



HOKKAIDO UNIVERSITY

Title	The “Irrational” in Germany and Japan at the Beginning of the 20th Century
Author(s)	Miyajima, Shunichi
Citation	Journal of the Faculty of Humanities and Human Sciences, 21, 1-5
Issue Date	2026-02
DOI	https://doi.org/10.14943/jfhhs.21.1
Doc URL	https://hdl.handle.net/2115/98923
Type	departmental bulletin paper
File Information	03_MIYAJIMA.pdf



The “Irrational” in Germany and Japan at the Beginning of the 20th Century¹

Shunichi MIYAJIMA

Abstract: There is a growing interest in comparison in global history in the field of religious studies. This paper examines interest in the “irrational” in Germany and Japan during the early 20th century from this perspective. In Germany, Rudolf Otto’s *The Idea of the Holy* was published in 1917, and Friedrich Heiler’s *Prayer* in 1918. In this period, religious phenomenologists argued that the “irrational” was at the core of religion. As a result, the oppositional structure between “irrational” religion and rational science was emphasized. Scientific methods were considered to be limited in terms of their productiveness for studying religion, which led to an emphasis on the phenomenological approach. Further, interest in the “irrational” in a broad sense also grew in Japan during the same period; in the early 1910s, scholars conducted experiments to prove the reality of supernatural power. This phenomenon emerged against a popular interest in Spiritualism. It was hoped that science might rationally prove the “irrational,” but those involved in the case were considered to have falsified their results and either took their own lives or were expelled from academia. This is the Senrigan incident. The beginning of the 20th century showed a growing interest in the “irrational” in both Japan and Germany, driven by a backlash against modernism that affected scholarship in both countries. However, the ways that it manifested itself and the responses to the “irrational” were different between the two countries. In Germany, phenomenological religious studies explored the “irrational,” while in Japan, scientism sought to confront it.

Keywords: irrational, phenomenology, Spiritualism, Scientism

1. Introduction

Interest in global history is steadily growing in the field of religious studies. In this paper, I will examine how the notion of “irrationality” emerged as a significant theme in both Germany and Japan in the early 20th century.

¹ Read at a session on “XXIII International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR) World Congress” at Jagiellonian University, Kraków, Poland, August 29, 2025. The author thanks the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science for the KAKENHI (Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research (B): Grant Number 24K00010 and (C): Grant Number 24K03391, which supported the research on which this article is based.

2. German religious studies in the early 20th century

In Germany, Rudolf Otto's *The Idea of the Holy* (1917) was followed by Friedrich Heiler's *Prayer* (1918). Both works played an important role in shaping religious studies in Germany during the Weimar Republic, and both authors have generally been regarded as religious phenomenologists.

During this period, phenomenologists argued that "irrationality" lay at the core of religion. For instance, in his magnum opus *The Idea of the Holy*, Otto excluded rational elements from the category of "the holy" and defined the remaining "irrational" aspects as the *numinous*, which he regarded as the very essence of religion (Otto 1979). Similarly, Heiler criticized the rational interpretation of prayer in his major work and adopted a stance opposed to modern science (Heiler 1918).

Because religion was defined as essentially irrational, it was seen as standing in opposition to science. This led to an emphasis on the dichotomy between "irrational religion" and "rational science." Consequently, scientific methods were considered inadequate for the study of religion, while phenomenological approaches that stressed "intuition of essence" were prioritized (Heiler 1961). This dichotomy is thought to have persisted into the present (Ambasciano 2018).

The argument that "irrational" phenomena, such as religion, are difficult to study using "rational" modern scientific methods is understandable to a degree. However, in practice, it contributed to religious studies in Germany during the Weimar Republic, taking on a quasi-religious character itself. In other words, religious scholars acted as religious leaders, as if they were "prophets." (Flasche 1982)

3. Japan in the early 20th century

Meanwhile, interest in the "irrational" also increased in Japan during the same period. In the early 1910s, scholars who believed in psychic abilities carried out experiments to prove their authenticity, reflecting the growing popularity of spiritualism. A well-known example is the so-called the *Senrigan (Clairvoyance) incident*, described below.

