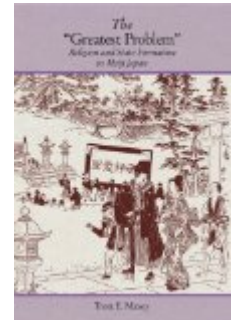


Trent Maxey. *The "Greatest Problem": Religion and State Formation in Meiji Japan.* Harvard University Asia Center, 2014. ISBN 978-0-674-49199-1.



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Critical studies of the formation of the category of religion stand out as one of the major trends in recent scholarship on the religious history of modern Japan.[1] Trent Maxey's *The "Greatest Problem": Religion and State Formation in Meiji Japan* productively expands this line of inquiry by combining intellectual and political history to explicate the problems posed by the category of religion for the architects of the Meiji state. Maxey's superb analysis of the many twists and turns officials took in their approach to religion policy carefully historicizes this complicated process and reveals how the Meiji government adapted contemporary ideas and institutions from the West. They did this not in a blind, imitative fashion but with a keen sense of how they might facilitate their urgent domestic task of consolidating political power and constructing a cohesive national identity in post-Restoration Japan. Seen from this perspective, the creation of imperial rites and the concomitant concern with isolating the imperial institution from religious debate and contestation

no longer appear as premodern remnants but as thoroughly modern phenomena.

The book's five chapters follow the chronology of what Maxey terms the "five separations": the "disassociation of Shinto kami from Buddhist deities" in 1868; the "separation of the Bureau of Rites from the Ministry of Doctrine" in 1872; the "separation of Shinto priests from doctrinal instructors" in 1882; the "constitutional separation of state and religion" in 1889; and the "administrative separation of the Home Ministry Bureau of Shrines from the Bureau of Religion" in 1900 (p. 3). Over the first half of the book Maxey's narrative revisits several topics that are familiar to any student of nineteenth-century Japan, including the political thought of Aizawa Seishisai, the "discovery" of the Urakami Christians, the rise and fall of the doctrinal instructor system, the Iwakura Embassy, and the Meiroku Society. While each of these topics has been explored from various angles in previous scholarship, Maxey productively re-reads them through the prism of his analytic frame of the "crisis of conversion," skillfully

drawing out their interconnected significance in light of his broader focus on religion—the titular “greatest problem”—in the context of nation-building and diplomacy by the Meiji state.[2]

The opening chapter, “The Crisis of Conversion in Restoration Japan, 1868-1872,” begins with a discussion of the Mito-domain scholar-official Aizawa Seishisai and his 1825 work *New Theses* (*Shinron*). This treatise advocated an ideal form of governance based on the principle of the “unity of rite and rule” (*saisei itchi*)—restoring the emperor’s authority as political sovereign and reinstating his sacerdotal role for conducting rites of state. For Aizawa, Christianity figured as a potent ideological force that aided the European powers in their conquest of foreign lands; *saisei itchi* would regenerate and unify a Japanese politico-spiritual community that would serve as a bulwark against this external threat. Aizawa’s ideas remained influential in Restoration Japan and informed the logic underlying the “crisis of conversion.” At the heart of this crisis, Maxey argues, was the post-Restoration political elites’ recognition of the “ineradically contingent nature of belief and identification,” which complicated their pressing task of creating a shared sense of national consciousness to establish ideological legitimacy in the face of domestic and international challenges to the sovereignty of the newly formed Meiji State (p. 19). Christianity, in their view, continued to represent a threat to a nascent Japanese community ordered around the idea of a national polity (*kokutai*) centered on the authority of the imperial institution. The 1867 discovery of a band of crypto-Christians in Urakami, a village near Nagasaki, served to confirm and deepen such suspicions. Driven partly by a desire to guard against the spread of Christianity, the new government launched the Great Promulgation Campaign in 1870 with the chief goal of spreading a national teaching that could “unite the hearts of the masses” and ensure loyalty to the imperial government (p. 33). At the same time, Maxey shows, even as the idiom of Shinto was being deployed to rein-

state the emperor as a state ritualist who would achieve the goal of restoring the unity of rite and rule, internecine debates among Shinto sectarians regarding proper teachings on *kami* and the nature of the afterlife revealed the contingent and contested nature of religion, confirming for many of the Meiji oligarchy that the imperial institution must be sealed off as nonreligious in order to insulate it from the vagaries of such contestation.

