefore, that if the Kakure had reigned in their worship practices to include only Christian saints, they would have shared in the Catholic guilt of mere polytheistic “tendencies.” I am unsure, however, as to how the Kakure veneration of Christian martyrs and traditional kami would materially differ, especially if it is true, as Turnbull stresses, that there is a correspondence of the concept of traditional kami and the Kakure’s martyrs-turned-kami (85). Likewise, I am unsure how this difference, if it exists, would cause the Kakure religion to suddenly pass from a monotheism into a stark polytheism. Is it only the worship of non-Christian figures that breaks monotheism? Regardless, for Turnbull, the purest or most genuine monotheism appears to require the veneration of only one divine being. Reinforcing our reading of Turnbull’s outlook is his contrasting characterization of the inhospitable Japanese religious world within which the missionary’s exclusivist brand of Christian monotheism struggled to establish itself. “One very important characteristic of Japanese religious belief and practice,” says Turnbull, “is that it is by no means a monotheistic system. Various shrines and temples appear to be dedicated to the inhabitants of a vast pantheon of gods” (16). Here we see that Turnbull is in alignment with both the popular Western definition of monotheism as the veneration of a single deity and the Western scholarly tradition of perceiving no trace of monotheism in Japanese religious history. Thus, in the end, the “extraordinarily wide range encompassed by the Kakure *kamisama*, and the vagueness of definition noted earlier, indicate that the Kakure Kirishitan faith has much in common with the polytheistic nature of Japanese religion, with its numerous, and often undefined, kami” (153).

### 6.3.2. Positive Western Assessments

J.H. Kamstra exemplifies the minority report which discerns a Kakure monotheism, speaking of “the pluriform monotheism of the Kakure Kirishitan” (1994, 112). What sort of teaching is this? As noted above, Kamstra did not provide any workable definition of “pluriform monotheism,” and this vagueness was pointed out by others (Young 1995, 585; Cusack 2007, 323). As we have seen, this is one of the modern categories by which scholars have attempted to bring nuance to the umbrella category “monotheism,” and is a term which has sometimes been found in discussions of the Hindu monotheisms. Again, modern Hindu theologians have employed terms like “pluriform” and “polymorphic monotheism” to describe monotheisms which involve “a single unitary deity who takes many forms and manifests at different levels of reality” (Rosen 2006, 235; see also Schweig 2004, 18–19, 26). That Kamstra means something similar is revealed by the fact that he describes the Kakure as having envisioned biblical figures like God and Satan, as well as other non-biblical deities, as having many different “forms” (*sō*) (1994, 114). In the *Tenchi* text, Kamstra notes that the one god is also the creator of tens of thousands of angels who each have thirty-three forms, similar to the thirty-three bodies (*sanjūsanshin*) of the bodhisattva Kannon (Avalokiteśvara) (114). In Kamstra’s view, contrary to that of Turnbull, monotheism is inclusive of the belief in and even veneration of myriad divine beings, both created deities and different personalities of a single god. Kamstra’s surprising conclusion as to both the source of the Kakure conception and its survival in the NRMs is worthy of note:

The Jesuits who during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries preached God as Deusu or Tenshu never expected their ideas to develop into specific Shinto concepts of pluriform monotheism such as Ame no minaka nushi no mikoto or to Buddhist manifestations of God in many forms akin to the 33 forms of Kannon. Since then a special brand of Japanese theism contributed also to the reduction of myriads of gods to one monotheistic god in Tenrikyō, Konkōkyō, and Omotokyō. (Kamstra 1994, 115)

Kamstra attests here not only to the presence of monotheism in Kakure belief, but to pre-existing “specific Shinto concepts” of “pluriform monotheism” which he implies were synthesized with the Jesuit concept of God. As an example, he makes a fleeting reference to the first deity of the *Kojiki*, Amenominakanushi-no-kami, as if the mere mention of this deity will conjure an image of the kind of monotheism he has in view. In truth, a variety of differing beliefs about Amenominakanushi-no-kami have existed in Shinto history. Nevertheless, Kamstra’s detection of a premodern Shinto monotheism centered on Amenominakanushi, a monotheism which he suggests has some relationship to that found in the NRMs, is significant and will be discussed in detail in the following chapter. However, it is interesting that Kamstra, while pointing to the presence of “Shinto concepts of pluriform monotheism” which allegedly have some affinity to the monotheism of the NRMs, at the same time assumed the apparently contradictory position that it is “not difficult to trace [the monotheism of the NRMs] back

to Kirishitan influences since Japan's religious traditions are polytheistic rather than monotheistic" (107). If there indeed existed a monotheistic Shinto tradition of Amenominakanushi, as Kamstra says, would this not qualify as a "Japanese religious tradition"? Should not the intersection of this monotheistic Japanese tradition and the monotheism of the NRMs be thoroughly explored? All of this in due time. For now, we will focus on the question of monotheism and Kakure Kirishitan beliefs.

#### 6.4. Revisiting Kakure Monotheism

Which of these general assessments (monotheistic or not) best fits the data we have about Kakure belief and practice? While Turnbull concluded that because the Kakure venerated other deities alongside of God the Father, Jesus, and Mary, that they were "polytheists" (1994, 212–213), such veneration in no way precludes monotheism. At the head of the Kakure pandeon sits Deusu. The *Tenchi* says that Deusu is "worshiped as Lord of Heaven and Earth, and Parent of humankind and all creation" (Whelan 1996, 39). He is "Deusu the Almighty" (66) and holds the highest "rank" of all beings, identified with the number two-hundred (see 39–41). Not even Jesus or Mary are described in these elevated terms. Jesus, despite possessing a divided portion of Deusu's substance as his body, has a "parent"—the great Deusu (62). There is no question that Deusu is a god.

It is possible that the "forty-two forms" (*yonjūni sō*) of Deusu may indeed correspond, as Kamstra says, to a pluriform scheme akin to the thirty-three bodies of Kannon (1994, 114). In such an interpretation, Deusu himself would take on different appearances in the same way Kannon herself appears variously as the birdman Garuda, or as a monk or a dragon, in order to save people. However, Whelan interprets the *sō* of Deusu as being analogous to the *sanjūni-sō* (thirty-two features or bodily marks) of the Buddha—the extraordinary physical features which can identify superior beings, including webbed skin between the fingers, a long and wide tongue which can cover the whole face, and other striking traits (1996, 75–76). The fact that the Kirishitan god Deusu has forty-two forms demonstrates his superiority over the Buddha. I ultimately argue for Whelan's reading on the basis of both the correspondence of the *Tenchi's* language to Buddhist vocabulary and the fact that in the same section of the *Tenchi* which describes Deusu's *sō*, we read thus of the biblical Adam's creation on Sunday (Portuguese: Domingo): "On the seventh day Deusu blew breath into this [human] being and named him Domeigosu-no-Adan, who possessed thirty-three forms. So this is the usual number of forms for a human being" (39). While normal humans aren't able to manifest in various bodies like Kannon, they can certainly be said to have a shared collection of identifiable physical traits.

In the end, the one god Deusu, along with Jesus and Mary whose bodies are made from Deusu's body, stand tall among the myriad spirits. In the outlook of the *Tenchi*, there no *conscious* rejection of trinitarianism (which entails the elevation of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit over Catholic saints and angels due to the triad's shared divine substance), and, again, the Kakure presentation of God as *Tenteisantai* (Heaven Emperor in Three Bodies) surely represents an earnest though unsuccessful intent to preserve an original reception of the Christian Trinity. If the above reconstruction indeed corresponds to what the Kakure of the *Tenchi* had in mind, their view would likely best be described by

our category “transcendent polydeistic monotheism.” The one Deusu was the original “Lord of Heaven and Earth, and Parent of humankind and all creation” (Whelan 1996, 39) whose creation includes myriad deities. It might be said, however, that Deusu’s dividing up portions of himself for the formation of Jesus’ and Mary’s bodies corresponds to the category “fragmentary polydeistic monotheism.” Thus, we might even produce a combined category of “transcendent-fragmentary polydeistic monotheism”—some deities in the *Tenchi* (only two, Jesus and Mary) are made from fragments of the one god’s substance, while (all) other deities are direct creations of the one god.

Now, apart from a lack of consistent access to Christian doctrinal information, how have Western scholars interpreted the failure of the Kakure to maintain trinitarian orthodoxy? The most common perspective, based on the assumption that premodern Japan had absolutely no concept of a supreme god, centers around a mutual relationship of non-comprehension: the Japanese simply did not understand the Christian concept of a supreme god or the doctrine of the Trinity, and the Jesuit missionaries simply did not understand that Japan’s religious outlook completely lacked and was incompatible with such concepts. Indeed, Western surveys tell us that from the moment Jesuit missionaries first touched down on the sandy shores of Kagoshima in 1549, the traditional Christian concept that there is “one God in three persons” was doomed by a cultural pre-conditioning which stifled Japanese reception of the Christian god (Whelan 1996, 33). As we have seen, Japanese scholars have also insisted that there simply “was no concept of a creator God” (Kawai 1994, 52). And Western scholars such as Turnbull have continued to contrast monotheism with the religious order of Japan: the mere existence of a vast number of Shinto shrines to various deities across the country is proof that “Japanese religious belief and practice... is by no means a monotheistic system” (1998, 16). Thus, the Japanese people, and even the first Kirishitan converts, “misunderstood” the concept of both “one all-powerful creator-God” and “the Trinity” (Harrington 1980, 334).

In my view, some Western historians have perhaps too hastily concluded that the first Christian missionaries introduced theological ideas (e.g. the concept of a supreme creator god) which had “no cultural bedrock on which to rest in Japan” and that “[c]oncepts introduced to them, such as the Trinity, were either never fully digested or they resisted understanding what did not appeal or seem relevant to them” (Whelan 1996, 33). At the very least, monotheism was certainly able to be understood. Higashibaba Ikuo, after reviewing documents containing Kirishitan confessions, revealed one text in which a Kirishitan convert not only describes his own faith in the “one body” of Deus, but also the fact that “even gentiles” (non-Christians in Japan) know the single body of Deus (2001, 94–95). As Higashibaba observes, “[t]he monotheistic character of Deus... was easy for the Japanese follower to comprehend” (95). Furthermore, as will be discussed in detail at the end of this chapter, some anti-Christian writers of the period even became angry at the claims of Christian theologians that the Japanese couldn’t comprehend the idea of a supreme creator god, and demanded that these theologians accept the fact that the Japanese could indeed understand these “unoriginal” teachings (see Elison 1991 [1973], 263; Paramore 2009, 46; see below sections). In my eyes, discussions of a Japanese non-

comprehension of monotheism featuring appeals to divergent “cultural bedrocks” ultimately verge on a culturalist approach to the interaction between Japan and Christianity in this period, in which intellectual histories draw up compartmentalized images of a “clash” between essentialized “Western” and “Eastern” cultures (see Paramore 2009, 4–5). As we have seen in earlier chapters, Orientalist/Occidental theorizing has regularly focused on a “polytheistic animism/monotheistic” dichotomy (Porcu 2008, 3) in which monotheism is cast as antithetical to the Japanese consciousness. This sort of framing, it turns out, had its genesis in the anti-Christian discourse of the early Tokugawa period itself, in which Christian ideas were generally decried as exclusively “Western” phenomena, and as the products of a “‘barbarian’ religion inherently opposed to ‘Eastern,’ ‘Japanese,’ ‘civilized’ ethical and religious systems” (Paramore 2009, 5). This discourse, based on “an imagined, constructed conflict between images of ‘Japaneseness’ and ‘non-Japaneseness’” (11), subsequently reverberated into modern Western representations of the period (5, 11). While it is true that contemporary Western scholarship on Japanese Christianity has largely departed from narrating “the flow of history as a determined function of an essentialized conception of ‘culture’” (5), I suggest that the ongoing treatment of the basic concept of monotheism as flatly uncongenial to Japan’s “cultural bedrock” may be among the most stubborn remnants of such a culturalist reading in Western analysis. That at least some Japanese of the period would have been capable of comprehending the basic concept of a supreme god will be demonstrated in the latter sections of this chapter and especially in the next.

## **6.5. The Possibility of a Kirishitan/NRM Connection**

Now that we have established the presence of monotheism among the Kakure Kirishitan, how likely is it that the founders of Kurozumikyō, Tenrikyō, and Konkōkyō were influenced by Kakure monotheism? The first step to answering this question requires a comparison between the teaching of these NRMs and what we know of Kakure belief. The second step will be to gauge the probability of their interaction in history.

### **6.5.1. Kakure and NRM Monotheisms Compared**

First, how do the Kakure beliefs and those of the NRMs compare? In the above analysis of NRM monotheisms, it was determined that Kurozumikyō generally represents an emanationistic polydeistic monotheism. Meanwhile, Tenrikyō generally represents some form of polydeistic monotheism (either transcendent, emanationistic, or fragmentary), or a pluriform monodeistic monotheism (depending on interpretation). Finally, Konkōkyō generally represents a pluriform monodeistic monotheism (and a pantheism, in which all things, including the human self, are identical to the one god).

If the present reconstruction of Kakure belief is correct, their system resembles a compound category, “transcendent-fragmentary polydeistic monotheism,” in which only two members of a divine triad are made from fragments of the one god’s substance while myriad other deities are the direct

creations of the one god. None of the above NRM monotheisms are in alignment with this system. First, none have any triadic metaphysical configuration like the Kakure Trinity. “Transcendent” interpretation of Tenrikyō’s polydeism seem to at first draw near to Christian/Kirishitan thought; however, Tenrikyō theology includes (at least the bodies of) human beings and the whole of the universe in the body of God the Parent, and ultimately has no correspondence to the Kakure Deusu’s unique division of his bodily substance between Jesus and Mary and sharp distinction from the world. While Kurozumikyō (and perhaps some early interpretations of Tenrikyō) see various beings as emanations of the one god, the Kakure do not conceptualize the relationship between Deusu and other entities in terms of emanationism. Konkōkyō’s pluriform monodeistic monotheism and its evident pantheism is absent from Kakure theology. Instead, the Kakure appear to insist on their Catholic inheritance that the world and its inhabitants are related to a transcendent God as his creations.

If there is indeed little to no metaphysical correspondence between the Kakure system and those of the NRMs, the question might be raised as to the Kakure transmission of at least a basic concept of a supreme god—a minimal, rudimentary substrate which might have been elaborated upon by NRM innovators. Such a proposition would, of course, only become more likely than other historical options if we were compelled by some unquestionable evidence of contact between NRM founders and Kakure belief and if no other Japanese source bore more similarity to the teachings of the NRMs.

### **6.5.2. The Question of Historical Probability**

As Richard Drummond summarized, some scholars have mentioned the possibility that “popular memories of Christianity” or even “accounts from even more direct sources” may have had an impact on the leadership of “the three most prominent new religions of the common people founded during the nineteenth century, Tenrikyō, Konkōkyō and Ōmotokyō” (1971, 122). He concludes, however, that it is “impossible to prove or to disprove this thesis, but the virtual monotheism, or at least strongly theistic position, which emerged in the case of each of these religious movements suggests some such influence” (122). He briefly mentions in support of this idea that “in the Catholic period” there had been Kirishitan living in the home district of the founder of Konkōkyō, Kawate Bunjirō (122). More specifically, Peter B. Clarke writes that “Japanese NRMs have made a difference to the religious life of Japan by the emphasis in their teaching on monotheism—the most likely influences in this case being Jesuit Christian literature secretly imported from China and the tradition of the Kakure-Kirishitan or Hidden Christians (Kamstra, 1994)” (Clarke 2006b, 304). In this section, and in the following chapters, this historical proposition will be challenged. It should first be pointed out that we have little to no explicit testimony from our NRM founders as to what contiguous religious influences they may have incorporated into their views, being the products of divine revelation. The results of this examination will therefore constitute something less than an inarguable case, and we are only able to recommend which of the historical proposals at hand is more or less likely. That being said, in light of the nation’s policy of isolation and the ban on Christianity during the time of the NRMs’ founding, positive contact with Western Christian missionaries, imported Jesuit literature, and also with Kakure Kirishitan declines

in probability. I will now expand on this suggestion, exploring the potential Kakure connection in detail but beginning with a brief survey of the presence of Christian ideas in Japan in light of the widely-discussed anti-Christian discourse preceding and during the rise of the NRMs.

### **6.5.2.1. The Presence of Christian Doctrine in the Wake of Japan's Anti-Christian Action**

Kiri Paramore's *Ideology and Christianity in Japan* (2009) refocused the subject of anti-Christian discourse in the early Tokugawa period away from a "clash between Eastern and Western religions and cultures" and towards "concrete conflicts occurring in domestic Japanese politics" (5). Paramore explained that this anti-Christian discourse, which emerged again in a second wave in the early 1800s, belonged to a "broader trend of political suppression of certain religious and minority groups in Japanese society" (2009, 5). Most of this anti-Christian literature was not focused on doctrinal arguments (62–63), and neither was an "invasion" of Christianity from the West a matter of serious concern. Rather, domestic discourse on Christianity had been overwhelmed by the period's discussions on Confucian political theory, and was largely focused on how Christian doctrine weakened the social structure of Japan. Since at least the seventeenth century, a "key anti-Christian argument had been that Christianity, in encouraging the people to directly worship God, undermined the hierarchical structure of east Asian society by removing the roles of lords and sovereigns as intermediaries in the worship of Heaven" (165). Thus, Christianity was often "portrayed as a political threat, but in terms of its potential threat to social order" (108–109). Interestingly, most anti-Christian literature was produced "after nearly all Christian elements had been eradicated from Japanese society" (5). Indeed, by the 1640s, "Christianity had been effectively wiped out" (53), and by at least the 1660s "there were no non-Japanese Christians and virtually no Japanese Christians in Japan" (65). Paramore also took notice of some contemporary Japanese scholars, like Kurozumi Makoto, who went so far as to say that the "image of Christianity in Tokugawa Japan [was] 'an imagined rather than real projection of what was alien to the consciousness of order, a necessary 'demon,' an oppositional figure against which the early modern Japanese order was established'" (4–5).

These findings are relevant for our question about the possibility of Christian influence on NRM founders in a few interrelated ways. First, it is clear that the government's anti-Christian actions had eliminated the Christian organism's ability to widely and effectively influence the religious views of the Japanese people. Second, the emergence of anti-Christian literature was not necessarily a response to a sudden rise in public conversions to Christianity or a rise in the propagation of distinctly Christian theology; rather, it belonged to a campaign to further suppress a body of already-defeated marginalized groups whose potential ideological resurgence in Japan's political sphere represented a threat to domestic interests (see also Hur 2007, 28, 103–104, 364). Regardless, while the primary motivation behind this anti-Christian campaign may have been political, its targeting of Christianity ultimately reinforced the suppression of Christian theology in the country.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> An "annual anti-Christian inspection" of the entire population facilitated by the Buddhist funerary system provided further suppression of a Christian threat which "had ceased to exist"; see Hur 2007, 16, 103.

In light of Christianity's clear public defeat in Japan, some Western scholars have pointed to the possibility that NRM monotheism has some relationship with clandestine Jesuit writings which entered the country after its isolation (Clarke 2006b, 5, 304; Kamstra 1994, 107–109). How prevalent or accessible were such texts in Japan following the government's anti-Christian action?

It is well known that access to Jesuit books dramatically declined in Japan due to the government's systematic annihilation of the missionary presence and its "suppression of Japanese Christian objects (including texts)" (Paramore 2009, 26), best exemplified by the shogun Tokugawa Iemitsu's Edict of Kan'ei (1630) which banned the importation of all Western Christian material. As with any contraband, the rarity of Christian texts increased their value among interested Japanese intellectuals and, naturally, the willingness of Chinese merchants to smuggle them. In 1658, a Chinese trader was executed by the government for importing Christian books. In 1671, the members of the bookseller's guild in Nagasaki signed an oath to report any Christian books discovered there, or anywhere else in Japan. Merely passing references to Christianity, even mentions of Christian churches on maps of China, could be grounds for the censorship or destruction of books and the revocation of an importer's ability to trade (see Kornicki 2001 [1998], 327–328; Storm 2012, 103). Naturally, "[b]anned terminology included any explicitly Christian terms and even the basic terms of any monotheism, such as God (*Tenshu*), or the naming of famous Christians, such as [Matteo] Ricci. This meant that even the few references to Christian subjects that inspectors might have overlooked lacked context" (Storm 2012, 103). In 1685, the government reduced the number of Chinese trading vessels permitted in Nagasaki ports to only seventy due to Chinese violations of their literary prohibition (see Kamstra 1994, 107–108). In 1698, officials in Osaka forced the city's booksellers to hang lists of banned Christian titles outside their shops (Kornicki 2001 [1998], 330). The extreme suppression of Christian writings in the country continued until the late nineteenth century with the lifting of the ban on Christianity in 1873. However, it should be noted that in 1720, the shogun Tokugawa Yoshimune (1684–1751) was begged by Genki Nakane (1662–1733) to suspend the ban on Jesuit scientific writings so that Jesuit astronomical knowledge could be used by shogunal astronomers for the revision of the Japanese calendar (Drummond 1971, 120; Kornicki 2001 [1998], 328). The selective relaxation on non-evangelistic works by Jesuit authors at this time was entirely related to Yoshimune's calendrical project, an initiative which he had been told required the reading of Western data. This was an attempt to utilize Western learning without Western religion. Indeed, Iemitsu's shogunate continued to order the writing and propagation of anti-Christian literature in the country (Antoni and Ucerler 2017, 331), and the Osaka booksellers' guild continued to be fearful despite the 1720 relaxation on scientific works and perpetuated the total ban on all of the originally banned Jesuit scientific writings (Kornicki 2001 [1998], 330). Iemitsu's relaxation on shogunal officials reading astronomical books can still be thought of as a surprising move in light of the "rigidity with which the ban [on Jesuit literature] was implemented" and the fact that "other [anti-Christian] regulations instituted in the early seventeenth century remained in force until the last years of the Bakufu [Tokugawa Shogunate, which ended in 1868]" —all part of a consistent, centuries-long program of suppression which continued "long after there was any threat from Christianity" (Kornicki 2001 [1998], 330; see also Paramore 2009). During this period of Christian dormancy, a few secret,

handwritten copies of Jesuit books did continue to survive in the possession of generational Kakure families (see Orii 2015, 189–207).

