The Irony of Secularist Nation-Building in Japanese Modernity:
Inoue Kowashi and Fukuzawa Yukichi

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INTRODUCTION

Japan seems to face the issue of “religion and politics” again, as movements towards religious nationalism under the Abe government attract attention (Japan Times 2014). These movements allegedly aim at “return to prewar Japan” (Shimazono 2014; Yamazaki 2015; Sugano 2016). Underlying such observation is an assumption that such return to prewar Japan is nothing but a return to religious nationalism, which culminated in the fanatic militarism of wartime Japan. This assumption is based on a conventional view of Japanese political modernity. According to this view, political leaders of the Meiji era endeavored to build a modern state, that is, the Meiji regime, in which a state religion called State Shinto played a significant role. For example, Mark Juergensmeyer (1993: 199) categorizes Japan as a case of “religious nationalism”—a type of nationalism in which “religion has a role to play in defining a nation and in stating its basic values.” Such religious view of Japanese nationalism, often coupled with the implication of a deviant case from the normal course of modernization, has been widely shared among scholars of Japan studies.¹

Yet, important questions about the nature of the Meiji regime arise. Did political and intellectual leaders of Meiji Japan intend to establish a modern state based on religious nationalism? How could most oligarchs of the Meiji government, often characterized as Machiavellian, be theocrats? Were intellectuals of the early years of the Meiji period not engaged in the task of enlightening and hence modernizing Japanese society to hastily catch up Western
countries, in which theocracy was already deemed politically bankrupt? Is fanatic ultranationalism from the 1930s to the mid 1940s identical with, or at least a natural consequence of, the religious type of nationalism allegedly underlying the Meiji regime? Is the religiously focused view of Japanese nationalism not an anachronistic projection from the experience of the religiously-tinged fanaticism of the 1930s and 1940s onto the Meiji era?

My paper attempts to critically examine the conventional view of modern Japan as based on religious nationalism. To this end, I will focus on the political thoughts of two key figures in the Meiji era, who present a vantage point for our interest. They are Inoue Kowashi (1844-1895) and Fukuzawa Yukichi (1835-1901). I focus on these figures for three reasons. First, both of them exerted influence on the formation of the Meiji regime. Inoue is an intellectual statesman contributing to shaping the Meiji constitution; Fukuzawa is the most influential enlightenment thinker in modern Japan. Second, each of them is self-consciously engaged with the task of nation-building. Third and most importantly, Inoue and Fukuzawa have a basic position on the issue of nationalism in common. To be sure, they are diametrically opposed to each other on important political issues and orientation. Concerning a desirable constitutional framework, Fukuzawa stood for the British model in which “the king reigns but does not govern,” whereas Inoue opted for the Prussian type that gives the emperor more prerogatives; Inoue is a statist conservative bureaucrat, whereas Fukuzawa is an ant-statist pluralist thinker (cf. Ito 1999). Yet, what concerns us here is not their difference but commonality, which helps us understand the nature of nationalism pursued in the formative period of prewar Japan.

The purpose of this paper is to show the commonality between Inoue and Fukuzawa in two respects. First, they share aspiration for a secular type of nationalism. This suggests that Japanese nationalism in its formative stage was secular in nature, contrary to what the aforementioned
conventional view claims. Second, I will argue that their secular nationalism is not robust enough to prevent religious nationalism from permeating, and particularly in the 1930s and 40s dominating, the Meiji regime. They are responsible for making some room for ultranationalistic and religious fanaticism, mainly due to their twofold secularist strategy of nationalism, that is, a secularist politics of interpretation and that of overlapping consensus. Putting the two commonalities together, an irony comes to light: Inoue and Fukuzawa, though being devout proponents of secular nationalism, enabled religious nationalism to make its way into the Meiji regime. It is a consequence of their secularist triumphalistic and instrumental attitude towards religion, which blinds them to a possibility that their strategy may plant the seeds of religious nationalism and even fanaticism. Their secularist optimism succumbed to a paradoxical, dialectical nature inherent in the relationship between religion and politics.

At this juncture, a definitional note is in place. In this paper, I will deploy the concept of religious nationalism to denote the type of nationalism in which religion is the most constitutive identity marker. By secular nationalism I understand such type of nationalism in which the most constitutive identity marker is non-religious in nature. To differentiate secular nationalism, I would like to introduce a further distinction between a strictly secularist type and a moderately secularist type. The strictly secularist type of nationalism, being essentially anti-religious, admits no role of religion for a nation-building project; the moderately secularist type is open to a strategic use of religion so that religion plays an auxiliary and subordinated role. In my view, nationalism embraced by Inoue and Fukuzawa is moderately secularist in, when deemed expedient, utilizing religion for political purposes.

