

Article

The Missing Link between Meiji Universalism and Postwar Pacifism, and What It Means for the Future

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Abstract: This article focuses on the life of two individuals who were actively promoting universalism in the Meiji era, becoming silent during World War II, and then resurfacing after the war, pursuing similar ideas and agendas. These two individuals were Imaoka Shin'ichirō (1881–1988), the former secretary of the Japanese Unitarian Association who died in 1988 at age 106, and Nishida Tenkō (1872–1968), the founder of the Ittōen movement. The author scrutinizes their role in formulating ideas and forming alliances between groups that still claim to promote transnational and transreligious ideas in the twenty-first century. Although Imaoka and Nishida contributed to bridge the gap between the Meiji era and today, whatever remains of their legacy may be related to the current standstill in attempts to deal with transnational and transdenominational divisions. In reviewing avenues for future transreligious conversations, this article discusses the extent to which the present Japanese religious traditions could contribute to such nonsectarian endeavors. It also indicates some of the philosophical strategies that could be adopted, highlighting the limits of common attempts based on an ethical approach, suggesting instead that empirical and epistemological approaches avoiding the pitfall of language may be more conducive to overcoming the current inertia in transreligious conversations.

Keywords: Japanese religions; intellectual history; pacifism; Meiji era; Imaoka Shin'ichirō; Nishida Tenkō; nonsectarian endeavors; transreligious movements; universalism; postwar Japan

1. Introduction

Our scrutiny of links between the past, the present, and the future of transreligious developments in Japan must begin by reviewing some of the past gestures toward universalism. The second necessary step is to examine what occurred during and after the Pacific War and to ask whether the movements toward universalism remained consistent despite Japan's dramatic withdrawal from the international community in 1933.¹ Right after the 1945 surrender, for example, many individuals performed an about-face and suddenly claimed to have always been "pacifists." Finally, this article will consider speculations about the future and will discuss how the idea of overcoming religious boundaries could and should be revisited.

Far from claiming to prescribe how the future of transreligious conversations should unfold, this article attempts to contextualize the efforts made toward such endeavor in postwar Japan, by showing its neglected roots in the prewar period. Religious studies tend to focus on discrete individuals and discrete time periods, thus, inevitably, providing a fragmented outlook on how deeper currents of thought tend to affect intellectual and religious history in the long run. Although this piece also examines only a limited sample, mostly two individuals who "bridged the gap" between

¹ Japan's official withdrawal from the League of Nations was proclaimed on 27 March 1933, marking one of the turning points that set Japan on a course toward isolation and, eventually, on the path of war.

the prewar and postwar period, it attempts to address the broader issue of how religious studies could reopen discussions about universality in a postmodern era marked by skepticism toward this question. Choosing to examine these two individuals and to critically discuss their impact on postwar interreligious dialogues aims at complicating the images that tend to prevail on the contrast between Japanese religious thought before and after the Pacific War.

The first discovery I made while researching these issues was that some of the individuals who were actively promoting universalism since the Meiji era became silent during the war and then reemerged in the postwar period with almost identical agendas. For decades after the war, these individuals helped to shape what I call “transreligious attempts.” I chose to focus, in particular, on two such figures, who also became friends: Imaoka Shin’ichirō (1881–1988), the former secretary of the Japanese Unitarian Association who died in 1988 at age 106 and Nishida Tenkō (1872–1968), the founder of the Ittōen movement.

I argue that these two individuals played a significant but neglected role in formulating ideas and forming alliances between groups that, to this day, still endeavor to promote transnational and transreligious ideas. Furthermore, although Imaoka and Nishida were instrumental in bridging the gap between the Meiji² era and today, their legacy—or perhaps the sketchy way in which it was later understood—may have contributed to the current standstill in efforts to overcome petty national and denominational rivalries. In any case, more scholarly attention needs to be devoted to areas of continuity in intellectual and religious history, precisely because political shifts occupied center stage throughout the twentieth century.

2. Past Attempts to Embrace Universalism in Japan

This article provides only a brief outline of the prewar period³ so that more attention can be given to postwar developments and reflections about the future. Aside from the tribulations of the Unitarian movement and its eventual failure to secure a firm foothold in Japan as an organization, the thirty-five years of its existence between 1887 and 1922 marked the peak of the phenomenon we can identify as “Meiji universalism.” What is particularly relevant for our analysis is that Imaoka Shin’ichirō served as the secretary of the Japanese Unitarian Association between 1918 and 1921 and that he witnessed his association’s struggle to remain relevant to its Japanese audience at a time of fast-paced changes in all areas of society.⁴

The Impact of Imaoka’s Encounter with Nishida Tenkō

Several early events had a deep impact on Imaoka’s intellectual trajectory. First, while enrolled as a student at Tokyo Imperial University beginning in 1903, Imaoka attended religious services at the nearby Hongō Church, where Ebina Danjō (1856–1937) was delivering sermons. Ebina stood out as one of the leading contemporary preachers and, although he had a Congregational affiliation, he later became increasingly supportive of the Unitarian movement.⁵ When Imaoka graduated in 1906, Ebina recommended that he be appointed as minister in a Congregational church in Kobe.⁶ It is during

² Here “Meiji” will be used as a broad marker including both the Meiji (1868–1912) and Taishō (1912–1926) eras.