The most-cited example by Western scholars of an influential Jesuit text which found secret popularity among the Japanese intellectuals willing to risk possession, was a book published in China in 1603 by Italian Jesuit priest Matteo Ricci (1552–1610), *Tianzhu shiyi* (Jp. *Tenshu jitsugi*; True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven). Ricci's text had first arrived in Japan in roughly 1605 but was not spread by the Jesuit mission as they mostly disagreed with Ricci's theological and evangelistic approach (Paramore 2009, 25), an approach which was ruled against by Rome itself (see Rule 1986, 88–100). Later, however, and after the sharp decline in the availability of other Christian writings, Ricci's work became the most referenced Jesuit text in the country, and, if they ever encountered it, probably became what mid to late Tokugawa intellectuals imagined was quintessentially “Christian” thought (25). Iemitsu's 1630 edict specifically banned thirty-two works of Ricci. In the 1685 action, authorities forbade all texts which mentioned Ricci's name (and many other words like “Catholic,” “Jesus,” “Western,” etc., and also depictions of the Western hemisphere or maps of “Christian” countries) (see Goodman 2012 [1986], 34–35). Nevertheless, copies of Ricci's *Tianzhu shiyi* published in China, it is true, were secreted into Japan and eventually made their way into the hands of intellectuals like Razan Hayashi (1583–1657) and later Hirata Atsutane (1776–1843), the latter of which dared not even use Ricci's name in light of the national ban on such literature (see Devine 1981, 37–54). As Storm notes, “[w]hile some banned books were secretly smuggled into Japan and circulated clandestinely, the Tokugawa state officially discouraged private scholars from studying most forms of Western learning” (2012, 104). What must be briefly considered is the nature of the presentation of monotheism in this important text, and then, later, the likelihood that such a writing was ever encountered by Kurozumi Munetada, Nakayama Miki, or Kawate Bunjirō.

In Ricci's *Tianzhu shiyi*, Paramore summarizes, “the creator is an externalized God... [and he is a creator of] an internalized [human] soul (anima).” However, this is a God who, belonging to a distinct category as creator, is nevertheless “present and acting” in human beings and in the world (2009, 27). Ricci utilizes Confucian arguments to demonstrate the existence of a supreme god. He furthermore argues that the ancient Chinese had believed wholeheartedly in this god, which is none other than the Christian god by a different name: “What in my country is called the Lord of Heaven (*Tianzhu*), is in Chinese called *Shangdi*” (Ricci 1985 [1603], 68).

Ricci's insistence that God is present and active amongst human beings and the world is evocative of but not the same as Kurozumi's emanationism, nor is it a match for Nakayama's polydeistic monotheism (or perhaps her pluriform monodeistic monotheism), and it is not at all like Kawate's pantheistic/pluriform monodeistic monotheism. I admit that it is still possible that a basic concept of a supreme god could have been gleaned and transformed/elaborated on by these founders from this or some similar source. However, my argument does not involve a claim that there was absolutely no Christian literature available in Japan and no Kakure Kirishitan presence; rather, mine is a claim only about the probability of contact with such sources versus the probability of contact with other non-Christian sources which are soon to be discussed. Indeed, while Ricci's work had been smuggled into

Japan, its availability continued to be low. Even most intellectual circles seem to have been unable to obtain copies of this text. For example, Fabian Fukun, a former Jesuit and one of the greatest intellectuals of the early Tokugawa period, was an “intelligent seeker” exposed to “a huge diversity of religious and philosophical thought.” Nevertheless, by 1620 he had evidently not read Ricci, though Ricci’s text would have contained information which would have been most useful for his post-Christian confrontation with Jesuit doctrine in his own writings (see Paramore 2009, 26). Even in the mid-Tokugawa period, it is evident that powerful Japanese intellectuals still had difficulty accessing Ricci and other Christian texts. While accusations of Christian influence sometimes flew between rival Confucian scholars, “Christian ideas” were often inconsistently and inaccurately portrayed (see 85–86, 183, no. 21), and by this time a case can be made that the government’s anti-Christian action in the preceding period had been so effective as to generally prevent even Japan’s intellectual class from recognizing Christian theology. A famed quotation of Sorai Ogyū (1666–1728), thought to be the “greatest” and “most influential” of all Tokugawa Confucian scholars and a scholar who had the ear of the shogunate (103, 112), reinforces this picture of a near-total loss of Christian doctrine in the country:

Today there are no Christians anywhere in Japan. Today even if we look for one family of them, we find nothing. Among the ruling clans there are no traces of their kin... Five generations have now passed since those who renounced Christianity turned. That being the case, they are no different to everyone else [no Christian influence remains]. Also, because there is no one who has even seen a Christian book, today there is no one who possesses the knowledge to say what kind of thing that teaching is. [This means that] when Confucianism, Buddhism or Shinto are preached badly, it is difficult to assess whether that is being affected by Christian infiltration. For this reason, the Christian texts held in the shogunate libraries should be shown to Confucian scholars so that the true nature of this heresy can be investigated.

(Sorai Ogyū, *Seidan* (Discourse on Government), 4:43; translation in Paramore 2009, 112)<sup>53</sup>

All of this indicates the extreme scarcity of Christian teaching in Japan, as well as the difficulty with which even the resourceful intellectual obtained Christian material. For Japanese like our NRM founders, belonging more to the general population, it is certain that their access was even more limited than that of inquirers like Sorai. In light of the erosion of access to and awareness of Christian texts and ideas in the preceding generation, we must ask how likely it is that our NRM founders would have each encountered secret Jesuit material like Ricci’s book (and subsequently embraced some of its forbidden, socio-politically seditious content—material which had come under renewed public denigration in the second wave of anti-Christian discourse launched in the early 1800s). It seems clear that “[a]fter the ban

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<sup>53</sup> In the 1720s, Sorai was finally shown a copy of Ricci’s forbidden material and managed to make a secret copy of his own. In a note in his text, he castigated the officials who continued to strictly enforce ignorance (Kornicki 2001 [1998], 330).

on Christianity, the expulsion of the missionaries and the pronouncement of the *sakoku* policy, the general public lost most of its opportunities to have any contact with Western works” (Goodman 2012 [1986], 35). Not only was there a lack of availability to the general public, those most interested in Christianity during this period and during the Meiji restoration were not part of the working or agricultural class, but the intellectual stratum (see Shimazono 2003, 282–284). However, there may not be a single, simple answer to the question of interest in and access to Christian texts among the founders. Kurozumi belonged to a family of Shinto priests from the samurai class; Nakayama and Kawate belonged to the peasant, agricultural class. Of the three, Kurozumi seems to have been the only one who could have possibly been economically and hierarchically situated to have had an opportunity to acquire and study banned Jesuit materials. However, I am not aware of any Western arguments that Kurozumi borrowed his monotheism from Jesuit texts. Neither am I aware of any such arguments regarding the peasant Kawate. Indeed, there is relatively little discussion about the possibility of Christian influence on Kurozumi or Kawate compared with Nakayama Miki. For these reasons, I trust I am justified in leaving to one side the question of Jesuit writings and the monotheism of Kurozumi and Kawate, and focusing our attention on Nakayama Miki.

#### **6.5.2.2. Nakayama’s Tenrikyō as a Case Study for Direct Christian Exposure**

None of the NRMs have been accused by Western scholars of borrowing from Christianity as often as Tenrikyō (e.g. Clement 1909, 259), and I will use this NRM as a case study for the hypothesis of Nakayama Miki’s *direct* Kakure Kirishitan contact or exposure to Jesuit writings. The other hypothesis related to *indirect* Christian influence mentioned above, that of secret Jesuit writings influencing Kokugaku scholars like Hirata Atsutane (who in turn is said to have influenced our NRMs), will be saved for an examination in proper detail in a subsequent chapter discussing Kokugaku. For clarity, I am focusing on Tenrikyō and neglecting our other NRMs first and foremost for reasons of space, and second for the perceived concentration of Western studies on the possible influences of Nakayama Miki, and thirdly because the probabilistic historical argument I will be developing below can be applied generally to the situations of Kurozumikyō, Tenrikyō, and Konkōkyō.

Regarding evidence of contact between Tenrikyō’s Nakayama Miki and Christianity, the history of Western scholarship on this topic prepares us with low expectations. Peery writes: “It is interesting to conjecture as to the influence Christianity has had upon Tenrikyō. It does not seem probable that Omiiiki [Nakayama] was at all influenced by it, unless the traditions of the Catholic Christianity of some two or three hundred years previous reached her in some way” (1897, 141). As we will see, the situation has remained much the same, and little to no advancement has been made in the past century in Western scholarship regarding the viability of the basic thesis that subterranean Christian contact (via either the Kakure Kirishitan or exposure to Jesuit writings) is responsible for Tenrikyō’s monotheism, and the evidence supporting Peery’s conclusion as to its improbability continues to stand strong. None of this has stifled the temptation of Western specialists in this direction, however.

### 6.5.2.2.1. Western Scholars on Tenrikyō's Similarity with Christian Writings as Evidence of Christian Influence

I will first discuss Western views on the relationship between Tenrikyō writings and Christian writings. As mentioned above, there is only shallow conceptual affinity between the kind of monotheism which can be reconstructed from the Kakure documents and the kind(s) of monotheism observed in Tenrikyō, and neither is there a shared outlook between Tenrikyō and the orthodox trinitarianism espoused by Jesuit sources. As also mentioned above, however, it still might be that a basic monotheism (a rudimentary belief in a creator god) was transmitted by the Kakure or through Jesuit texts.

Harry Thomsen, highlighting evidence of a similarity of phraseology and vocabulary between Tenrikyō and Christian publications, argued that “[c]onsciously or unconsciously Tenrikyo leaders have borrowed extensively from the form and teachings of Christianity” (1963, 59). Henry van Straelen also perceived a “number of similarities with or borrowings from Christianity” though he admitted that he did not have “sufficient arguments for establishing a direct relationship between parts of the Christian teaching and Tenrikyō” (1954, 7). He also conceded that in terms of Tenrikyō's self-understanding, he had “not yet come across any statement that their teaching has been really taken from Christianity” (9), and he points out that Tenrikyō itself has directly denied a debt to Christian doctrine. Indeed, its representatives have acknowledged that “our Tenrikyō [doctrine] has indeed affinities with the teachings of Buddhism and Christianity. [And it is true that] Christ's view of God, that we should call Him Father, is very close to Tenrikyō” (see 8–9). However, as van Straelen noticed, Tenrikyō has also affinities with other religious traditions. “[B]esides Christian vestiges,” he writes, “we find in the *Tenrikyō* doctrine a very great amount of Shintoism, Buddhism and some Confucianism” (9). As he also notes, Tenrikyō has an answer for this similarity: Tenrikyō teachings were pre-figured in the world's traditions before Nakayama's decisive (“most perfect”) revelation; the views toward the truth given by God the Parent in Christianity and other religions were only partial, but now there is no more need for revelation (11–12). Meanwhile, from the standpoint of the history of religions, van Straelen's theory is that Nakayama “mixed these teachings [of Christianity and other religions] with many revelations which she claims to have received directly from God the Parent,” and he even goes so far as to say that Miki provides “a clear example of a well-known Oriental characteristic: the inclination towards religious eclecticism, combining the most diverse elements from various religious systems... One can even speak of Miki's genius which shows itself in her immense power to absorb alien thoughts into her own expansive religious system” (12).

Now, there is no question that Tenrikyōists have studied and drawn on Christian missionary literature, especially sixteenth-century missionary texts, a robust collection of which is housed at the Tenri University library. As Thomsen acknowledged, this study and borrowing has been performed to “increase the effectiveness of the [Tenrikyō] mission abroad” under a motto of accommodation to “foreign ways so [Tenrikyō] will become as appealing to other peoples as it has become to so many people of Japan” (1963, 58–59). Thomsen does seem to sense more than a superficial influence on

Tenrikyō doctrine, however, and it may very well be the case that the shape of the borrowing of Tenrikyō theologians from Christian sources extends beyond mere contextualization or evangelistic gesturing at plots of common ground. Yet it seems reasonable at this stage to interpret the Christian morphology of some of Tenrikyō's literature in light of Thomsen's final remarks, that Tenrikyō "has a remarkable gift for modification and accommodation that has carried it some way from its original teaching and may take it still further as it follows developments in Buddhism, Shintoism, and Christianity" (59–60; see also van Straelen 1954, 12, no. 1). Van Straelen concludes that in his pointing out similarities between Tenrikyō and Christian teaching, his readers must "be extremely careful in making any final conclusions and to remember well the heading of these introductory lines: 'First Impressions'" (11). I suggest these first impressions need also wait for a thorough exploration of the Shinto world which van Straelen says also was influential on Nakayama's Tenrikyō.

While there is a solid case that Tenrikyō has adopted from Christian writings some elements of Christian teaching, or at least some elements of that teaching's external form, we are not as concerned with the actions of Tenrikyō theologians and missionaries as we are with the subject of Nakayama herself. Van Straelen wrote of his "strong impression that present-day Tenrikyō has already deviated from its original teaching" (1954, 12, no. 1), and he also noted that "it may be that Christian influences entered Tenrikyō at a later date and after the death of the foundress" (7, no. 1). My own impression is that no change has occurred in regard to Tenrikyō's status as a monotheistic religion; however, a change has occurred in regard to Tenrikyō's official interpretation of the ten deities of the creation myth as merely the functions or properties of God the Parent. In my view, Nakayama's original conception expressed in the *Ofudesaki* must have been that of a genuinely polydeistic monotheism. However, in light of the possibility that Tenrikyōists have to some degree paced beyond their founder's original conceptions (a habit of a great many religions in human history), and in light of the possibility that such movements included an adoption of Christian elements (whether doctrinally substantial or not), we must continue to focus our attention squarely on the case of Nakayama Miki herself and the probability of her exposure to Jesuit or Kakure sources. Of Nakayama's own historical contact with Jesuit writings, no unassailable evidence has emerged and I am not aware of any serious arguments for her exposure to any particular Jesuit text or author. This encapsulates rather succinctly the suggestive and ultimately precarious nature of the hypothesis. By the end of this thesis, my intention is to have raised against this theory a worthy probabilistic rival. Building towards that end, I will now address the probability of Nakayama's personal encounter with Christians before I later compare this option to the probability of her exposure to other sources.

#### **6.5.2.2.2. The Question of Nakayama's Personal Contact with Kirishitan**

Van Straelen raised a number of "hypotheses, theories and suppositions" regarding how Nakayama might have learned what he recognized as Christian teaching. For example, she might have "contacted one of the ±20,000 [Kakure Kirishitan hiding in Japan]... in spite of the most severe persecution history has ever known," or perhaps she met some "Catholic or Protestant missionaries who entered Japan

immediately after the *Sakoku* period, the period of seclusion” (1954, 7, no. 1). These explanations (if deployed to explain her monotheism) are so improbable as to be unrealistic. Contemporary estimates of Kakure Kirishitan at the time of their “rediscovery” by the missionaries around 1865 hover around 30,000. In 1834, roughly four years before the founding of Tenrikyō, shogunate records show Japan’s population to have been approximately 32,476,700 (20% added by Kito 1996, 65–79). These figures yield a Kakure Kirishitan presence constituting a staggeringly meager .0009% of the population. Estimates of urban populations in the year 1850 (Saitō 1984, 48–63) show figures for Nara proper (a historic Buddhist town in proximity to the village where Nakayama Miki lived), as approximately 27,000 people. If our .0009% estimate carries over, there might have at best been twenty to twenty-four people—perhaps no more than a few families—who secretly hid their Kirishitan faith in Nara. However, the real figures are certain to be far lower than this. Nakayama’s much smaller village (modern Tenri City, whose current population is roughly 18% of Nara City’s), is extremely far (700–750 km by ferry, depending on route) from the area of Nagasaki where the vast majority of the Kakure Kirishitan in Japan were concentrated (see Kamstra 1993, 142).

Despite all of this, it should be noted that in Western studies of Tenrikyō there has been brief and unsubstantial mention of an elusive rumor regarding alleged contact between Nakayama and a “Christian *ronin*” (masterless samurai), from whom Nakayama is supposed to have borrowed some Christian elements. In the midst of van Straelen’s lamentations over a stark lack of “any solid arguments” for Christian contact, he mentions his hearing that this rumor about a Christian *ronin* comes from an 1896 book (and also from “some other booklets”) by Amano Muhendōjin called *Tettsui ichimi Tenrikyō bemmō* (a Hammer-blow on or Refutation of Tenrikyō). However, van Straelen discloses that “However hard I tried, I could not get hold of a copy of this particular book” (1954, 7, no. 1). Later, J.H. Kamstra also mentions this text, but he only repeats van Straelen’s limited information, and the fact that he does so almost verbatim (in a few sentences changing only several of van Straelen’s words), leads me to believe he was also unsuccessful in locating this work, if he even tried at all (1994, 105). I have also been unable to find a copy of *Hammer-blow*. It is not in the Japanese databases, and neither is it in the archives of Tenri University (where one might expect it to be found). My inclination, based on the title of the book and the fact that it was written more than four decades after the founding of Tenrikyō by an anti-Tenrikyōist, is that the rumor is at this time best counted an unsubstantiated slander against Tenrikyō by a detractor. This is supported by the fact that none of the Japanese Tenrikyō historians and librarians I have met with are familiar with any historical sources whatsoever which evidence Nakayama’s personal contact with Christians of any sort.

Quite wisely therefore, Western scholars, including van Straelen, have held all theories of personal contact with Christians very loosely. Peter B. Clarke (2013a) says that “Thomsen believes that Tenrikyō’s monotheism owes more than Anesaki suggests to the influence of Hidden Christians...” (21). However, upon review, Thomsen’s persuasion is not as strong as Clarke describes. “Some people,” says Thomsen, and he neglects to specify who, “*even go so far* as to maintain that Miki herself was under the influence of a little secret group of *hanare* [separated] Kirishitan” (1963, 59, emphasis mine). Most importantly, Thomsen concludes that “no proof” of this theory of Kirishitan exposure has ever been

discovered (59). Likewise, for van Straelen (even in light of the rumor of the Christian *ronin*), he concedes that his own preferred theory of Kirishitan contact is inconclusive and without proof (1954, 7, no. 1).

What about van Straelen's other suggestion that Western missionaries might have entered Japan after the *sakoku* period ended? Japan's isolationist policy was not challenged until the arrival of the Perry Expedition in 1853 which forced Tokugawa Iemitsu to open the country to the West, but Nakayama had already founded her movement in 1838. In 1858, the Japan-United States Treaty of Amity and Commerce was signed and Protestant missionaries began traveling to Japan, and the Kakure were not found by French Catholics in Nagasaki until around 1865. Even if we (far too generously) allowed the fantasy that there might have been missionaries onboard Commander Perry's warship who happened to make their way deep into Japan in 1853 and reached Nakayama's village, such an exposure would have occurred roughly fifteen years after the founding of Tenrikyō. The re-entrance of Western missionaries might help to explain the Christian shape of later Tenrikyō material, but it will explain not at all how Nakayama first came by her monotheism—unless we were willing to pursue the groundless and irresponsible argument that God the Parent was not revealed as creator in Nakayama's revelation until the 1860s (when modern Christian denominations actually made inroads in Japan, and after Nakayama had been possessed by this deity for decades). No, according to Tenrikyō, Nakayama's original revelation featured the immortal words of God the Parent which have continued to be enshrined at the core of the movement's origin story: "*Ware wa moto no kami jitsu no kami de aru*" (I am God of Origin, God in Truth) (translation in *Doctrine of Tenrikyō* 1994, 3; see Porcu 2017, 89–90).

As Kamstra forcefully concluded, "[i]t is *out of the question* that these [monotheistic] developments [in the NRMs] were due to modern Christian denominations which have been in Japan only since the 1860s" (1994, 106, emphasis mine). Even van Straelen likewise concluded that theories of direct missionary contact, like all theories of Christian influence on Nakayama, "cannot be told with any amount of accuracy," and he insisted that "whatever supposition there may be [as to Nakayama's Christian influence], there are no conclusive proofs... any apodictic statement would be scientifically untenable" (1954, 7, no. 1). Speaking of scientific arguments, below I will attempt to better formalize the above speculations in order to juxtapose this hypothesis with my own historical reasoning.

#### **6.5.2.2.3. Reframing Arguments about Monotheistic Influence**

The segment of Western scholars who both find in Tenrikyō a genuine monotheism and at the same time favor the idea of direct Christian influence on Nakayama appear to be embracing this historical option on the basis of deductive reasoning. The arguments of Drummond (1971), Parker (1983), and Kamstra (1994) are certainly examples. Drummond writes that while Christian influence on NRM founders is "impossible to prove," their "virtual monotheism, or at least strongly theistic position... suggests some such influence" (1971, 122). Parker, in his study on Nyoraikyō, that "the only such [creator] deity to appear in Japan before Nyorai was the supreme deity introduced in the mid-sixteenth century by Christian missionaries" (1983, 59). And Kamstra also writes: "It is not difficult to trace

[NRM monotheism] back to Kirishitan influence since Japan's religious traditions are polytheistic rather than monotheistic" (1994, 107). Beneath the surface of these comments lies an assumption which forms the first premise of their deduction: Christian monotheism was the only monotheistic source available to Nakayama. In light of this, the fact that Nakayama became a monotheist leads them to the conclusion that Nakayama was probably influenced by Christianity. However, the invalidation of the first premise in this argument, if such can be achieved in the following chapters, will necessarily reveal the problem at hand to be one of inference under uncertainty, and one requiring a revised probabilistic argument from history. Without getting too far ahead, I will reframe the above deductive reasoning on the assumption that there were both Christian and non-Christian sources which may have influenced Nakayama's conceptual development, and that the latter was much more prevalent in the country. Thus, my reframing: (1) sources of non-Christian monotheism were probably more available to Nakayama than Christian sources; (2) Nakayama became a monotheist; (3) Nakayama was probably influenced by non-Christian monotheism. I hope to accomplish support for the above premise (1) in the next two chapters. At this stage, I will only offer my historical arguments against the probability of NRM founders like Nakayama being exposed to Kakure or Jesuit sources.

