Critical studies of secularization in modern Japan have usually focused on the specific mode in which Japanese political elites in the last quarter of the nineteenth century used Western models of state-church relationship to form a uniquely Japanese variant of such a relationship. After a period of trial and error, this unique relationship was found in State Shintō. Frequently misunderstood as a state religion,¹ State Shintō was rather a specific strategy to resolve a particular legal problem. This problem was that all the while the constitution had guaranteed freedom of belief ever since 1890,² the state at the same time forced its subjects to participate in certain rituals. These rituals, which were implemented by the state in schools (first only in the public sector, later also in private schools) with increasing pressure since the 1890s, included the worship of the (photographic) portraits of the emperor and his consort, of the Imperial Rescript on Education (promulgated in 1890), and visits to Shintō Shrines. The solution to this legal conundrum between freedom of belief and de facto forced participation in rituals was to define the national cult, later called State Shintō, as a religious, i.e. not even touching upon (constitutional) issues of faith.

The conventional critique of State Shintō holds that secularization before 1945 was incomplete (rather, State Shintō is held to represent

¹ Compare the definition in Betz, Religion: “State religion means the religious unity of the subjects (‘un roi, une loi, une foi’) regarded as indispensable for the state, in case of need to be implemented by force. It is the self-evident foundation of almost all older state formations. […] State religion is regularly realized in the form of a state church.” The goal of State Shintō, however, was neither to create religious unity among the populace by excluding other creeds, nor to establish a main religion against which the others would only have minority status. In contrast, private belief was free in pre-1945 Japan, as long as its practice did not run counter to the state cult.

² Article 28 of The Constitution of the Empire of Japan, which was promulgated in February 1889, reads: “Japanese subjects shall, within limits not prejudicial to peace and order, and not antagonistic to their duties as subjects, enjoy freedom of religious belief.”
something like a re-sacralization of the public sphere) and really only fully achieved after the end of the Second World War. Against this somewhat simple view, the post-secularist argument, which has recently been articulated, claims that the modern Japanese state, by emulating Western models, adopted a secularist posture in claiming religious neutrality for itself. In this way, the conventional critique of State Shintō as somehow deviating from rational modes of state-church relationships developed in the modern West can be overcome and instead Western secularist models subjected to criticism as well.

In this paper, however, I want to focus less on actual policies than on the conceptual matrix of a non-European society and, by stressing the historical semantics of secularization, to analyze secularization as a concept we use to structure historical and actual experience, rather than as an objectified and quantifiable phenomenon. The way I intend to do this is by highlighting a specific twentieth century application of the trope of secularization to Japanese history and by attempting to establish a genealogy of discovering secularization abroad and at home in modern Japan.

In doing so, I will stress a different layer of the secularization paradigm than studies concentrating on the actual relationship of state and religion(s). Those studies mostly refer to what José Casanova has termed the differentiation thesis, or, in Charles Taylor’s scheme, secularity in sense one, i.e. the shift from the premodern connection of political organization to some notion of ultimate reality towards the modern state, which is free from this connection. In contrast, I will look at secularization in the sense of the ‘decline-of-religion thesis’ as formulated by Casanova.

An early Japanese verbalization of a secularization narrative in this sense can be found in an article series on the history of two thinkers of the Tokugawa period (1600–1868) penned in 1928 by one of the pioneers of the history of thought and religion in Japan, Muraoka Tsunetsugu (村岡典嗣 1884–1946). Muraoka wrote that:

Two principal characteristics of Tokugawa culture distinguish it from medieval culture. First, Tokugawa culture was liberated from the special possessors of culture, the priests and nobles; and at the same time it was freed of

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3 This kind of argument has been espoused by leading social scientists both in and outside Japan for most of the postwar period. See e.g. Tominaga Ken’ichi, Die Modernisierung Japans, 6ff, or Eisenstadt, “Japan,” 88.

4 For an exemplary version of this kind of argument, see the contribution by Isomae Jun’ichi to this volume.

5 Taylor, A Secular Age, 1–3.