³ The pre-war phase is discussed by [Mohr \(2014\)](#).

⁴ Unitarians in Japan worked closely with the labor movement. Imaoka was appointed to replace Suzuki Bunji (1885–1946), who decided to focus on his work with the Yūaikai (Friendly Society). This association was meant to circumvent the ban on labor unions and, eventually, became the largest labor union in Japan. See [\(Mohr 2014, p. 134\)](#). The Unitarian movement in Japan was also deeply involved in pacifism, as indicated by Clay MacCauley’s strong support of the American Peace Society of Japan. MacCauley (1843–1925) even served as acting president of this organization in 1919. (*Ibid.*, p. 138). MacCauley was the central pillar of the Unitarian mission in Japan. Although not a Unitarian, Sidney Lewis Gulick (1860–1945) also played an important role in supporting Suzuki’s travel abroad and peace efforts. See [\(Taylor 1984\)](#).

⁵ A pair of articles in English focusing on Ebina are available [\(Iwai 2008, 2009\)](#), but they do not mention this dimension. The gradual shift of Ebina toward some of the Unitarian ideas is well documented. See [\(Mohr 2014, pp. 85, 145\)](#).

⁶ Hyōgo Kyōkai (Kumiai-ha). See [\(Imaoka 1981, p. 652\)](#).

his tenure at this church that Imaoka met Nishida Tenkō.⁷ Imaoka, who referred to Nishida Tenkō as Tenkō-san, recalled:

Years later, Tenkō published his experiences in a book titled *Zange no seikatsu* (A life of repentance).⁸ Yet, thanks to Tenkō, what I had originally been taught by Professor Ebina, by Professor Anesaki, and by Professor Ryōsen about the perspective of free religion (*jiyū shūkyō*) was not only confirmed, I was also shown something altogether different, something that couldn't bear comparison with what I had seen so far in the religious world.⁹

Inspired by Tenkō's emphasis on religion as a practice (*jissen*) rather than a belief system, Imaoka decided that he could no longer preach about what he had not personally experienced. He had worked as a minister for three years but resigned from his position at the church in Kobe.¹⁰ Tenkō recommended that Imaoka learn the Okada method of "quiet sitting."¹¹ Such were the circumstances that led Imaoka to return to Tokyo in 1910 with the idea of furthering his research in the direction of a nondenominational approach to religion.

Imaoka's former mentor Anesaki Masaharu (1873–1949) took him on as an unpaid assistant (*fukushu*). To support himself, Imaoka acquired Eirinkan, one of the private dormitories in Hongō, and rented it to Tokyo University students. The Eirinkan was also used to hold gatherings to discuss religion. In 1912, the Concordia Association (Kiitsu kyōkai) was founded,¹² and Imaoka served as secretary. Two years later, when Anesaki went to Harvard as a visiting professor, he asked Imaoka to join him in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where Imaoka lived in 1915–1916. This further cemented Imaoka's relations with the American Unitarians, at a time when Japanese society as a whole was rife with tensions.

During this period in Japan, the public was divided: some favored greater integration with the international community, others promoted exclusivism and Japan's self-interests, and still others encouraged a compromise where Japan would assimilate only what was deemed beneficial to its future. The delicate balance between the two extreme factions could have shifted in either direction, though the scale definitely tipped toward militarism in 1931 with the Manchurian Incident, which was used as a pretext for the invasion of China.

3. Imaoka and Nishida's Posture during and after the Pacific War

Imaoka and Nishida were not the only activists who promoted peace and interreligious dialogue in the postwar period. This new trend was gaining attention but those who were spearheading it were split between socialist sympathizers and the faction epitomized by Imaoka and Nishida,¹³ who shared a distrust of socialist ideas. They believed that transforming society was impossible if individuals did not first give up their self-centered tendencies (*onore o suteru*).

⁷ Imaoka mentions that he met Nishida Tenkō through the Ryōsen-kai, an association dedicated to commemorating the life and work of Tsunashima Ryōsen (1873–1907). Imaoka then had several opportunities to learn directly from Tenkō (he called him "Tenkō-san") about his personal realization. To avoid confusing him with another famous Nishida (Nishida Kitarō), hereafter, I will follow Imaoka in calling him "Tenkō" instead of using his family name.

⁸ Selections have been translated as (Nishida[1969] 1972). An early review of this book can be found in two publications by Hoashi Riichirō (1881–1963): (Hoashi 1922, 1923). Hoashi was one of the leading Japanese Unitarians, and he kept working in the same direction after the war. In these two publications Hoashi discusses the ideas of Tolstoy, as well as Gandhi's formulation of *ahimsā*. A group picture with Hoashi is included in (Akashi 1995, p. 234). Note that there are two Japanese readings for the term translated as repentance. The *zange* reading tends to be favored in Christianity, whereas *sange* is the older reading from Buddhism. In printed and online publications the current Ittōen movement tends to use *sange*.