First, and most importantly, there remains no indisputable evidence regarding such historical contact with Nakayama (or any of our NRMs founders), and this is not surprising in the least. Though a small number of Westerners and Western texts continued to be present in the country during its *sakoku* period, the Christian organism had all but died an agonizing and effectively complete death beneath the heavy hand of the shogunate by the 1640s (see Paramore 2009, 53; Hur 2007, 364). Setting aside the presently unsubstantiated rumor of a later anti-Tenrikyōist, and taking into consideration the inability of Tenrikyō scholars (insiders and outsiders) to locate evidence of Christian contact, the probability of Nakayama's personal encounter with a Christian (Hidden or Western) appears very low.

Second, Kakure Kirishitan communities and their members will by default have been eager to preserve their "hidden" and by nature insular community, decreasing the prevalence of hypothetical evangelistic engagements with the members (and even priests) of competitive and even hostile traditions like those of our NRM founders. Turnbull, observing the Kakure faith in the lives of its modern inheritors, confirms that "the Kakure faith is essentially a closed system. Entry is by birth, or in some cases, by marriage. Evangelisation is unknown" (1994, 215). The question can also be raised as to why someone like Nakayama, a dedicated practitioner of Pure Land Buddhism who at one point wanted to become a nun, would entertain sacrilegious (and culturally traitorous) Kakure company much less discussions of Kakure theology, and then subsequently borrow its most basic point of doctrine.

Third, ascribing NRM monotheism to subterranean Kirishitan contact requires so many dangerous and perhaps unlikely engagements to have taken place, and in so many different places, and so effectively, and in such a peculiar way that it produced a host of sudden NRM monotheisms from roughly 1802–1859 but not before. Such happenstance seems increasingly improbable in light of the fact that the longstanding blanket of suppression of Christian ideas was not lifting in the country at this time, but growing heavier. Again, it was in the early 1800s that the "second wave" of anti-Christian discourse swept Japan and continued into the Meiji Restoration and into the twentieth century

(Paramore 2009, 2). So far, in focusing on Tenrikyō, we have not had the opportunity to discuss the cases of Kurozumikyō and Konkōkyō, or the much earlier case of the monotheistic Nyoraikyō. Indeed, even if Tenrikyō, for example, were found to have gleaned a basic monotheism from a Kakure or Jesuit source, we will still have to deal with the others. Nyoraikyō has been determined by Japanese scholars to have “obviously not received any influence from the Christian religion whatsoever... it is purely made-in-Japan, a domestic product...” (Ishibashi 1927, 504, quoted in Shimazono 2003, 287; see also Ishibashi and Dumoulin 1938, 223). While Japanese scholar Murakami Shigeyoshi (1971, 585–586)—and his Western student Kenneth Wayne Parker whom he inspired (Parker 1983, iii-v)—saw a possibility of Kakure Kirishitan influence on Nyoraikyō, Japanese scholar Kanda Hideo, who produced the most comprehensive investigation into Nyoraikyō, determined that Christian influence was improbable (Kanda 1990, 133–135; see Shimazono 2003, 288–289). According to Shimazono, scholars who “at one time” argued “that Christian influences could be found in [Nyoraikyō]” are now a thing of the past (2003, 287). Thus the similar observation of German theologian Ulrich Luz, who notes that Nyoraikyō’s resemblance to Christianity seemed strong to scholars in the early twentieth century when the movement was first discovered, but now the influence of Kirishitan before the Meiji era is considered unlikely (Luz 2016, 99).

Kurozumikyō will also provide a formidable challenge. Kurozumi Munetada, who founded his monotheistic movement in 1814 (roughly twenty-four years before Nakayama Miki) was a dedicated Shinto priest sworn to the service of Amaterasu—a dedication which only strengthened during his life—and there is absolutely no historical evidence that he learned his religious outlook from direct contact with Christian sources (neither are there even rumors of Christian *ronin*). In a private meeting with Rev. Nagatsune Akihiro, Head Master of the Kurozumikyō Academy in Okayama, and academy staff member Fujiwara Teruhiko, I was told that “there is no such evidence” of Christian contact or influence on the founder Kurozumi Munetada. They emphasized Christianity’s prohibition during this period, insisting that “people did not have a great concept of this religious tradition, so there is a very low chance that they encountered the Christian god in their religious life.”<sup>54</sup> In terms of historical influences, they recommended instead that we look to Japanese sources. Similarly, though the founding of Konkōkyō is later than that of Tenrikyō by two decades, we still have the problem of improbable exposure to Kakure Kirishitan and Western missionaries. The first Protestant missionaries did not begin to arrive in southern Japan until 1859, the same year Kawate founded Konkōkyō in a poor village in modern Okayama prefecture. The Christian missionary Drummond mentioned briefly that there were Kirishitan living in this area “during the Catholic period” (presumably 1549–c.1587 or perhaps 1614, the date of Sūden/Ieyasu Tokugawa’s anti-Christian edict) (1971, 122), but their continued existence hundreds of years later will be difficult if not impossible to substantiate, and we must remember that in the 1860s when Kawate founded his movement it was still extremely dangerous for Kirishitan to reveal themselves as the government was still carrying out anti-Christian action and Kakure Kirishitan were still being ferreted out and imprisoned (Kamstra 1993, 142). Indeed, the government’s ban on Christianity would

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<sup>54</sup> Private meeting, February 23, 2023.

not be lifted until 1873. I need not further recapitulate my arguments as to the improbability of Christian influence on any one of these NRMs; however, taken together, the likelihood that such already improbable Christian contact (either personal or literary) is solely responsible for the (diverse) monotheisms of all four of these NRMs, each founded in different times and places and none corresponding neatly to either Christian theology or to that of the others, dwindles into evanescence.

Fourth, Occam's Razor begs us to avoid multiplying entities unnecessarily. While hypothetical contact with Kakure Kirishitan or any other Christian source might provide sufficient motivation for the development of monotheism in the NRMs, it will ultimately prove sufficient but unnecessary for the explanation of such developments in light of the information forthcoming in the next chapters; i.e. the prevalence of certain medieval Shinto and Neo-Confucian conceptions in the country and the widely-acknowledged impact of Kokugaku scholarship in the nineteenth-century formation of Shinto and Shinto-related NRMs.

## **6.6. Buddhist Anti-Christian Discourse as a Clue to Japanese NRM Sources**

In the final leg of this chapter, an examination of a few of the most oft-discussed examples of early-Tokugawa anti-Christian discourse will offer vital clues towards a more viable, non-Christian ("Japanese") source for NRM monotheism. This information will provide a ramp to our revisitation of medieval sources and their Western coverage in the next chapter.

### **6.6.1. Buddhist-Christian Debate in its Historical Context**

When Jesuit missionary Francis Xavier (1506–1552) arrived in Kagoshima in 1549, Buddhism was the dominant religious force in the country (see Ward 2009, 1045). It is well known that there were misunderstandings between the first trinitarian missionaries and the Shingon Buddhists about both the Catholic doctrine of God and Buddhist teachings (see Higashibaba 2001, 9; Stewart 2017, 745; Storm 2012, 62). As we have seen, some Western scholars have concluded that the Jesuit proposition about the existence of a supreme, creator god was doomed by the fact that it had not even a basic correspondence to any premodern Japanese belief. Contemporary Japanese scholarship has likewise argued that "the character of Deus as the creator of the whole world was not shared with any other Japanese conceptions of deities of the time, including even the Confucian *Tentō*, the most popular alternative title to Deus" (Higashibaba 2001, 88, citing Kobori Keiichirō). Supporting this historical claim that no "creator gods" existed in Japan during this period, Higashibaba cites a 1552 letter by Francis Xavier to his European confreres, saying that the Jesuit missionary had "noted that the Japanese were surprised at the Christian teaching of the creator of the world 'about whom none of their saints had taught'" (Higashibaba 2001, 88). By this time, Xavier's earlier conviction in the stories of his earnest translator and convert Anjirō (d. c. 1550) about the Japanese Buddhists who worshipped a supreme god seems to have evaporated. Now Xavier says that "[t]he Japanese doctrines teach absolutely nothing concerning the creation of the

world... [and] in their religious tradition there is nowhere any mention of a Creator of the universe. If there existed one single First Cause of all things, they said, the Chinese, from whom they derive their religion, must have known it” (336–337). It may be important to note that these comments occur in a series of passages about the Buddhist teachers who Xavier’s missionaries had been publicly debating, “the bonzes, who were the teachers of the religion of their [the Japanese people’s] fathers” (Xavier, translated in Coleridge 1872, 336). It was the failure of these particular Buddhist interlocutors to defeat the arguments of Xavier and his friends, he claims, which prompted a number of Japanese converts. First, it seems best to keep in mind that just as Xavier had gained a certain (myopic? misinformed?) view of the boundaries of Japan’s traditions from Anjirō, it is also possible that Xavier gained a similarly narrow interpretation of that tradition from the other Japanese people he encountered, including these Buddhist monks and the Buddhists who overheard their debates. As will be argued below, at least some of the Buddhists engaged in inter-religious debate at this time were aware of both traditions which accepted a universal “First Cause” (even one derived from Chinese, i.e. Confucian tradition), as well as a tradition of a personal “First Cause” (i.e. a creator god) derived from a particular interpretation of the Shinto classics. Second, it is important that we distinguish the Catholic doctrine of a creator god as one in which an entirely transcendent deity, wholly distinct from and outside of the world and its beings, created *ex nihilo* the various phenomena (in our terms, a transcendent polydeistic monotheism). *This* sort of creation and creative deity, it is true, appears to have been unknown in Japan at this time. The evidence suggests, however, that other forms of monotheistic teachings were indeed known among at least some Japanese, who may or may not have shared these ideas with Xavier and his friends (who in turn may or may not have properly recognized them or even cared to report them to their European audience—a constituency most interested in the news of Japanese awareness of and conversions to orthodox Christian views).

While arguing against the existence of a Japanese deity in the mold of the Catholic creator god during this period, Higashibaba also emphasized the presence of centralized Buddhist figures, namely Amida Buddha of the Pure Land schools, who received “monotheistic” levels of devotion while not demanding exclusive worship like the god of the missionaries. The centralization of Amida opens the door to the possibility that the concept of monotheism in Japan, if it existed, might not necessarily have involved a “monopraxis” (see Higashibaba 2001, 89, 91). Indeed it was not, in Higashibaba’s view, the prioritization of a single, powerful deity which was “foreign” to Japan; rather, it was the exclusive worship required by Kirishitan teaching which became “dangerous” (91). Higashibaba’s suggestion in this regard, especially his point that monotheism need not require monopraxis, is very helpful, and I will pursue this insightful line of thinking in an examination of a well-known Buddhist, anti-Christian writing below.

### 6.6.2. Fabian Fukan (c. 1565–1621): Deus Destroyed

The case of Fabian Fukan is invaluable to the present study. Fukan had converted to Christianity as a young man and had worked diligently on behalf of the Kirishitan cause for over twenty years, only to later apostatize and turn to Buddhism (see Elison 1991, 259). He even began writing anti-Christian treatises, and supported the government persecution of his former religion. Fukan's writings thus provide two unique vantage points: that of a Japanese convert to the Catholic brand of theism, and that of a severe critic of that theology. In most Western analysis of the twentieth-century, Fukan's first pro- and then anti-Christian writings have been assigned a place in essentializing historiographies as examples of first a Japanese interpretation of uniquely "Western" thought, and then an apostatizing reaction against this thought (see Paramore 2009, 11–12).

In his pro-Christian writing *Myōtei mondō* (Myōtei Dialogues), published in 1605, he offered a spirited Christian critique of Japanese religion, ostensibly inspired by the writings of the Jesuit Alessandro Valignano (1539–1606) (see Schrimpf 2008, 35–36). Here he insists, on the basis of the first commandment of the Mosaic law, that "you must revere and cherish one Deus. That means after you become a Christian, you must not use kami, Buddhas or even inferior 'things' any more. You are supposed to revere and worship the one Deus only" (Fukan, in Schrimpf 2008, 42). In his anti-Christian *Ha Daiusu* (Deus Destroyed) published in 1620, he reverses course. Now he says that Kirishitan commitment to worship and serve only God, preferring him over all magistrates, parents, and deities, is a "cursed doctrine" which conflicts with Confucian values and is "completely the working of the devil" (Fukan, in Elison 1991 [1973], 284).

Fukan's former Kirishitan brothers had argued for the existence of a single and all-powerful creator by using logical arguments about nature, and he sums up this Catholic reasoning thus: "When we see a splendid place, we realize there existed a craftsman who built it; when we see that house laws exist within a family and the family is governed according to their initiative, we realize that the family must certainly have a household head. Such realization is the universal rule" (261). Surprisingly, Fukan counters this argument, not by denying it, but by *denigrating its originality*: "What is so amazing about all this? What schools fail to discuss this?" He cites the Zen Buddhist teaching that "There was something before heaven and earth... it [emptiness] acts as the lord of the myriad phenomena..." (464). He quotes also from a Confucian text wherein "Heaven" is the origin of life (see Fukan, in Elison 1991 [1973], 262). He furthermore points out that in Shinto, "the first of the Seven Gods of Heaven are the Three: Kunitokotachi no Mikoto, Kuni-sazuchi no Mikoto, and Toyokunnu no Mikoto; they are the ones who opened up heaven and earth" (262). When Fukan refers to Shinto he ostensibly has in mind the text of the *Nihon shoki* and the interpretation of the powerful Yoshida school, emphasizing the first of these deities, Kunitokotachi no Mikoto, and calling him "the lord who always rises to the land's government." Here Fukan launches the full force of his attack: "Why then do the adherents of Deus press their tedious claims with the pretense that they alone know the lord who opened heaven and earth? Idle verbosity without substance, and most annoying!" (262).

Fukan then confronts the Catholic proposition that their god exists as a spiritual substance while all Buddhas and kami are “merely human beings.” He fights back by emphasizing the spiritual Buddha-body of the Trikāya, which he says all Buddhas possess. Only the deluded, he concludes, would think that such beings are *mere* humans. And how could the Catholics dare to ever say such a thing? Indeed, “what about the main deity of the Deus sect, Jesus Christus? Joseph was his father, Santa Maria his mother. His birth was issue from simple humans, that’s all. And they tell us that a human being cannot be the Lord of Heaven and Earth!” (265).<sup>55</sup> Concerning the traditional kami, he shows himself an adherent of the *honji-suijaku* interpretation: they are all manifestations of Buddhist figures. Finishing his argument, he says: “But let us go no further, let us take up the example of Kuni-tokotachi no Mikoto. How could you ever say he is a mere human, he who was a god before even one human existed, before heaven and earth were opened up! Don’t dare say it, don’t dare say it! Accept as understood the things you can understand, admit you do not fathom the things you cannot fathom” (Fukan, in Elison 1991 [1973], 263).

Fukan, who has referenced Confucian, Buddhist, and Shinto conceptions of divinity, implies that in his mind, these sources feature concepts which in some way approximate to the monotheism of the missionaries. Fukan’s comments here are vital to us, being one of the key intellectuals of the period and thoroughly informed by both sides of its public theological debate. On the basis of this learning and experience, Fukan has selected the case of the creator kami Kunitokotachi as his finishing blow. He specifically equates the personal “lord” of the Christian monotheists with this “lord” of the Japanese classics. As will be discussed in detail in the following chapter, powerful and influential Shinto thought leaders like Yoshida Kanetomo (1435–1511) had long ago identified the *Nihon shoki*’s Kunitokotachi with the *Kojiki*’s first kami, Amenominakanushi. Yoshida had declared this deity to be the primordial god of Ultimate Origin (*Daigen sonjin*). As Helen Hardacre describes it, this is the “fundamental god of the universe” standing at the center of the cosmos (2017, 220; Endō 2003 [1998], 112), and the “supreme deity” of Yoshida’s Yuiitsu Shinto (only-one Shinto) (Baskind and Bowring 2016, 163, no. 50). This is a god who, via the partnership of the two other creative kami mentioned in the opening passages of the classics, was “the great progenitor” of all kami and humans (Browning 2017, 67; 2005, 421). We know that Fukan has Yoshida’s tradition of a Shinto creator kami in mind since he discusses this Yoshida interpretation at length in his earlier pro-Christian treatise (see his *Myōtei Dialogues*, second fascicle; Baskind and Bowring 2016, 147–164). Has Fukan’s reference to this distinctly “Japanese” tradition—his insistence that the kami Kunitokotachi (or certain historical interpretations of Kunitokotachi) is a god analogous to the god of the Christians—been paid enough attention by Western scholars?

I see the conclusions I am drawing here as but the next step in a process of revisitation of anti-Christian dialogues like those of Fukan begun by Kiri Paramore in 2009. Paramore argued that Fukan’s intellectual journey from his Jesuit period to his non-Jesuit period, still often cast by Western historians as a transition from “non-Japaneseness” to “Japaneseness” (10–12), must be reframed. “There is ample

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<sup>55</sup> This comment should be taken as a denigration of Christian doctrine, not a lack of awareness of the Incarnation.

evidence,” he suggested, “that intellectual and religious discourse in Japan in the late 1500s and early 1600s was far from the polarized image of mutually exclusive ‘Western’ and ‘Eastern’ thought...” (12). Paramore concluded that “the various intellectual currents” involved in literature like Fukan’s should not be so neatly isolated as has often been done (12).

Indeed, in Fukan’s view, Japanese traditions such as Yoshida’s interpretation of Shinto had prepared the Japanese religious consciousness for the arrival of Christian monotheism. Though a Buddhist like Fukan personally appreciated a different concept, what he reveals is that not all Japanese religionists who rejected the Catholic theological paradigm would have necessarily done so on the basis of their basic claim of a supreme god. As Paramore also (fleetingly) noticed, “The interesting things about *Hadaiusu*’s treatment of the existence of a creator God is that, rather than rejecting this idea outright, *Hadaiusu* attacks Christianity on this point for its ‘unoriginality’... what [Fukan] does criticize is the idea of God as a sentient being” (2009, 46).

Paramore’s notice was and still is significant, though I suggest an even more nuanced review of Fukan’s argumentation is possible. While the Buddhist and Confucian principles which Fukan mentions approximate to the Christian claim of a universal ultimate, they are truly impersonal principles. However, the first kami of the Japanese classics was certainly a personal kami, and in Yoshida Kanetomo’s widely-known interpretation, a personal creator kami. In Fukan’s reading of Yoshida, Kunitokotachi is as much a personal kami as the famous pair Izanagi and Izanami—Kunitokotachi is the “first” of such kami to appear (see *Myōtei Dialogues*, second fascicle; Baskind and Bowring 2016, 149–150). For Fukan, Kunitokotachi is no “mere human” but is a person “who was a god before even one human existed...” (Ellison 1991 [1970], 263). Yoshida had claimed that this great deity had decided to transmit the doctrine of his Yoshida school of Shinto through the ages and down to his family, a doctrine which grew so influential as to form a sort of “orthodoxy cum orthopraxy” in the Shinto world during the Tokugawa period (Grapard 1992, 45). Ultimately, it is important to recognize that in the opening passages of Fukan’s treatise, Fukan is confronting two constituent claims of the “Deus sect”: first, that “there was a time when heaven did not exist and earth did not exist and nothing existed and all was a lonely void”; and second, that the world which emerged could not be generated “without the existence of an all-powerful creator” (see Ellison 1991 [1970], 261). Again, as Paramore noted, Fukan’s strategy is to argue against the originality of these claims. Challenging the originality of the first Christian claim about an original void before creation, Fukan summons the Zen logion: “There was something before heaven and earth: The shapeless original emptiness; It acts as lord of the myriad phenomena” (261–262). This emptiness may act as a lord, but it is not in truth a lord (a person). Fukan summons also a passage from the *Analects* (17.19): “Heaven does not speak; Yet the four seasons run their course thereby, The hundred creatures, each after its kind, Are born thereby” (Fukan, in Ellison 1991 [1970], 262). This Heaven, at least among many Confucianists, is neither a personal being directing the manifestation of seasons and creatures, but an impersonal ultimate. However, when Fukan summons Shinto traditions about Kunitokotachi/Amenominakanushi to his cause, he does so in order to defeat the second claim of the “Deus sect,” that the generation of the world involved a personal creator god. In light of this Shinto tradition, Fukan thinks it is an outrage that the Christians dare to claim “that they

alone know the lord who opened up heaven and earth”—a “most annoying” claim “without substance” (262). I suggest that if Fukan has not, in fact, understood Kunitokotachi/Amenominakanushi to be a personal creator god in (Yoshida) Shinto tradition, then his assault on the originality of the second claim of the Deus sect fails miserably.

It is ultimately clear that Fukan, as spokesperson for a “Japanese” way of doing religion, takes issue with Catholic claims about: the utterly transcendent relationship of God to the world and to human beings; the nature and role of the man Jesus; the nature of creation and human souls; the non-existence of the traditional deities; and the Christian prohibition on the veneration of those deities. In addition, as a Buddhist he personally decries Catholic arguments for the personal nature of the Ultimate. But we must keep in mind that Fukan is working simultaneously as a representative of both Buddhism and the entirety of the mainline “Japanese” traditions which the religious and political establishment was seeking to coalesce and strengthen against all domestic and international threats. Fukan therefore deftly oscillates between different roles and pathways of argumentation against his Christian foes. As a Buddhist, he lambasts the idea of a creator god. As an agent of “Japanese religion,” however, he cannot attack too directly Christian claims about the existence of a creator god, for this has been the very claim of some of his own non-Christian countrymen. His best course of action was to attack instead the Christian claim of originality on this point.

