

German Institute for Japanese Studies (DIJ)

DIJ History and Humanities Study Group



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(Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg / DIJ)

Negotiating “Superstition” and “Religion”: The Case of the “Immoral Heresies Tenrikyō and Renmonkyō” in Meiji Japan

The rise of the so-called new religions (*shinshūkyō*) amidst Japan's traditional religions Buddhism and Shintō had attracted much commentary already in the Meiji period, ever since they started vying for official recognition in Denominational Shintō. Research has tended to lock early groups like Tenrikyō and Renmonkyō in the narration of a modern Japan, placing them firmly in the pre-modern and superstitious “enchanted garden” of the Weberian modern “disenchanted” world. In the context of the critique of modernization theory it is necessary to re-examine the formation of the new religions in the Meiji period.

Tenrikyō and Renmonkyō were faced with the challenge of finding their place in the sociopolitical structure of the Meiji period, amid continuously renegotiated ideas about what religion was meant to be. In the research on both new religions the newspaper campaigns of the 1890s launched against them figure prominently. The newspapers strongly demanded their immediate banning, denouncing them as immoral, fraudulent, and “superstitious” because of their magical healing practices. Considering, however, that neither group was banned and that the Tenrikyō even gained official recognition as Shintō Tenrikyō in 1908, the narration of seemingly vanquished superstition leaves unanswered questions. With a particular focus on the discursive role of the label “superstition” I aim to present new approaches to understanding how the concepts of “religion” and “superstition” were negotiated. As a result I wish to shed light on the history of Tenrikyō and Renmonkyō as part of the process of negotiating concepts of modernity in order to enrich our understanding of the Meiji period.

Franziska Steffen is a PhD student the programme “Languages-Texts-Society. Interpreting Asia and Europe” at Martin-Luther University Halle-Wittenberg, Germany. She is currently conducting research in Japan as a DIJ doctoral fellowship recipient.

The DIJ History and Humanities Study Group is organized by Miki Aoyama-Olschina and Torsten Weber. All are welcome to attend, but prior registration (weber@dijtokyo.org) is greatly appreciated.

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