

Nichirenism in the Socio-Cultural Dynamics of Meiji society: Exploring Anesaki Masaharu's Vision for Modern Japan

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Abstract:

Religious studies became deeply intertwined with Japanese society during the Meiji and Taisho eras, particularly amidst debates surrounding religious freedom. This period marked a significant historical juncture in Japan. Numerous intellectual figures played pivotal roles in these intersections, with one of them being Anesaki Masaharu, a professor at Tokyo Imperial University. He played a crucial role in the establishment and development of religious studies in Japan, leveraging his position as a leading figure in the field. Born in 1873 and initially raised in the Pure Land Buddhist tradition, by 1904, he had shifted his allegiance to Nichiren Buddhism. As a scholar, he adopted a universalist perspective, diligently seeking common ground between Buddhism and Christianity. His commitment to this endeavour led him to frequently travel abroad, and the documentation of his journeys can be found in "Hanatsumi no nikki", a record that chronicles his experiences. Anesaki emphasized that religion constituted a facet of human affairs, manifesting as variations in "religious consciousness." He conceptualized religion as comprising two layers, namely, phenomena and essence. Anesaki meticulously delved into the essence of religious consciousness. Anesaki distinguished religion from politics and directed attention to what he perceived as a crisis: the erosion of genuine, individual faith in modern humanity, leading to conflict and potential calamity. In 1906, he released a compilation of essays titled "Kokun to Shinkou" (National Fate and Faith), wherein he (fessler, 2010) contended, among other points, that a nation's destiny is intimately connected to the faith held by its citizens. It is fascinating to explore his analysis of individualism and Japanese identity within the context of Nichiren Buddhism, which he employed to comprehend the modernization of Meiji Japan.

Keywords:

Pure Land Buddhism, Nichiren, individualism, Meiji modernisation, religious consciousness

Introduction

The Meiji restoration (1868-1912) considered as an age of enlightenment in Japan. There were numerous intellectual figures who emerged with their intellectual thoughts. After a long period of isolation Japan open itself to west countries which was considered as modernization as well as. Japan started adaptations the western ideology and knowledge technology, comparative religious studies, new methodology etc in the field of philology and critical philosophy. Some intellectual figures who played a central role to established and developed of religious studies in modern Japan. Among them was Anesaki Masaharu (1873-1949) who was professor of Tokyo Imperial University in comparative religious studies. Subsequently he became a leader in religious field in Japan. He went to abroad for study in this field and carefully learned and understood the various religion in the world and sought many religion differences and revealed it in society. Besides he actively contributed in religion and morality related movements mainly centred on the educated strata of society and he had a great influence on Japan's government and social trends. He established the essence of individual religious consciousness and the chair of religious studies in 1905 at Tokyo university.

Anesaki was born in Tokyo and raised the pure land Buddhist tradition in an *Edokoro household* (絵所) where his family produced Buddhist artworks for selling. From the childhood he devoted to buddha by watching his grandmother daily worship for buddha. In fact, he didn't receive any formal doctrines education in religion. He says in his written book that;

“When I was a child, my grandmother was the centre of the household. I was much influenced by her piety, we always had ritual services twice a day, morning and evening, and during those services I heard the story of how the buddha was the embodiment of compassion.” (我が生涯)¹ [Masaharu, 1951].

From his younger age, Anesaki was exposed to the connect between art and religion. His interest was in art and focuses were on the expression of the artist's faith much more than technique or style. He describes paintings of Quattrocento (Totality of cultural and artistic events and movement that occurred in Italy during the 15th century) at Takuma school as focus on use of colour. Not the colour of figures of paintings impressed the most to Anesaki, the artists heart of emotion of expression in the art were not for a sake of amusement it was for worship painting to

¹ Anesaki Masaharu 姉崎正治, 1951. 我が生涯 (Waga Shougai). pp.3.



him.² At the age of fourteen or thirteen, Anesaki had realized that his interest was not just philosophy in religion as well. The world of comparative religion exposed by his getting the world of western scholarship after that the environment greatly changed around him, from the sectarian world of practice-oriented judo Shinshu to a world assuming the generalized concept of “religion” and concerning on western type of beliefs.