⁹ (Imaoka 1981, p. 279).

¹⁰ Details of this crucial event are narrated by Imaoka himself in his 1910 article "Yo wa ikan ni shite bokushoku o shirizokishi ya" (How did I resign from the ministry?). See (Imaoka 1910). Regarding Tenkō's influence, see also (Imaoka 1981, pp. 278–79, 360, 436–37), and many other passages in the same publication.

¹¹ (Imaoka 1981, p. 360). This refers to the quiet sitting method (*Okadashiki seizaō*) taught by Okada Torajirō (1872–1920).

¹² For a critical account of the background of this association, in particular its resemblance to the government-sponsored Sankyō Kaidō (Gathering of the three religions) held in 1912, see (Isomae 2002).

¹³ Regarding the socialist sympathizers, see (Ōtani 2012).

Both Imaoka and Nishida were humble men who did not enjoy parading in front of the media or engaging in purely scholarly pursuits. They were concerned with practical matters and steered clear of academic debates. Before, during, and after the war, they continued to work toward the same objectives. Although they had to maintain a low profile, by and large, they avoided giving in to war rhetoric.

In the 1930s and 1940s, when any discourse about internationalism was taboo, Imaoka focused on research into Shinto with his journalist friend Joseph Warren Teets Mason (1879–1941).¹⁴ This collaboration resulted in the publication of two solid monographs in Japanese.¹⁵ One of the long-term benefits of the trips Imaoka and Mason made to Shinto shrines throughout Japan was the contacts they established during those visits, which proved useful when Imaoka mobilized a segment of the Shinto clergy in the postwar period.

A lasting collaboration developed in particular with Yamamoto Yukitaka (1923–2002), the high priest of the Tsubaki Grand Shrine (Tsubaki Ōkami Yashiro).¹⁶ In 1970 Yamamoto Yukitaka's shrine was one of the first Japanese religious organizations to join the International Association for Liberal Christianity and Religious Freedom (now the International Association for Religious Freedom, or IARF) "with an introduction from Dr. Imaoka," as Yamamoto puts it.¹⁷ This decision proved successful, as Yamamoto eventually became president of the IARF between 1996 and 1999.¹⁸

It is slightly more difficult to draw an accurate picture of Nishida Tenkō, but his commitment to support Japanese in Manchuria even after the 1931 Manchurian Incident and in the midst of the Pacific War¹⁹ is one of several indices suggesting his dedication to internationalism during the war period. Miyata Masaaki, who has dedicated his life to the study of Tenkō, even suggests that his personal involvement in Manchuria opened the way to his activities on the international scene.²⁰ The Ittōen movement²¹ included a theater troupe, Suwaraji Gekien,²² which, according to Nishida Tenkō's grandson Nishida Takeshi, continued to perform throughout Japan during the war, until July 1945. Suspending their activities for barely a month when Japan was forced to surrender, they immediately resumed theatrical performances at the end of August 1945, using the same repertoire and scenarios (*daimoku*).²³ We should abstain from reading this as evidence of pacifism since it merely suggests that

¹⁴ Mason seems to have been introduced to Shinto while in Europe through his acquaintance with the Japanese diplomats Suematsu Kenshō (1855–1920) and Hayashi Gonsuke (1860–1939). He came to Japan in 1931 and may have met Imaoka through the Harvard Club. The date of Mason's arrival relies on (Imaoka 1981, p. 385). His papers are kept at Columbia University. <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/lweb/eresources/archives/eastasian/mason/ldpd.6601952.001b.html>.

¹⁵ (Mason 1933, 1940).

¹⁶ According to Yamamoto Yukitaka, his initial meeting with Imaoka and Mason took place in 1937, when his father, Yamamoto Yukiteru, was still the head of Tsubaki Grand Shrine (IARF 2001, p. 113). The amazing fact about Yamamoto Yukiteru is that he was a pacifist, whose convictions were tolerated during wartime because the Imperial Police used his shrine for rituals. He is described as "one of the first conscientious objectors in Mie prefecture" (Ibid., p. 124), footnote. His son, Yamamoto Yukitaka, could not avoid conscription, however. For the unusual history of this shrine, see (Yamamoto 1997).

¹⁷ (IARF 2001, p. 113).

¹⁸ (Ibid., p. 124).

¹⁹ For a detailed account of Tenkō's trips to Manchuria, even in the midst of the war in 1943, see (Miyata 2008, pp. 195–253).