In chapter 2, “Religion and Diplomacy in a Semicolonial World, 1853–1873,” Maxey’s attention turns to consider the influence of international political and cultural relations in shaping domestic policy. He returns to the Urakami Christians to show how their persecution became something of a *cause célèbre* among politicians and religious leaders in the West, who cited the case as evidence of Japan’s uncivilized approach to religious liberty—the guarantee of which had already crystallized as a prerequisite for future treaty revisions in the minds of Western diplomats. Diplomatic discussions over the issue of religious freedom would follow the members of the Iwakura Embassy throughout their travels in North America and Europe in 1871-73, and formed a major part of the “catechism of diplomacy” they received in audience with their Western interlocutors (p. 76). This chapter highlights many astute and sober observations on the treatment of religious minorities and the potential conflicts between religious and national loyalties in the West as noted by members of the embassy, who were themselves generally skeptical in matters of religious belief. Their comments demonstrate how Japan and European nations faced a similar predicament, that is, “how does a nation-state secure uncontested loyalty when a ‘national’ population can be so easily fragmented by religion?” (p. 91). Maxey concludes that, just as important as its clarification of the diplomatic necessity of legalizing Christianity, was the embassy’s revelation of the extent to which the status of “Christianity” and “religion” more generally was widely contested within European countries and the United

States. Not only was there conflict between Christian sects—displayed quite vividly in the ongoing *Kulturkampf* in Bismarck's Germany—but debates raged over the proper bounds of state and religious authority in the realm of education. When the embassy returned to Japan in 1873, it had become clear that legislating a general category of “religion,” rather than Christianity in particular, was the best way to assuage the treaty powers' concerns over religious freedom while maintaining the prerogative to regulate religion for the sake of social order.

Chapter 3, “Civilizing Faith and Subjectified Religion 1872-1877,” explores how a new concern for addressing the broader category of “religion” in the abstract, a development largely attributed to the influence of the Iwakura Embassy, impacted contemporary debates. Focusing on the writings of Tsuda Mamichi, Nishi Amane, Katō Hiroyuki, and Mori Arinori, Maxey offers a close reading of Meiroku Society approaches to the relationship of religion to law, society, and education. Their discourse shifted away from discussions of how to counter Christianity and instead turned to a new dilemma: “the state had to disassociate itself from the unstable realm of private belief (religion) in the interest of effective governance, but it also had to retain some sort of claim over inner beliefs if the ‘unenlightened’ majority was to be effectively molded into a body of civilized, national subjects” (p. 94). Maxey proceeds to demonstrate how this conceptual dilemma played out in more practical terms through an analysis of Shimaji Mokurai's criticism of the Ministry of Doctrine and successful push to remove Shin Buddhist clergy from its Great Teaching Academy and system of doctrinal instructors. Shimaji argued for the separation of political authority and religion in general (not simply Buddhism) and asserted that Shin Buddhists could best serve society—and the nation—if left free from state interference to operate within the realm of private belief. Maxey describes the resulting arrangement as the “subjectification of religion,” which points to “the

way in which the claim for an authentic and self-determining religious identity that stands apart from state power actually presumes that power and responds to its demands” (p. 129). This subject position proved both liberating and isolating.

Chapter 4, “Seeking a ‘Religious Settlement,’ 1877-1884,” outlines how a number of mounting pressures, including criticisms of the imperial institution as “theocratic,” continuing doctrinal debates among Shinto partisans, and hostile relations between Buddhists and Christians all pushed the government to devise a “religious settlement” that could shield the state and its policies “from being held hostage by ‘religious’ interests” (p. 179). Here Maxey underscores how both diplomatic and domestic political concerns informed the thinking of the architects of the settlement. Continuing in the trajectory initiated by Shimaji Mokurai, government policy gradually developed a construct of religion as a realm of private belief, with the goal of bestowing a degree of freedom upon the religious sphere that would, ideally, also simultaneously exclude it from the public realm of governance.

