CHAPTER 2

Gods, Dragons, Catfish, and Godzilla

*Fragments for a History of Religious Views on Natural Disasters in Japan*

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The triple disaster that affected large areas in northeastern Japan on 11 March 2011, has provoked, among other things, discussions on the role of religion, including its capacity to explain natural disasters. One of the topics that have been widely discussed is whether this disaster could be considered a form of ‘divine punishment’ for the directions taken by Japan, its government and its people, after modernization and especially in the post-war period. Former governor of Tokyo Ishikawa Shintarō was the first to open up discussion with a controversial statement. Professor Emeritus of Tokyo University Sueki Fumihiko has argued for the need of a ‘re-enchantment’ of the world, which would bring about a general reconfiguration of the ways in which human beings, and the Japanese in particular, envision and interact with nature. This chapter begins by looking at the arguments by Ishikawa and Sueki and continues with an exploration of premodern religious interpretations of natural disasters, especially earthquakes. We shall see that several competing discourses on the subject coexisted in Japan over many centuries, including Confucian perspectives, Buddhist doctrines, local legends, and more or less secular, scientific attitudes. Thus, the theme of divine punishment also was far from homogenous and uncontested; as we shall see, in some cases, it was invoked by authorities to emphasize their legitimacy and rule, but in other cases it was deployed by commoners to criticize the contemporary social order. The chapter concludes with some considerations on the possibility of re-enchantment—or, rather, on the inescapable tendency towards increased desacralization as a paradoxical but powerful way to envision the sacred today.

The Tōhoku Disaster as Heavenly Punishment

On 14 March 2011, three days after the earthquake and tsunami, the Governor of Tokyo, Ishihara Shintarō, said at a press conference: ‘It is necessary to wash away at once, by using the tsunami well, our selfishness—I mean, the dirt
accumulated over many years in the heart of the Japanese. I believe that this was a heavenly punishment. I feel really sorry for the victims'. The reaction from the media and concerned citizens was immediate, and the next day, on 15 March, Ishihara issued a half-hearted apology and retracted his previous comment. At the time, Ishihara did not elaborate on the concept of ‘heavenly punishment’ (tenbatsu) nor on its alleged cause, selfishness (gayoku). A few months later, however, he published a book in which he described his own criticism of contemporary Japan based on his own definition of selfishness. In the book, Ishihara argues that post-war Japan has become subservient to the US and pursued a facile and passive politics of peace (fuji no heiwa) which has privileged the improvement of material conditions of life and has made the Japanese more concerned with their own personal well-being and less resilient and combative.1 Ishihara, by employing the idea of tenbatsu, seems to imply that Japan is an organic entity, and whatever faults it has, they are collective; according to this logic, heavenly punishment hits one part of Japan as an example for all. Of course, the notion of collective responsibility, implicit in this organicistic vision of the state, is essentially premodern and certainly undemocratic. One could argue further that the area most directly hit by the earthquake and tsunami, compounded by the nuclear accident, can hardly be singled out in Japan for its ‘selfishness’ and disrespect for traditional values: a fairly traditional and conservative region of small companies, emigration, and hard-working people, is hardly the ‘right’ place for ‘Heaven’ to mete out its punishment and avenge its divine anger...

In any case, this was the first time that the concept of ‘heavenly punishment’ (tenbatsu) was brought in the public discourse by an influential figure in recent memory. It did not end there. Soon after Ishihara’s controversial statement, Sueki Fumihiko, professor emeritus of Tokyo University, a well-known and respected scholar of Japanese Buddhism, published an article in which he argued that the notion of heavenly punishment cannot be easily dismissed as irrelevant to the 3/11 triple disaster. Sueki’s article generated broad and heated discussions in the intellectual and religious worlds of Japan. Sueki made his controversial article available online in his blog and opened up a discussion with his readers; he further developed his argument and subsequently included the most important postings in a book.2 Sueki stressed that it was not the fault of the people living in the affected areas. Rather, Japan as a whole and even the entire world have taken a wrong direction, by privileging economic growth and scientific and technological development. This has resulted in environmental