²⁰ See Chapter 5, "Manshū kara sekai e no shisen" (From Manchuria to glancing at the whole world), (Miyata 2008). On the other hand, Miyata's position as director of the Ittōen Museum (Kōsōin) suggests that he would be inclined to present Tenkō in a favorable light. Tenkō's travels abroad had started earlier with, for instance, four months spent in Hawai'i between 16 August and 4 December 1924 (Ibid., pp. 184–89).

²¹ The utopian community created in 1904 by Nishida Tenkō included both those who led a communal life without personal possessions in their "village" located outside Kyoto, and the larger community of followers and supporters. During my visit in June 2013, the current Ittōen director (Tōban), Nishida Tenkō's grandson Nishida Takeshi, told me that the members are aging and that there are about sixty-five people currently living in the commune.

²² The name of this theater troupe, Suwaraji, comes from the Japanese pronunciation for the Sanskrit *sva-raj* (*svarāja*, literally "self-ruling"), a concept used by Gandhi to emphasize the need not to resort to violence to acquire true independence. It is also a pun suggesting the humble posture of someone walking barefoot (*suashi*) with straw sandals (*waraji*) and the choice to remain active without sitting down (*suwaraji*). (Miyata 2008, p. 211).

²³ Interview of Nishida Takeshi, 26 June 2013.

these performances conveyed messages considered innocuous,²⁴ but it illustrates the willingness of Ittōen representatives to deliver ideas whose validity would not be contingent upon the circumstances and to refrain from directly challenging the political order even during the Pacific War.

Overall, we should also be wary of embellishing Imaoka's and Tenkō's thinking. They were products of their time, and their ability to navigate throughout the war period without being harassed appears to have resulted from their mild political discourse, in which the centrality of the emperor was never openly questioned.

This is illustrated by a statement Tenkō made shortly after the war about the new constitution and its interpretation by Kanamori Tokujirō (1886–1959). Kanamori was one of the ministers in the first Yoshida cabinet, and he had just made an impassioned speech in the Diet in which he argued that “the emperor constitutes the center (*chūshin*) of our admiration (*akogare*), he constitutes the central bond (*tsunagari*) extending its roots in the depth of our hearts (*kokoro no oku fukaku*).”²⁵ Commenting on this in relation to his own formulation of Ittōen's ideals,²⁶ Tenkō praised Kanamori's words and indicated how close they were to Ittōen's aspirations:

Kanamori's explanation was overflowing with earnestness. Overcoming the political parties' mindset, he was able to unify the spirit (*seishin*) of the Diet members, who almost all approved him. Fundamentally, it is the national polity (*kokutai*) in a good sense, going beyond common interpretations. I was not only happy that these things were actually explained, I was simultaneously struck by the inexplicable feeling (*fushigi*) that this perfectly matched the first article of our Prayer for Light.²⁷

During the war, the term “national polity” (*kokutai*) often served as a euphemism for the emperor, although this term's usage implied significantly different nuances depending on which group used it and how it understood the concept of nation and of its identity. What can be ascertained is that Imaoka and Tenkō adopted a rather conservative position regarding the emperor. Yet, being men of action rather than philosophers, they worked behind the scenes for progressive causes, introducing people and facilitating events they considered important. It is worth noting that, in the postwar period, Japanese history was largely rewritten by historians with Marxist sympathies, who tended to obliterate such emperor-friendly contributions. This may explain the emergence of two distinct types of pacifist discourse (socialist and conservative), which thoroughly ignored each other. Such lack of unity certainly has impaired the ability of mainstream Japanese intellectuals to successfully process war memory and apologize to other Asian countries.

Tenkō, while remaining faithful to his ideal of total humility (*geza*),²⁸ briefly emerged in the political arena after his election to the House of Councillors in 1947 for a five-year term.²⁹ As for Imaoka, his propensity to work behind the scenes partly explains why he has received so little

²⁴ This troupe had its hour of glory when it performed at the United Nations headquarters in June 1957. (Miyata 2008, p. 335). The current list of plays gives an idea of their rather harmless orientation, targeting elementary and middle school students: <http://www.swa-raj.com/gallery/> (accessed on 11 March 2017) (In Japanese).

²⁵ The language quoted here follows the version of this statement transcribed by Nishida Tenkō in his writing, maybe quoted from memory. (Nishida 2013, p. 55). It refers to a statement made on 1 July 1946.

²⁶ The “Prayer for Light” (*Kōmyō Kigan*), formulated in (Nishida 2013, pp. 48–50).

²⁷ (Nishida 2013, p. 55). This is a free translation of this long passage transcribed from Tenkō's oral delivery. The first article of the prayer begins with the sentence “the light of nonduality entirely fills the universe, like sunshine” (*fumi no kōmyō wa uchū ni henman suru yōkō no gotoshi*). (Ibid., p. 48).

²⁸ This concept can also be translated as humbleness, but the English word does not adequately convey the practical connotation of the term, which implies “adopting an attitude of total humility” by sitting in the lowest possible position. In the case of Tenkō, he demonstrated this attitude by repairing the base boards (soles) of other people's wooden clogs (*geta no haire*), a task traditionally done by outcasts. He seems to have realized the importance of *geza* during his Zen training with various teachers at Nanzenji and Kenninji. Interview of Nishida Takeshi, 26 June 2013.

