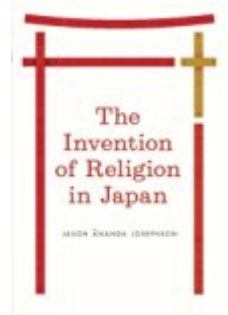


Jason Ānanda Josephson. *The Invention of Religion in Japan*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012. xiii + 387 pages \$30.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-226-41234-4.



Reviewed by Wilburn Hansen

Published on H-Shukyo (July, 2013)

Commissioned by Jolyon B. Thomas (University of Pennsylvania)

One popular formula for producing new work on Japanese religions is to unearth previously untranslated text produced by an understudied figure, group, or segment of society, and then raise a random theoretical question as a pretext for displaying philological virtuosity in hopes of disguising analytical underdevelopment. This is not the formula used by Professor Josephson. The range of Japanese primary sources consulted in his book is prodigious, as is his familiarity and usage of multidisciplinary theoretical works by familiar names from postmodern discourse. That is to say, Josephson's book is not about "a man and his work," or "a doctrine and its development." Josephson has set out on an unusual track for scholars of Japanese religions. In fact, this book is, in an important sense, not necessarily about Japan. Japan is the example, the familiar case study for his readers. Josephson conveniently uses the familiar example of Japan to show convincingly that many or even most of us are applying the term "religion" all too thoughtlessly and, at best, anachronistically. Furthermore, and per-

haps more importantly, Josephson suggests that if we scholars and students of religion think in terms of a secular/religious binary schema, where the secular is committed to the extinction of the religious, we are sorely mistaken.

Josephson's book is on one level an exercise in grappling with changes in theoretical religious studies. He starts his theoretical project by seeking how and when the concept of religion became available to the Japanese. Josephson takes a hard line by refusing to bend to scholars who think of religion as something universal, "a fundamental dimension of human experience." Josephson is also not receptive to Japan-focused scholarship that seeks to establish a "continuity of usage" for the Japanese term *shūkyō*, which is most often used to translate the word "religion." He dismisses this option handily because he sides with those who root the concept in "modernity," and who find it deeply indebted to (and working in concert with) the goals of missionary Christianity. Because of that stance he does well to open his search for

the concept in Japan with 1853 and the arrival of Commodore Perry's Black Ships.

In order to provide the context for this pivotal event, Josephson has to backtrack to demonstrate how earlier Christianity was conceived of without the modern concept of religion, that is, before the modern concept developed in Japan through contact with the West after 1853. This he pulls off quite well by displaying familiarity with a wide range of early modern Japanese textual sources as well as theoretical models for explaining how Christianity and other "religions" were classified and categorized without modern Christian sensibilities. With a religion-less past established, Josephson returns to the 1850s when the modern Christian concept of religion became the reality with which the Japanese would have to deal. However, Josephson also deftly demonstrates that the Japanese were historically prepared to be actively involved in manipulation and indigenization of the concept.

A fairly well-known topic in Japanese religious studies of the nineteenth century is the Japanese governmental insistence that Shinto was not a religion. The historical understanding of this political stance most favorable to the Japanese is one in which the annulment of the unequal treaties with the Western nations is the justifiable reason behind this "obviously absurd" claim. This usual response (not Josephson's) is a cynical evaluation that understands Meiji-era politicians to be acting duplicitously, knowing full well that Shinto was a religion while arguing the opposite in order to be able to declare a freedom of religion. It is read as a self-serving and specious policy hoping to impress the Western nations, on the one hand by promoting freedom of worship, while at the same time requiring "ritual" observance of the cult of the Japanese emperor. I surmise that it was this stance on the nature of Shinto that started the chain reaction leading to Josephson's attempt to re-evaluate theoretical scholarship on religious studies in a time of global modernity. This topic

brings Josephson's work into a conversation shared with Talal Asad and Isomae Junichi and their work on the relationship between secularity and religion in the modern era.

