Introduction

The nineteenth century was an era of extraordinary religious ferment in Japan. Popular thought and culture underwent a surge of creativity, especially during the last several decades of the Tokugawa shogunal order. New religious groups, revivals of older ones, mass pilgrimages, devotional gatherings, and moralist associations of various types proliferated. The religious restlessness, which the governing authorities periodically suppressed with indifferent success, is often interpreted as part of the larger social turmoil that led to the Meiji Restoration or (in the case of movements that first appeared after 1868) as a manifestation of popular dissatisfaction with the dramatic changes that accompanied that transition. In this book, while recognizing the importance of the Restoration as a turning point in the history of nineteenth-century Japan, I concentrate on apparent continuities across the period—specifically, on the ways in which a family of Tokugawa interpretive groups reproduced itself in the Meiji in the form of a political network led by Buddhist and Shinto activists.

Chartier has remarked that intellectual history is the tension between the belief that one can conceptualize the past and the reality that “to conceptualize an object cut out of the past implies that one cannot simultaneously conceptualize all objects.” I have certainly cut an object out of the past and thereby sacrificed the rest of the historical brocade to which it “belonged.” The object of my conceptualization, however, is not necessarily a single idea or practice, or how this presumably developed over time, but a conversation that actor-thinkers of different affiliations carried on with each other about a common area of concern during the period in question. The participants in this discussion did not necessarily query and respond to each other directly, whether orally or in writing; in some cases they were only dimly aware of each other’s existence, if at all. The debate I sketch here is therefore rather disjointed, reduplicative, and sometimes dissonant—more like a prolonged town-hall meeting than an ordered academic panel.
In focusing on this intercourse, my aim is not to present an overarching history of Japanese religion from the late Tokugawa through the early Meiji, but to explore the religion and thought of this time on the scale of individuals and small groups. My immersion in the particular complements recent European and American studies of the religious phenomena of this pivotal epoch, which until very recently have painted pictures of “Buddhism” and “Shinto” on broad canvases. Instead of assaying a general history of these presumed entities, here I offer detailed analyses of the ideas and actions of single agents and the modest communities they represented. These individuals and their associates maintained some level of contact with each other throughout the nineteenth century. They took up new partners in dialogue, found different opponents to debate, were represented by spokespersons of more than one generation, and ultimately used channels of communication that did not exist at the beginning of the parley. Yet the basic set of players remained connected enough to warrant a construction of their relationship as ongoing quite apart from any resonances among the ideas and practices they promoted.

Scholars have long underscored the overlapping or syncretic nature of Japan’s religious culture, but in practice historical connections between different systems are often left unexplored in favor of intensive study of a single group or discourse. The neglect of the interstices between past religious formations has led to a disjunction between the common perception of contemporary Japanese religious life as one of variegation and multiple affiliation, on the one hand, and the representation of past phenomena as a set of discrete, insular “traditions,” on the other. This book moves in the direction of a multiplex history of Japanese religion by stressing interactions and commonalities between distinct systems and communities in their historical contexts. A metaphor used by Norbert Elias captures the thrust of this model of ongoing interrelatedness. He explains how a set of individuals playing a game together are fully interdependent during that particular game, whether they are positioned as allies or adversaries. By virtue of their interdependence, the players form what Elias calls a “figuration”—that is, a changing pattern of interaction that the players constitute as a whole. Elias uses the specific example of a soccer game to illustrate his meaning:

We can only understand the constant flux in the grouping of players on one side if we see that the grouping of players on the other side is also in constant flux. If the spectators are to understand and enjoy the game, they must be able to understand how the changing dispositions of each side are interrelated—to follow the fluid figuration of each team...
The process of interaction, in this view, is a fluctuation of power that reaches equilibrium first in one figuration and then in another. The power of the “fluid figurations” treated in this book became palpable in the early Meiji era, when several members of the network in question, though diverse in the details of their religious practices and ideas, formed coalitions based on political and economic interests. Winston Davis has spoken of the centripetal force of multiple religious affiliation in modern Japan; under some conditions, religious difference may serve, paradoxically, as an integrating force in society. The “game” or figuration process described in the following chapters suggests ways in which multireligious connections have contributed to the strengthening of social and political ties in Japan’s past. My aim is therefore not only to elucidate intellectual and ritual idiosyncrasies, but also to characterize the broader dispositions of the participants in this evolving network with an eye to how they may or may not have changed over time. The distinctive ideas and practices that the players in this socio-intellectual soccer game produced and reproduced during the nineteenth century differed from and sometimes conflicted with each other, but their creators shared key premises, and in their writings and speeches drew on a common (yet evolving) stock of textual allusions, lexicons, phraseology, and rhetorical patterns. In short, the multiple partners in this conversation relied on a common mental grammar in any particular historical moment—a logic that is marked in their discourse by similar linguistic elements.