²⁹ The few resources in English regarding Nishida Tenkō include the above-mentioned partial translation titled *A New Road to Ancient Truth* and a series of articles by Winston Davis reflecting a clearly reductionist perspective. See (Davis 1975, 1975).

scholarly attention.³⁰ In any case, the realization that Japanese scholarship tends to entirely bypass the contribution of these two individuals provides another incentive for examining their legacy.

3.1. Link to Developments in Postwar Japan

Regardless of location, war casts a profoundly negative shadow on efforts to reach beyond sectarian and national boundaries. Clearly, people living in Japan³¹ experienced a long period of darkness, often characterized by Japanese historians as the “fifteen-year war” (*jūgonen sensō*) because the country was almost continuously at war between 1931 and 1945.³² That period could even be extended to the string of wars that occurred at regular intervals beginning with the Taiwan expedition of May 1874.³³ This begs the question of how this immense trauma was overcome, and how transreligious attempts began to reemerge after the Pacific War.

In this regard, it is startling to realize that Imaoka organized a World Conference for International Peace through Religion in May 1931 in Tokyo³⁴ and then, though not as the sole organizer, did it again thirty-seven years later in Kyoto, with the Japanese-American Inter-Religious Consultation on Peace in January 1968.³⁵ This resulted, two years later, in the creation of the World Conference of Religions for Peace (WCRP), which is relatively active to this day under the name Religions for Peace.³⁶ In a nutshell, the WCRP resulted from the successful convergence of interests between Dana McLean Greeley—the last president of the American Unitarian Association (AUA) before its merging with the Universalists—and Niwano Nikkyō—the president of the Japanese Risshō Kōseikai—but, as detailed below when discussing the “Participation of Japanese Religious Groups in International Organizations,” this crucial encounter took place at the instigation of Imaoka.

Simultaneously, in the war’s aftermath, organizations derived from the traditional Buddhist denominations were launching similar movements in Kyoto, sometimes with the support of Christian churches. They included mostly the Shūkyōjin Kondankai (Religionists’ Consultation Group) founded in 1950 and the Kyōto Bukkyōto Kaigi (Conference of Kyoto Buddhists) founded in 1954, whose pacifist stance led to antinuclear demonstrations in the wake of an incident where a Japanese fishing crew was contaminated following the fallout from nuclear testing in the Bikini Atoll. Although both movements (the Unitarian driven one and the one in Kyoto) shared some common objectives, they failed to converge and even to communicate, likely because of their political divergences. The fact is that since the 1950s, such Buddhist organizations located in Kyoto were closely linked to the socialist movement, with Seno’o Girō (1890–1961) at the helm. Accordingly, Ōtani characterizes their political orientation as, “a peace movement emanating from the Socialist Party and the General Council of Trade Unions.”³⁷

In the immediate postwar period, considerable reconstruction was taking place, both in the country’s material infrastructure, almost completely destroyed during the war, and in public morale—all under the watchful eyes of the American Occupation authorities. Government policies

³⁰ The only work in English regarding Imaoka is (Williams and Imaoka 1984), aside from brief mentions in periodicals, especially those published by Risshō Kōseikai. Williams has in preparation a new monograph focusing on Imaoka and his thought.

³¹ Tenkō’s definition of what constitutes a “Japanese” person is interesting: “any person having come to this country is Japanese” (*kono kuni ni kita hito wa nihonjin*). Interview of Nishida Takeshi, 26 June 2013.

³² Expression credited to Tsurumi Shunsuke (b. 1922). See (Yoshida 1991, p. 134).

³³ This expedition (*Taiwan shuppei*, known in Taiwan as *Mudanshe shijian*) served as a trial balloon for sending the Japanese army abroad. See (Mōri 1996). It was followed by the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895), the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905), and the annexation of Korea (*Kankoku gappei*) in 1910.

³⁴ This is acknowledged as Imaoka’s proposal in the proceedings: “at the general meeting held in November 1930, Rev. N. Imaoka, a member of the Executive Committee made a proposal to hold a National Religious Conference for International Peace.” (Japan National Committee Japan National Committee of the World Conference for International Peace through Religion, p. 4). Nobuichirō was Imaoka’s original first name, but he later chose to read it Shin’ichirō.

³⁵ See (Kyoto Conference 1970).

³⁶ See Religions for Peace, “History,” <http://www.rfp.org/vision-history/history/> (accessed on 11 March 2017).