While historians have continued to speak of a Japanese religious world which could only misunderstand monotheism, Fukan continues to instruct historians that Tokugawa religionists had indeed “understood the things you can understand” (Fukan, in *Elison* 1991 [1973], 263).

## 6.7. Preliminary Conclusions

What does the above review of Western historical analysis of Christian influence in Tokugawa Japan suggest? We have considered in this chapter the proposal of some Western scholars that Christianity, namely the presence of the Kakure Kirishitan or clandestine Jesuit literature, is the best candidate for the source of the monotheism which would develop in early NRMs like Kurozumikyō, Tenrikyō, and Konkōkyō. In the process of demonstrating how meager the probability is for this sort of influence, I have also pointed out references in Western sources to other non-Christian channels which may have contributed more directly to monotheistic developments in the NRMs—references in both the works of early Tokugawa polemicists like Fukan who railed against the unoriginality of Christian monotheists by appealing to a Shinto tradition centered on a god derived from the Japanese classics (Kunitokotachi/Amenominakanushi), and also in the fleeting historical conclusions of Western scholars like J.H. Kamstra, who likewise spoke (vaguely) about a premodern tradition of Shinto “pluriform monotheism” centered on Amenominakanushi—a monotheism which Kamstra implied (in an apparently self-contradictory way) has some genetic relationship to what we encounter in the NRMs (1994, 115; cf. 107). We will now pursue these historical clues backwards into Western analysis of Japan’s medieval period (1185–1600), and perhaps towards a more definitive view of Japanese contributions to NRM monotheism.

## The Medieval and Early Tokugawa Contributions

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*“If one makes one’s heart like a mirror,  
one’s heart will be the same as that of  
Amenominakanushi or Amaterasu Ōmikami...  
As it is said that a heart is like a residence of kami,  
kami can stay in people’s heart.”*

— Watarai Nobuyoshi (1615–1690)

*“Even if there is heaven and earth, when there is no god,  
it is like a ship without a rudder.”*

— Tsurumine Shigenobu (1788–1858)

### 7.1. Introduction

In standard assessments, “medieval” Japanese history encompasses roughly the years 1185–1600. This chapter will consider the impact which centuries of Buddhist theorizing had on Japanese conceptions of kami and on interpretations of the Shinto classics during this period, and will consider also the Confucian-inspired developments of the Tokugawa period (c. 1600–1868), concluding with an examination of developments within Kokugaku, the ethnocentric movement of Japanese philology and philosophy which so significantly shaped the world out of which our NRMs emerged.

### 7.2. Ryōbu Shinto and *Shinpon Butsujaku*

As is well known, Ryōbu Shinto, a development within the Shingon sect of Buddhism emerging at the end of the Heian period (794–1185 CE), attempted to resolve philosophically the relationship between the Japanese kami and the myriad Buddhist deities which had progressively dominated the Japanese religious landscape since the middle of the sixth century. Thus, the doctrine of *honji suijaku* (original ground/nature and trace manifestations) emerged: all Japanese kami, it was said, are in fact manifestations of Indian Buddhist deities (see Teeuwen and Rambelli 2003; Rhodes 2020, 363; Mase-Hasegawa 2008, 32–33). The Ryōbu Shinto theorists ultimately argued that the two realms of Dainichi

Nyorai, the central buddha in Shingon, correspond to the two kami housed at the Ise shrine complex: Amaterasu was identified with the *taizō-kai* (“Womb World,” associated with the ultimate principle, *ri*), and Toyouke was identified with *kongō-kai* (“Diamond World,” associated with the wisdom principle, *chi*). Since the ultimate principle (which underlies the universe) and wisdom (active mind) were two aspects of the one Dainichi, the two shrines and their kami were thus said to be “one and not two” (Teeuwen 1993, 242–243).

However, as is also well known, not all Japanese were pleased with the idea that their great ancestral kami like Amaterasu had been reduced to manifestations of Indian figures (see Hirai 1954, 32–33). Thus, a reversal of *honji suijaku* developed, *shinpon butsujaku*, in which all Buddhist deities are derivative manifestations (*butsujaku*) of Japan’s original deities (*shinpon*) (see Reader and Tanabe 1998, 149–150). As we will now observe, this reactionary philosophy unlocked the door for monotheistic developments in the Shinto world.

### 7.3. The Watarai (Ise) Revolution

At the Ise Jingū shrine complex lay the Inner Shrine (Naikū, focused on Amaterasu) and the Outer Shrine (Gekū, focused on Toyouke). Amaterasu’s shrine at Naikū had long been preeminent at Ise, and had received the attention and funding of the imperial family. The Watarai, however, hereditarily managed the Outer Shrine at Gekū, and competed with Naikū for influence. Faced with decreasing court support, the Watarai, led by Watarai Ieyuki (1256–1351), began a project to modify Ryōbu Shinto in their favor (Teeuwen 1993, 232).

As described above, both Amaterasu and Toyouke were already understood to represent the two mandalas and dual natures of the single Dainichi. On an inversion of *honji suijaku*, however, at the apex of the universe was an original kami essence. For the Watarai, this must be Toyouke. While Amaterasu was reduced to an emanation, Toyouke was made the superior and fundamental source of the phenomenal world. Justifying this teaching, the Watarai searched the classics for a primordial kami and identified the *Kojiki*’s Amenominakanushi-no-kami with the *Nihon shoki*’s Kunitokotachi-no-mikoto, and subsequently equated their Toyouke with this primordial kami. As Mark Teeuwen put it, this Toyouke/Amenominakanushi/Kunitokotachi was “the first god of the cosmogony... and, in short, the universal Great God of Origin of all existence” (Teeuwen 1993, 225). In other words, Toyouke was understood to be the farthest-back being with no progenitor, the deity responsible for the generation of the world. While Teeuwen and other Westerners have not classified this teaching under the heading of “monotheism” (either due to a deficiency of taxonomical tools or a lack of interest in making such classifications), on our definition of monotheism discussed above, the Watarai movement’s interpretation of Toyouke, so long as it is a personal kami, is monotheistic.

The Watarai teaching about Toyouke was, the Watarai claimed, no recent invention, but was based on hereditary mythos and secret books kept at Gekū. The Watarai revealed the contents of these books, featuring what Teeuwen called “a sophisticated theology” (1993, 225), after Watarai claims of supremacy were challenged in court. The Watarai testified that these books had been written by their

forefathers in the fifth and sixth centuries, making them older than the *Kojiki*, *Nihon shoki*, and the *Sendai kuji hongei* (supposedly one of the oldest written texts; see Bentley 2006). However, the oldest book in the Watarai's secret collection, the *Hōki hongei*, is from roughly 1214–1266 CE, and the others date from 1264–1288 CE. The books would later be published in the *Gobusho* (Five Scriptures), and are sometimes described as the “Shinto Pentateuch” (Williams 2005, 53). In the eyes of many, especially before the eighteenth century, these texts have even assumed a quasi-scriptural status (Williams 2005, 53) and have played a role in the development of views of Shinto as a way of life for common people (Bocking 2005, 130). Ultimately, the Watarai were successful in arguing their case on the basis of these secret books. Their theological revolution made waves at Ise, and, critically, with the imperial court. Indeed, the claim that the Gekū shrine's deity was Amenominakanushi/Kunitokotachi was not challenged until the Meiji reformation of Shinto shrines in the late seventeenth century (c. 1871) (Teeuwen 1993, 227).

### 7.3.1. The Watarai God and the Heart-Mind

It is no surprise, given the Watarai movement's interest in distancing itself from Buddhism, that certain linguistic and conceptual elements of Buddhist thought pertaining to the metaphysical relationship between human beings and the divine were eventually jettisoned. Buddhist phrases about enlightenment were exchanged for Daoist language. Sayings like “to attain union” and “to preserve the original state of chaos” were preferred to the formulae of Ryōbu Shinto (“to return to the principle of *aji hompusho*,” and “to realize the true wisdom of the brightness of one's self-nature”).<sup>56</sup> What are the anthropological implications of this change, and what relationship might this development have with the teaching of the later NRMs?

In the Watarai branch of Shinto, the goal of the purification ritual becomes the realization of union with the primordial god of the Japanese classics. This god is identified in Watarai texts with “the ultimate state of origin” and “the primal state of chaos.” While a personal being, this god is also immanent, dwelling in all things. Thus, the so-called “mind-god” which the Watarai found dwelling inside of every human being is identical to this divinity, which is shared between the deities and humanity. To become enlightened, then, the Watarai adherent must contemplate this primordial inner tranquility and work to internally “preserve the original state of chaos,” protecting the divinity within herself and her link to the first kami (Teeuwen 1993, 234). As Teeuwen concludes, the Watarai phrases “to return to the ultimate state of origin” (*Hōki hongei*), “to rest in the original beginning” (*Yamato-hime no seiki*), and similar expressions, “assume the meaning of ‘to attain union with *Ame no Minakanushi* and *Kuni no Tokotachi*’” (239). This union with a god (*kaiji*) is brought about primarily through the performance of ritual, like the *nakatomi* rite inherited from Ryōbu Shinto. The Watarai realization that the potential for divine communion was within every human being had implications for the life of Shinto in Japan.

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<sup>56</sup> The product of this development was, as Teeuwen notes, “a theory of purity and union that was neither Buddhist nor Taoist but could be referred to only as ‘Shintō’” (1993, 244).

Shinto ritual—the realm of state ceremony, of the elite, and of the trained priest—became the goal of every human being.

The successor of Watarai Shinto in the early Tokugawa period, Watarai (Deguchi) Nobuyoshi (1615–1690 CE), would continue and further enhance this emphasis on the new goal of Shinto. He says that “Shinto is a path of daily life which is practiced by everyone from the sovereign to ordinary people,” and he teaches that:

If one makes one’s heart like a mirror, one’s heart will be the same as that of Amenominakanushi or Amaterasu Ōmikami... As it is said that a heart is like a residence of kami, kami can stay in people’s heart. However, a dark heart is like a residence with closed doors and a mirror with rust. You should open the doors of kami’s residence and remove the rust of the mirror. (Watarai Nobuyoshi, *Yōbukuki*, in Matsumoto 2018, 2)

Regarding the Watarai teaching about humanity’s relationship to a primordial kami, Teeuwen observes that:

This change set the stage for the development of Yoshida Shintō in the fifteenth century, and of Confucian Shintō in the early Tokugawa period. For centuries, the mainstream of Shintō thought maintained that ‘the mind is the dwelling place of the divine,’ and that to do good is ‘to obey the god in the mind.’ This doctrine survives to this day in sectarian Shintō, and is expressed in a moving way in the poems of Kurozumi Munetada I, 1780–1850, which form the basic texts of Kurozumi Shintō...” (Teeuwen 1993, 244–245).

Indeed, as the founder of Kurozumikyō would later write: “Whenever the heart of Amaterasu and a person’s heart are joined together as one—this is the Abiding Life.” This sentiment has endured in the foundational statements of Kurozumikyō observed in the reflection of the movement’s sixth Chief Patriarch Kurozumi Muneharu: “I am always with Kami,” “I am a child of Kami,” and “Kami lives in my mind” (1989b, 74). Teeuwen’s description of a Shinto doctrine of a primordial kami (with some close affinity to Amaterasu) having a relationship with the heart-mind of human beings—a relationship which is to be contemplated and cultivated—is important for the present historical inquiry. I suggest that Western studies have not paid enough attention to Teeuwen’s characterization of this Watarai paradigm as having “survived” in later Kurozumikyō—a tantalizing thread in the search for the source of NRM monotheism. As we will now see, the Watarai revolution was but the first stage in a long chain of development.

#### 7.4. Yoshida Shinto: The One-and-Only in Heaven

The influential priest and court officer Yoshida Kanetomo (1435–1511), descended from an important family of imperial advisors, founded the Yoshida Shinto tradition (also known as *Genpon-sogen-Shintō*, “Original Source Shinto,” or as *Yuiitsu shintō*, “One-and-Only Shinto”). Yoshida used the guiding light of the *I Ching* to reflect on Shinto religious texts, pursuing directly questions like “What is the meaning of god?” and “What was the situation before the beginning of the universe?” (Ng 2000, 15). He concluded that the “Three Pure Ones,” that is, the *zoka no sanjin* described in the classics, dwell in a special heaven which is “beyond the realm of formlessness,” and is called the Great Ultimate, *takamagahara*. This corresponds to the Heaven of the Great Ultimate (*daigyokuten*) in Daoism. While there are three kami in *takamagahara*, there is only one supreme god. This can be observed in the very language of Daoist verse. Addressing the question of why the *Hokuto genrei-kyō*<sup>57</sup> uses graphs to describe Shinto as the “true way” instead of “way of the kami,” Yoshida says: “The term ‘kami’ is the general denomination of all spirits good and bad, false and true. In this particular case the term ‘true’ [*shin*] is used so that there be no mistake that what is referred to is the One kami of the true origins that is unique and unadulterated” (1992, 159). For Yoshida, it is Kunitokotachi, the first deity of the *Nihon shoki*, who is the kami of Ultimate Origin (*Daigen sonjin*). Yoshida says that:

The Kami of Deity is a Spirit without form, unknowable, transcending both cosmic principles, the *In* and the *Yo* (the *yin* and the *yang*)... changeless, eternal, existing from the very beginning of Heaven and Earth up to the present, unfathomable, infinite itself with neither beginning nor end, so that the so-called “Divine Age” is not only in the past, but also in the present; it is, indeed, the eternal now. (Yoshida in Katō 1971, 148)

What have Western scholars had to say about this great kami? As recent studies have reported, Yoshida’s Kunitokotachi is the “fundamental god of the universe,” the “great founding deity” situated at the center of the cosmos (Hardacre 2017, 220; Endō 2003 [1998], 112). Kunitokotachi “was responsible for all creation” (Nosco 1997 [1998], 172), and was “the great progenitor” of all kami and humans (Browning 2017, 67; 2005, 421). Yoshida had uniquely “conceptualize[d] the idea of kami. He declared that kami was a form of absolute existence that was prior to the formation of heaven and earth. It transcends the principles of *in* (*yin*) and *yo* (*yang*) but can act with them. This power as manifest in heaven and earth is called kami. It is called spirit (*rei*) in objects and things, and in human beings it is known as heart (*kokoro*). Kami, *rei*, and *kokoro* are words that refer to the same reality” (Picken 1994, 304). While there existed a “natural principle of heaven and earth,” the fundament of all religions, the god Kunitokotachi is “the ultimate source of this natural principle” (Nosco 1997 [1984], 172). Ultimately, Yoshida’s was “a distinctive Kunitokotachi-focused theology” (Clarke and Beyer 2009, 629).

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<sup>57</sup> The *Hokuto genreikyō* quoted here has not yet been identified by scholars; see Yoshida 1992, 142.

Regarding the source of this theology, Japanese scholars have observed that there had occurred a “rendition of Kunitokotachi under the influence of Chu Hsi Confucianism into a creator deity, unique, eternal and omnipotent” (Oyama Tokuko, cited in Breen 2003, 251), and this teaching of a “God of Great Origin” is able to be traced back to the earlier Watarai concept (see Endō 2003 [1998], 112). If this is a monotheism, what sort of monotheism is it?

In 1485, Yoshida built a unique, octagonal shrine known as the Daigenkyū in Kyoto (still standing behind Kyoto University) with the intention of unifying all kami and all local shrines. As Hardacre describes, this was built to be the nation’s ultimate ritual site, since here “The Kami of Ultimate Origin might manifest as any of the Kami of Japan, but all of them were encompassed by the Kami of Ultimate Origin” (2017, 220).



Fig. 7.1. Yoshida’s Daigenkyū, Mt. Yoshida, Kyoto. *Photo by author.*

This “encompassing” of the *yaoyorozu no kami*, in which a single god is manifest in different personalities might seem to speak to a pluriform monodeistic monotheism. However, we also learn that at the time of the universe’s founding, this god had divided up his body and became all of Japan’s deities, and is now present in the minds of kami and humans by way of an indwelling kami principle (67). This may suggest a fragmentary polydeistic monotheism. For Yoshida, kami and humanity are united by way of the indwelling substance of the “God of Great Origin,” and humanity’s goal is to realize this unity and live accordingly (219). The significance of the individual does not seem compromised by this unity; Yoshida’s view does not ultimately resemble a pantheistic monotheism. Hardacre observes that Yoshida did treat kami as a principle dwelling in each person, “but Kami is more than these individual beings. Kami is both formless spirit, or soul, and it also may have form. Kami animates all existence. It is the spirit of all things and of human morality” (218–219). On this interpretation, kami seems more like a divine fragment dwelling in the distinct things and beings of the world. Indeed, the fact that kami, *rei*, and *kokoro* are able to be identified as peculiarly divine elements within the things of the world, suggests that not everything in the world is identified with a god, and draws us more towards a fragmentary polydeistic monotheism, but one in which all things, and not only deities, house divine portions. In the

end, while it is true that this kami is a “spiritual substance” which connects all kami and living beings (Yoshida 1992, 142), we must not lose sight of the fact that for Yoshida, this divinity is, in fact, a kami—Kunitokotachi—a specific deity described in the classics and a personal agent in the history of Japan. Yoshida claimed that his doctrine had been transmitted through his family since before the arrival of Buddhism by the primordial god Kunitokotachi himself, who first transmitted it to the kami called Ame-no-koyane-no-mikoto before it ultimately passed to Yoshida’s family (Hardacre 2017, 216; Teeuwen and Breen 2017, 118). From this hereditary teaching, Yoshida learned that the god of the universe is both transcendent and immanent. As we have seen, divine immanence of a metaphysical sort (even pantheism or so-called panentheism), proves no barrier to monotheism.

As in the Western analysis of Watarai teaching, contemporary Western studies of Yoshida have clearly documented in Yoshida all of the requisite features of monotheism, yet in the end have been either unable or unwilling to classify it as such. In the case of Hardacre’s review of Yoshida teaching (2017, 211–225), we have also her analysis of Kurozumikyō, in which she ruled that Kurozumi’s deity, while the creator of all the universe and the parent of all beings, in the end represents only a “functional” but not an actual monotheism in light of Kurozumi’s acknowledgment of myriad kami (see Hardacre 1986, 53–55; 2017, 11, 353). This may inform us as to the reasons why Yoshida’s doctrine, replete with kami, was also never identified as a monotheism.

It must be emphasized that Yoshida is no footnote to Shinto history, or he does not deserve to be. As Grapard (1992) surmised, “The school of thought and practice that Kanetomo created and that came to rule much of the world of ‘Shinto’ during the premodern period is hardly ever mentioned in books on Japanese religious history, even though Kanetomo set the foundations of a movement that, in spite of its being a formidable anomaly, swiftly pervaded the sacerdotal world of his country” (41). As discussed in the previous chapter, it was by way of this wide-ranging Yoshida influence that anti-Christian writer Fabian Fukun was able to summon the kami Kunitokotachi as an example of Japanese religious doctrines which undermined Christian claims of originality on the point of monotheism.

In the last stage of this chapter, I must draw attention to the life of these developments in the subsequent Tokugawa period (1600–1868), an age which ultimately gave birth to our earliest NRMs. This requires a momentary turn backward to the history of Confucianism in Japan, a tradition which ultimately came to play a vital role in the theories of important Yoshida and Watarai inheritors before the rise of Kokugaku scholarship.

## **7.5. Early Tokugawa Neo-Confucianism and the Watarai Resurgence**

Philosopher Kelly Clark has convincingly argued that the roots of Confucianism in China are decidedly theistic (2005, 109–136; see also Ching 1977, 115–118; Chen 2009). The theological traditions of the Shang (1600–1046 BCE) and Zhou (1046–256 BCE) dynasties promoted a supreme entity called *Tiān* (Heaven) or *Shàngdì* (Highest Deity) (see Keightley 1999, 3–6, 10–14), traditions which influenced Confucius (551–479 BCE) (see Confucius, *Analects* 7.1). Clearly, subsequent Confucianism developed in ultimistic (atheistic) directions (see Yao 2000, 45; Clark 2005, 110).

However, “strong theistic strands of thought” are “very much in evidence throughout the early Confucian classics” (Ivanhoe 2016, 132). Julia Ching once went so far as to say that while various schools of Confucianism may now be “characterized either as theist or atheist,” it is on the whole “more accurate to say that Confucianism appears more theistic than atheistic” (1977, 112). What of the work of the great Zhu Xi, which became the basis of a Neo-Confucian “orthodoxy” in Tokugawa Japan? (see de Bary 1987, 188–216). The Zhu Xi school (Jp. *Shushigaku*) is typically described as “atheistic” (e.g. Yamashita 1979, 310–311; see also Ching 1984, 295; Maruyama 1974, 231). Zhu Xi had treated the “Heaven” in the Classics as referring to the sky, sometimes to the principle of *li*, and at other times to the Supreme Ruler or Master (*Chu-tsai*) (see Ching 1977, 133; Chen 2009, 13–27). While Zhu Xi read the latter language as anthropomorphism, there is nevertheless *some* ruler in the heavens, and the principle *li*, equated with the actions of this ruling power, both flows from and is one with *T'ai-chi*, the ultimate source and principle of all things (see Ching 1977, 134; 1984, 297; Chung 2012, 214). In light of Zhu Xi’s (atheistic) ultimism, William de Bary concluded that it was “Japanese Neo-Confucianism” in particular which “exhibited an intense theistic and moralistic quality which is not wholly identifiable with [Zhu Xi’s] philosophy” (De Bary 1979b, 133). Nevertheless, if at the very least the ancient origins of Confucianism are monotheistic, it will be no surprise that as a basic framework Confucianism remained compatible with and perhaps, when paired with Japan’s penchant for personal kami, even encouraged such thinking in Japanese history.

