In order to understand the subject of this study better, a brief review of its historical background may be helpful. With the modernization of Japan since the Meiji Period (1868–1912), new Western sciences and technology were introduced on a grand scale. With the heliocentric cosmology and Darwin’s Evolution theory, for example, these kinds of natural sciences challenged the traditional worldviews and practices of Japanese religions. As in Europe and elsewhere, modern sciences caused a split, or contradiction, between traditional faith and knowledge in Japan. Hence, after having learned this kind of thinking from their Western teachers, Japanese natural scientists began to emphasize the incompatibility of science and religion, as well as to criticize religion in the name of rational sciences. (Cf. Stalker 2008: 10 f). Moreover, an important part of the Meiji government policy was to eradicate “superstition” in religious practices in order to transform Japan into a modern nation. (Ketelaar 1990: 51) Following this academic and political criticism of religion, the notion of the incompatibility of science and religion was introduced into the curricula of Japanese schools, and thus helped to form the thinking of Japanese people until today. However, since the Meiji Period, a number of individuals and groups became concerned with the problem of the incompatibility of science and religion, and attempted to respond to this challenge in different ways.

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1 Japanese words in this article are not romanized with macrons on vowels for technical reasons. Japanese names are written according to the Asian order (first family name, then personal name) except of quotations from English publications. If not indicated otherwise, Japanese texts are translated by the author.

2 Between ca. 1630 and 1880, European sciences had been introduced via the Dutch trade, but this reception was controlled by the government. Access to “Dutch learning” (rangaku) was limited only to few selected scholars and did not play a significant role in public discourse. For the development of sciences and related foreign influences in pre-modern Japan, see Sugimoto and Swain 1989 and Nakayama 1983.
First, Buddhist scholars began to deal with the dichotomization of knowledge and faith as early as the Meiji period. This kind of response consisted mostly in theoretical attempts to explain that the respective religious teachings, such as traditional Buddhist cosmology, conformed perfectly with modern sciences. This kind of Buddhist discourse continued in one way or another until the present day.3

Following the Meiji Period, a second type of response emerged when some intellectuals tried to harmonize the rational and irrational by investigating occult phenomena via scientific means. For example, a group of intellectuals around Motora Yujiro, the first professor of psychology at Tokyo Imperial University, experimented with telepathy, telekinesis, channeling, etc. in order to understand such phenomena in a rational way.4 These and other intellectuals5 began an alternative tradition in Japan to deal experimentally with the problem of science and religion, especially spiritualism. This practical approach is located somewhere on the borderline between the two, whereby the tendency towards the occult side of religion frequently prevails.6 Scientists would call such an approach “pseudo-scientific.”7

This evaluation may also be applied to a third type of response which was developed by some Japanese new religions since the middle of the 20th century, especially by those belonging to the Mahikari group.8 They tried to harmonize religion and science through experiments and attempts at scientific explanations, for example, of healing (jorei, purification of the spirit) through “divine light” energy (mahikari).

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3 See, for example, Nishitani (1982: 46 ff) and Takeda 2005.
4 Nozaki 2009: 168. These practices were popular in 19th century England and America, and had been introduced to Japan also in the Meiji Period.
6 Today, such an approach can be observed in Japan, for example, in popular TV programs dealing with the spirits of dead people by employing special cameras.
7 For this reason, a student of Motora lost his job at Tokyo Imperial University. (Nozaki 2009: 168)
8 These are Sekai Kyusei-kyo (World Messianity, also called MOA), Sekai Mahikari Bummei Kyodan, and Sukyo Mahikari. The founder of Sekai Kyusei-kyo, Okada Mokichi, stated: “Johrei is the most advanced scientific method to date: it is no exaggeration to say that it will become the basis for medicine in the twenty-first century.” (Sekai Kyusei Kyo International Headquarters, no date; cf. Okada 1984: 105–111) For Sukyo Mahikari, see for example Tebecis (1982), who is the head of the Australian branch, and has a Ph.D. in neurophysiology. He writes in his book about the “ideal union of religion and science” and the search “from human science to divine science.” (Tebecis 1982: 1 ff and 287 ff) See also the “Foreword” by the biochemist Z. Yoshizawa.