4. The Senrigan (Clairvoyance) Incident

The Senrigan Incident consisted of a series of controversies over parapsychological experiments, including public demonstrations and disputes about authenticity, conducted in Japan from the 1900s to the early 1910s. The main figures included Tomokichi Fukurai of Tokyo Imperial University, Shinkichi Imamura of Kyoto Imperial University, and two women, Chizuko Mifune and Ikuko Nagao, who claimed clairvoyant and psychographic abilities.

5. The case of Chizuko Mifune

In 1909, Chizuko Mifune, a 23-year-old from Kumamoto Prefecture, began to attract public attention for her alleged clairvoyant powers. Her abilities were reportedly discovered by her brother-in-law, Takeo Kiyohara, who practiced spiritual therapy through hypnosis. From 1908, Chizuko performed "treatments" at the Kiyohara home, claiming to see inside the body using clairvoyance. At this time, Japan was experiencing a hypnosis boom, and many folk healers, including Kiyohara and Chizuko, practiced

alternative therapies (Kurita et al. 2019).

The *Tokyo Asahi Shimbun* (August 14, 1909) was the first newspaper to report on Chizuko, calling her a “mysterious clairvoyant.” The article noted that she had treated Kinoshita Hirotsugu, former president of Kyoto Imperial University. On February 19, 1910, Imamura Shinji of Tokyo Imperial University experimented on Chizuko during a visit to Kumamoto, using cards as test materials; she achieved a high accuracy rate. On April 9 of the same year, Fukurai Tomoyoshi and Imamura repeated the experiment with more strictly sealed cards. Although the attempt failed at first, after modifying the method, they recorded successful results. Fukurai later presented these findings at Tokyo Imperial University (April 25), which brought Chizuko into the national spotlight.

6. Public experiment and aftermath

On September 14, 1910, Chizuko and Fukurai, who had traveled to Tokyo, held a public experiment before contemporary scientists and journalists. However, due to the substitution of test materials, the results failed to establish the authenticity of her clairvoyance, and the event ended mainly as a topic of public debate. On September 15 and again on September 17, smaller follow-up experiments were conducted using methods preferred by Chizuko. The results were favorable, but skepticism persisted. Chizuko refused to perform in the same room with observers; even when she allowed someone to sit in an adjoining room, she positioned herself with her back turned, facing a wall or sliding door. As her hands, central to the test, remained hidden, even those sympathetic to Fukurai could not overcome their doubts. Ultimately, after returning to Kumamoto, Chizuko committed suicide on January 19, 1911.

7. The case of Ikuko Nagao

Another figure was Ikuko Nagao, the 40-year-old wife of Judge Yokichi Nagao of Marugame, Kagawa Prefecture. Ikuko had long been noted by acquaintances for her seemingly accurate predictions of disasters and other events. When Fukurai learned of her reputation, he experimented similarly to those with Chizuko and again obtained strikingly accurate results.

On November 12, 1910, Fukurai and Imamura carried out their first experiment with Ikuko. Unlike Chizuko, she performed her clairvoyance facing the participants and consistently achieved accurate outcomes. Moreover, the experiment used a different method, “psychic photography,” which involved undeveloped dry plates and was devised by Fukurai himself. Attempts to reproduce this method with Chizuko had failed, but with Ikuko, it successfully produced psychic photographs of characters shown to her in advance. As a result, Fukurai and his collaborators shifted their focus to experiments with Ikuko in Marugame.

8. Distrust of the experiment

From January 4, 1911, a series of clairvoyance and psychography experiments were conducted at the Nagao residence in Marugame, with the participation of physicist Kenjiro Yamakawa, former president of Tokyo Imperial University. Yamakawa pointed out numerous irregularities. For example, the Nagao side insisted on using a specific room for writing the words to be physically perceived. Yamakawa wrote the

words in that room while shielding them with his body, and Ikuko was unable to perceive them. In another case, traces of tampering were found on an envelope prepared by Yamakawa, which had been designed to reveal if it had been opened.

Yamakawa's experiments were carefully planned so that the conditions under which clairvoyance was successful or failed could be identified. Success occurred only when the writing was not hidden or when signs of the envelope being opened were detected. On January 12 of the same year, interference in the experiments was reported, and suspicion fell on Yokose Takayuki, a hypnotist staying at the Nagao household who was closely associated with Ikuko. This prompted public speculation about a possible affair between Yokose and Ikuko. As a result, attention shifted away from the authenticity of "clairvoyance" and "psychic photography" and toward scandal. On February 26, 1911, Ikuko died of illness. Yamakawa and his colleagues later published the experimental results, accompanied by photographs, and concluded that the phenomena were nothing more than tricks.