In order to establish my arguments mentioned above, this paper is structured as follows. In the first section, I will present religiously-based views of Japanese political modernity to set the
stage for my considerations on Inoue and Fukuzawa. In the second section, I will highlight some common grounds between Inoue and Fukuzawa, thereby showing that their political thoughts basically revolve around secular nationalism. In the third section, I will consider the nature of the irony their secularist nationalist project is finally led to, by showing how it plants within itself the seeds that develop into religious nationalism and irrational fanaticism culminating in wartime Japan. Finally, I will conclude with implications deriving from my considerations.

I. DID THE MEIJI REGIME STRIVE FOR RELIGIOUS NATIONALISM?

The Meiji Restoration in 1868 proclaimed a return to the original form of the Japanese polity, which allegedly started with the first emperor of Jimmu, a descendent of Shinto gods. The return to the beginning means a return to saisei icchi (祭政一致), the unity of politics and rituals. This is because the original form of polity was thought to be based on it. As a result, a theocratic form of politics was energetically pursued in the first years of the Meiji era. In the course of time, however, the Meiji government faced practical difficulties with implementing the theocratic ideal and had to tackle the task of building a constitutional monarchy, to which any theocracy ran counter in the eyes of political leaders, thereby giving up the theocratic project altogether.

The nature of the problem that Japanese leaders had to tackle was clearly stated by Ito Hirobumi, one of the key persons involved in constitution-making, in June 1888 at the first session of the Privy Council (Sumitsuin), the highest body that deliberates over the draft constitution mostly penned by Ito and Inoue.

What is the cornerstone (機軸) of our country? This is the problem we have to solve. If there is no cornerstone, politics will fall into the hands of the uncontrollable masses; and then the government will become powerless (...) In Europe (...) there is religion that
constitutes a cornerstone and has permeated and hence united the hearts of people. In Japan, however, religion does not play such an important role and cannot become the foundation of constitutional government. Though Buddhism once flourished and was the bond of union between all classes, high and low, today its influence has declined. Though Shintoism is based on the traditions of our ancestors, as a religion it is not powerful enough to become the center of the country. Thus, in our country the one institution which can become the cornerstone of our constitution is the Imperial house. (Pye 1989: 700)

As is well known, Ito’s solution to the problem of establishing the core of political cohesion is to place at this core the emperor as a sacralized monarch, who would rule on the basis of the unbroken imperial line down from the mythic origin of the Japanese polity to present. How can we interpret this well-known fact? At this point, a religiously-based view steps in. For instance, Ian Burma and Avishai Margalit in their book Occidentalism claim as follows:

The modern emperor cult was based partly on a misunderstanding of religion in the West. Trying to analyze the source of European power, nineteenth-century Japanese scholars concluded that Christianity, as a state religion, was the glue that held European nations together as disciplined communities (…) The most common view was that Japan needed its own state religion, and this was to be State Shinto, a politicized version of ancient rites, mostly to do with nature and fertility. (Burma and Margalit 2005: 63)

According to Burma and Margalit, the Meiji leaders are misguided by their own misunderstanding of Western countries to institutionalize Shinto as a state religion—an interpretation in line with Juergensmeyer’s view mentioned above. Similar views are expressed by many scholars. All of these views suggest that the nature of nationalism as pursued by the Meiji regime is religious or, more vaguely, pseudo-religious.

Though being widely shared, these religiously-based views face a serious question. How
does the view of Shinto as a state religion underlying the Meiji regime cohere with the Meiji government’s official stance on Shinto as non-religion, which became dominant after the unsuccessful experiment of theocracy? One may reply that the Meiji government unwittingly established a state religion, while sincerely believing in the non-religious nature of Shinto rituals underlying the emperor cult. Yet, this interpretation is problematic in tacitly adopting a functional concept of religion as a standard foreign to what Meiji elites think. In my view, such approach can be effectively deployed only after difficult questions about the nature of religion and objective criteria of it are settled in a non-arbitrary manner. This paper, therefore, focuses on the self-understanding of the Meiji elites concerning the religion/non-religion distinction, instead of deploying a functional approach.

There would be another reply to my critical question. It claims that the Meiji government, albeit knowing that it was religion, officially declared Shinto a non-religion, thereby keeping a façade of a secular modern state and hence deceiving the nation and foreign countries. Yet, this reply begs a crucial question concerning whether political as well as intellectual leaders of the Meiji era self-consciously attempted to establish a state religion and hence to strive for religious nationalism. In the following section, by showing that the thoughts of Inoue and Fukuzawa revolve around not religious but secular nationalism, I will attempt to refute this argument or, at least, to show that it is not the whole story.