The subsequent evolution of the “religious settlement” forms the core of chapter 5, “The Religious Constitution of Meiji Japan, 1888-1900.” In particular, Maxey demonstrates how the Imperial Constitution enshrined in law the principle of religious freedom, rather than toleration, while it also both “sacralized and secularized the imperial institution” (p. 185). In his discussion of Article 28, [4] Maxey neatly encapsulates the limitations imposed on the public exercise of religion in exchange for freedom of private belief when he writes that the constitution “offered the avowedly religious the promise of freedom in proportion to their irrelevance to and undifferentiated treatment by the state” (p. 184). Shinto and Buddhist clergy, he notes, quickly recognized the nature of this trade-off. In response Shinto priests lobbied to revive the Department of Divinities, which would help legitimize their claims to “nonreli-

gious” status, while Buddhists sought to attain an elevated status as an established, rather than simply tolerated, religion, particularly vis-à-vis Christianity. Maxey closely tracks the ways in which these two partisan pursuits attempted to engage in constitutional politics over the course of the 1890s—as well as the press’s critique of this engagement—and argues that “the Diet provided the primary stage on which the political disposition of religion under the constitution was negotiated and enforced” (p. 185).

Carefully researched and cogently argued throughout, *The “Greatest Problem”* offers a fresh interpretation of the role religion played in the formation of the Meiji state. One regrets, however, that, perhaps due to time constraints, Maxey did not directly engage with some of the most recent scholarship related to his topic. In particular, Maxey’s compelling account of how Meiji political leaders sought to separate the imperial institution from Shinto doctrine in an effort to avoid the competition and contingency engendered by religious conversion both complements, and is complemented by, the concept of the “Shinto secular” that Jason Ānanda Josephson deploys when analyzing similar phenomena in his 2012 book *The Invention of Religion in Japan*. While these works do cover some of the same ground thematically and chronologically, their distinctive focal points, as well as their unique disciplinary and theoretical perspectives, should allow readers to bring them into very productive conversation with each other. This book merits a wide audience and is essential reading for scholars with an interest in any aspect of religion in modern Japanese history. At the same time, its focus on the significance of religion for understanding both the process of Meiji state-building and the first decade of constitutional politics in Japan should offer much of interest to students of Meiji political history as well.

Notes

[1]. These works have variously described the diverse and mutually constitutive processes by

which *shūkyō* became standardized as the translation for “religion,” analyzed how *shūkyō* was deployed discursively and enshrined in academic and legal discourses, and problematized the ahistorical use of a term of largely Protestant Christian origins within a Japanese context. Some notable examples include Suzuki Norihisa, *Meiji shūkyō shichō no kenkyū: shūkyōgaku kotohajime* (Tokyo: Tōkyō Daigaku Shuppankai, 1979); Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Isomae Jun’ichi, *Kindai nihon no shūkyō gensetsu to sono keifu: shūkyō, kokka, shintō* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2003); Jason Ā. Josephson, *The Invention of Religion in Japan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012); Hoshino Seiji, *Kindai nihon no shūkyō gainen: shūkyōsha no kotoba to kindai* (Tokyo: Yūshisha, 2013); and Hans Martin Krämer, “How ‘Religion’ Came to Be Translated as Shūkyō: Shimaji Mokurai and the Appropriation of Religion in Early Meiji Japan,” *Japan Review* 25 (2013): 89-111.

[2]. The “greatest problem” indicated in the title comes from Inoue Kowashi’s observation in 1884 that “The matter of religion is indeed the single greatest problem confronting political policy, and if not properly addressed it may produce unforeseeable problems in the future and lead to insurmountable complications. In light of the experience of nations through the ages, this appears a matter not to be taken lightly” (quoted, p. 1).

[3]. Works by John Breen and James Ketelaar are particularly relevant here. John Breen, “Shintoists in Restoration Japan: Towards a Reassessment,” *Modern Asian Studies* 24, no. 3 (1990): 407-29; John Breen, “Beyond the Prohibition: Christianity in Restoration Japan” in *Japan and Christianity: Impacts and Responses*, ed. John Breen and Mark Williams (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996), 75-93; John Breen, “The Imperial Oath of April 1868: Ritual, Politics and Power in the Restoration,” *Monumenta Nipponica* 52 no. 4 (1996): 407-29; and James Ketelaar, *Of Heretics*

and Martyrs in Meiji Japan: Buddhism and Its Persecution (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990).

[4]. Article 28 of the Imperial Constitution states, “Japanese subjects possess the freedom of belief to the extent that it does not disrupt peace and order, and does not contradict one’s duties as a subject” (quoted, p. 186).

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