As his interest in philosophy was well developed, in 1893 when he began to study philosophy and comparative religious studies at Tokyo imperial University. In 1896 he enrolled as a scholar under nationalist professor of Inou Tetsujirou (1855-1944)³. With Japanese religious scholar Kishimoto Nobuta (1866-1928) he organized a comparative religion society, after that he gave a lecture on comparative religion at Tokyo Senmon Gakkou in 1898. His first book published on the “*History of the Indian religion*” 上世印度宗教史 (1897). Wherein he utilized the method of research in comparative religion for its description of the religion of India.

Anesaki’s formal study of western academic traditions began in 1893 when he entered department of philosophy in university. During the period of 1892-1896, he started studies about emergence of the concept of “new religion” among religionists and intellectuals in Japan. Although Meiji constitution include the “Freedom of religion” in 1889 and as distinct from the new term now used to refer to the popular “New religion” (Shinko Shūkyō) established before and after the Meiji restoration. This “New religion” embodied two meaning: one meant the act of “Devising a name for a religious group and organizing its creed”, in the other words, any movement aiming to establish a new religious group. The other concerned “The expression of absolute truths that are universal to all religion, though aiming at the articulation of the religion” that embrace all exiting schools of religion.⁴

In the background of this free religion trend, Japanese intellectual figures began searching for new religiosity that could respond to the circumstance of modernization. Anesaki disapproved of the former trend which involved establishing new religious groups, describing them in term of their “regressive, spiritual attitudes” that “consider their own organizations to be without flaw”.⁵

² Anesaki Masaharu. 1905. “how Christianity Appeals to a Japanese Buddhist”, The Hibbert Journal.

³ Inou Tetsujirou was the first Japanese professor of philosophy at Tokyo Imperial University and known for introducing Western philosophy and Eastern philosophy in Japan.

⁴ Anesaki Masaharu, 宗教哲学, “The philosophy of religion” in 1898.

⁵ Anesaki Masaharu. (1897). 印度宗教史 “History of the Indian religion”, p.78

In contrast he valued highly the letter, intellectual side, which aspired to transcend the frameworks of the various religious and sects and “seek peace of mind sincerely”.⁶

In 1895, Anesaki had written that “comparative study is not the final stage in the study of religion”, expressing his sense of inadequacy of comparative religion and his groping toward a new form of religious studies that would subsume comparative studies as one means to that end. The point at which Anesaki began to proclaim the establishment of his new “religious studies” in name and fact was with the publication of his book “Introduction of religious Studies” [宗教概論] (Shuukyougairon) in 1900. Wherein he wrote that “At the root of all religious phenomena, we should identify the central force which informs the unified essence of a concept, and this must constitute the starting point for religious research”. With regard to essence lay “the foundation of religious phenomena is in individual consciousness”. Moreover, explained devotion to God or divine as “The natural result of the desire to eternally enrich, extend, and proclaim one’s existence”⁷. In addition, he sought to understand religion’s social role in a historical process of development.

Anesaki Masaharu is perhaps best known in the Western countries for his seminar work “*History of Japanese religion*” (1930), but his academic career spanned much more in West. He was an active researcher throughout his life, he was also a man of letter, publishing under *the nom de plume of chofu*.⁸ He published in Japanese, English, German, French and travelled the world delivering the papers and attending conferences, in his efforts to bring a mutual understanding of human spirituality to followers of all world traditions.

As a graduate of student of Tokyo university Anesaki went to Germany 1900-1902, funded by Japanese Ministry of Education, where he spent time in Kiel, Berlin, Munich, Leipzig. In a long, meandering journey home from Germany he also visited the Netherlands, London, Paris, Italy, as well as stopping on the Indian sub-continent before arriving in Japan in June of 1903.

Being the position of Professor of comparative religious study at Tokyo Imperial University Anesaki began to publish numerous articles, books in both Japanese and English and in prominent journal such as 太陽 (Taiyō)、哲学雑誌 (Tetsugakuzasshi)、国民の友

⁶ Isomae Jun’ichi. (2014). “State and Religion in Anesaki Masaharu”. pp.155

⁷ Anesaki Masaharu, (1900). 宗教概論, “Shuukyougairon”.

⁸ Meaning of the Nom de plume is a pen name in French and Chofu is a pen name of Anesaki.