II. INOUE AND FUKUZAWA FOR SECULARIST NATIONALISM

There is a tendency in the literature to pay more attention to differences than to commonalities between Inoue and Fukuzawa, as I suggested at the outset. On the contrary, I will shed light on an important commonality beyond all of their differences. It is their aspiration for secularist
nationalism. To show this, in this section I will highlight their views with respect to atheism, religious governance, Shinto, and the emperor.\(^6\)

(1) Atheism

Inoue and Fukuzawa are avowedly atheist thinkers.\(^7\) Inoue (1969a [1872]: 499) claims that only a non-theistic philosophy can claim to be a true moral teaching, saying that “if in a remote future after thousands years a morally and intellectually perfect human being establishes a teaching based on nature, this must be non-theistic.” This is, he believes, why Confucian moral teaching is superior to religiously oriented teachings. He is thus dismissive of any irrational, supernatural beliefs, and even those parts of Confucian canons that deal with augur and supernatural beings—the texts which Inoue claims do not belong to properly Confucian teaching (Inoue 1969b [1905]: 685). In his view, religions are the products of human nature, which, facing defects and evils of this world, is led to imagine that there exist elsewhere perfectly good human beings and a perfectly good society (ibid., 650).

Fukuzawa is another atheist thinker on a par with Inoue. In his major work on civilization, Fukuzawa (2008 [1875]: 48) attacks credulity or blind belief (wakudeki) as the main obstacle to civilizing process, which consists in “the progress of man’s knowledge and virtue.” Seen from this perspective, religious belief is thus a form of credulity that a civilized person would not embrace. In his Autobiography, he tells his boyhood experience of dismantling credulity. One day, he opened a small shrine and discovered that it was a little stone that was worshipped as a “holy body”; throwing it away and replacing it with another stone, he was amused to observe that people continued to worship the stone, without later incurring any misfortunes on him (Fukuzawa 1959 [1899]: 18-19).\(^8\)
At this juncture, one may wonder why religions continue to exist despite their backwardness. In reply, Inoue and Fukuzawa agree on a view that religion exists for “the ignorant masses”—the view that reveals a typical samurai’s prejudice towards religion as common people’s opium. Inoue (1969 [1864]: 4-5) regards the absurdity of religious beliefs as the main reason why religion gains people’s hearts. The more absurd and the more deceptive religious teaching is, the easier people are seduced; they prefer sermons by Buddhist monks to a lecture on Confucian’s Analects. In this way, Inoue links religion with class distinction: non-religion for elites and religion for the masses.

A similar distinction is observable in Fukuzawa. According to him, whereas men and women of upper classes can endeavor to grasp what is good and wrong by themselves, people of lower classes, being little more than “benighted men and women,” need moral guidance by religion (Fukuzawa 1981 [1897]: 42); there accordingly continues to be the need for religion, as long as there exist such people lacking in moral and intellectual independence (Fukuzawa 1963 [ca. 1881]: 232). Fukuzawa recognizes only an instrumental value of religion as moral guidance for “the ignorant masses.” In Fukuzawa’s view (1981 [1897]: 42-45), many mysterious stories in religious teachings are “the powerful means” to teach common people morality. All of this suggests that, at least with respect to common people, he gives up or loosens the imperative of civilization to emancipate people from credulity.

(2) Religious Governance

Inoue as well as Fukuzawa objects to political regimes based on a close link between religion and politics, such as theocracy and church establishment. Inoue (1977 [1883]: 163) vehemently opposes theocracy (神教政治) and the establishment of church and state religion (国教主義). In his view, theocratic regimes have disappeared in civilized countries, whereas the established church
continues only in Britain and Russia, both of which present “the extreme point of conservatism” (守旧癖之極点)—a model that deserves no emulation (Inoue 1966 [1884]: 389). Fukuzawa is similarly averse to theocracy. For him, any government based on divine revelation is nothing but “a temporary device employed in the dark age of the ancient past,” which has lost its value as human intelligence has developed (Fukuzawa 2008 [1875]: 40). Put differently, theocracy is a clear manifestation of credulity, in which people obey political authority “in awe of its external forms” (ibid., 39); it thus presents “the height of credulity” to “lead men further down the path of stupidity” and to “make the people ignorant” in order to establish political authority (ibid., 40). Therefore, he is opposed to Shinto scholars who require the unity of politics and religion to be embodied in the emperor (ibid, 29).