Japanese Neo-Confucianist Nakae Tōju (1608–1648), founder of the Wang Yang-ming school (Jp. *Ōyōmeigaku*) in Japan, clearly connected the “Heaven” of Zhu Xi and Wang Yang-ming Neo-Confucianism with an explicitly personal deity, and identified this supreme god as the Great August One in the heavens (Ching 1984, 299–300). This is not to be taken as a mere ultimism as Nakae adamantly maintained what Hiroko Willcock called “a personalized, ethical God” (2011 [2007], 103), and what Steben recognized as an “explicit theism” (1998, 233). Ching likewise observed that while some Neo-Confucianists like Zhu Xi preferred to speak in abstract (or non-anthropomorphic) ways about the Great Ultimate (*T'ai-chi*), Nakae, following in the “Chinese religion of antiquity and its personal theism,” himself “prefers reverence for a supreme and personal being, a God to whom he gives many names, but whom he honors especially as Lord-on-high [Jp. *Jōtei*]” (1984, 297–298). This is a god who both creates and pervades the universe, not unlike the great kami in some medieval Shinto conceptions. As other Western scholars have noted, “[f]ollowing Wang Ji in the school of Wang Yangming, Tōju identified the supreme value with the idea of a personal god, which readily harmonized with Shinto belief” (De Bary, Gluck, and Tiedemann 2005, 121; see also de Bary 1981, 213). Nakae’s supreme god is envisioned primarily as a great and universal parent. He writes:

The Supreme Lord Above is infinite and yet He is the final end of all. He is absolute truth and absolute spirit. All forms of ether are His form; infinite principle is His mind. He is greater than all else and yet there is nothing smaller. That principle and that ether are self-sustaining and unceasing. Through their union He produces lives

throughout all time, without beginning or end. He is the father and mother of all things. (Nakae Tōju in Tsunoda 1958, 373–374)

This great parent, clearly no philosophical abstraction, was the supreme object of personal devotion for all human beings, since “He alone is worthy of devotion and without peer... Nameless Himself, He has been called by the sages ‘The Supreme Heavenly God of Life,’ in order to let men know that He is the source of all creation so that they may pay homage to him” (Nakae Tōju in Tsunoda 1958, 372; see also Yamashita 1979, 314–315). The primary way which humans honor this god is by “awakening the Divine Light within them,” which is “united to the divinity of heaven” (Nakae Tōju in Tucker 1988, 60). This inner light—equated with conscience, reason, and knowledge—is cultivated through the exercise of the five relationships of Confucianism and other principles in the Chinese classics (62). All humans are “descendants of the Great Lord-on-high,” and have been “brought into being” by “the gods of heaven and earth according to the mandate given them by the August Lord on High of the Great Vacuity” (Nakae Tōju, quoted in de Bary, Gluck, and Tiedemann 2005, 119; see Yamashita 1979, 325).

As scholars have long observed, the “most distinctive and characteristic features of Tōju’s philosophy” are clearly “Filial piety and theism” (Ivanhoe 2016, 132). Indeed, Nakae’s “principle religious ideas can be summarized as a profound reverence for the Supreme Lord (Chin. *Shang-ti*, Jpn. *jōtei*) which was manifested in an optimistic doctrine of moral self-cultivation based on the innate knowledge of the human” (Tucker 1988, 58). As suggested above, Ching found that Nakae’s vision was drawn from the personal, monotheistic god of early Chinese Confucianism (*Shangdi*) (1984, 304; see also Yamashita 1979, 311). Yet Ching suggested also that in addition to early Confucianism, Nakae may have been inspired to a personal theism by Shinto, referring briefly to the possibility that “the presence of personal gods” in “the Shinto ambience in Japan” could have cultivated Nakae’s belief in “the personal dimension of the godhead” (1984, 303). As de Bary notes, not only were the “theistic influences and moral activism” of the late Ming “quite compatible with Shinto worship,” the two “tended to be mutually reinforcing” (De Bary 1979a, 31). Yamashita observes that as Nakae’s thought embraced a “theistic dimension,” he “did not abandon worship of the ancestral Japanese kami. The August High Lord was both the ancestral kami and the God who creates the universe, and the many Japanese kami were gods subordinate to the August High Lord. Tōju’s position can be called a synthesis of theism and polytheism” (1979, 322). Or, on our terms, a form of *polydeistic monotheism*.

It is perhaps not surprising, in light of the scholarly treatment of monotheism in the NRMs, that there has been some speculation about Christian influences on Nakae. Ching documents two possible leads: Christian missionary activity in Nakae’s hometown of Iwo, and the rumor of a possible family connection to a Christian *daimyō* and poet named Kinoshita Chōshōshi (1569–1649). Of course, Christianity was violently outlawed and driven underground around 1612, when Nakae was about four years old. Ching suggests that Nakae, if he ever did become a Christian, would not have revealed this fact in light of the severe persecutions of Christians at this time. Scholar Ebisawa Arimichi, however, argued that later Neo-Confucianists like Hayashi Razan (1583–1657) had only tried to smear Nakae’s school with Christian associations (1966, 252–257). Ultimately, as Ching rightly concluded:

But Tōju's idea of God is not entirely similar to the Christian idea. The distinction between the two seems to be his acceptance of God as a kind of universal ancestral deity, albeit a just and merciful one, and the Christian doctrine of God as Creator, with an explicit doctrine of how the world came to be through a creation *ex nihilo*. Besides, we have no evidence in Tōju's writings of any belief in the Trinity or Incarnation, or in any other characteristically Christian doctrine. Certainly, when considered according the Christian norms of his time, Tōju's ideas were eclectic, harboring, as they did, Buddhist as well as Confucian influences. But looking back from today, perhaps the distance of time, and the new developments in Christian theological thinking today, permit us to perceive a greater closeness between Tōju's idea of God and the core idea of God in Christian belief. (Ching 1984, 307)

In terms of its provenance, there is no need to look for Christian influence on the basis of monotheism alone if both Confucianism and Shinto (e.g. Yoshida) already have a history replete with similar ideas and means of expression. Rather than turning to Christianity, Nakae pivoted from the Four Books to the Five Classics and, embracing “the theistic dimensions of the early Confucian tradition” (Ivanhoe 2016, 132), turned from “the atheism of the Chu Hsi school... [and] returned to the theism of classical antiquity” (Yamashita 1979, 311). Indeed, he supported his monotheism not with recourse to Christian texts, nor with merely rational appeals, but with citations of the Chinese *Book of Odes* (311). Nakae's combination of Neo-Confucian metaphysics with Shinto ideas ultimately produced “a unique and distinctly Japanese expression of Confucianism” (Ivanhoe 2016, 133)—a strongly *monotheistic* Japanese religion, *pace* current and essentializing paradigms.

In terms of Nakae's own influence on Japan, we read thus from the vantage point of Meiji-era scholar Anesaki Masaharu:

Though Tōju's direct influence was limited to the narrow circle of his few disciples, mostly his fellow-villagers, his inspiration was extended to a wider circle and produced many able men active in the fields of education, administration, and economy... They believed in the equality of mankind as children of the cosmic Lord, and consequently they always stood for giving all men full opportunities for the realization of the true self in communion with the universal conscience... some [of these students of Nakae Tōju] helped to overthrow feudalism and contributed to establishing a new regime in the middle of the nineteenth century. (Anesaki 1963 [1930], 277–278)

In considering the forces which paved the way for NRM monotheism, a force worthy of greater investigation than this space can afford is the Shingaku (heart-mind learning) movement which

developed out of Japanese Neo-Confucianism in the period following the monotheist Nakae Tōju (see Sawada 1993, 2–5). Noteworthy here is Nakae’s student Kumazawa Banzan (1619–1691), who operated in Okayama where Kurozumi Munetada was raised; likewise, Ekken Kaibara (1630–1714) though Tucker found him “less overtly theistic in expression than Nakae” (1988, 62); and especially Ishida Baigan (1685–1744), whose Shingaku focused on Amaterasu and immediately preceded the development of early NRMs like Kurozumikyō. Ishida’s disciple Teshima Toan (1718–1786) organized this Shingaku into a countrywide religious movement which became popular among people in less-educated segments of Tokugawa society (see Sawada 1993, 1–8, 9–50).

There is likewise not space in this thesis to adequately consider the doctrines of the Neo-Confucianist successors of Yoshida’s work, for example Yoshikawa Koretaru (1616–1694 CE) and Ansai Yamazaki (1619–1682 CE) (see Grapard 1992, 58). Worthy of further investigation is the fact that these thinkers regarded the Neo-Confucian concept of *taiji* (supreme ultimate) as identical to the god of Watarai and Yoshida Shinto, and also as the fundamental principle of the universe which all living beings, human and kami, have within them as the heart-mind (*kokoro*). As in Watarai tradition, the ultimate goal of the worshiper here is purification and the realization that all humans and kami are united—and all are one with Kunitokotachi. As Hardacre put it, for Yoshikawa, “to become one with Kunitokotachi,” or “to realiz[e] this unity” with this kami of the Japanese classics, “is the goal of Shinto” (2017, 252). And for Ansai, Hardacre observes that he “clearly accepted important ideas from Yoshida Shinto, including the idea that Kunitokotachi is the primal deity of the universe, and that he is ultimately identical to Amenominakanushi,” and also that Ansai was a reader of the Watarai *Gobusho* (2017, 256). For Yoshikawa, Ansai, and the earlier Yoshida, the *Nihon shoki* was to some degree analogous to the *I Ching* (see Burns 2003, 42–43; cf. Ng 2000), and for Ansai especially, Shinto creation myth was to be equated with Chinese cosmology and metaphysics (see de Bary, Gluck, and Tiedemann 2005, 86–88). This reading of the Divine Age as an exposition of Neo-Confucian principles would continue to be taught throughout Japan after Ansai’s death, having been preached to the more than one thousand students Ansai had gathered during his career, and this approach would even be adopted by many priests of the Ise Shrine (Burns 2003, 66). This basic reading of the classics would stand tall and largely unchallenged until robust, alternative, and allegedly “non-Chinese” interpretations were developed in the subsequent period of Kokugaku scholarship (67). By the middle of the seventeenth century, the Ise tradition had waned and was in need of the resuscitation attempted by the Shinto priest at Gekū, Watarai (Deguchi) Nobuyoshi (d. 1690). Called the most important of the Watarai theorists (Wehmeyer in Norinaga 1997, 71, no. 2), Nobuyoshi argued for a return to the original form of Shinto and criticized the influence of Yoshida tradition and the impact of Buddhism (Scheid 2002, 306). In his *Yōfukuji* (1650 CE), he largely follows the teachings of the Watarai *Gobusho* but also explores new paths by way of Confucian metaphysics. Like his predecessors, he also taught that the Outer Shrine’s Toyouke was superior to Amaterasu, identical to Amenominakanushi/Kunitokotachi, and the supreme god of the universe (Bowring 2017, 95).

As mentioned above, Nobuyoshi is representative of a popular emphasis in this period on the relationship between a supreme god and the heart-mind of humanity. For Nobuyoshi, “God is of course the master of our hearts, so clearly God is I and I am God; there is no distinction at all” (Nobuyoshi, *Yōfukuji*, Book I, quoted in Maruyama 1974, 154). This divine pervasiveness is observed also in his contemporary Yoshikawa, who declared that “this God is Kunitokotachi-no-mikoto, the founder of the earth, and his spirit inhabits even the minutest particle” (Yoshikawa, *Shintō taiichū*, quoted in Maruyama 1974, 155). Scholar Maruyama Masao once observed that the use of Neo-Confucian philosophy in this period caused Shinto to assume “a more or less pantheistic, or rather panpsychic, structure... all [of these theorists] endowed their gods with pantheistic characteristics. Even when they spoke of gods in anthropomorphic terms, they conceived them as continuous with an impersonal *li*” (1974, 154). Maruyama’s use of “pantheism” here seems to indicate a type of atheistic ultimism centered on an impersonal, anthropomorphized principle called Kunitokotachi. However, it may turn out that Maruyama’s impression of the “panpsychist” nature of these theories has picked up on the fact that the principle which these theorists found undergirding the universe was, in fact, *mind*—a divine mind, to be precise—that of the kami Kunitokotachi. An important question for the future is whether mere anthropomorphism is afoot in these theories or whether the Neo-Confucian principle of *li*, allegedly “a cold, abstract idea” (Kim 1973, ii), has been infused with personality upon its identification with the personal kami Amenominakanushi or Kunitokotachi. In the end, some monotheistic classification inclusive of both pantheistic notions and the concept of a personal god may serve to corral these ideas. In order to gain a clearer picture, further studies in light of our proposed taxonomical revisions will be needed.

From the standpoint of our historical inquiry about Japanese influences on the NRM founders, I will also briefly point out that in addition to the possibility that these Neo-Confucian and Shinto theorists mentioned above did, in fact, harbor a belief in a personal god, there is also the question of the monotheistic reception of these ideas among the common people of Japan. Indeed, an impersonal “god” of the philosopher, handed down to the religionist, may be transformed into a personal god when worshipped as such.

## **7.6. The Medieval and Early Tokugawa Periods and Western Studies**

The belief in a supreme creator in medieval, pre-Christian Japan emerged out of Shingon Buddhism primarily as a consequence of the idea that Japanese kami should have priority in Japanese religion. The ancestral kami—personal deities—were understood by many Shinto theorists to be the heart and soul of Japan’s religious tradition, powerful beings who should not be reduced to derivations of Indian figures and principles. At the same time, Japanese Buddhism had already contributed its unifying energy in the form of centralized figures like Amida and Dainichi Nyorai. Similar ultimistic and even explicitly monotheistic contributions were made by the progress of the Confucian tradition. Thus, the resulting

ideas about a creator kami in certain Shinto movements of the medieval and early Tokugawa periods could only have emerged in Japan. By the time of the arrival of Christianity in the country, these distinctly Japanese ideas about a creator kami, motivated by distinctly Japanese concerns, had already belonged to a well-developed (and still-developing) conceptual world undergirded by a history of philosophical and scriptural argumentation. The fact that the historical persons involved in the development of this thought-world are among the pillars, and not the footnotes, of what we today identify as medieval and early Tokugawa Shinto tradition, make the Western comments about a stark lack of belief in a creator god in premodern Shinto all the more interesting. Shinto historian Bernhard Scheid once concluded that “virtually all medieval Shinto theoreticians” believed that “Kuni-no-tokotachi, or his alias Ame-no-minaka-nushi” is “the founding deity of the universe,” and he recognized that “[t]his ontology is based primarily on the *Nihon shoki* account of how the world came into being (where Kuni-no-tokotachi is mentioned as the primary deity)” (2002, 317). However, Scheid’s other ruling that “there is no trace of monotheism in the case of Shintō” (2006–2007, 327) reinforces our observations of the limitations of contemporary taxonomical analysis. Indeed, Scheid is without question a first-rate historian of Japan’s medieval period and is deeply versed in the doctrines of the Watarai and Yoshida traditions; likewise other Western analysts like Helen Hardacre may be similarly recognized for their broad understanding of Shinto’s doctrine and doctrinal history. I humbly suggest, therefore, that such negative observations are made from a foggy vantage point not at all exclusive to these scholars, in which the boundary lines of “monotheism” as a religious phenomenon are incomplete and misleading.

### **7.7. Kokugaku**

The term Kokugaku (“national learning” or “native study”) refers to an ethnocentric movement of Japanese philology and philosophy in the Tokugawa period (1600–1868). The movement emerged as part of the increasing interest in extracting a pure “Japanese religion” from Indian Buddhist and Chinese influence, gaining energy as the Tokugawa state forefronted Sinocentric philosophy in the form of Neo-Confucianism. Kokugaku scholars poured over Shinto texts, especially the classics, searching out the purest, most original, most “Japanese” traditions. Like the Shinto scholars of the medieval period, when Kokugaku scholars looked into the mirror of their sacred heritage, namely the opening passages of the *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki*, many found a primordial, creator kami staring back at them. Below some of the most important Kokugaku thinkers for the development of monotheism in Japan will be investigated, as well as the claims often made by modern scholars, Western and Japanese, regarding their alleged Christian and foreign influences.

### **7.8. Motoori Norinaga (1730–1801): The Musubi God**

The most eminent scholar of the early Kokugaku movement is undoubtedly Motoori Norinaga. His densely annotated forty-nine volume commentary on the *Kojiki* (*Kojiki-den*), the last volume of which

debuted in 1798, took over thirty years to complete. Norinaga's interpretations of the classics, though not without their detractors, had tremendous influence on both Japanese scholarship in the period and on the formation of a national Japanese consciousness (see Burns 2003, 2).

In his interpretation of the *Kojiki*, Norinaga emphasized the personal nature of the heavenly kami. He directly criticizes non-theistic ultimism like that found in Chinese philosophy (e.g. Daoism and ultimistic forms of Confucianism), lambasting the Chinese tendency to speak of the principle of Heaven, but not to speak of a personal god. "Now Heaven," he writes, "is nothing more than the region where the gods of Heaven dwell. It is a thing destitute of sense, and it is unreasonable to talk of its 'command' and the like. To fear and honor *Ten* [Heaven], and not fear and honor the gods, is like yielding an idle honor and awe to the Imperial Palace, and showing no reverence or honor to its sovereign" (Norinaga, quoted in Ballou 1945, 150–151; see also Norinaga 1997, 44–45).

What does Norinaga think of the first heavenly kami mentioned in the *Kojiki*, Amenominakanushi, so often identified in history with the *Nihon shoki*'s Kunitokotachi and also with other prestigious figures like Amaterasu and Toyouke? Certainly, on Norinaga's reading of the text, this Amenominakanushi must be a real and personal deity, and in light of Norinaga's rejection of the *Nihon shoki*'s more overtly philosophical interpretation of the Divine Age, we know this deity was not understood to have been formed by any pre-existing object or principle. But is it the singularly farthest-back being in the cosmos? For Norinaga, although *tsugi* ("next" or "following") is used in the text to introduce the two deities which follow Amenominakanushi (the figures Takami-musubi and Kami-musubi), this is not to be taken in terms of either temporality or causality. Amenominakanushi did not generate Takami-musubi, and subsequently Takami-musubi did not generate Kami-musubi. Norinaga's Amenominakanushi is not peculiarly assigned the characteristics of a creator god and is furthermore rejected as an ultimate source of human ethics (see Sasaki 2015, ch. 2, sec. 1; see also Burns 2003, 85–86). He argues that it is "incorrect to think that Ame no Minakanushi no Kami is a Great Parent" (Norinaga 1995, 24). Furthermore, this kami's chronological priority does not necessitate this kami's superiority over all others. As we have seen, Norinaga's was a treatment in contrast to earlier readers in the medieval and early Tokugawa periods, but it also contrasted with that of other Kokugaku scholars working in his wake. For example, in Fujitani Mitsue (1798–1823), the phrase *tsugi ni* represented the "following" or "submitting" of Takami-musubi and Kami-musubi to Amenominakanushi; their emergence "signaled their recognition of Ame no Minakanushi as a superior and their new willingness to follow and aid him" (Burns 2003, 149). In the creative acts of the Divine Age, Amenominakanushi "was acting through or by means of the two Musubi deities" (149). In the work of Tachibana Moribe (1791–1849), while he agreed that the Divine Age began "with the dimension of kami already in existence," it was first Amenominakanushi who appeared and then "used his power" to "bring the two other primal deities... into existence," who then "act[ed] together" (178). These images were more in line with then-traditional readings of Amenominakanushi's hierarchical/causal situation. However, Norinaga's unique interpretive theory attempted to move beyond the interpretations of Amenominakanushi/Kunitokotachi held by the likes of the Watarai and also the Yoshida, the "leading Shintō school of his time" (Teeuwen in Norinaga 1995, 22 no. 60).

Norinaga confirms that in his day, traditional interpretations of Amenominakanushi, in which this deity was identified with Kunitokotachi and was the highest being in the universe, were both widely known and highly esteemed. He writes that “one may object [to his challenges] that these theories on Ame no Minakanushi no Kami and Kuni no Tokotachi no Mikoto are theories of our predecessors, and that one should avoid rejecting them now, because they are of long standing, and everyone, high and low, knows them well” (Norinaga 1995, 31). There are even those, he says, who he presumes would persist in this theological tradition, even if confronted with contradictory information from the classics. These persons will “find it hard to change their opinions now” and will stubbornly continue to “rescue this old theory...” (31). When Norinaga says that Kokugaku advancements had made it so that “hardly anyone is left” who believes such an erroneous theory—is this political hyperbole or historical reality? The continued fixation on Amenominakanushi as creator of the universe even among his own Kokuagku followers suggests the former.

Nevertheless, Norinaga confronted Japanese fears of denying tradition by claiming that the worse affront was to continue in error about who the greatest kami is (Norinaga 1995, 22). Attempting to correct the mistake of the Watarai, Norinaga appears to instead ascribe all glory to Takami-musubi. He argues that because all things “without exception, have been produced by the life-bearing spirit of Takami-musubi no Mikoto, it is this god whom we must call the Great Parent of heaven and earth, of the many gods and the myriad objects” (Norinaga 1995, 29–30).

Has Norinaga merely replaced the Watarai god (Amenominakanushi/Kunitokotachi/Toyoke) with Takami-musubi? In some places, Norinaga appears to ascribe the highest esteem only to Takami-musubi, and in others, he appears to ascribe this status to both of the *musubi* deities from the *Kojiki*'s opening, Takami-musubi and Kami-musubi, referring to creation as a result of “the productive spirit [*musubi*] of these two great kami of production” and concluding that both kami are “particularly esteemed for the blessed virtue [*mimegumi*] of their productive spirit.” Indeed it is these two, he says, “of all others, which should be worshiped with highest esteem (Norinaga, *Kojiki-den*, in Sasaki 1998 [1994], 132).”