(Kokuminnotomo) and 時代思潮 (Jidaishichou). During studied at Tokyo, his closet friend was Takayama Chogyō 「高山樗牛」 (1871-1902)⁹, he was editor of Taiyo, also one of the most influential cultural critics of the day. Anesaki immensely influenced by Takayama's devotion of Buddhism.

In 1908, spring, Anesaki again get the opportunity to visit Italy, funded by the Albert Kahn Foundation as a part of its International Exchange Programme, *La bourse pour le tour autour du monde* (*Travel around the world*). Anesaki didn't chose randomly to visited in Italy. His one of the main interests at the time was trans-national. He wanted to bring the human experiences from different traditions together inside the same frame in an effort to agree that there was a common thread, hence articles such as “*Buddhist and Christian Gospel. Being Gospel parallels from Palli text*” in 1905 and “*How Christianity Appeals to a Japanese Buddhist*” in 1905.

Anesaki visited Italy with some specific goals. The first was to visit Florence to view the painting of Fra Angelico (1387-1455).¹⁰ Next he went to Assisi to trace the steps of St. Francis (1181-1226). Then he headed for Rome, where he contemplated the role and structure of the Roman catholic church in the spiritual lives of adherents.

His abroad journey was recorded into a book of travelogue “Flower of Italy” 「花つみ日記」 in 1909. There he talks about the mankind and its core, a common spirit, that spirit found its expression most genuinely through art, that more than organized religion, the catalyst for bringing that spirit to common man mere charismatic individuals. There in discernible themes: expression of religion experience; specifically, those of Italy in comparison to Japan, and place of spirituality in modern world.¹¹

Lineage of the Anesaki's family retained a pious reverence for the prince Shotoku (574-622), but after Anesaki met with Takayama, the former became a passionate follower of Nichiren

⁹ Takayama Chogyū (1871–1902) was a close friend of Anesaki and studied aesthetics in graduate school at Tokyo Imperial University and was also famous as a literary critic. He introduced the ideas of Nietzsche (German philosopher) praising individual instinct, then became a believer in Nichiren Buddhism in the endeavor to synthesize individualism and Japanese nationalism.

¹⁰ Fra Angelico was an Italian painter, one of the greatest 15th-century painters, whose works within the framework of the early Renaissance style embody a serene religious attitude and reflect a strong Classical influence.

¹¹ Fessler S. (2010). “The Pure Land of Assisi: Anesaki Masaharu in Italy”, East Asian Studies Faculty Scholarship.15.



(1222-1282)¹² and devoted himself to the Nichirenism. Simultaneously, he also wrote a book on the life of Nichiren as reformer of thirteenth century. American founder of idealist of Josiah Royce (1855-1916) has encouraged to Anesaki to write this book.¹³ Name of the Book is “*Nichiren: The Buddhist prophet*” published in 1916. When this book was published, his closet friend Takayama Chogyu was already died in 1902. this book he dedicated to memory of Chogyu.

During Russo-Japanese war, Russian great novelist Leo Tolstoy’s essay “*Bethink Yourselves*” (1904) was widely read and disseminated in the world. Many western newspapers criticized it for being unreasonable and idealistic. But for Anesaki, it was intellectual nerve and a clarion call to mankind to change its ways fundamentally.¹⁴ After reading this essay he wrote a book on “*National Fate and Faith* 国運と信仰” in 1906. In his book he mentions Tolstoy’s great warning as 「トルストイの大警告」. In there he says “Most of the British and American newspapers have reprinted Tolstoy’s passionate, prophetic and masterful essay. How odd, then, that although the Osaka Asahi and Heimin Shinbun (newspapers) have translated it, Japanese critics are largely not nothing this great commentary.”¹⁵

Anesaki says that the only way to understand Tolstoy’s lofty is as something that transcends the benefits of any group of people and instead appeals to the sincerity of the human heart. He recognizes that in the current age of warning nation states, most would see Tolstoy’s ideal as unattainable. However, fighting between countries for economic profit and between classes for authority extends to the realm of individual morals. He tried to say to people through this book that war only brings brutality and evil and people are actually giving rein to brutal selfishness.¹⁶

Beside that, he saw that such a compromised peace within solders. There was spirit between the individual and the harmony. Anesaki held that there need to be a need direct connect between the self and conviction, it should not be compromised by bending to societal or governmental pressure. Through arguments Anesaki smoothly move from the importance of self

¹² Nichiren was a Japanese Buddhist priest and philosopher of the Kamakura period. His personality was partly a product of his time, but he lived both in the past and the future, being convinced of his predestined message and aspiring for future realization of his ideals.