How, then, should politics deal with religion? Inoue basically regards religion as a potential source of danger and conflict. In his view (1969a [1872]: 499), “a common disease of religions” is that they easily permeate people and require absolute allegiance, hereby leading through religious conflicts to bloodshed. Therefore, Inoue (1966 [1884]: 389) claims that religion or, more precisely, religious governance must “the primary issue of politics.” A primary principle for religious governance is separation between religion and politics; it is necessary to keep these two things separate (Inoue 1977 [1883]: 162). Yet, this means neither a complete religious freedom nor government’s hands-off policy on religion. Inoue thinks it necessary to exert some control on religions for the sake of public security. Inoue (1966 [1884]: 390-391) thus argues for a tolerance-based public authorization system, which, while allowing everyone to have a religious belief as a inner conviction, subjects religious organizations to public scrutiny and regulation, giving only qualified groups the public status of religion to enjoy some legal privileges, such as tax exemption.
Contrary to Inoue who is an elite bureaucrat deeply involved in religious policies among others, Fukuzawa does not develop his own ideas on this matter. Nevertheless, in line with Inoue, Fukuzawa considers religion as a potential source of social conflict. Claiming that religious enthusiasm often leads through harsh conflict to consequences that are detrimental not only to believers but also to third parties and hence the society at large, Fukuzawa (1970 [1884]: 15-16) requires that “religious fervor should be kept cool under the boiling point.” For Fukuzawa as well as Inoue, religions thus must stay within their own sphere while serving for social and political purposes. They see no room for radically politicized religion, which is nothing but irrational fanaticism for them.

(3) Shinto

Where the common view regards Shinto as the main religious pillar of Japanese nationalism, Inoue and Fukuzawa share a non-religious view of Shinto. According to Inoue (1975 [1888]: 383), a religious view of Shinto is a wrong view that was propagated by recent Kokugaku or National Learning scholars and notably Hirata Atsutane and later accepted by Western scholars, who then coined the word “Shintoism”—denoting a religion ⁹ Fukuzawa (1960 [1881]: 80) welcomes government’s decisions that distance from theocracy towards the non-religious view of Shinto. In his view, Shinto is non-religion, since it is characterized not so much by otherworldliness, which he thinks is the hallmark of religion, as by thisworldliness (Fukuzawa 1962 [1883]: 710).

One may wonder what Shinto is all about, if it is not religion. In Inoue’s view (1968 [1903]: 604), the essence of Shinto consists in National or Nativists Learning (国学), a body of knowledge concerning “state rituals” and “general education.” He stresses the importance of National Learning as general education, saying that the canons of National Learning serve as the basis for the study of
national history and language, both of which nurture “a national character.” Inoue (1975 [1888]: 384) elsewhere calls such general education “national education” that cultivates “people’s patriotic feeling.” Simply speaking, by dereligionizing Shinto into a set of national classics and history, Inoue attempts to make it serviceable to the secularist project of nation-building.

In a similar way, Fukuzawa dereligionizes Shinto to make it a means for secularist nationalism. For him, Shinto priests are in reality “a kind of historians” about Japanese ancient history. This history centers around the unbroken line of emperors that presents “a unique polity unlike any other in the world” (Fukuzawa 1961 [1886]: 433), thus delivering a moral teaching that “attaches great importance to the country” (Fukuzawa 1960 [1881]: 81). In his view, learning national history is important, because it nurtures “nostalgia for the past” (ibid.)—the very affection that Fukuzawa includes among decisive factors in forming nationality in his *An Outline of a Theory of Civilization*. Although his expression of “a unique polity unlike any other in the world” sounds like a typical view of National Learning scholars, Fukuzawa decisively differs from them in recommending that “absurd tales of the age of Gods” be skipped in history teaching (ibid., 82). In this way, Fukuzawa pursues, like Inoue, the nation-building project on a non-religious secular ground.

**(4) The Emperor**

Looking into the views of Inoue and Fukuzawa on the emperor, it becomes clear that their secularist project of nationalism is their guiding principle. The first article of the Meiji constitution, which declares that Japan is governed by “a line of Emperors unbroken for ages eternal,” presents a serious problem from a secularist perspective. If, as Shinto scholars insist, the allegedly unbroken line of emperors traces back to mythic deities, the view of Shinto as non-religion is undermined.
Inoue is fully conscious of this difficulty and shows his solution. A case in point is the explanation concerning the first article in the official commentary on the Meiji constitution, which was penned by Inoue himself, though published in the name of Ito Hirobumi. Though implicitly referring to the goddess Amaterasu, it seeks to base the legitimacy of imperial rule on its public-orientedness, inherited from the first emperor Jimmu onward (Ito 1906: 4; cf. Inoue 1969b [1905]: 644).