Some Norinaga scholars seem to follow this pattern and treat Norinaga's reading of the *musubi* deities as that of two distinct kami (see Burns 2003, 86–87; see also Maruyama 1974, 156). However, scholar Isomae Jun'ichi has explained that Norinaga has actually collapsed the earliest deities of the *Kojiki*—including Amenominakanushi—into a single creator god he called Musubi-no-kami (2000, 23). Hardacre, drawing on Isomae, also reads Norinaga's treatment of the three earliest kami as that of a single god, Mubusi-no-kami. For Hardacre, this combinative reading is a “novel idea” and an “innovation” (2017, 330). Along these lines, Ueda Kenji highlights one passage in which Norinaga does speculate that “this great kami [Musubi-no-kami] is recorded as being two kami in *Kojiki*... while their names are different, it would seem that they are one and the same. So then, these two kami appear as one, and just when they are thought to be one, they are two; the unease of their distinction must spring from a very deep source” (Norinaga, quoted in Ueda 1998 [1986], 110). Other comments from Norinaga seem to challenge the reading of Isomae (and Hardacre) that *all three* of the first kami (including Amenominakanushi) have been combined. Indeed, it is “incorrect,” in Norinaga's view, to

consider Amenominakanushi a “Great Parent,” and this deity is to be afforded relatively little honor. Meanwhile, the *musubi* deities are held in the highest esteem, and Takami-musubi clearly “must be called a Great Parent” (Norinaga 1995, 30). Are the two *musubi* deities uniquely intertwined while Amenominakanushi is excluded from identification with Musubi-no-kami? Is “Musubi-no-kami” a plural referring term for the two *musubi* figures, or perhaps for all three of the earliest deities of the *Kojiki*? Ultimately, Isomae concludes that Norinaga’s version of Amenominakanushi, the kami who had received so much attention in prior traditions and who would be emphasized by the Kokugaku theorists following Norinaga, “lacks any concrete meaning” (2000, 24).

Nevertheless, is Norinaga a monotheist? If it turns out that in Norinaga’s view the earliest kami are in fact a single deity which includes Amenominakanushi (as in Isomae and Hardacre), then Norinaga’s is a monotheistic reading of the *Kojiki*. As Isomae puts it, Norinaga’s Musubi-no-kami is “an original deity... the source of all beings, encompassing the creation of heaven and earth” and a “single creator deity” who is “the source of all beings, existing since before the creation of heaven and earth: a single, fundamental deity from which all things are ‘born into the world’...” (2000, 23–24). However, if Norinaga has not included Amenominakanushi in this creator kami, then Norinaga does not appear to be a monotheist. Supporting Amenominakanushi’s exclusion is the fact that Norinaga thinks Amenominakanushi existed *first*, though for him this makes no argument for this deity’s supremacy or worthiness among the kami. If the farthest-back being, Amenominakanushi, did not create the subsequent deities or the universe, and if Musubi-no-kami is not the farthest-back being and did not create Amenominakanushi, then Norinaga is a true polydeist—a theologian for whom there are myriad “deities” in the universe, and for whom none of them, despite their creative acts, is a “god” on our definition (a singular, farthest-back personality responsible for the creation of the world, and not a *group* of personalities who severally have god-like characteristics).

### **7.9. Hirata Atsutane (1776–1843): Amenominakanushi, a Personal Creator**

Hirata Atsutane is often styled the student of Norinaga. He never met the man in person, however, though he claimed to have met him in a dream and considered himself Norinaga’s posthumous disciple. Boasting hundreds of disciples of “Hirata Shinto,” Hirata was widely influential, and his ideas were known to the inner circles of the Imperial Court. As has long been observed, his influence ultimately motivated developments in both Shinto other related religious movements in Japan, including our NRMs (Kamstra 1994, 111). Without doubt, Hirata was a monotheist, and on this fact virtually all Western scholars agree. The discrepancy, of course, is as to whether or not Hirata’s monotheism was merely the byproduct of an undue Western (i.e. Christian) inspiration or if it can rightly be called an expression of a “Japanese” outlook.

Hirata’s interpretation of the figures of the classics as personal deities demonstrates that he inherited Norinaga’s basic position when it came to the nature of kami (see Sasaki 2015, ch. 1, sec. 2). However, Hirata developed his concept of a monotheistic creator deity much further than his predecessor (see Lande 2008, 4–5). While the Watarai tradition had identified the *Kojiki*’s Amenominakanushi and the

*Nihon shoki's* Kunitokotachi, Hirata separated them. He held that Kunitokotachi had only created our world, while Amenominakanushi had created the entire universe. Clearly, Amenominakanushi existed before creation, and was none other than the creator himself, and was furthermore an uncreated creator (see Hirata, *Koshiden*, 91, in McNally 2005, 183). This seems to have been a departure from his predecessor Norinaga, whose views about Amenominakanushi's name (referring to existing in the midst of heaven) he pushed towards what he believed to be their logical ends. "We understand," he writes, "that [Amenominakanushi] has sovereignty over all the things in the universe. Since this great kami thus exists without a beginning, it is only appropriate that he be called the ultimate, first deity, and that no words should possibly exist to describe the heights and depths of his virtuous power. (Hirata, quoted in Sasaki 1998 [1994], 137)

In Hirata's *Honkyō gaihen* (1806), we encounter perhaps the clearest explication of his monotheistic thought: Amenominakanushi is the original parent of all things, and "has no beginning and no end." However, unlike in Christian theology, this god is not directly but indirectly active in the world. Amenominakanushi is "furnished with the quality of producing all things within heaven and earth, but it acts not and is quiescent (it dwells in the so-called Plain of High Heaven from the original beginning), and it is sovereign over all existence" (Hirata, quoted in Sasaki 1998 [1994], 138). Hirata breaks further with Norinaga: the two *musubi* deities are distinct and are derived from Amenominkanushi, who delegates creative functions to these expressed deities and remains hidden in heaven—a model somewhat reminiscent of the creative, demiurgical *logos* in some Middle Platonist and Christian philosophies (*logos* subordinationism), wherein a transcendent and impassible god delegates the work of creation to a derivative entity.

Sasaki argued that "From Hirata's perspective, Amenominakanushi no kami was neither a supreme being nor creator deity of the Christian mold. Hirata related the creation of all existing things to the second level of Takamimusubi no kami, while considering Amenominakanushi as existing in a world separate and apart, in a state of inaction and quiescence" (1998 [1994]). Nevertheless, while not filling the "Christian mold," that is, an image of "orthodox" Christian theology (i.e. a transcendent creator who works *ex nihilo* and is personally involved in human affairs), it is unmistakable that this god is a supreme god and a creator in a sense. Indeed, this god is ultimately responsible for creation, being responsible for the creative kami who generate everything by way of his divine energy. Richard Devine is therefore right when he concludes that in Hirata's theology, "[a] monotheistic concept of god appears. God is one. He is eternal. He is outside time. He is the creator and is in all creation. Other beings emanate from this supreme being" (1981, 54). This god, Hirata claims, is in fact the same god worshipped by the many monotheists of the world (see Tsunoda 1958, 544). Indeed, all other supreme beings of the world's religions, including the god of the Chinese (identified as "Shang-ti or T'ienti"), the Hindus ("*Mahabrahaisvaradeva* or Brahman"), and the Christians, are manifestations of this god, or, at least, of his *musubi* emanations, by whom this god has revealed himself as creator (see Keane 2017, 42).

Hirata has been criticized by Ishida Ichirō as an example of "syncretic Shintō-Christian Shintō" (*Shin-ki shūgō shintō*). Such assessments have formed a convenient brush to sweep aside any suggestion that monotheism is a product of Japanese reflection on Japanese tradition or at all compatible with the

Shinto world (1983, 149–150). But the question for the historian interested in the development of monotheism in Japan is not one about exegetical justification; rather, it is concerned directly with the fact of such readings in history. Now, how came Hirata by such readings? Hirata was certainly among the intellectuals able to procure clandestine Jesuit writings translated into Chinese (Hansen 2009, 103). There is also no doubt that he utilized certain Jesuit arguments in explaining his own conceptions. For example, he is found to have relied on the work of Matteo Ricci (discussed above) and Giulio Alenio (1582–1649) and his *San shan lun hsueh chi* (1625). From this Hirata was clearly able to derive logical arguments about time to support his notion of Amenominakanushi preceding creation (see Devine 1981, 43). Of course, while one may detect the influence of Jesuit arguments, one can also observe the sentiment of Norinaga, who had similarly argued against Chinese philosophy that the acknowledgement of the existence of the heavenly realm should necessarily lead to the acknowledgement of the god who dwells there.

How indebted to Christian sources is Hirata's thinking? Since at least the 1920s there has existed a range of conflicting positions that either accept or deny the influence of Christianity on Hirata, especially in Japan (Sasaki 2015, ch. 1, sec. 1–3). There is little doubt that at least Hirata's famed *Honkyō gaihen*—unpublished during his lifetime and bearing a note that says it should not be published—relies in some ways on Christian sources (see Devine 1981, 44). Its second half appears to be heavily reliant on Jesuit writer Diego de Pantoja's tract called *Ch'i k'o* (1614), wherein “God” and “Jesus” are replaced with the phrase *kakure no kami* (hidden god) (43–45). Likewise, the presence of Ricci's tract *Chi jen shih p'ien* (1608), is detectable in his work. Arguably borrowed to some degree by Hirata are Christian notions of the afterlife, morality, judgement, and the problems of suffering (Devine 1981, 44–53). But what about Hirata's monotheism?

Sasaki, after comprehensive investigation, concluded that Hirata's concept of Amenominakanushi has no substantial relationship to the orthodox Christian doctrine of God. Even if some similarities and terminological influences have been pointed out by both Christian and Shinto scholars in Japan, to the ends that some have labeled Hirata a Christian-Shinto “syncretist,” Hirata's contact with Christianity was not “accepted” at the level of dogma, and in his faith Hirata “has absolutely no Christian ideas” (Sasaki 2015, ch. 1, sec. 4, translation mine; see also ch. 2, sec. 3). For Sasaki, Ishida Ichirō's charge that Hirata's views are a “syncretic Shintō-Christian Shintō” (1983, 149–150) are unfounded (see Sasaki 2015, ch. 1, sec. 4), and attempts to establish with certainty a Christian influence on Hirata's “creator-god concept” amount to “a distortion of Hirata's thought” (Sasaki 1998 [1994], 129). Western scholarship has yielded similar results, and while there remains a recognition of “striking similarities” between some of Hirata's works and Jesuit texts, “recent scholars warn against overemphasizing Christian influence on Hirata” (Breen 2003, 253). As Devine rightly notices, while Hirata was aware of and utilized Jesuit formulations, “he was eclectic in his approach and selected only what was useful for his own ideas” (54). The question then remains, as Sasaki asks: “so what was Christianity to Atsutane?” (2015, ch. 1, sec. 4, translation mine). For Hirata, similarities between his own conceptions of Shinto and the ideas of foreign countries (e.g. Christianity, Buddhism, Confucianism) are evidence of the universal truth of his own religion, supporting evidence for the reality of the Japanese classics (see Sasaki

2015, ch. 1, sec. 4). Hirata's "purpose," writes John Breen, "was to demonstrate to all Japanese, and in time to Westerners, too, that all knowledge—theological and otherwise—grew from the seeds scattered across the globe by Japanese deities in mythical times" (2003, 253). Realizing this starting point for Hirata's theological work, we seem unjustified in singling out Christianity as the "source" of Hirata's creator god on the basis of his acknowledgement of similarities between the two or even his gesturing at or borrowing from Christian works, since this can be interpreted as reflective of a programmatic effort to both personally realize and publicly promote the universal character of Japan's traditions—truths towards which all the world's legends and religions have always been pointing. David C. Lewis has recently catalogued four non-Christian sources by which Hirata could have come to his monotheistic interpretation of the *Kojiki's* first god (2018, 52–53; cf. Devine 1981, 37–54): 1) Personal experiences or revelations; 2) "sky god" traditions of primitive monotheism in Japan, like those proposed by Lang or Schmidt;<sup>58</sup> 3) The Chinese god Shangdi (Lord Above), the meaning of whose name is similar to the *Kojiki's* first *kami*; 4) Lao Zi's Daoism, which had described "an entity with attributes similar to those ascribed to God in monotheistic religions; existing before the creation of heaven and earth, unchanging, and 'alone'—a term similar to that used of the three original deities at the beginning of the *Kojiki*" (52–53).

Alongside Lewis' suggestions I am now proposing another "Japanese" source for Hirata's monotheistic reading: a longstanding basic interpretation of the Japanese classics centered on a creator god, exemplified in various expressions by the traditions of the Watarai and Yoshida schools (which were still known as traditional in Norinaga and Hirata's time) and also the Neo-Confucianist theories of figures like Nakae Tojū. Some Japanese scholars, without identifying "monotheism," have already imagined (but not endorsed) a similar historical explanation based on the possibility of "Confucian" influence (see Sasaki 2015, ch. 1, sec. 3).

The development of Kokugaku theories about Amenominakanushi would not cease with Hirata. Sasaki's assessments of the Kokugaku personalities which followed him, while of tremendous use, provides a case study for the current problems attached to monotheism as a technical category. In his view, these were not monotheists. Rather, they were generally "pantheists" who believed in sometimes personal and sometimes impersonal gods, albeit, Sasaki grants, in ways which laid the groundwork for monotheistic developments in Japanese religion. With this analysis in mind, we will have space to consider only one of the many Kokugaku theorists who elaborated on the concept of a creator *kami* in the nineteenth century, setting up our historical conclusions regarding the exposure of our NRM founders to Kokugaku ideas.

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<sup>58</sup> It is "relevant to note that Hirata Atsutane made use of traditions within folk Shinto that were not recorded in the *Kojiki* or other classical writings (Sasaki 1998 [1994], 137). Within 'mainstream' Shinto there had also been the influence of Deguchi Nobuyoshi" (Lewis 2018, 53).

## 7.10. Ōkuni Takamasa (1792–1871): The Pre-Christian God in Japan

Ōkuni (Nonokuchi) Takamasa, a well-educated samurai and student of Hirata, was deeply influenced by Hirata's teaching though he ultimately insisted on his own interpretation (see Mitsumatsu 2020, 60, 62). Nevertheless, for Ōkuni, Amenominakanushi is “the true god” (Ōkuni, quoted in Sasaki 1998 [1994], 148). This grand deity, primarily associated with Amaterasu, is in fact diffused throughout the universe in a monotheistic emanationism. Ōkuni says that Amenominakanushi and Amaterasu “are a single deity, but divided spirits, and that is why the *sakimitama* (apportioned spirit) of Amenominakanushi no kami is revealed as Amaterasu” (152). While people worship the ruling sovereign Amaterasu, they are worshipping a manifestation of the supreme god to whom she is linked. As Mitsumatsu Makoto has recently recognized, Ōkuni's theories, which demonstrate “an Amaterasu-centric monotheistic character,” had the effect of absorbing into Amaterasu the roles of the three kami of creation (*zōka sanjin*) and also that of Ōkuninushi as ruler of the afterlife (the “Invisible World”) (2020, 63). “Ame-no-minaka-nushi no kami,” says Ōkuni, “is the supreme object of veneration... [but] [w]e on this earth should venerate Amaterasu as the ‘Ruler of Heaven’” (Ōkuni, quoted in de Bary, Gluck, and Tiedemann 2005, 517).

Ōkuni says that this teaching about the true god (*shintenshu*) is the “original doctrine” (*honkyō*) which had already existed in Japan “without waiting” for the arrival of the Christian god (*Tenshu*). “In our ancient legends,” he says, “the fundament of heaven and earth is called Amenominakanushi no kami. The two characters for ‘god’ (*tenshu*) are both found in this name. By this, we should know that the teaching of the true god is in Japan” (Ōkuni, quoted in Sasaki 1998 [1994], 148). By this he means that the Chinese characters *ten/ame* (god or heaven) and *shu/nushi* (master or emperor), which together composed the name used by Catholic missionaries in China for God (*Tiānzhū*, Heavenly Emperor) are visible in the name of the *Kojiki*'s first deity Amenominakanushi. Ōkuni clearly thinks foreigners have brought the Japanese nothing new. His publicized *honkyō* not only meant “original doctrine” but could also be read as “Japan teaching.” Foreign traditions about god might be useful, but Japan's tradition was the body of the text while foreign explanations were mere footnotes, incomplete and deficient. In keeping with the Kokugaku spirit, Ōkuni writes that “[t]he people of distant lands, those lands that we call Western or ‘barbarian’ lands, do not yet know the ancient truths. This, too, is part of the secret heavenly plan of the Ruler of Heaven and the Creator, whose firm intention it is to eventually elevate Japan to the rank of greater imperial nation” (Ōkuni, quoted in de Bary, Gluck, and Tiedemann 2005, 517–518).

Sasaki, however, insists that this “god” which Ōkuni has in view, despite Ōkuni's claim that this is the “same god” as “*Tenshu* in the West and *Jōtei* or *Tentei* in China,” is actually an impersonal essence, and therefore not a god at all. Sasaki says this because Amenominakanushi, like the “original nature” of Neo-Confucianism, fills the universe and has “pantheistic” characteristics (Sasaki 1998 [1994], 149–152). Sasaki's basic instinct is right, of course, at least in that he distances Ōkuni's theology from a direct dependency on Christian doctrine. However, Sasaki seems to struggle with the pervasiveness of Ōkuni's deity and how it could be reconciled to the presence of a personal god. Unwilling to commit entirely to

his earlier assessment that Ōkuni's god is impersonal, he writes: "Amenominakanushi no kami is not merely the personalized kami described by Norinaga Motoori. While possessing a personal kind of existence at the center of the universe, he also represents an impersonal aspect of existence bestowed on everyone" (1998 [1994]). Of course, an entity cannot be both personal and impersonal at the same time, but it is entirely possible, as we have seen, that a monotheism might envision a personal god who is diffused throughout the universe in a variety of ways. For example, through emanationism a god's still-connected substance may exist as an indwelling principle within all people; alternatively, it might also be that a unitary god's divine substance has splintered into many fragments which have become lodged within the universe or in human beings; a god might also exist in a pantheistic way. Both our earlier taxonomical investigation, as well as the lessons learned from the monotheisms of history (like the Vedic, gnostic, and Hermetic monotheisms), clearly demonstrate the possibility of theistic systems which metaphysically associate but ultimately differentiate individual beings and an ultimate personality. I suggest that Ōkuni's system is more compatible with monotheism (e.g. an emanationistic polydeistic monotheism) than it is with atheistic or ultimistic schemes (Sasaki calls such views "pantheism").

In the Kokugaku scholarship which followed Hirata and Ōkuni, we encounter a colorful diversity of theories about Amenominakanushi and this kami's relationship to the world and to human beings. There is not space enough in this thesis to properly discuss the various theories about Amenominakanushi from Kokugaku voices such as Suzuki Shigetane (1812–1863), who formally joined Hirata's retinue of disciples at the age of twenty-one and eventually joined Ōkuni in Osaka in 1834; or the work of Suzuki Masayuki (1837–1871), or Watanabe Ikarimaru (1836–1915). Like the earlier Shinto and Neo-Confucian theories, these ideas deserve further investigation.

### 7.11. Historical Conclusions

The transmission of a creator kami in the history of Japanese religion has been recognized before, both in the course of Japanese history and (at least fleetingly) in Western analysis. The anti-Christian writer of the early Tokugawa period, Fabian Fukun, when confronted with Christian claims about monotheism, pointed to one link in this chain of Japanese sources when he referred to the creator kami of the Yoshida tradition, Kunitokotachi. Representing something of a minority report in modern Western studies, J.H. Kamstra spoke vaguely about a premodern tradition of Shinto "pluriform monotheism" centered on Amenominakanushi (regularly identified with Kunitokotachi), and he furthermore implied (in a self-contradictory way) that this tradition has some relationship to the monotheistic doctrines we encounter in Japan's NRMs (1994, 115). Pursuing this possibility, we have established a potential link between the medieval traditions of a creator kami and our NRM founders in the Kokugaku surveyed above. As has been widely recognized, Kokugaku influenced the development of the pool of ideas out of which the early Shinto-related NRMs emerged (Inoue 2002, 418, 425). Specifically, "in the nineteenth century, influential *kokugakusha* such as Hirata Atsutane (1776–1843) and Ōkuni Takamasa (1792–1871) initiated an intellectual movement that had an impact on a wide section of society" (Inoue 2002, 425). It was as early as Anesaki Masaharu's famed *History of Japanese Religion* (1930) that Japanese scholarship noticed that the "rise of popular theism" with the NRMs

under investigation is to be included with the developments of Kokugaku voices like Hirata Atsutane in a wider “revival of Shinto” (1963 [1930], 308–316). Given the content of Kokugaku monotheisms, and given their exposure to Japanese society, it is not surprising in the least that the founders of the monotheistic NRM Ōmotokyō (founded 1892), a movement which emerged from Konkōkyō, explicitly identified Ōmotokyō’s supreme deity named Ushitora Konjin as both Amenominakanushi and Kunitokotachi from the Japanese classics.<sup>59</sup>

I am not suggesting, however, that direct exposure to Kokugaku scholarship is the sole culprit for the emergence of NRM monotheism. More historical work will need to be done before the precise lines of transmission can be definitively traced. What can be said at this stage supports my probabilistic historical argument described above, that while hypothetical contact with Kakure Kirishitan or any other Christian source might provide sufficient motivation for the development of monotheism in the NRMs, sufficient theoretical developments had already occurred in Japanese history prior to the emergence of the NRMs in the nineteenth century so as not to require Christian influence to explain its presence. These Japanese developments provided a host of “contributive layers” towards the development of monotheism in Kurozumikyō, Tenrikyō, and Konkōkyō (and also in the earlier Nyoraikyō and later Ōmotokyō), layers which are found to have included: Watarai and Yoshida theories about Amenominakanushi/Kunitokotachi; Neo-Confucian theories like those of Nakae, Yoshikawa, Ansai, Nobuyoshi, and the Shingaku movement; the elevation of Amaterasu over the Shinto pandeon in both Shinto history and in Kokugaku; Buddhist emphasis on celestial or fundamental Buddhas like Amida and Dainichi Nyorai; Kokugaku theories about a creator god in the classics; and, for at least some of the relatively later NRMs, there is also the influence of other early monotheistic NRMs (e.g. Nyoraikyō, Kurozumikyō). In the end, the diversity of the NRM monotheisms is likely best understood by an assumption of varying degrees of exposure to and absorption of some or all of these contributive layers, a process which produced a unique doctrinal character in each NRM grounded simultaneously in historical tradition and divine revelation.