This shared logic provides the heuristic framework for my treatment of several interpretive groups. The ideas and practices that were elaborated by the spokespersons of these associations converged on the definition of “personal cultivation” (mi o osameru; shūshin), or as some advocates called it, “learning” (gakumon)—that is, the moral, ritual, physiological, and/or educational processes by which individuals were believed to attain well-being. The delineation of the enterprise of cultivation is pervasive to the point of banality in nineteenth-century Japanese religious and intellectual discourse, and as such provides a convenient template for gauging differences and affinities between the various interpretive positions of the time. The terminology of personal cultivation is also broad enough to comprehend phenomena that are implicitly channeled into distinct fields of study by the English-language rubrics “religion,” “morality,” “divination,” “health,” and “education,” but that in Japanese texts of the time are often presented as a unified human endeavor.

The present work encompasses to a modest degree consideration of phenomena pertinent to more than one social stratum. My aim is to infringe as much as possible on the old boundary between “popular” and “learned” culture, a distinction that still endures in the study of Japanese
religion despite the application of more fluid interpretive models in religious histories of other parts of the world. The ideas and actions of highly educated thinkers, on the one hand, and of semiliterate religious adepts, on the other, are placed on the same playing field and viewed as interdependent. I originally aspired to give equal attention to the details of thought and practice generated or interpreted by persons of a wide range of social origins within a particular geohistorical context, and to highlight the movement and interaction among them. While rummaging through the documents associated with the lesser-known units that I selected for this analysis, however, I realized that the core members of the understudied groups were not as socially subordinate as I had surmised from these movements’ “popular” image in the few pertinent secondary accounts available. When examined closely in terms of their relations with other individuals and communities from the late Tokugawa into the 1880s, the leading practitioners of these systems (those for whom records are available) turn out to be rather well-connected. Village headmen, craftworkers, tradesmen, unemployed samurai, and other middle-level Tokugawa estates developed into educational elites, some of whom wielded significant influence in Meiji society.

Since the scope of this study is defined by relevance to a single network of persons and groups, in the course of my research I have ultimately maintained the bias of the traditional intellectual historian for documents that can be identified with individuals. Nevertheless, with the exception of the few chapters in which I deliberately discuss the ideas of well-known scholars and thinkers in order to create an intellectual backdrop for the analyses of diffusers and dissenters that ensue in each case, the book draws mostly on interpretations that are valuable for their representativeness of the general mentality or “world vision” of the particular community in question, rather than for their originality. The best of such discourses, like that of Carlo Ginzburg’s sixteenth-century miller, directly illuminate how persons of rudimentary education appropriate and transform the stock of religious knowledge available to them in their own era. Most of the sources I use in this book, however, are less vivid in this regard, and indeed somewhat conventional in form: essays, biographies, records of sermons and speeches, eulogies, personal letters, the occasional poem or playscript, government documents, political pronouncements, denominational registers, and newspaper articles. The ideas and practices elaborated and recorded in these texts do not directly reveal the appropriations of the “masses.” The voices in the texts interpreted here are for the most part one step or more away from the interests of the less articulate people who made up the larger chorus of the time. Nevertheless, precisely because of their authors’ intermediary position in the socio-educational process, some of the records left behind by
the spokespersons treated here (especially those of the Tokugawa era) shed light on forms of practice and thought that never came to be associated with the mainstream religious and educational institutions of modern Japan, and that are accordingly under studied today. Although the available information about these little-known interpretive systems in their formative stages is fragmentary, it provides a modicum of insight into a side of Japanese religious history that tends to be left out or sublimated in modern textbook accounts. I should add that the absence in my later chapters of extended analysis of these groups’ practices and theories marks my own perception of the displacement of the religious creativity of the earlier practitioners by the ideological frenzy of the systemizers and proselytizers who succeeded them in the Meiji era.