¹³ Anesaki Masaharu. (1913-15). “Nichiren: The Buddhist Prophet, in Preface.

¹⁴ Fessler S. (2018). “Anesaki Masaharu’s Reception of Leo Tolstoy and His Fail Attempt at Finding the Faith”, University of Albany, pp.72.

¹⁵ Anesaki Masaharu, (1906). “*National Fate and Faith*” 国運と信仰. Tranlated into English by PhD scholar Susnna Fessler.

¹⁶ Fessler S. (2018). pp. 83.

(自分) to the importance of personal faith(自信) in way of “self-confidence” or “personal faith” (自分の信仰).¹⁷

There had been a very deep influence of Tolstoy on Anesaki. He says, “we need to read Tolstoy’s gospel, which tells us that if ‘we love our enemy, we will have no enemy’”.¹⁸ However, for Anesaki faith was paramount in the world. It was directly tied to a country’s fate. He mentions in his book “*国運と信仰*” that the human spirit as core to future development of Japan. He also suggests that Japan need a spiritual prophet like Tolstoy. Such a prognosticator would unite the people’s spirit and consequently channel that spiritual strength to guide the entire world.

Anesaki’s writing was much more prolific topic such “Russian’s Faith and future of Russia’s Nature” ロシア人の信仰とロシアの国運の将来 (Taiyo 太陽, 1905), “Buddhism and Nature” 仏教と天然 (1906), “Religion and Character” 宗教と人格 (1907), “Buddhism and Dante” 仏教とダンテ (1906) and “Man, God, and Persona” 人と神とペルソナ (1907). These publications show us many visions of Anesaki’s research at the time, many of which were involved in the comparison of Japanese and western traditions on number of levels and through a number of disciplines, including literature, religion, and political science. There is not one particular “theme” running through his studies. Rather, the publication of the contents are general commentary and history to a broad Japanese readership. In the 20th century he supposed that the world will turn from practical competition towards gaining spiritual knowledge in the 20th century.¹⁹

Anesaki experienced each and every major wars in his entire life. Such as the Sino-Japanese war (1894-1895), when he was twenty-one; Russo-Japanese war (1904-1905) started when he was thirty-one; World war I (1914-1918) opened when he was forty-one; World War II (1939-1945) began when he was fifty-eight etc. He was often to be found abroad in turbulent times: studying in Germany after the Sino-Japanese War when the world feared the “yellow peril”; teaching at an American university at the time of the outbreak of World War I; and residing in England when Japan declared war on the Allies in World War II (he was returned to Japan on a repatriation ship).

¹⁷ Fessler S. (2018). pp. 85.

¹⁸ Anesaki Masaharu, (1906). “トルストイの大警告” Torusutoi no daikeikoku [Tolstoy’s Great Warning]. In “*国運と信仰*” *kokuin to shinkou* (National fate and faith).

¹⁹ Fessler S. (2010). pp. 5.



He was a rare figure able to coolly observe Japan's situation from the perspective of Europe and the United States.²⁰

Conclusion:

In Meiji era having contemporary debates on the concept of religion as well as establishment of religion as an academic discipline and unfolded as attempt largely centred in Japan at self-critique of national religion studies. On that time as universalist perspective figure Anesaki's concept of religion with faith and inner beliefs of individuals, essence of religious consciousness, religious phenomena were flourished the field of religion into Japanese society. His thoughts of enlightenment and his contribution in religious studies developed the modern Japan. Specially In 13th century Nichiren's ideals and moral aspects tried to revive in this modern period for Japan modernization with spiritually. Appearance of philosophy of religion refined by Anesaki and adapted various perspectives of religion from western country and preached the ideals on his various book and lectures. His conviction was that all religion should equally be contained with the field of religious study. Subsequently we can see that he became a respective leader in the religious field in Japan.

²⁰ ISOMAE JUN'ICHI. (2014) *"State and Religion in Anesaki Masaharu"*.

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