While the process by which Kurozumi Munetada, for example, came to understand Amaterasu to be not merely the founding deity of the imperial house but the founding deity of the universe is difficult to conclusively reconstruct, the means by which Kurozumi would have been exposed to the contributive layers offered by Japan’s traditions are not difficult to imagine. Below I will attempt a loose reconstruction of these means of exposure, but in the end I will be arguing only for the greater likelihood of some such history over a history of hypothetical Christian encounters.

When Kurozumi was born in 1780, Kokugaku pioneer Norinaga was still at work on his grand commentary on the *Kojiki*. Hirata Atsutane was four years old. Thus, Kurozumi “saw the light when the tide was rising and sturdy patriots [that is, *kokugakusha* and those interested in their teachings] were championing the ancestral rights and prerogative of the Imperial line” (Hepner 1935, 55). The previous generation of Japanese Neo-Confucianists (e.g. Nakae Tojū, Yamazaki Ansai, Kaibara Ekken) had also contributed significantly to the intellectual world into which Kurozumi was born. As mentioned above,

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<sup>59</sup> “All this is arranged by me, Kami Ushitora, otherwise known as Kami Kunitokotachi” (Deguchi Nao, *Ōmoto Shin’Yu*, quoted in de Bary, Gluck, and Tiedemann 2005, 1139); “There is only one god (or *kami*) that created the universe. We adore him using the name Ame-no-minaka-nushi... ‘God,’ or, the True God” (Deguchi Onisaburō, *Michi no Shiori*, quoted in de Bary, Gluck, and Tiedemann 2005, 1142).

one of the monotheist Nakae Tojū's most famous disciples, Kumazawa Banzan (1619–1691), served the lord of Bizen Province (east Okayama) Ikeda Mitsumasa (1609–1682), who saturated the region in Confucian education, and this governmental dissemination in Okayama continued even into the 1790s (Sawada 1993, 10). Hardacre writes that the Neo-Confucian thought of “Yamazaki Ansai (1611–1682), Kaibara Ekken (1630–1714), and Nakae Toju (1608–1648)... took on a theistic emphasis that bore deep affinities with Shintō” (1986, 44). However, the Neo-Confucian thought which “probably influenced Kurozumi most directly was the Shingaku (‘Learning of the Heart-Mind’) of Ishida Baigan (1685–1744)” (45). Ishida’s premise, that “the good person [is] united with the heart of Amaterasu” (Ishida, quoted in Kinsley 1989, 82), was not, as we have seen, entirely original; however, Ishida traveled the country with this message and cultivated a movement which at one stage came to boast eighty-one schools in Japan. Hardacre is certainly right to point out that Kurozumi, in his own development of Neo-Confucianism, “takes a theistic view of Heaven and later uses the term *ten* interchangeably with Amaterasu Omikami.” Thus, it is clear that a “theistic, religio-ethical strain of Neo-Confucian thought... most likely influenced Kurozumi” (51, no. 52; Hardacre also cites de Bary in this regard, 1987, 66ff).

Other, more medieval layers of Amaterasu-devotion contributed to Kurozumi’s religious consciousness. By the age of nineteen (around the year 1799), motivated by the Neo-Confucian tradition of sagehood, Kurozumi had resolved to become a living kami. More than a decade before his revelation of Amaterasu as a universal deity, Kurozumi had begun visiting the Ise shrine in 1803 at the age of twenty-three. “We may be sure,” says Hepner, whose 1935 study offers several historical passageways worthy of revisitation by Western scholars, “that [his first visit to Ise in 1803] was a great event in [Kurozumi’s] life” (1935, 72). Indeed, “The trips made to Ise by Kurozumi Munetada are of immense significance, because the Inner Shrine (Nai-Gū) of Ise is the seat of [Amaterasu], [and] the Outer Shrine (Ge Gū) had been the center of the development of various theories of Shinto philosophy...” (71). In 1798, when Kurozumi had been about eighteen, Norinaga had reported on the ongoing controversy over the traditional interpretation of the shrines which Kurozumi had visited, which involved an esteemed tradition about a single kami being the lord of the universe and also the subjection of Amaterasu to Toyouke (Norinaga 1995, 31). Rethinking Amaterasu’s place in the Shinto hierarchy and her role in Shinto cosmology, and, most importantly, removing her from the at-that-time traditional but arguably erroneous subjugation to Toyouke, was a particular preoccupation of Norinaga. His own personal faith in the existence of Amaterasu ran deep. We should ultimately not forget, therefore, the influence of Norinaga’s nationalistic appeals in intellectual circles which eventually pervaded the countryside, appeals which featured both a restoration of Amaterasu’s honor, and praise for heads of state like Tokugawa Ieyasu as one “who made his mind one with that of Amaterasu ōmikami” (quoted in Ueda 1998 [1986], 119 no. 19). Theorists like Ōkuni Takamasa also forefronted Amaterasu as the principle manifestation of the supreme god. Ultimately, I suggest we must consider Kurozumi Munetada’s elevation of Amaterasu and his emphasis on her connection with humanity as situated within this broad movement, and the same can be said for other Amaterasu-focused NRMs such as Misogikyō and Uden Shinto, both of which developed around the same time and with many similarities to Kurozumikyō (see Hardacre 2019, 315–322). Indeed, this was, in a sense, a restorationist measure focusing itself on a long-standing Japanese tradition represented in the classics in which

Amaterasu is the Ruler of the High Plains of Heaven. As has been said, the fact that from ancient times Amaterasu had enjoyed rulership of the Japanese pandeon “constitutes a wonderful background for the teachings of [Kurozumikyō]” (Hepner 1935, 103–104). At the very least, Kurozumi, who was acquainted with the *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki*, would have belonged to the “everyone, high and low” whom Norinaga said were aware of the traditional interpretations of the Japanese classics and the Ise shrines in the books of Watarai Shinto, interpretations featuring a supreme, creator kami (Amenominakanushi/Kunitokotachi) who had some (metaphysical) relationship with Amaterasu. Thus, it can confidently be said, as the 1994 biography of the founder by Rev. Kurozumi Tadaaki observed, that a basis for the difference between Kurozumi’s doctrine of Amaterasu and the “folk beliefs” about kami at that time exists in “the ancient books of Japan, where the kami Ame-no-Minaka-Nushi-no-Kami is believed to have created everything in the universe” (Kurozumi 1994, 21). If Kurozumi had somehow not heard of such theories before his first pilgrimage to Ise in 1803 (!), his visit to the heartland of this theological controversy would surely have cured his ignorance. As Hepner notes:

It is quite reasonable to assume that Kurozumi Munetada was conversant with the following theories which center indeed around this shrine... that Amaterasu-Ō-Mi-Kami was regarded the incarnation of Dainichi Nyōrai... that... Dainichi Nyōrai [was identified] with the Tai-Zō-Kai of the Inner Shrine (Nai-Gū) and also with the Kon-Gō-Kai of the Outer Shrine (Ge-Gū) at Ise... that Watarai Shinto utilized Confucian, Taoistic, Buddhistic, and Shintō elements in support of the claims of the Outer Shrine against the Inner Shrine; that Yuiitsu [Yoshida] Shintō regarded the Sun and the Moon as the Soul of the Universe... These facts were available to any one as interested in the affairs of Ise as Kurozumi Munetada was. (Hepner 1935, 106–107)

Ultimately, after Kurozumi’s initial pilgrimage to Ise, he continued to serve Amaterasu at the Imamura Shrine. Between March and December of 1814, Kurozumi would focus greater and greater attention on Amaterasu, and, on December 22, 1814, he experienced the rays of the sun as the indwelling of Amaterasu and the direct reception of heaven’s will. Ten years after the founding of Kurozumikyō, he would begin regularly returning to Ise, visiting five more times from 1824 to 1845. The repeated trips to Ise have already been considered important by some Western scholars for the development of Kurozumi’s thought (see Hepner 1935, 75, 99). As the editor of a collection of stories of Kurozumi Munetada put it, while the man was certainly an “original voice” expressing his own experiences of the great kami Amaterasu, there are “a number of similarities between his teachings and those of others of his times. To know Kurozumi Munetada is to gain entrance to the wider Japanese religious tradition” (Stoesz 2000, xxii). This “wider Japanese religious tradition” certainly included monotheism-compatible forms of Neo-Confucianism, and Kurozumi certainly read many books on Confucianism and was indisputably familiar with the Ōyōmei school (Wang Yang-ming). Some of its disciples even joined him in his movement (Nobuhara 1982, 6–7, 13, 30). While we are able to point to

Neo-Confucianism (and especially its Shingaku expressions), I am equally inclined to point to the probability of his encounter with Kokugaku monotheisms, and I am not alone in this. In a meeting with Kurozumikyō leadership, I was told by Rev. Nagatsune Akihiro, Head Master of Kurozumikyō Academy, Fujiwara Teruhiko, and Rev. Kurozumi Munemichi, current Chief Patriarch, that: “It is rather clear, though it has not been well-transmitted to us, that [Kurozumi Munetada] must have read and was affected by Hirata Atsutane’s books.”<sup>60</sup> During this meeting about historical influences, I was told also that I should look to “the previous era of Shinto,” that is, to “Yoshida Shinto.” Rev. Nagatsune reminded us that in 1862, Kurozumi Munetada’s shrine (Kaguraoka Munetada jinja) was allowed by special permission of the emperor to be built on the same land as Yoshida’s shrine behind Kyoto University—a shrine which honors the great kami of ultimate origin.



Fig. 7.2. Kaguraoka Munetada Shrine, Kyoto. *Photo by author.*

Ultimately, Kurozumi’s teaching, gained by revelation, was at the same time a product of the age in which he lived—a time when the many layers of historical theorizing about Amaterasu’s supremacy and her relationship with the concept of a supreme creator kami had mounted in such a way that Kurozumi had no difficulty elevating Amaterasu into both the throne room of the Plain of High Heaven and also into the seat of the human heart—a maneuver which had already existed in various forms in the Shinto/Neo-Confucian world since the medieval and early Tokugawa periods.

By the year 1841, the influence of Hirata’s theories, centered on Amenominakanushi as supreme ruler of heaven and earth, had become so widespread and influential that the government ordered him to cease his writing. However, a doctrinal impact on the Japanese landscape had already been achieved (Hepner 1935, 51). Following in Hirata’s footsteps, the influence of *kokugakusha* like Ōkuni Takamasa should also be taken into account. Ōkuni was certainly well known, and a “prominent local scholar” in Osaka’s literary circles where he spread Hirata’s theories (see Caddeau 2006, 43). Osaka was less than

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<sup>60</sup> Private meeting, February 23, 2023.

forty kilometers from the village where Tenrikyō's foundress Nakayama Miki lived (perhaps seven to eight hours walking distance). Also, less than fifty kilometers north lay Kyoto where Ōkuni founded an academy called the True Learning School (Hōhongakusha) in 1841. Four years after Suzuki Shigetane joined with the Ōkuni school in Osaka, Nakayama Miki had her revelation in 1838. Four years later in 1841, the same year of Ōkuni's academy's founding in Kyoto and the same year in which the government became so concerned with the spread of Hirata's teachings that it forbade him from writing, Nakayama descended into poverty on the order of God the Parent. Following in the Ōkuni school's footsteps, by 1853, Nakayama was preaching her own brand of monotheism on the street corners of Osaka.

While it is not difficult to imagine Nakayama Miki or her acquaintances picking up on Hirata or Ōkuni's teaching during visits to Osaka or Kyoto, it is likely that we do not need to rely on her or her associates frequenting these locales. Hirata's Kokugaku, it is clear, had already become popular among rural villages and doubtless would have reached modern Nara prefecture before the time of Nakayama's revelation. As historian of Kokugaku Harry D. Harootunian reveals, all of the great Kokugaku schools had been located in either the Osaka or Kyoto region, but "[i]n the early 1830s, nativism left the cities for the countryside" (1988, 176). Hirata's lectures, centered on Japan's history, namely on "categories and concepts... rooted in a preurban environment" eventually "turn[ed] to agricultural life" (177). By the late eighteenth century, Hirata and other *kokugakusha* had promoted systematic cosmologies which aimed to integrate society into a whole by drawing analogies between the structure and activity of social life and the cosmos, ideas popular with village leadership (179, 231–232). We know that Hirata's ideas had spread across the country, even reaching as far as Shimōsa where it was adopted by village leader Miyahiro Sadao (1767–1837). Likewise, the work of Hirata's disciples, Ōkuni Takamasa and Suzuki Shigetane, continued to "recover the village community as an autonomous and reconstituted whole" (232). What sort of ideas would rural villages like Nakayama Miki's have been exposed to? Harootunian reveals that *kokugakusha* demonstrated for agricultural communities "a structural homology between their conception of cosmology... and the quotidian life of the most ordinary person" (179). This amounted to a reformulation of the "purpose of Shinto," in which the relationships between apparently disparate things was emphasized. Indeed, the Kokugaku lessons which radiated into the countryside from Osaka and Kyoto would have promoted "linkages" between "deity and human, divine plan and daily practice (worship and work), as if no real differences intruded, and [these teachings aimed] to show, above all else, how relationships between things could never have been other than connected and successive from the time of creation" (179). For Hirata, the "connectedness and kinship of all things" was owed to their creation by the deities of the Japanese cosmic myth, and human beings "reproduce the conditions of the productive moment in worship and work, a ceaseless and ongoing practice" (119). There is no question that these cosmological discussions emphasizing the link between deity and humanity, between the creation of the cosmos in texts like the *Kojiki* and the daily lives of rural Japanese, would have included mention of the great creator kami espoused by the likes of Hirata and Ōkuni, along with mention of this kami's connection to human beings.

Other means for Nakayama Miki's exposure to Japanese monotheism may exist, namely through her evident knowledge of Neo-Confucian movements like Shingaku. In Nakayama's *Ofudesaki*, she writes that "Even until now, there have been teachings, ethical and ancient, but there has been no one who knows the origin [of the world/humanity]" (*Ofudesaki* III, 69). The Japanese text reads *ima made mo shingaku kōki aru keredo / moto o shiritaru mono wa nai zo ya*. This reference to "*shingaku kōki*" may refer directly to the Shingaku movements following the monotheist Nakae and other Ōyōmei teachers; meanwhile, "*kōki*" may refer to generally ancient teachings, or possibly to the Neo-Confucian Kogaku (Ancient Learning) school. Yamashita reminds us that "both the Yomeigaku (Wang Yang-ming) and Kogaku (Ancient Learning) schools of the Tokugawa period held theistic positions..." (1979, 312). In this light, is it possible that the *Ofudesaki*, in its emphasis on the uniqueness of its creation story, might be read as demonstrating Tenrikyō's superiority over proximate theisms? Further investigation is needed.

In the end, my appeal is simply that we sooner look to the verifiable movements of historical persons and groups whose religious views we know are relatively closer to those of our NRM founders rather than to rumors or speculation about secret contact with Kakure Kirishitan. If such methodology is acceptable, then, at least in the cases of Tenrikyō and Konkōkyō, we might likewise sooner point to the possibility of exposure to the ideas of the earlier Nyoraikyō or the teachings of Kurozumi Munetada—a popular healer whose pilgrimages to Ise between 1803–1845 frequently stopped in Nara, the birthplace of Nakayama's monotheism. We know that Nakayama was witness to many pilgrims who passed through Nara on their way to Ise (Horootunian 1989, 225). The fact that there are indeed many points of overlap between Kurozumi's and Nakayama's movements may be worthy of further investigation (see 225–230).

Regarding Konkōkyō, we may turn our inquiry toward its exposure to Kurozumikyō. This was already the path of D.C. Holtom, in whose view it was "probable" that Kurozumi exerted some "limited" influence on Kawate Bunjirō, though he said nothing more than this (1933, 294). It remains noteworthy that Kurozumi's movement emerged in Kawate's same area of operation in Okayama, and that the original headquarters of Kurozumikyō (modern Omoto) was perhaps a five to six-hour walk from Kawate's Urami village and the current headquarters of Konkōkyō (present-day Konkō-cho). Pursuing this question in discussion with Rev. Koichi Konko, a member of Kawate's family, I was told that Kawate was indeed aware of Kurozumi, and I was directed to collected sayings of Kawate in the *Gorikai* documents (and other yet-unpublished literature) about Kawate's early disciples. Here I encountered sayings which demonstrated Kawate's clear awareness and negative opinion of Kurozumi and his movement, and one gets a strong sense of his feelings of rivalry. At every opportunity, Kawate disparages the efficacy of Kurozumi's way. In one dramatic example, Tenchi Kane no Kami himself reveals Kurozumi Munetada's presence to Kawate and speaks of the latter as one destined to supplant the former: "In Nakano, Mino County, Bizen Province, there was a person named Munetada no Kami... He preached the Way of Heaven to the people. However, it was not enough to put people at ease. I, Konjin, then decided to put people at ease... [Kawate,] Lend me your voice and physical form. I will teach the Way of Tenchi and show people the way to put themselves at ease" (*Gorikai* II: Okida,

Kisaburo: 3.2). Additionally, there are many stories in this literature in which Kurozumi Munetada's disciples flock to Kawate after they are unable to obtain healing. The ministers of Konkōkyō with whom I have dialogued have been relatively uninterested in the idea that Kurozumi influenced Kawate. They have pointed out instead that Kawate, before founding Konkōkyō, was a member of a group led by his younger brother Kandori Shige'emon (fl. 1857) which focused on the worship of the dangerous deity Konjin, a kami hailing from Onmyōdō (Japanese Yin-Yang divination). According to Konkōkyō, Kawate's Tenchi Kane no Kami was "the same deity Shige'emon believed in" yet this kami was eventually understood to be both more benevolent and universal than in Shige'emon's view. What is clear is that Kawate's revelation as to the nature of this god was progressive and continued after his movement's founding, and this fact continues to open the question as to Kawate's historical exposure to forces which might have inspired or supplemented his doctrinal changes. It is clear that as early as 1860, Kawate was being visited by Kurozumi's disciples (e.g. Shibuya Sen 1819–1912). Furthermore, doctrinal discussions regarding Kurozumi's teaching seem to have regularly taken place, as observed in a report from the important disciple and minister Sato Norio (1856–1942), who around 1876 says that he "always debated about Kurozumi with other people in front of Konko-Sama [Kawate]" (*Gorikai* II: Sato, Norio: 4.1). Sato also "criticized the flaws of Christianity and Buddhism at length in front of Konko-Sama," but says he was motivated to give these particular criticisms around 1881 when he "began to fondly read Hirata Atsutane's books" (4.2). Thus, the teachings of both Kurozumi Munetada and Hirata Atsutane, two earlier Japanese monotheists, had been readily accessible to Kawate and his circle, and their teachings continued to be relevant in doctrinal discussions within Konkōkyō. The fact that Kawate and Kurozumi were born only kilometers apart, and the fact that Kawate "came into the world when Hirata Atsutane... [was] at the peak of his influence" (Schneider 1962, 59), is quite suggestive. Either or both of these sources may have motivated Kawate's doctrine of Tenchi Kane no Kami, evolving out of an Onmyōdō conception of the deity Konjin after a series of revelations.

Further historical investigations will be required before any definitive arguments along these lines can be proposed. In terms of the probabilistic historical argument of this thesis, however, I trust that a range of "Japanese" sources for the development of NRM monotheism has been sufficiently presented. I trust also that in light of what we know of the period these sources will be considered probably more available to our NRM founders than the transcendent god of Christianity—in either its Jesuit or Kakure forms—a god whose dissimilarity with our founders' monotheisms is only overshadowed by its lack of availability in the country.

Concluding this historical study, I will point to the salient analysis of Byron Earhart, who once observed that "[t]he new religions may be best understood as renewals of the older tradition in somewhat different form. The new religions revitalized the slumbering religious heritage by reviving its vital elements in the garb of divine inspiration and creative restructuring" (1970, 3). This older, indisputably "Japanese" heritage referred to by Earhart has been found in the present study to have transmitted an array of conceptual elements into the religious consciousness of our NRM founders, each of which who, under the authority of revelation, conducted idiosyncratic interpretations of an

older tradition—a tradition of a primordial creator kami based on the opening passages of the Shinto classics. As Kurozumi once said in prayer to Amaterasu:

The Poems Thou hast taught me now  
Are Teachings directly from the Divine Age.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Kurozumi Munetada in *Kurozumi-Kyō-Kyō-Sho*, quoted in Hepner 1935, 105.