³⁷ (Ōtani 2012, p. 8). The abbreviation Sōhyō stands for Nihon Rōdō Kumiai Sōhyō Gikai, the General Council of Trade Unions of Japan, a labor federation founded in 1950.

proved beneficial to new religious movements of various stripes, which mushroomed, thanks in particular to tax laws favoring religious nonprofit organizations, and also because traditional religions had been tarnished by the mainstream clergy's collaboration in the war.³⁸

It is within this context that in 1948 Imaoka launched a new organization called "Kiitsu Kyōkai," literally the "Return to Oneness Church." The word "oneness"³⁹ was charged with several meanings, including the Unitarian ideals, the objectives of the Concordia Association (the same pronunciation but different characters for Kyōkai) created by his mentor Anesaki,⁴⁰ and the dream embedded in the new term "free religion" (*jiyū shūkyō*).⁴¹ The launch of Kiitsu Kyōkai appears to have been part of a larger strategy because it also coincided with Imaoka's creation of the Nihon Jiyū Shūkyō Renmei (Japanese Association for Free Religion). Four years later, in 1952, this group became the first Japanese religious organization to join the International Association for Liberal Christianity and Religious Freedom (now the IARF).⁴² It may prove useful to see how Imaoka himself expressed the idea of "free religion." In the foreword to a book published on the occasion of his hundredth birthday, he recapped the postwar developments, adding:

And, together with like-minded people in Japan and in different foreign countries, we believed that "religion does not consist of religious organizations or doctrines: it is nothing else than the realization and the manifestation of the independent, creative, and incomparably sacred (*shinsei muhi*) human nature (*ningensei*) shared by everyone." Thus, insofar as even education, culture, politics, and economy are expressions of the sacred human nature, I reached the conclusion that everything is Free Religion (to avoid adhering to the word "religion," one could also simply speak of "the human way").⁴³

In another passage, Imaoka explains that in naming his organization Kiitsu Kyōkai, his intentions were to encourage "Eastern and Western civilizations to return to oneness" (*tōzai bunmei no kiitsu*) and to promote "cooperation between the various religions" (*shoshūkyō no teikei*).⁴⁴

3.2. Participation of Japanese Religious Groups in International Organizations

Thus, one of the major organizations whose fate became linked to Imaoka is the International Association for Religious Freedom (IARF), which has undergone several name changes and shifts in its objectives. It emerged in 1900 in Boston as the International Council of Unitarian and Other Liberal Religious Thinkers and Workers⁴⁵ and celebrated its centennial in 2000.

³⁸ Regarding the mood prevalent during that period, see (Dorman 2012).

³⁹ Tenkō shared with Imaoka this fascination with "oneness" (or "the one"), which he often identified as "light" (*hikari*). This seems to suggest a connection with the Zen kōan involving the question "if everything returns to the one, where does the one return?" It was included in the *Recorded Sayings of Zhaozhou* and later in *The Transmission of the Flame*, CDL 10, T 51 no. 2076, 278a02. Constitutes also case 45 in *The Emerald Cliff Record*, BYL, T 48 no. 2003, 181c17. See (Green 1998, p. 222).

⁴⁰ Anesaki died one year later but saw the emergence of these organizations.

⁴¹ This was also a way for Imaoka to honor Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882) and the Free Religious Association created in 1867, to which Emerson lent his name and support. Part of the ambiguity of this term in Japanese is that the expression *Jiyū* also serves to translate the adjective "liberal." For instance, already in 1891 the School of Liberal Theology created by the Unitarians in Japan was called *Jiyū Shingakkō*.

⁴² The renaming of this organization also resulted from an initiative taken by Imaoka. It was first suggested in 1952 to delete the word "Christianity," but the motion was rejected. Eventually, the renaming took place in 1969. (IARF 2001, p. 115). The new name is interesting in itself, and may have been the result either of divergent opinions or of a slight misunderstanding between Japanese and English speakers. The Japanese term *Jiyū Shūkyō* unambiguously means "free religion," whereas the English name of the organization became International Association for Religious Freedom. There is thus a huge gap between the Japanese equivalent "Kokusai Jiyū Shūkyō Renmei," still implying "free religion," and the English name of the organization, where "religious freedom" has a completely different connotation. It may also have been a mischievous trick achieved by Imaoka without the knowledge of his foreign counterparts.

⁴³ (Imaoka 1981), foreword (unpaginated).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 499.

⁴⁵ See the fascinating picture of the 1920 meeting in Boston, included as Figure 9 in (Mohr 2014, p. 173). It includes two Unitarian representatives from Japan, MacCauley and Uchigasaki, as well as Yogānanda (1893–1952) from India.

