We are now quite aware of how the embedding of the translation of “religion” as *shūkyō* in Japanese usage by the late 1870s marked a shift away from terms such as *buppō* (Buddhist law) or *butsudō* (Buddhist path) (which had included the characters *hō* (dharma) or *dō* (path) and which had been the predominant terms in the Edo period) and substituted a preference for the new term using the character *kyō* (teaching).¹ Michel Mohr has also pointed out how the modern understanding of the term *Zen shū*, meaning “Zen sect”—now referring to the sectarian institutional unification that constituted a conceptual subcategory of *shūkyō*—was a by-product of modernizing bureaucratic institutions.² The word Bukkyō, or Buddhism, was itself an invention of modern times, too, created to fit a certain system of belief into the newly conceptualized unitary concept of “religion.” That is, although the Japanese term Bukkyō effectively corresponded with “Buddhism” in the Euro-American sphere, the term was something recent, a conceptual innovation created out of European contact with Indian tradition—the result of overlapping layers of influence as ideas and beliefs were transferred across cultural and linguistic boundaries.³

Compared to earlier times, what differed about the modern times that began with the opening of Japan in 1853 was that instead of maintaining only restricted exchange with China, Korea, and the Netherlands, Japan was subsumed in the colonialist competition among the Western powers. In the context of such circumstances of contact with diverse cultures, Japan came to need such an all-encompassing concept of “religion” (*shūkyō*). Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, even Shintō and Confucianism were identified within that rubric as individual “religions,” each with their individual characteristics. In Japan, Christianity and Buddhism, which had teachings or doctrine (*kyō*) at their core, were the first to be strictly recognized as such. Shintō and Confucianism (the latter also referred to as Jugaku—the “study” or “scholarship”

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¹ On the process by which not only the concept of *shūkyō* (religion) but also that of *kyō* (teaching, doctrine) was involved in the development of *buppō* and *butsudō* into Bukkyō, see Tanigawa 2008.
of Confucius—did not completely correspond to the category of “religion” and were eventually placed outside of or on its margins in the separate category of dōtoku or “morality.” Indeed, even Buddhism was thought to be ill-fitted to the new category of “religion” and already from the late 1870s it was located somewhere between religion and philosophy. There were frequent discussions about defining a new category for Buddhism in order to establish Buddhism’s superiority vis-à-vis Christianity, a movement based on Spencerian ideas about the evolution of religion.4

The concept of religion or the newly defined shūkyō has its vagaries and blank areas; it is certainly not a concept or phenomenon that can be brought to a static position with final or fixed content.5 Any concept harbors within it the possibility of self-dislocation, but the concept of religion should not be confused with universal aspirations regarding the transcendentally indefinable (like “god”). The concept of religion ought rather—as in the case of the word Buddhism, which is also an example—avoid the preconception that was once held as to “correctness” at its core (that is, whatever scholars or followers were inclined to support). Instead, the concept should embrace a mode of understanding that could reflect a dynamic that would be distinguishable from contingent, short-lived definitions, and yet would be germinative, ceaselessly questioning itself.6

The word Bukkyō as used in Japan today has as its tacit premise the transformation from the premodern usages of buppō and butsudō over to the modern Western concept of “Buddhism.” Before the Meiji era, there was no unified concept of Bukkyō; the several Buddhist organizations of earlier times were identified separately in accordance with categories of shūmon (lineage membership) or shūshi (lineage or principles of a specific sect), which corresponded to the different sects or schools of Buddhist practice. Christianity, which was prohibited at the time, was called Yasokyō or Jakyō (the lineage of Jesus’s teaching); it, too, was part of the same categorization. In the Edo period, the various schools of Buddhist teaching were each independently linked to the temple registration system. The temple affiliation records (shūmon ninnetsuataramechō 宗門人別改帳) specified by family unit which school (shūha) was to conduct the funeral rights for its members. The categories of shūshi or shūmon corresponded to this specific religious organizational structure.

4 On how the concepts of Buddhism, philosophy (tetsugaku), and religion (shūkyō) were unstable, contradictory categories, see Cho 2002.
5 Vries 2008.