The debate over personal improvement that transpired in nineteenth-century Japan is illustrated with specific reference to a social circuit that operated mostly (though not exclusively) in the Edo/Tokyo and eastern Kanagawa areas. In order to display the duration and range of this network, the book adopts a “skip-stop” approach, dwelling in turn on religious and ideological discourses produced in three distinct subcontexts (roughly, 1830s–1860s; 1870s–early 1880s; and late 1880s–early 1890s). The first part of the book describes systems of moral and religious development that were elaborated by precursors of this circuit from about the Ten’pō era (1830–1843) to the Bakumatsu (1853–1867). By way of introducing the intellectual climate in which these proposals emerged, in chapter 1 I sketch the textualist trends that marked the Confucian scholarly world during the late Tokugawa and the related ambivalence of diverse educators about the ultimate meaningfulness of the classical Chinese texts. In chapters 2 and 3 I consider three cultivation programs, two of which originated in divination systems (To-kyūjutsu and Nanboku physiognomy), while the third became a “new religion” (Misogi kyō). I present a considerable amount of historical information in narrative form about each of these little-known communities and their teachings, but return in each case to the ways in which their spokespersons redefined the Confucian-associated enterprise of “learning” to accord with their own notions of practicable self-improvement. The available historical sources for these groups (especially the first two) are limited to a few unannotated, uncritical editions of primary texts, but taken together their content suggests characteristic patterns in the thought and practices of nonmainstream interpretive communities during a critical phase in the history of early modern Japan.

The survey of Tokugawa groups is followed by a transitional discussion in chapter 4 of the institutional and ideological processes of the first Meiji years that shifted the parameters of the continuing debate over personal development and social well-being. Notions of practicality or
“practical learning” (jitsugaku) took on a pressing interest for so-called enlightenment thinkers, government officials, educators, and newspaper writers. I describe in this chapter how “learning” in the sense of adult moral cultivation was displaced in the 1870s—both institutionally, in the Meiji higher education system, and discursively, by modern constructs of meaning such as “education” (kyōiku) and “religion” (shakkyō). In a related process, both critics and supporters of “Confucianism” (jukyo) argued that it was completely distinct from the phenomenon that was now designated “religion.” In the last part of the chapter I cite the fate during these years of Shingaku, a syncretic religious movement that had flourished in the late Tokugawa period, in order to illustrate the implications of this renegotiation of terms for unofficial concepts of learning that did not fit the categories of the new age.

Chapters 5 and 6 pursue the quest for practical forms of cultivation into the world of established Buddhism. My concern here is not to characterize the state of Meiji Buddhism in general, nor to explicate the ideas and practices of the particular Buddhist system that I discuss, Rinzai Zen; excellent Japanese and Western scholarship on these topics is already available. I aim rather to illuminate the way in which representatives of a single, well-established Buddhist community assimilated elements from contemporary discourse about practicality into their own debates over monastic education, on the one hand, and the role of the lay practitioner, on the other. Chapter 5 examines the “practical” Zen education that Imakita Kōsen, the abbot of the Kamakura temple, Engaku-ji, proposed in the early Meiji period in response to the current vogue for “doctrinal” or Western-influenced utilitarian studies. Chapters 6 and 7 transport the discussion from the educational to the social dimensions of the Engaku-ji program as it developed during the 1870s and 1880s. I suggest that two East Asian models of human fulfillment, the Confucian gentleman-official and the Buddhist lay bodhisattva, coalesced in a new idealization of the lay practitioner during the mid-Meiji. It is well-known that laypeople played a prominent role in the reinvigoration of Japanese Buddhism in the decades following the anti-Buddhist drive of the first Meiji years. My emphasis here is that the rise of lay activism was not simply the result of a reconstruction strategy devised by clerical leaders in the aftermath of the anti-Buddhist campaign; it was also driven by an elite form of voluntarism that had precedents in Tokugawa systems of social and religious practice.

The growing prominence of lay forms of religious life in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Japan was part of a general trend toward greater public access to religious knowledge. In the late Edo period, people played an increasingly active role in creating and controlling their own religious lives, both inside and outside the clerical and scholarly estab
lishment. This trend was marked, for example, by the multiplication of religious associations or こう—groups of laypeople who met together to study, pray, or practice rituals. The development of these lay groups facilitated voluntary participation in religion by individuals of various social origins, though usually still within the larger administrative hierarchy of the established institutions. The gradual spread of ways of thinking that emphasized the moral autonomy of the individual and the value of communalism, whether mediated by Confucian-inspired educators, rural nativists, or divinely inspired leaders of new religions, also marked a rising discomfort with clerical and scholastic restrictions on religious knowledge. The lay appropriation of ritual and educational functions that had traditionally been reserved to priests and scholars in fact characterizes several new movements of the time. Many early-nineteenth-century groups presented themselves as nearly autonomous subworlds that downplayed reliance on the expertise of Buddhist, school-Shinto, and Confucian professionals—figures who for the most part were formally associated with the Tokugawa order. The new forms of practice did not require the direct intervention in religious life of ritual experts, much less entrance into a monastery or other formal training; ordinary family life and work were often depicted in popular discourse of the time as the ideal context for personal and social improvement.