Inoue takes recourse to a similar interpretation concerning the phrase “imperial ancestor” (皇祖) placed at the beginning of the Imperial Rescript on Education of 1890, which is the emperor’s instruction on basic morality, such as filial piety and loyalty towards the emperor. Facing a question concerning what is meant by the phrase “imperial ancestor” as the founder of morality, Inoue (1969b [1905]: 691-692), who drafted the instruction, explains that the phrase in question denotes an emperor—either Jimmu or Sujin—but not the goddess Amaterasu, who is “heaven’s ancestor” distinct from “imperial ancestor.” This account is clearly aimed at bringing home the non-religious nature of the Rescript. In this way, Inoue cautiously avoids religionizing and hence theocratizing the emperor, whereas sacralizing him as the highest political authority (see Yamamuro 1985).

Unlike Inoue, Fukuzawa does not explicitly develop arguments on the mythic origin of the Meiji constitution and the Rescript on Education. Yet, he sometimes shows his view of the emperor, which draws on more pragmatic and more openly expediency-focused considerations than Inoue’s view. In his essay On the Imperial House, Fukuzawa (1981 [1882]: 67) suggests that the imperial house assume multiple roles to unify the people’s hearts in order to fend off possible disintegrating conflicts of future parliamentary politics. For example, the emperor is expected to maintain moral sentiments of the people by giving charities and honors and to promote arts and sciences. In Fukuo hyakuwa, Fukuzawa (1981 [1897]: 217) presents a far more radical view on monarchy, claiming
that a civilized country having a monarch is a sign of the low-level intellect of people as a whole. Constitutional monarchy, which normally takes recourse to majestic appearance, is “a temporary expedient means” or “the last resort” to gain the hearts of “the ignorant masses” and thereby to control them (ibid., 222-23). Fukuzawa goes so far as to say that any sensible intellectual person should hold the view that faith in a constitutional monarch needs to be strengthened, “as if one were eager at religious as well as secular worship” (ibid., 223). In a sequel to Fukuo hyakuwa, he claims that people should worship and respect the emperor, “as if he were a god, as if he were their father and mother” (1981 [1901]: 196).

Having said this, however, Fukuzawa suggests neither that a religious basis of polity is expedient and hence necessary, nor that the worship of the emperor should be religious. Rather his point is that the emperor system is an expedient means to unite people and particularly “the ignorant masses” by appealing to their natural and semi-religious emotions of awe and respect towards time-honored things. This point is understandable if we see that considerations on political expediency logically cannot be our religious reasons for worship of something—an insight Fukuzawa is probably fully aware of. For him, it is not intellectual persons but “the ignorant masses” that may worship the emperor with emotions comparable to religious ones.

In this section, we have considered the views that Inoue and Fukuzawa hold on atheism, religious governance, Shinto, and the emperor. All of them suggest that their project of nationalism is primarily secularist in nature. On the one hand, their secularist nationalism recognizes the need of sacralizing the emperor, which is supported fully by Inoue and somewhat sarcastically by Fukuzawa. On the other hand, it rejects any religious or theocratic foundation of the Meiji regime, which they believe should be based on secularist nationalism. Given the above considerations, the conventional view that the nature of nationalism underlying the Meiji regime is religious is called
into question. Furthermore, Inoue and Fukuzawa do not seek to mold the Meiji regime on the premise that European nation-states are based on Christianity as a state religion. For them, the basis of legitimacy for the Meiji regime, though intertwined with the dubious mythic, divine origin of the Japanese polity, should be as much secular as modern nation-states in general should be. Thus, our considerations on Inoue and Fukuzawa suggest that the conventional view does not hold true of them. One cannot belittle their aspiration of secularist nationalism by regarding it as a minority or exception. In my view, the fact that the two influential persons in the formation of the Meiji regime embrace secularist nationalism suffices to provide good reasons to rethink and examine the conventional view of Japanese modernity as based on religious nationalism.

III. THE IRONY AND LIMITS OF SECULAR NATIONALISM

In the previous section, we considered that Inoue and Fukuzawa embrace secularist nationalism. Looking back on the fate of the Meiji regime and particularly ultranationalism based on religious nationalism from the 1930s to the mid-1940s, however, the conventional, religiously-based view of Japanese nationalism seems to be a true picture. Claiming that Japan is an “immortal divine land” and that the emperor is a deity in human form, ultranationalism regarded as the only and highest duty of Japanese subjects the act of self-sacrifice for the emperor, as later exemplified by kamikaze suicide attacks. Viewed in this way, it is appropriate to judge the secularist project of nationalism pursued by Inoue and Fukuzawa to have failed. Moreover, it seems to be an irony that the Meiji regime designed and led by the hands of secularist nationalist transformed into an irrational type of religious nationalism. No matter how tragic and ironical this transformation appears in the eyes of Inoue and Fukuzawa, however, I would like to suggest that in their secularist project of nation-building there are two problematic points that make the project inherently unstable and
allow religious nationalism to coexist with, and later overwhelm, their secularist nationalism: a politics of interpretation and a politics of “overlapping consensus.”