One of our tasks as scholars is to attempt to keep track of these shape-shifting organizations and their Japanese counterparts, and to identify those who are funding their activities.⁴⁶ Although in 1952 the Japanese chapter of the IARF was limited to Imaoka's Kiitsu Kyōkai, in 1969 two new Japanese organizations joined the group at Imaoka's request: the Risshō Kōseikai⁴⁷ and the Konkōkyō Izuo Kyōkai. In the following year, the above-mentioned Tsubaki Grand Shrine also added its membership. Ittōen⁴⁸ joined the group in 1981, followed by Sōhonzan Shitennōji in 1990.⁴⁹ Currently, there is still an IARF Japan Liaison Committee comprised of all the above organizations but the Tsubaki Grand Shrine, plus four new groups.⁵⁰ Yet none of the mainstream Japanese religious organizations are represented.⁵¹

This leads to the observation that, although the intentions behind the creation of the IARF and the WCRP were remarkable, they never succeeded in gaining traction among the leading traditional religious denominations in Japan. On the one hand, changes in the mentality of those born in the postwar period and their more pragmatic or sometimes even materialist perspective played a role in this lack of popularity. On the other hand, this appears to be related to the demise of Imaoka, the charismatic creator of the Japanese Association for Free Religion.⁵² Another factor is that those who participate in these organizations tend also to sit on the committees of like-minded groups so that there is an overlap in their roles; when such an individual dies, all related groups are affected. Fragmentation into too many organizations pursuing similar goals has been an endemic problem in Japanese NGOs.

3.3. Toward New Conceptual Frameworks

Rather than criticize the current inertia of some of these organizations, let us consider how the ideas that sparked their initial fire could be rekindled and how their mandates could be renewed. There is no ready-made solution that could immediately resolve all the issues that have been lingering since the late 1980s and any new initiative will need to result from the consensus of many dedicated people, but we can begin by putting some cards on the table.

For a long time, interreligious conversations, or so-called dialogues, have been dominated in the West by monotheistic religions, in particular in the wake of the Second Vatican Council, whereas in Japan, new religious movements have been the most active. This suggests that the main incentive for participating in such activities is the practical benefit that an organization can derive in terms of international recognition and outreach to a wider audience. Special events such as conferences are often organized by specific denominations, with the majority of participants being ministers, ordained individuals, and believers from various religious traditions—individuals who have dedicated their lives to lofty ideals of peace, at both the personal and the planetary level. A large number of participants attend dressed in full religious regalia. Gatherings often conclude with vague statements about world peace and goodwill. To an outside observer, such activities can appear almost farcical and certainly no challenge to the status quo.

⁴⁶ Nishida Takeshi remarked that in recent years the IARF has become too dependent on Japan. Interview, 26 June 2013.

⁴⁷ The role of Imaoka as bridge-builder is acknowledged in the biography of the Risshō Kōseikai founder, in (Nezu 2000, p. 89). This passage discloses how in 1978 Imaoka introduced the Unitarian Dana McLean Greeley (1908–1986) to Niwano Nikkyō, and how this resulted in a decisive collaboration between the two organizations. Greeley was the last president of the American Unitarian Association (AUA) and was instrumental in engineering the transition to the new Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA), the result of a merger with the Universalists.

⁴⁸ Strictly speaking, Ittōen is not a religious organization, though the insights of its founder, Tenkō, were of a deeply religious nature. His grandson mentioned the secularization (*sezokuka*) of the organization after Tenkō's demise in 1968. Interview of Nishida Takeshi, 26 June 2013. Today Ittōen's legal status is that of an incorporated foundation (*zaidan hōjin*).

⁴⁹ (IARF 2001, p. 113).

⁵⁰ <http://www.relnet.co.jp/jlc/> (accessed on 11 March 2017).

⁵¹ The Tendai denomination has been organizing its own event, called Hieizan Shūkyō Samitto (the Religious Summit Meeting on Mt. Hiei, according to the official translation) since 1987. See <http://www.tendai.or.jp/summit/> (accessed on 11 March 2017).

⁵² Both the Kiitsu Kyōkai and the Nihon Jiyū Shūkyō Renmei have all but vanished with the death of their founder, Imaoka, in 1988.

What could constitute a fruitful alternative? There is an increasing need for *scholarly* conversations focusing on transreligious issues. It would be worthwhile to explore the idea of some sort of academic structure to study interreligious questions and cross-pollination between religious traditions. This would not compete with the IARF and the WCRP or other associations made up of religious believers, which are fulfilling an important but different role. The academic study group could cooperate with these associations or even serve as a consultative body for them.⁵³

Regarding the conceptual framework guiding such an endeavor, its first task would be to revisit the fundamental issue of universality, which has been set aside for too long. At first sight, the most straightforward reply to asking, “what is universal?” would be to indicate what is independent of location and time. Yet, understandably, this triggers a plethora of follow-up questions, which reflect skepticism about the possibility to identify such universals. Since religious dogma and most of the elements constituting established religious traditions do not belong to this category, this conceptual framework needs to be grounded in non-discursive elements, in phenomena that remain unaffected by language. If this sounds familiar, it may be because of Imaoka’s concept of free religion, discussed previously. The problem with Imaoka’s formulation of free religion is that it almost constitutes an oxymoron, as if we were to speak of a religion without religion. When envisioning this from a philosophical perspective, there are some seemingly more constructive avenues to follow.

