CHAPTER 5

State and Religion in Anesaki Masaharu

What was Japan’s modern era like when viewed through the lens of religion? Following the opening of the country in the middle of the nineteenth century, the country was incorporated into the capitalist and imperialist systems of the West. How did Japanese religious life respond? And how was Japan manipulated? This chapter examines the problems faced by modern Japan through the life and perspective of one of the prewar period’s leading intellectuals.

Anesaki Masaharu, as already noted, played a leading role in the establishment of religious studies in Japan through his position at the Imperial University of Tokyo and as the first head of the Japanese Association for Religious Studies. He also occupied a series of government-related official posts such as member of the House of Peers, member of the Investigative Committee for Religious Institutions (Shūkyō Seido Chōsakai), and member of the Advisory Committee for Education in Korea (Chōsen Kyōiku Shingikai). Anesaki’s career was studded with prominent positions not only in Japan but overseas: he was involved in activities to encourage international peace as a member of both the International Committee on Intellectual Co-operation and the Institute of Pacific Relations and he served as secretary of the Prince Shōtoku Worship Association and the Association Concordia (Kūitsu Kyōkai), contributing actively in religion- and morality-related movements mainly centered on the educated strata of society. Although Anesaki is largely forgotten today, the political nature of the positions he held meant that he had a great influence on Japan’s government and social trends.

Born in 1873, Anesaki experienced each of the major wars in which modern Japan became involved: the Sino-Japanese War broke out when he was twenty-one; the Russo-Japanese War started when he was thirty-one; World War I opened when he was forty-one; and the Japanese war in China that segued into World War II began when he was fifty-eight. He was often to be found abroad in turbulent times: studying in Germany after the Sino-Japanese War when the world feared the “yellow peril”; teaching at an American university at the time of the outbreak of World War I; and residing in England when Japan declared war on the Allies in World War II (he was returned to Japan on a repatriation ship). He was a rare figure able to coolly observe Japan’s situation from the perspective of Europe and the United States. At the same time, as the son of a family that had served a family of royal blood, he retained a pious reverence for the emperor throughout his life. In his early thirties he became a
passionate follower of Nichiren, and in his forties, a devotee of the worship of Prince Shōtoku (574–622).\(^1\)

How did this nationalistic dimension of Anesaki relate to that part of him devoted to international cooperation? Understanding that connection sheds light not just on Anesaki but on how Japanese society established its national identity under pressures from the Western world and formed relationships with the West and with Asian society. I hope it will also illustrate what connected the state and the individual within Japan's traditional society in the process of being integrated into international society.

As we have seen, Anesaki faced these circumstances through the gaze of religion—shūkyō in modern Japanese—and it was largely through the auspices of the academic discipline of religious studies as he introduced it to Japan that the sense of “religion” as Japanese understand it today—with its connotations of the nonrational realm connected to the interiority of individuals—became established. And then, in the ensuing years, along with his devotion to Nichiren and Prince Shōtoku, he relied on religion, which allowed for some national particularity, both in the project of establishing the nation-state of the as-yet-unfinished Japan and in the effort to overcome the confusion brought about by conflict between East and West as Japan forged toward a new civilization based on spiritual self-awareness.

We could dismiss Anesaki’s career as that of a fanatic religious follower or a nationalist. However, when we consider that Japanese are still unsure of how to deal with their rigid nationalistic consciousness as well as the various problems caused by religious organizations, we can see that the problems that plagued Anesaki throughout his career are by no means resolved even today. Rather, we can find relevance for our own lives by asking how one scholar of religion thought and acted amid the prescriptive structures thrust upon the country in the name of modernization, namely, by analyzing his words and deeds, both in terms of what they might have been and how they were constrained by the conditions of history.

---

1 Nichiren (1222–1282) was a priest of Japan's medieval age who seemed to Anesaki to be a prophet who saved the Japanese nation from invaders from abroad. Prince Shōtoku was a legendary figure, and at least for Anesaki a saint and politician with deep knowledge of Buddhism and Confucianism. For Anesaki both Nichiren and Prince Shōtoku were practitioners of a public religion committed to political activities.