(1) Politics of Interpretation

In claiming that Shinto is non-religion and that the nature of the Meiji regime is not theocratic, Inoue and Fukuzawa are deeply involved in a politics of interpretation—an act to decide on a right interpretation in the face of alternative interpretations to bring about a desirable situation. In this context, questions of a Hobbesian and Schmittian kind arise. Who judges? Who decides on a right interpretation among others? As Talal Asad (1999: 192) puts it, we need to ask a question, “How, when, and by whom are the categories of religion and the secular defined?” Inoue and Fukuzawa think that it is elites in a political or intellectual sense who are entitled to judge. They then face another, more difficult question. How effective is the decision? Does interpretation as such command broad acceptance? Can Inoue and Fukuzawa decide on what is religion and what is non-religion in a way that guides what people think about religion and non-religion?

If their answer is affirmative, then what Marx critically says on German thinkers in his *German Ideology* applies here, *mutatis mutandis*.

Once upon a time a valiant fellow had the idea that men were drowned in water only because they were possessed with the idea of gravity. If they were to knock this notion out of their heads, say by stating it to be a superstition, a religious concept, they would be sublimely proof against any danger from water. (Marx 2000: 176)

By declaring Shinto to be non-religion, Inoue and Fukuzawa try to knock theocratic and religious notions concerning the Japanese polity out of people’s heads. As the quote from Marx
suggests it, however, changing the notions is not tantamount to changing the reality, particularly in
the matter of religious belief and practice. To see this, suffice it to recall Motoori Norinaga
(1730-1801). This influential National Learning scholar in the Edo period claims that what is
written in *Kojiki*, a main canon of National Learning, should be unqualifiedly believed as a fact,
without any rationalizing modification. For example, we need to literally read and believe that a
goddess Amaterasu, though being born in Japan, sheds light over the world from the heaven
(Motoori 1986 [1780]: 77). Motoori would wholeheartedly agree with Leo Strauss’s claim (1995:
123) that religion has not been refuted by philosophy. Secular rationalism thus would not change
Motoori’s belief and practice.

Facing strong resistance of religious belief as claimed by a Motoori, the politics of
interpretation pursued by Inoue and Fukuzawa reveals itself as incapable of changing or removing
it. This implies that the secularist politics of interpretation cannot forestall a rise of religious
nationalism. But their secular rationalism, while reinforced, though not initiated, by the nineteenth
European evolutionist and atheist thinkers, blinds them to this inability. Inoue and Fukuzawa
believe that religion is doomed to disappear in the course of civilizing process, although the time is
not ripe. Triumphalism of secular rationalism leads them to believe not only that they are privileged
to decide what is religion and what is not religion, but also that their politics of interpretation is
valid and effective. Such optimism seems fragile, if we turn to a lesson Ronald Beiner draws from
his considerations on theocratic thinkers: “there is no once-and-for-all triumph over theocracy on
the part of liberal society” (Beiner 2011: 415). Triumphalist secularism of Inoue and Fukuzawa
prevents them from tackling seriously the question “why a retheocratization of politics continues to
look attractive from certain theoretically extreme points of view” (ibid.).
(2) Overlapping Consensus

The fact that Inoue and Fukuzawa stick to their triumphalist secularism does not contradict their tacit and pragmatic use of religion. Their secularist nationalism tacitly and pragmatically draws on religious nationalism for gaining a broad support of the Meiji regime. The non-religious view of Shinto and the emperor, which Jason Josephson (2012) calls “the Shinto secular,” indeed gained a broad support including religious groups, such as Buddhists and Christians. Yet, to borrow a term coined by John Rawls (1987), it is a situation in which an “overlapping consensus” emerges in support of the imperial legitimacy between secularist and religious nationalists. The ambivalent nature of the mythic origin of the Japanese polity, which can be interpreted in both religious and secular ways, makes the overlapping consensus between proponents of the secular reading and those of the religious reading possible. There is a possibility that Inoue and Fukuzawa consider it not only permitted but also more desirable that such overlapping consensus is formed than there is none.

This interpretation becomes plausible, if we recall Inoue’s commentary on the Meiji constitution that refers to mythic deities as well as Fukuzawa’s instrumentalist-minded demand that the emperor be worshipped “as if he were a god.” Given their assumption of the two-layer view of society consisting of the minority of intelligent upper classes and the majority of “the ignorant masses,” they are probably not so sanguine about a short-term prospect of their secularist nationalism. As a result, their secularist nationalism is not strictly but moderately secularist in admitting the need to utilize the non-secularist type of nationalism in which religion plays an important role for the purpose of nation-building. It is the very instrumentalist character underlying this moderate secularism that decisively opens the way for future religiously-tinged ultranationalism to permeate the Meiji regime and to overwhelm secularist nationalists.
At this juncture, we can fully understand an inherent difficulty with the instrumentally-oriented securalism. It comes to light if we turn to Ronald Beiner’s arguments on civil religion. Beiner puts forth three patterns concerning the relationship between politics and religion.