Josephson asserts that the claim to Shinto's secular status was based on over a hundred years of discourse on science introduced slowly but convincingly from the Western nations, which later came to be reconstructed and reinterpreted by a Japanese intellectual movement with strong nativist and proto-nationalist proclivities. To make his long argument short, this intellectual movement repeatedly made the assertion that the empirically verifiable, publicly reproducible results of Western science, which were originally inspired by and equally identifiable through Japanese classical sources, depended on the power of Japanese *kami*, that is, Shinto. However, at this time in the early eighteenth century, the modern Christian-determined concept of religion had yet to reach Japan. Moreover, secularized Western scientific discoveries and procedures, intentionally stripped of Christian influence by government decree, were becoming well known in educated circles in early modern Japan.

It is during this part of Josephson's argument that he acknowledges he is departing from generations of English-language scholarship on the aforementioned Japanese intellectual movement, known by the Japanese term *kokugaku*, by advancing yet another English phrase. Josephson's phrase, "National Science," works very well in representing his argument that secular Western science and claims for Japanese spiritual/mythological reality were being conflated into a new understanding of reality for the ordinary Japanese citizen starting in the late eighteenth century. It also supports the late *kokugaku* principle that the sacred status of the Japanese emperor, the national polity which that sacred status produced, and scientific representations of the cosmos such as the Copernican solar system were in all three cases not matters of faith or belief. However, this

term that works so conveniently for those arguments does not work well, if at all, with the majority of the work of the earlier “great men” of *koku-gaku* and their academies of followers, since they were motivated chiefly by studies of ancient Japanese poetry.

So in Josephson’s argument National Science paved the way for a nonreligious understanding of Shinto that became the political ideology for the modern nation-state of Japan created in the Meiji period. According to Josephson, he is mapping the formation of the Japanese Shinto secular. This Shinto secular was to be the way of thinking, the way of understanding the world that was to create the national identity supported by the political authorities in the Meiji period. This Shinto secular was to dominate and define the public sphere of the Japanese citizen. In turn, the private sphere was to become the proper place for religion in modern Japan.

The modern Christian concept of religion with which Josephson’s book is concerned is defined as different from other Japan scholars’ concepts of religion in Japan. Josephson’s examples from Ian Reader’s and Michael Pye’s work (p. 7) make this difference quite evident. It is also then quite removed from the Universalist or Eliadean concepts employed by those in other fields of religious studies. Josephson asserts that this modern concept first confronted the Japanese in their diplomatic dealings with the Americans on Perry’s ship, which was soon followed by the religiously oriented demands of several other European nations. Josephson goes to lengths to deny that the Japanese simply had this concept forced upon them against their will. He demonstrates how this concept was debated domestically and internationally, and as a result of that debate, Japanese scholars purposely defined Japanese religion as distinct from the Japanese secular.

In fact, one important result of Josephson’s mapping of the invention of the Japanese secular and the Japanese religious is a new understand-

ing of their relationship. The secular and the religious are not seen as a binary structure in conflict, bent on denial of the truths along with the destruction of the stability of the other. Instead, Josephson identifies a third term involved in this modern invention of the secular and the religious. This third term, in a now trinary structure transcending the binary structures of Asad and Iso-mae, is superstition. Superstitions are the banned delusions; the obstacles to state-sanctioned reality; and the religious ideas that have failed to “make the cut” of acceptable spirituality.

In summary, Josephson has used well-documented examples of the creation of various Japanese belief systems in the modern era to suggest a new model for understanding the colonial past of religious studies and to provide new tools and models for grappling with continuing change in religious studies theory, extending his concern to the evolving meaning(s) of the term “religion” itself. Josephson’s book is erudite, informative, and interesting. It should be a worthwhile read for Japan scholars as well as scholars and students interested in religious studies theory and history. However, readers must decide for themselves whether Josephson satisfies their understanding of the concept of religion and whether the concept of religion that this study circles was as novel to Japan as he contends. Also, Josephson will be held to account for the new term “National Science,” and for establishing the limits, or more specifically the shortcomings of this choice. Finally, Josephson’s “trinary” is insightful, but cannot escape the problems associated with nebulous borders and permeable membranes, and would benefit from more testing on other case studies. However, these few quibbles aside, this work contributes substantially to the fields of Japan studies and religious studies, and is worthy of all controversy and contestation it should produce.

a wide range of

‘
,
S
-
,
S
R
S

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-shukyo>

Citation: Wilburn Hansen. Review of Josephson, Jason Ānanda. *The Invention of Religion in Japan*. H-Shukyo, H-Net Reviews. July, 2013.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=38984>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.