The development of a new level of lay religious participation made itself felt in the monastically oriented Buddhist sects especially after the institutional changes of the first Meiji years. The process was complex. One cannot speak of an anticlerical spirit in the Tokugawa and early Meiji periods along the lines of the early modern European phenomenon; what emerges in nineteenth-century Japan is not massive lay opposition to priestly control of socioreligious practices, but rather an overall reinterpretation by both the clerical and lay sectors of their mutual relations—a process that was greatly accelerated by direct government intervention. Each phase of this reinterpretation involved economic, territorial, gender, and other issues specific to the sectarian context. Chapters 6 and 7 show how some of these issues came into play in the development of the lay program at the Rinzai temple, Engakuji.

The successors of the nonmainstream religious and divinatory groups that are treated in the early chapters of this book rearranged themselves in the Meiji under the auspices of “sect Shinto” (shakai Shinto). The conventional view of the so-called Shinto sects is that they were artificial groupings, marshaled together in response to the centralizing pressures of the Meiji state. In chapter 8 I stress, rather, the voluntaristic dimension of the sect-Shinto phenomenon, as illustrated by the formation and early history of a sect called Shintō Taiseikyō. My larger
purpose in chapters 8, 9, and 10 is in fact to delineate the spontaneous participation across religious boundaries of diverse proponents of personal cultivation (whether associated with a long-established Buddhist monastery or with a newly constructed Shinto sect) in the ideological coalition building that swept over Japan in the years just prior to the establishment of the Meiji constitution and the national diet. Ideals of personal development that prevailed among the educated classes in Japan invariably included the notion that, for men, moral cultivation should culminate in public service, especially government service. In the Meiji context, political activity, whether in or out of the government, was part of everyday life for many educated males who lived in the vicinity of the capital.

The discussion in the last part of this book accordingly shifts gears, moving away from the earlier description of religious and educational programs to the identification of their spokespersons’ political dispositions and ideologizing activities. While the early-nineteenth-century participants in this evolving figuration debated the relative efficacy of concrete practices of cultivation, their Meiji successors concentrated on how to spread ideologies of personal and social improvement. In chapter 9 I take up this aspect of the Engakuji community, characterizing diverse currents in its fluid political culture by sampling the organizational and ideological initiatives of its leading members and associates during the early Meiji decades. I highlight especially the crescendo of conservative voices in this circle in the 1880s, which arose in response to the liberalizing and Westernizing arguments that had dominated public discourse in the preceding years. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the informal political cooperation of key members of both the Buddhist and Shinto-associated groups treated earlier. The collaboration of the leading members of this circuit (another round in a figurational spiral that originated in the late Tokugawa period) suggests that multireligious groupings, ostensibly outside the public domain, functioned as effective political forces in late-nineteenth-century Japanese society.

Chapter 10 pushes the storyline a few years further, describing how the members of this socioreligious network, along with other moralists of the day, defined their views on the correct path to human fulfillment by demonizing the teachings of less conventional religious interpreters. The least orthodox member of the Taisei organization, Renmonkyō, became a prime target in this polemical process. A popular healing movement brought to the Tokyo area by a little-educated woman from Kyushu, Renmonkyō was systematically discredited in the 1890s by a brash new Meiji press in collaboration with religious professionals across the sectarian spectrum. The campaign against this movement (which later ceased to exist) and other new religions of the time helped
form modern journalistic conventions for writing about religious phenomena that are still employed in Japan today (most notably in the copious coverage of the new religion AUM Shinrikyō, whose members carried out the notorious sarin gas attack in the Tokyo subway system in 1995). The drive to disband Renmonkyō more than a century ago marks the foundational role of the Japanese press in constructing modern notions of religion and morality. It also invites consideration of the peculiar and often insidious relationship between the construction of religious orthodoxy and the rise of nationalism that is so familiar to us today across cultural contexts. In the early nineteenth century, the Tokugawa shogunate had swiftly suppressed movements characterized by devotional excitement, charismatic leadership, healing practices, female authority, and, above all, the potential to control large numbers of people. In 1894, as Japan was poised to enter its first modern war, ordinary citizens inspired by the vision of a powerful nation followed the lead of journalists and established religious leaders in voluntarily excluding these elements from their definition of an acceptable path of personal cultivation.