## 8

# Conclusion: The Future of Monotheism in Japan

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*“The best prophet of the future is the past.”*

— Lord Byron (1788–1824)

### 8.1. Findings and Final Reflections

What have we discovered in this wide-ranging thesis and what are its implications for the future of monotheism in Western studies of Japan’s NRMs? Firstly, we have learned, despite a creditable dossier of confident and unambiguous Western rulings, how difficult the deceptively simple questions about the existence and emergence of monotheism in Japan truly are. Indeed, scholarly confrontations with the possibility of a “Japanese” monotheism have acted as a lightning rod attracting a complex variety of interrelated socio-cultural, political, and academic problems which ultimately compound to form sedimentary barriers to clarity. As discussed in chapter one, these obstructive layers, assembled over many decades of East-West exchange, have included an ongoing essentializing of both “Eastern” and “Western” religion in academic and political discourse along a “polytheistic/monotheistic” divide; i.e. a persistent Orientalizing and Occidentalizing tendency—an oft-discussed situation in Asian studies which has continued to occupy the study of religion in Japan.<sup>62</sup> This misleading dichotomy of “Japanese polytheism” and “Western monotheism” has energized and sustained the construction of a certain image of the concept of monotheism in Japan—a portrait at the same time inescapably foreign, socially and ethically unattractive, and altogether useful as a buttress for nationalistic narratives about “uniqueness.” Making matters more difficult, this situation has in the past several decades become tightly interlinked

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<sup>62</sup> See for example the volume on religion and Orientalism in Asian studies edited by Paramore (2018 [2016]), particularly the chapters of Krämer 2018 [2016] and Paramore 2018b [2016] on Orientalism in studies of Japanese religion. Regarding Japan’s own contribution to Orientalizing models of religious studies around the turn of the century, see Krämer 2019; see also Snodgrass 2003. See especially the vital analyses of nationalistic presentations of Zen by Faure 1993, Sharf 1994, and Borup 2004, and the complimentary studies of Amstutz 1997 and Porcu 2008 on the marginalization of Pure Land Buddhism by Orientalizing forces. See also the German studies of Freiburger (2003) on Orientalism and Occidentalism, and Kleine’s analysis of Western views of Pure Land (2003). For a general discussion on Orientalism and the study of Japan, see Minear 1980, and on the general subject of Occidentalism in Japan, see Pye 2000; 2003.

with the advent of a certain scholarly self-consciousness in the West, a hyper-reflexiveness fixated on first “the interest-bound nature of all hermeneutical encounters” (Amstutz 1997, x) and then the rejection of an allegedly value-free Western secularism as a neutral starting point—part of what Richard King has described as a “Copernican turn” in the study of religion (2017, 11). As we have seen, this scholarly instinct to “break away from established interpretations” (Buck 1994, 5) has manifested acutely in the scholarly avoidance of “Western” terminology, concepts, and categories in the study of Japanese religion. Interestingly, while “monotheism in Japan” was once declared “an impossibility” by an older generation galvanized by Western dominance narratives and then-current anthropological theories (see Aston 1905, 53), contemporary scholarship operating from a postcolonial vantage point has in a circuitous way been found to have moved so strongly in the opposite direction (i.e. against a specifically “Western” interpretive lens and towards a Japan emancipated from “the West”) that the “impossibility” of “monotheism in Japan” has only strengthened. Subsequently, the scholarly disagreement and confusion on the status of Japanese religions like Kurozumikyō, Tenrikyō, and Konkōkyō has also been reinforced.

Among the other important findings established in chapter two of this thesis is the fact that most Western scholars commenting on Japan’s NRMs have operated with too-narrow definitions of monotheism. These scholarly accounts of monotheism, in addition to acknowledging or emphasizing a singular “god,” have regularly involved secondary assumptions about what a god’s relationship must be to the world, about the existence of other spiritual beings alongside this god, and about what sort of worship practices the belief in a single god requires. Combined with the difficult socio-cultural/political and academic situations described in chapter one, this attenuated outlook has been found to have sponsored a long legacy of disorientation in Western studies of Japan’s NRMs. Indeed, Western scholars have alternatively found NRMs like Kurozumikyō, Tenrikyō, and Konkōkyō to be “polytheistic,” “monotheistic,” or “pantheistic” (i.e. ultimistic/atheistic), while some have confusingly attempted to straddle them across multiple categories at once, or treated them as entirely *sui generis*. We have subsequently discovered how far the Kurozumikyō, Tenrikyō, and Konkōkyō organizations have themselves been affected by this disorderly situation in the West, with their own theological and evangelistic literature reflecting the same or similar categorical bewilderment as they attempt to interface with Western analysis. Popular writers and lay members of these NRMs have also experienced this same definitional turbulence, and have in some cases felt compelled to disagree with fellow members or even group leadership over whether their tradition is or is not monotheistic—something evidently felt to be unattractive or unmarketable from a certain point of view.

While scholars of monotheism in the West have long sought to either replace or assist the use of “monotheism” with qualifying terms (e.g. “henotheism,” “monolatry”), and despite scholarly calls for its abandonment as an overburdened and “eurocentric” imposition, it was discovered in chapter three of this thesis that “monotheism” remains surprisingly resilient as a comparative category, and continues to have potential in Japan. Indeed, Japan has not been particularly passive in its reception of an imposed lexical/categorical framework—its intellectual strata has been as actively involved in the parochial reading and subsequent rejection of “monotheism” as it was in the interpretation and integration of

*shūkyō* (religion) (see Kleine 2013; Krämer 2012, 278ff). However, we have found in the case of “monotheism” that this technical term washed up on Japanese shores in a trunk full of other Western trinkets, a trove of unhelpful theoretical assumptions (fashioned in part by theological and anthropological prejudices) with which Western scholars to this day have yet to entirely dispense. It is these additional Western assumptions, and not the highly-descriptive technical term “monotheism,” which should be promptly circumvented—a task perhaps more easily said than widely done. We also found in chapter three, contrary to the narrow definitions utilized by most Western commentators, that recent advancements in the taxonomy of religion which have lately helped to clarify the concept of monotheism (the belief in a single “god”) are able to be further enhanced with a range of new sub-taxa providing a principled and nuanced rubric for identifying the variety of ways in which the basic concept of monotheism has emerged and developed in the history of religion. These new subcategories of monotheism, which are able to distinguish how different monotheistic religions relate the one god to other deities,<sup>63</sup> ultimately allow for further categorization of Japan’s NRMs beneath the heading “monotheism.”

Despite the density of the aforementioned barriers to clarity, chapter four revealed that when the above taxonomical rubric is carefully applied, we are able to positively identify distinct varieties of monotheism between Kurozumikyō, Tenrikyō, and Konkōkyō. Without falling into the trap of imagining that one religion equals one doctrine, in general Kurozumikyō was found to resemble an emanationistic polydeistic monotheism (in which myriad figures are projections of the one god Amaterasu); Tenrikyō may be said to be either a “transcendent,” “fragmentary” or “emanationist” type of polydeistic monotheism, or, in the official interpretation of the so-called “ten deities/names,” a pluriform monodeistic monotheism (in which the “ten names” really refer to different modes or aspects of God the Parent). Meanwhile, Konkōkyō also tends to represent a pluriform monodeistic monotheism, and also a pantheism (in which both the world and the personalities within it are ultimately identified with Tenchi Kane no Kami). We have also seen in these three NRMs, and especially in the case of Tenrikyō, how the proposed taxonomical revision paves the way for resolution of the disagreement between Western scholarship and NRM theologians regarding issues of categorization and developmental history, and how it also contributes positively toward resolving technical, intra-religious disputes along these lines, as well as problems of scriptural interpretation. In other words, the door is opened for a principled change in self-interpretation. Interested scholars of religion and theologians will also doubtless perceive useful pathways for questions of interreligious dialogue in light of these classificatory developments.<sup>64</sup>

In the second half of this thesis, we discovered a range of historical interpretations in both Western and Japanese scholarship regarding the twin questions of the existence of monotheism in premodern Japan and how the monotheisms of the NRMs came to be. Attempting to move beyond implausible

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<sup>63</sup> Transcendent polydeistic monotheism; emanationistic polydeistic monotheism; fragmentary polydeistic monotheism; pluriform monodeistic monotheism; illusory monodeistic monotheism; and their various combinations.

<sup>64</sup> As Cornille once observed, “[t]he very possibility of dialogue between religious traditions signals, or perhaps requires significant shifts in the self-understanding of religious traditions” (2013, xiii).

reconstructions of Christian influence on NRM founders, a new historical proposal was developed in light of the new taxonomy. Here, the common theory of Christian contact with NRM founders, though widely circulated, was discovered to be grounded simultaneously in an assumption of overlap between Christian and NRM monotheisms, an assumption of the utter non-existence of monotheistic thinking in premodern Japan, and, finally, in a startling lack of evidence. The proposal that the development of monotheism in Kurozumikyō, Tenrikyō, and Konkōkyō can be traced to contact between Christians and the founders Kurozumi Munetada, Nakayama Miki, and Kawate Bunjirō, has been found to be far less plausible than their exposure to proximate Japanese sources. Despite Western portraits of a premodern Japan which could only misunderstand monotheism, and supporting a minority report in modern scholarship which has gestured in limited (and sometimes confusing) ways at the existence of a Japanese monotheism prior to the arrival of Christianity, it was discovered that Fabian Fukun, in his 1620 polemic against Christian claims of uniqueness, was not only able to understand monotheism but was able to undermine their claims by pointing to pre-Christian interpretations of Shinto mythology. Turning in this same direction, the present thesis has distilled an interconnected family of more plausible Japanese sources for NRM monotheism, namely Kokugaku teaching about a creator kami, earlier Shinto and Neo-Confucian interpretations of the Japanese classics, and, in the cases of some of the NRMs, the teaching of earlier NRMs like Nyoraikyō and Kurozumikyō. Being undoubtedly exposed to one or more of these readily-available sources, Kurozumi Munetada, Nakayama Miki, and Kawate Bunjirō were each able to take hold of the historical idea of a creator kami and to build upon this basic substrate in different ways.

In the course of investigating theories of historical Christian contact, this thesis also engaged in a new exploration and interpretation of the nature of Kakure Kirishitan theology, a subject which has shared in the categorical turmoil experienced by Kurozumikyō, Tenrikyō, and Konkōkyō. However, in addition to clarifying Kakure monotheism from a taxonomical standpoint, this thesis also revealed another dimension of the Kakure Kirishitan situation in scholarship which has been shared by our NRMs: the problem of East-West dichotomies, that is, the persistence of an Orientalizing and Occidentalizing tendency when it comes to thinking about religion in Japan. One pertinent example raised by this thesis is the fact that scholars from a variety of backgrounds have regularly documented in the preponderance of Japanese kami, bodhisattvas, ancestors, and other spirits a stark contradiction with “monotheism” (a category which they understand denies both the existence and worship of a multiplicity of spiritual or heavenly powers and which also decries iconographic veneration). However, these accounts have failed with equal regularity to recognize this same alleged contradiction in Western traditions like Catholicism or Eastern Orthodoxy, and in these religions’ dogmatic insistence on the reality of supernatural entities like demons, angels, and Satan; and also in the supplication and even iconographic veneration of a multiplicity of spiritual or heavenly powers in the form of saints. Such elements are often said in the West to immediately disqualify Japanese religions from the category of monotheism, but this is not the case for Catholic or Orthodox traditions—religions which insist not only on the petitionable power of other heavenly beings, but on a doctrine of God involving a trinity of three divine persons. Thus, even the narrow definition of monotheism assumed by most Western

scholars (in which “oneness” excludes any “moreness” and in which only one deity can be venerated) is unevenly applied in contrasts between “Christianity” and “Japan.” Despite the fact that it is actually impossible to apply this definition of monotheism to orthodox Christianity (or to any other global “monotheistic” religion), in Western reflection (and consequently in that of Japan), the Christian West is nevertheless ruled to be “monotheistic.” Is this not because of a tradition which simply declares that this is so rather than a principled application of a scholarly category? The fact that Christendom is allowed to bypass widely-held expectations for the category of monotheism while Japan is not, ultimately suggests that scholarly gesturing toward various traits of Japanese traditions (e.g. ancestor veneration, many spiritual beings, the use of icons) as clear evidence of their “polytheism,” is actually a post-factum justification for an *a priori* separation of “Eastern” and “Western” religions—the very “predetermined ontological and epistemological separation” Said decried (see 1979 [1978], 2, 30–40).

All of this returns us once again to the first chapter of this thesis and to the hostile situation in which monotheism has found itself in Japan. Again, both earlier Western scholarship and the contemporary paradigm have made the existence of monotheism in premodern Japan look like an impossibility, while the discussion around its existence in Japan’s NRMs has remained tortured at best. Nevertheless, historian Richard Minear once pondered if “it is in the nature of any field that those within it are slow to question its basic principles” and suggested that the lines drawn “so sharply in black and white” by inherited Western scholarship on Japan may in truth be “less dependable guides to understanding than we confidently assumed they were” (1980, 517). The question of how and why these guidelines were first drawn is important for their redrawing in the future. Those Western scholars whose studies belong to an earlier, more overtly domineering phase of Western analysis seem to have declined to classify any Japanese religions as monotheisms for two interconnected reasons: firstly, because of genuine confusion as a result of insufficient classificatory tools; and, secondly, because of an Orientalizing dialectic predicated on Tylorian “evolutionary” models of religion which prophesied the ignorance of Japan to such an “advancement” as monotheism. Meanwhile, more recent Western scholarship has responded negatively to the application of “monotheism” partly because of the same lack of proper classificatory tools suffered by earlier scholars, but also due to an overreaction to the domineering portraits of Western past, a response which instinctively rebuffs not only “monotheism” but any so-called “Western” means of classification. Today the term “Orientalism” has largely come to refer to a scholarship which “uses Western categories, assumptions, and methodologies for portraying Eastern peoples and cultures, and in so doing both distorts the Eastern realities and subjugates them to Western agendas” (Netland and Yandell 2009, 80). Going further, in the eyes of some scholars of religion, it has not been merely the application of “Western” categories which has qualified as an Orientalizing interest, but the imposition of *any* categories on such a richly variegated subject as “Eastern religion.” Indeed, the scholarly drawing of “too sharp of lines in black and white” has certainly been observed in the treatment of monotheism in Japan’s NRMs (and also in its earlier traditions); however, it has also been the case that some scholars have refused to draw lines at all, implying that any classificatory system is a form of incipient colonialism (see Levinson 2013, 24).

What should our response be to this suggestion? Some voices will doubtless cry havoc at any effort to aim such words as “monotheism” in a Japanese direction, citing an agenda to protect the East from hegemonic interests. However, I recall Said’s irreverence for an allegedly inviolable “protocol of pretended suprapolitical objectivity” (Said 1979 [1978], 10) and I similarly suggest we should not hesitate to penetrate the veil of allegedly supraorientalizing objectivity which has sometimes been declared or assumed. This necessary disruption will be achieved by first pointing out that no methodology yet exists which indemnifies the scholar against her own *Sitz im Leben*, i.e. her position as both a human being and a member of a human society—two mutually dependent and inescapably impressionable organisms capable of only a relative discretion when it comes to interpreting the facts of the world, and two organisms which by necessity must funnel whatever facts they absorb into some system of classification, however substratal or complex. Not only do all scholars of religion categorize, and some perhaps unconsciously, their motivations for any act of classification will inevitably be informed to some degree by the human societies to which they are umbilically linked. This is a fundamental principle in the Saidian paradigm and, of course, a bare fact, but one which must be continually summoned in analysis of the study of religion. All of this is not to say that scholars of religion cannot draw much nearer to the truth than they have (again, I entertain a hopeful romance that the study of religion has more than heuristic value); rather, it is to point out that it is not only the fields of philosophy or theology whose suffering in subjectivity has *attachment* at its roots—a noble truth, indeed. This reality necessitates a persistently hyper-reflexive stance, especially for those operating from explicitly postcolonial vantage points—earnest and understandable positions which, despite their significant value, have a greater proclivity to devolve into a form of demonology in which all things perceptibly “Western” are enumerated and recommended for exorcism. However, as the Slavic proverb goes, it is often the still waters in which the demons dwell.

While a direct relationship between Orientalism *qua* Orientalism and raw political and institutional power has dwindled, Orientalism as a “style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between ‘the Orient’ and (most of the time) ‘the Occident’” (Said 1979 [1978]: 2, 30–40), is by no means a vanquished haunt condemned to the archives but continues to roam freely in the guise of postcolonial interests. Indeed, to challenge postcolonial approaches to Japanese religion armed with an insistence on the category of monotheism is at present likely to prove an unpopular approach. However, as Said rightly urged, “Above all, authority can, indeed must, be analyzed” (Said 1979 [1978], 20). Responding to forces citing a protectionist schema behind their denunciations of allegedly “eurocentric” or “Christian/theological” terms, I will point out not merely their potential failure to overcome inherited and Orientalizing impulses, but the already-accomplished failure to avoid supplementing the very totalizing exchanges between Japan and the West which they have sallied forth to refuse. Brett Levinson encapsulated Said’s project as one which demonstrates “how certain cultures and races have been Othered. Orientalism is not about the devaluation of the Other, as many seem to believe; it is about Othering as devaluation. Indeed non-Western sites are objected the moment they are Othered” (Levinson 2013, 20). Evidence of a persistent Othering, and thus for an internalized and still operative Orientalism, can certainly be found in the instinctive rejection of all “Western categories” in

descriptions of Japanese religion, a phrase which sometimes ends up being a cipher for categorization of any kind. The expected result of this momentum, at worst an enshrining of a *sui generis* Japan, constitutes an Othering of Japanese religion which enforces an Orientalizing distancing between “East” and “West.”

Another question can be raised in light of this thesis, namely as to whether or not purportedly anti-hegemonic complaints about the application of “eurocentric” terms like “monotheism” are in fact related to another countervailing program: an agenda to shield a new, twin-headed hegemon of anti-Western secularism and anti-Christian emotionalism from the brute facts of reality which threaten the romantic portrait of Japanese religion long promoted by those disillusioned with Euro-American ideals. As mentioned above, Galen Amstutz once observed that Western study of Pure Land Buddhism had become entangled with “layers of Western anti-Christian and Marxist preconception” perpetuated by “European iconoclasts and post-orientalists” who are “still enmeshed in rejection of Christianity,” and for whom an interest to locate Buddhism as “an overtly non-Christian phenomenon” has been dominant (1997, xii). Is the ongoing treatment of the subject of monotheism not also able to be viewed as “an example par excellence of the unempirical shaping of perceptions by a variety of special interests” (xii)? Regardless, some Western studies of Japanese religion have clearly concentrated so intensely on avoiding the sins of the past that they have (inadvertently) participated in the development of what I have called a “new myth of Japanese uniqueness,” and, ultimately, a “new Orientalism”—paradigms which generalize “Japanese religion” as flatly “polytheistic,” “not Western,” and, worse still, as unable to be classified. These maneuvers must now be itemized in the ledger of Western sins in need of restitution, a ledger which includes also the subsidization over many years of a similarly troubled model in Japanese scholarship which has contributed to defensive reactions in Japan like those of Ueda Kenji, who once so strongly declared that “Shintō crumbles when its polytheism is denied” (Ueda 1998, 111).

In analyzing scholarly and cultural presentations of Pure Land Buddhism, Porcu described a bi-directional Orientalist/Occidentalist process in which “prestige acquired at the external level can enable a specific power to gain consent internally and continue to exert its influence on civil society” (2008, 2–3). Precisely such a relationship is found to be still operative between Japanese and Western scholarship in their mutual reaction to “Western Orientalism,” motivated sometimes by an overt Japanese nationalism or an earnest postcolonialism which aims to prioritize Japanese self-definition. Here, both sides have gained the consent of the other to engage in an essentializing dialectic of interdependence which first paints “Japanese religion” and “Western religion” as intractably antithetical; and, secondly, paints the Japanese side of this dichotomy as explicitly “not monotheistic” or, even worse, as *sui generis*. This mutual, two-fold reductionism ultimately produces an abstracted and idealized “Japanese religion” which is, to borrow a phrase from Bernard Faure and Robert Sharf’s analysis of Zen and nationalism, one which is “free-floating” (Faure 1993, 65; Sharf 1994, 43–44). “Japanese religion,” in this detached form, is able to be deployed in order to authorize a range of socio-political agendas. Porcu recognized in the combination of decontextualized portraits of Zen and marginalized presentations of Pure Land Buddhism a sectarian agenda to market an exotic and spiritually superior Japanese culture to Europe and America (2008, 223–226). Similar observations can be made about the formation and deployment

of an explicitly non- or anti-monotheistic “Japanese religion.” As Porcu rightly concluded, “Presentations of Japanese religions and culture should better take into account their diversification instead of proclaiming an alleged ‘uniqueness’” (2008, 230–231). Indeed, in the end, to expect better categorization of religious beliefs in Japan, even to recognize specific traditions as “monotheistic,” is to advance neither a uniquely Western imperialism nor an unlawful domestication of the mysterious; rather, it is to move the study of Japanese religion beyond not only “taxonomical” and “historical” problems but also the arbitrary roadblocks of special interests in both Japan and the West.

Invoking Byron, what sort of prophecy does the past of Western scholarship on NRM monotheism offer about its future? So long as standard taxonomies of religious beliefs are left unchallenged, Western inquiries into Japanese religion will continue to perpetuate the paradigm of confusion on display in their history, and also their negative effects on the perception and reception of religions in Japan. A final implication of the present thesis should be mentioned here, namely its impact on the inherited image of an exclusively “polytheistic” Japanese religious consciousness, and also on a biased image of the concept of monotheism as a non-Japanese, necessarily intolerant, exclusivist, and even violent religious force. Scholars of Japanese religion, East and West, who continue to be committed to this restrictive and negative image of monotheism, when introduced to the above data regarding the monotheistic nature of some of Japan’s NRMs, will suddenly find themselves faced with a new challenge: either these Japanese NRMs will need to be viewed in the same overwhelmingly negative image in virtue of their monotheism, or the negative image of monotheism will need to be viewed as precisely that—an *image*. The end result of this revisitation of monotheism will be, I suggest, a Japanese religious world freed from behind a suffocating veil which has heretofore stifled its realization in some segments of Western scholarship and, perhaps additionally, its own self-realization in Japan. Stitched together over many years by a variety of voices from both East and West, I have argued that this veil had its first stitch sewn by an undeniably Western hand. Thus I have found it my obligation as a Western scholar to begin the unraveling of these threads, and it is my hope that the above analysis goes on to accomplish its mission to generate new interest in Japan’s NRMs among other Western scholars of monotheism.

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