What should define the relationship between politics and religion? The history of political philosophy has made available three possibilities: (1) the idea that politics and religion should be kept separate (liberalism); (2) the idea that politics and religion should be joined together but governed by the supremacy of religion (theocracy); and (3) the idea that politics and religion should be joined together but governed by the supremacy of politics (civil religion). (Beiner 2011: 412)

Clearly, Inoue and Fukuzawa reject the second possibility and accept the first one. How about the third possibility? Inoue and Fukuzawa aim to dereligionize Shinto, thereby making it serviceable to secularist nationalism. In other words, they attempt to dereligionize civil religion of Shinto into a set of national rituals that should serve a secular nation-state with the emperor sacralized. In my view, though dereligionized, their secularist nationalism coupled with a politics of overlapping consensus is not immune from a serious problem with civil religion. Beiner (2011: 414) points out that there are two aspects of civil religion in tension. It aims “to use religion for civic-moral purposes” and at the same time “to liberate human beings from the yoke of religion.” As a result, he concludes that civil religion is “an inherently unstable and contradictory mode of political thought.” In a similar vein, Mark Lilla (2008:398) claims that “The river separating political philosophy and political theology is narrow and deep; those who try to ride the waters will be swept away by spiritual forces beyond their control.” This insight applies to the secularist project of Inoue and Fukuzawa as well. It is inherently unstable and contradictory, largely because
there is always a possibility that this dereligionized civil religion may be religionized again. This possibility is basically not excluded, as long as their secularist nationalism deploys the politics of overlapping consensus and hence utilizes religious nationalism to gain a wide support for the Meiji regime, while involved in the politics of interpretation that triumphantly declares Shinto as non-religion, simply ignoring religion as practice.

CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to show that Inoue and Fukuzawa, two influential figures in Japanese political modernity, share aspiration for the secular type of nationalism. In doing so, it has demonstrated that the hitherto dominant religiously-based view of Japanese political modernity is too simplistic. Japanese modernity is more multifaceted and more open to paradoxes and ironies. Moreover, my paper has highlighted the irony of their secularist nationalism. It derives from the twofold politics of interpretation and overlapping consensus, which unintentionally opened the way for religious nationalism culminating in wartime Japan. This politics is ultimately premised on a secularist optimism or even hybris.

As Karsten Fischer (2010: 409) puts it, Hobbes presents “the paradox of politicizing religious belief to prevent an unrestrained politicization of society.” In contrast, Inoue and Fukuzawa present the paradox of dereligionizing and hence politicizing religious belief to prevent an unrestrained politicization of society and to pursue a politics of secularist nationalism. This paradox finally gave rise to the irony of opening the way for the rise of religious nationalism. As mentioned in the introduction, there are in Japan several moves that appear to return to religious nationalism in wartime Japan. Considering this situation, it seems that even today Japan struggles with what Inoue and Fukuzawa hoped to solve—the dialectical and tension-ridden relationship between politics and
religion. It would be a high time to rethink Japanese political modernity in the light of the irony that their secularist aspiration eventually had to be confronted with.

1 Though not assuming the normal course of Western nation-states that allegedly goes with secularization, Peter van der Veer and Hartmut Lehmann (1999: 11) argue that “the modernization of the state in Japan was instrumental not to the secularization of society but its sacralization,” drawing on Harootunian (1999: 148). For State Shinto, see Holtom (1963 [1947]) and Murakami (1970). Basil Hall Chamberlain (1927) dubs State Shinto “a new Japanese religion” which is characterized by the worship of the emperor and his divine ancestors. For a critical review of the scholarship on State Shinto, see Yasumaru (2001: 193-196) and Shimazono (2008; 2010).