I propose to establish a typology of universal formulations regrouped under three headings: empirical, epistemological, and ethical. Such approaches can be summarized by speaking of the “three Es,” referring to three aspects of existence whose validity, especially for the first two, remains stable, regardless of time and place, at least on our planet. It is precisely because the ethical component is the most debatable that this special issue focuses on the interaction between violence and its convoluted intertwinement with Japanese religions. Regarding the empirical dimension, it refers to pre-linguistic occurrences, such as death, about which every person can agree regardless of his or her belief system. The epistemological approach refers to the scrutiny of how the human mind works and to the components of psychology that appear unrelated to cultural or linguistic elements, such as those highlighted in neuroscience.

One more question needs to be addressed, however. Some readers may wonder about the relation between Japanese religions, our hopes for transreligious conversations, and a nonviolent future. Why Japan in particular? And is there some specific potential of Japanese religions that could contribute to the task?

On the one hand, Japan displays one of the most diverse religious landscapes on earth. It could also be argued that the trauma of wartime and the exploitation of religion for the purpose of an absurd fantasy about world domination, if properly acknowledged and absorbed in collective memory through genuine repentance, have the potential of morphing into positive energy. Much like the individual trauma experienced by war veterans, when properly processed, collective trauma has the potential to yield an inexhaustible source of generosity. We can also evoke the dedication of some of the victims of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings, who have devoted their lives to promoting peace worldwide.

On the other hand, claims about Japanese uniqueness are highly suspicious, and there is nothing more dangerous than these resurgences of nationalist discourse under various guises. Yet the case of Japan and of its drift toward militarism before and during the Pacific War is instructive because we can examine how this drift occurred. Secondly, we can scrutinize how those who opposed the warmongers’ race toward conflict managed not only to survive but also to rebuild confidence in ideas of internationalism and pacifism. Thirdly, one may venture to say that Japan, because of its religious plurality and the conservative tendency of its religious traditions, can serve as a perfect testing ground for new attempts to reach out beyond the thick walls of religious doctrines and sectarian identities.

⁵³ A tentative name for such an academic endeavor could be Transreligious Research Association (TRA) (*Tsūshūkyō kenkyūkai*).

This may serve as an additional reason why Japan could serve as a good litmus test: precisely because sectarian consciousness is so deeply anchored. That said, there is also a genuine desire to be liberated from the burdensome aspects of tradition, especially in the younger generation.⁵⁴ Lastly, regarding the core teachings of Buddhism, they tend to stand out as distinct from the particular historical developments that took place on Japanese soil, for instance regarding monastic precepts, which have been virtually abolished after Saichō, further relativized through Shinran's choice to get married, and then given a final blow with the 1872 government edict encouraging the clergy to marry and to eat meat. Yet, if to a certain extent some of the Buddhist teachings survived in Japan despite such challenges, it may be precisely because they are grounded in an awareness unaffected by the geographical context or the ups and downs of history. A more delicate question is the extent to which Japanese Buddhism has survived and will survive the upheavals following the Meiji Restoration and its established wartime collaboration. Although only the future will tell whether Japanese Buddhism has the potential to bounce back and find a new footing, in the early twenty-first century, the prognosis on this sensitive issue does not look promising.⁵⁵

4. Conclusions

In this snapshot of Japanese religious and intellectual history, I have attempted to describe the connections between the universalism that emerged during the Meiji era and postwar efforts to promote pacifism and transreligious conversations. Although Imaoka Shin'ichirō and Nishida Tenkō illustrate the neglected continuity between these two time periods, they also represent one particular approach to these issues. They never questioned the role of the emperor, and they rejected socialist and other attempts to change Japanese society. Although both approaches shared the goals of internationalization and peace, they split between those sympathetic to socialist ideas and those who put more emphasis on an "inner revolution." Efforts toward a unified front were fragmented as a result, contributing to the mixed history of Japanese universalist and pacifist movements in the 21st century.

Despite such caveats, this article also suggests that some of the ideas related to universalism could be revisited and may provide incentives to overcome the current inertia in transreligious conversations. There is a real need to construct robust conceptual frameworks that can withstand jingoistic onslaughts and can also yield concrete educational benefits. Yet addressing transreligious issues ought to be done cautiously, using rigorous critical tools and learning from past attempts. We need to be able to teach about universality without falling into the trap of mere belief or wishful thinking. Moreover, without safeguards, even the idea of universality can easily be twisted to suit particular political or religious agendas. If transreligious attempts are to be resurrected, they need to be built on firmer ground and would benefit from scholarly scrutiny. Re-examining the critical juncture of the Meiji era—whose early globalization bears marked similarities to current issues—should prove crucial in avoiding pitfalls, while the current resurgence of populist and nationalist discourses makes it all the more urgent to earnestly engage in such transnational and transreligious conversations.

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⁵⁴ It has been pointed out that one of the driving forces for many youths joining Asahara and his infamous Aum cult was precisely their disillusion with established Japanese traditions. See (Reader 2000).

⁵⁵ For instance, see (Ukai 2015), who shows how fast temple are being shut down, especially in rural areas.

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