9. The End

The scientists involved in researching psychic phenomena also became targets of criticism from the mass media. Finally, they issued the conclusion that "clairvoyance is not science," effectively declaring the end of the controversy. As a result, the chance to clarify the authenticity of "clairvoyance" and "psychography" was lost. Likewise, individuals across Japan who had come forward as clairvoyants after Chizuko Mifune gained attention were soon branded as magicians or frauds and subjected to public criticism. Even after the deaths of Chizuko and Ikuko, their families continued to face hostility.

Fukurai, who had championed their abilities, was attacked even more harshly, denounced as both a "fraud" and a "pseudoscientist." This forced him to resign from the University of Tokyo. Despite his resignation, he continued to conduct experiments with other alleged clairvoyants, such as Takahashi Sadako and Mitani Koichi. However, these later trials were no longer public scientific experiments like those involving Chizuko and Ikuko. Over time, Fukurai himself declared that clairvoyant abilities could not be proven by scientific methods. He went on to publish *The Spiritual and Mystical World (Shinrei to Shinpisekai)* (Fukurai 1932), further accelerating his shift toward occultism. In other words, Fukurai had shifted from the role of a scientist to that of a religious leader.

10. Comparison and Analysis

Germany and Japan did not share the same historical or social circumstances, and the cases examined here differ in nature: in Germany, the discussion centered on scholarly texts, whereas in Japan, it unfolded through a socially controversial incident. Nonetheless, at the beginning of the 20th century, both countries witnessed an academic turn toward the "irrational," arguably as a reaction against modern rationalism.

In German religious studies, the exploration of the irrational developed through a discipline with its own methodology, namely, religious phenomenology. By contrast, in Japan, as seen in the Senrigan Incident, attempts to approach the irrational were framed in rational and scientific terms. Thus, in Japan, scientism confronted the irrational.

The reasons for these differences have yet to be fully analyzed. From my current perspective, one factor lies in the background of German religious studies, which was shaped by liberal Protestant traditions.

Even when addressing “irrational” phenomena, German religious studies developed as a theological endeavor rooted in Christian theology, though distinct from it.

Japan, however, lacked a Christian theological foundation. It had no longstanding intellectual tradition for addressing irrational phenomena, which left modern science as the main framework for their investigation.

11. Limitations

This interpretation remains provisional. Two further issues need to be examined in future research. First is the reception of spiritualism in Germany: how far scientific inquiry engaged with the irrational (and if it did not, why not). Second is the reception of German religious studies in Japan: to what extent approaches to the irrational outside of natural science were developed (or failed to develop). These issues will be addressed in future discussions.

References

- Ambasciano, Leonardo, *An Unnatural History of Religions-Academia, Post-truth and the Quest for Scientific Knowledge*, Bloomsbury Academic, 2018
- Flasche, Reiner, Religionsmodelle und Erkenntnisprinzipien der Religionswissenschaft in der Weimarer Zeit. Cancik, Hubert (Hrsg.), *Religions- und Geistesgeschichte der Weimarer Republik*, Düsseldorf, 1982, S.261-276
- Fukurai, Tomokichi, *The Spiritual and Mystical World (Shinrei to Shinpisekai)*, Jinbun-shoin, 1932.
- Heiler, Friedrich, *Das Gebet. Eine Religionsgeschichtliche und Religions-psychologische Untersuchung*, Reinhardt, München, 1918 (5.Aufl. 1923).
- Heiler, Friedrich, *Erscheinungsformen und Wesen der Religion*, W. Kohlhammer, Stuttgart, 1961.
- Kurita, H., Tsukada, H. and Yoshinaga S., (ed.), *Modern and Contemporary Japanese Folk Psychotherapy (Kingendainihon no Minkanseishinryouhou)*, Kokusho-kankoukai, 2019.
- Otto, Rudolf, *Das Heilige: Über das Irrationale in der Idee des Göttlichen und sein Verhältnis zum Rationalen*, Beck, 1979 (1917)