2 Two methodological caveats are in place. First, the concepts “religious” and “secular” are controversial topics. A case in point would be the fact that people make an expansive use of religion-related terms in politics. Scholars speak of totalitarianism as “political religion” (Voegelin 1996 [1938]; Gregor 2012) and nationalism as “ersatz religion” (Alvis 2005: xv), “surrogate religion” (Smith 2010: 38), or “quasi-religion” (Smith 1994). For instance, Anthony Smith (2010: 154) refers to “political religion” of secular nationalism to highlight “the sacred bases of the nation” that draw on “older religious motifs for its liturgy, symbolism and myth-making”. In this way, religious aspects in nationalism are often stressed, as if any sacralized form of politics could be labeled as “religious.” Such expansive use of the concept “religion,” mainly drawing on the Durkheimian functional view of religion (Smith 2010: 38; cf. Brooker 1991: 318-323), appears to be so far stretched and so comprehensive that at the end of the day we may wonder what is properly religious (For an aptly differentiated view on politicized religion, civil religion, and political religion as totalitarianism, see Gregor 2012: 10, 282-283). In my paper, I will deploy not a functional concept of religion, which may lead to an inflationary use, but an internal perspective that primarily focuses on what Inoue and Fukuzawa understand as religion and as non-religion respectively. At the core of my considerations lies thus their self-understanding of their own arguments. Second, in order to establish my arguments, it is necessary to develop a more differentiated framework than Juergensmeyer’s original definition of religious nationalism. Juergensmeyer’s definition is so broad that any types of nationalism in which religion plays a role regardless of other identity markers fall under this category. As a result, it cannot distinguish between an overwhelmingly religious nationalism and a slightly religion-related nationalism in which religion is only one element among multiple identity markers. In order to differentiate
religion-related nationalisms, it is a crucial question whether it is religion or something else that plays the most constitutive role in collective identity formation.

3 Government’s gradual shift from theocracy brought about deep disillusionment and frustration among protagonists of theocracy and particularly Shinto and National Learning scholars (Hashikawa 2005 [1968]: 129-139). Hashikawa (ibid., 129) rightly claims that Japanese modern nationalism was built on the failure of the grandiose theocratic idea of “Japan as God’s country.” The resurgence of this theocratic idea in wartime Japan is an irony of secular nationalism pursued by the Meiji elites and a puzzle that this paper attempts to shed light on.

4 Based on the Japanese original text in Shimizu (1974: 104-105), I supplemented the quotation by adding a translated sentence where it is omitted in the English translation. For the detailed process of constitution-making in which Inoue played a decisive role, see Beasley (1989: 651-63).

5 For example, James Gregor (2012: 276-277) holds that Shintoism which presents “the rationale for empowering the emperor of Japan with absolute political authority” is “a politicized religion”; Mitsuo Mitaya (1981: 101) claims that Shinto constitutes the political-religious basis for the state orthodoxy in the emperor system.

6 My considerations in this section basically draw on my unpublished manuscripts (Kibe 2013; 2014). As to Fukuzawa’s view on religion, see Koizumi 2002, and as to Inoue’s view on religion and religious governance, see Saito 2006.

7 Their skeptical stance towards religion was widely shared among his contemporaries, largely due to the social and intellectual tradition of the samurai class (cf. Koizumi 2002; Watanabe 2005). This tendency is witnessed by Émile Acollas, a French scholar who was familiar personally with some Japanese elites studying in France. He refers in his *Philosophie de la science politique* to “the upper classes” or the former samurai as an example of “peoples without religion” (Acollas 1877: 461).

8 One may object that in his later years, Fukuzawa’s view of religion and particularly Christianity became rather positive. This is true. Yet, he comes to think highly of Christianity not because of its claim to supernatural truth or revelation but because of its positive effects of enhancing morality of people.

9 Inoue’s non-religious view of *Kokugaku* or Shinto is in line with the then emerging new, more academic type of *Kokugaku*, which endeavors to re-establish itself as a scientific discipline of Japanese language, history, and institutions (Inoue 2011; Josephson 2012: ch. 5). This movement, energetically supported by Inoue among others, derives from the demand for ascertaining something particularly Japanese in the midst of Westernization; it is at this background that we understand why Inoue’s commentary on the Meiji constitution lavishly refers to Japanese
classics (Yamamuro 1985: 154-156).
10 His account of nationality here is known to heavily draw on J. S. Mill’s argument in the chapter 16 of Considerations on Representative Government, where Mill argues that a nation as a “community of recollection” is nurtured by a national history.
11 Concerning Hobbes’s “God’s Lieutenant,” see Hobbes (1991 [1651]: 306) and Fischer (2010). A complication of the Meiji regime is that the emperor, who is a sovereign as “God’s Lieutenant” and hence a supreme judge on religious matters, is part of theological interpretation; he himself might be both God’s Lieutenant and God.
12 It may be an interesting question whether Motoori would agree to the other side of the same dictum: philosophy has not been refuted by religion.
13 Drawing on Charles Taylor’s “common core” type of secularism (Taylor 1998), Josephson (2012: 160-161) characterizes the nature of Shinto dominant in the Meiji era by the idea of overlapping consensus, by which he understands a consensus concerning the non-religious view of Shinto and the emperor. In contrast, I apply the term “overlapping consensus” to a wider agreement between secular and religious views concerning them.

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