

1 In the beginning: Religion and history

One morning early in 1551, a Spanish priest with Portuguese sponsors gazed out upon the great and ancient city of Kyoto. He had traveled from India to Japan to spread the Catholic faith, and to the capital in hope of receiving an audience with the emperor. We may never know why the priest was not granted his interview: was it the ridiculous cape that people said made him look like a flying bat, his ignorance of court protocol, or possibly just his horrible smell? But others were certainly happy to talk to him: access to the priests also meant access to lucrative trade routes, Western science, and, most importantly, European fire-arms. Before long, the missionaries had proven such a disruption that Japan would eventually ban Christianity and “seal the country,” closing its door to nearly all foreigners for over two centuries.

Three centuries later, a few thousand people calling themselves God Worshippers gathered in a remote village in China’s misty southern mountains to witness a solemn ceremony. That morning, Hong Xiuquan, a thirty-seven-year-old failed scholar who claimed to be the younger brother of Jesus Christ, was to be crowned monarch of the Heavenly Kingdom of Great Peace. Within four years, his kingdom covered nearly half of China. The financial cost of crushing its long-haired army dealt a deathblow to the mighty Qing Empire. The human cost was twenty million lives: more than twice the number killed on both sides of the First World War.

Nobody would think to write a history of the Western world without including religion. Even the most casual observer of Western history will know that the rise of Christianity radically transformed the Roman Empire, that the Protestant Reformation divided Europe for centuries, and that many of those who migrated to the American colonies came seeking religious freedom. For hundreds of years, Western art was devoted largely to depicting religious themes. Many of the great political and social debates, including ones that remain current today, have their roots in religious ideals.

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But is the same true outside the West? If someone wanted to convince you of the unchanging, essential nature of Asia, and in particular of the unbridgeable cultural gap between Asian and Western societies, religion might seem to be a good place to start. Images of Asian religion lay at the root of some of our more embarrassing racist stereotypes, but also of the seemingly endless stream of books about applying “ancient Asian wisdom” to our everyday lives. Back in the early 1990s, when Japan seemed economically unstoppable, popular authors wrote with great confidence about how the “way of the samurai” had entered the Japanese boardroom. In an earlier era, the argument went, samurai spirit had sent kamikaze fighter pilots on hopeless suicide runs against American warships. Now that same warrior ethos motivates mid-level businessmen to sacrifice their own personal comfort and independence in the name of the collective good. In either case, the view was that these were fundamentally unchanging values – as inextricably Japanese as sushi. Now in an era of Chinese ascendancy, we are likely to hear about the Dao of marketing, or how Sunzi’s *Art of War* can help you overcome your fear of public speaking. Yet the basic assumption of these books remains the same – when Asian societies are boiled down to their essential elements, what remain are religion and religious ideas, and those ideas are fundamentally different from our own.

I disagree.

Religion is more than just ideas: it is ideas in action. Religion lives and breathes in human society. It gives people a way to structure their world, mark time, and express their deepest fears and desires. Even if the ideas are different, much about how religion behaves in society is universal. Without oversimplifying matters too much, it is safe to say that you can visit a small town religious festival almost anywhere in the world and find much that feels at least familiar: community leaders will sit in a place of honor, the publicly pious will raise their eyebrows at their neighbors, and, it seems, the main ritual will always be followed by a big banquet.

Keeping this in mind, it is perhaps no surprise that religion was as important to the history of Asia as it was in the West. In some cases, Western and Asian history even seem to run parallel to each other. Just as Christian clergy alternately advised and manipulated the crowned heads of Europe, so too did emperors in China and Japan contend with the intrigues of resident monks and priests. And just as England’s Richard II longed to be rid of his “troublesome cleric,” and Henry VIII had his momentous row with the papacy, so too did these monks and priests sometimes overestimate their welcome in the halls of power. In the second century BC, a full seventeen centuries before Henry began cutting off

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heads, Qin Shi Huang (259–210 BC), the first Chinese emperor (he of the terra cotta army), expressed his displeasure with the Confucian scholars in his court in a particularly direct and dramatic fashion. Famously, he had a large pit dug, asked the scholars to enter, and filled in the hole, thereby (or so he thought) ridding China of Confucianism forever. Governments both in the West and in Asia profoundly feared religious dissent among the common people. Just as many European states persecuted or denied rights to atheists, heretics, and religious nonconformists (not to mention Jews and Muslims), so too did Chinese law outlaw certain religious teachings, executing their leaders and banishing ordinary followers to the farthest borderlands. In the early 1600s, the government of Tokugawa Japan began scouring the countryside for Christians. It continued its search for nearly two centuries, ordering villages to turn over any they discovered hiding in their midst immediately.

These anecdotes are pieces in a much larger puzzle. There is, of course, a great deal more. Yet most of the big sweeping histories of Asia relegate religion to a small stage, focusing instead on themes such as modernization, political change, or the “clash of civilizations” between Asia and the West. When they mention religion at all, it is often as a footnote to particular events: the rise of a rebel leader who claimed to foresee the end of the world or a diplomatic crisis over the mistreatment of Christian missionaries. Yet religion is more than just a symptom or vehicle of other historical processes. Religious beliefs and aspirations shaped countless millions of ordinary lives over thousands of years. If for no other reason than this, it is worth taking the time to understand them. What this book will show is how religion also shaped the *big* themes of history – the economic, political, and military transformation of modern East Asia.

Our focus will primarily be on China and Japan. Other countries will necessarily find their way into the story – one can hardly understand why Christian missionaries came to Asia without first knowing what was happening in Europe – but the main story will focus on these two ancient and enduring cultures. You may wish to know why other regional actors, such as Korea and Vietnam, are not given the same attention. It is certainly not because they were unimportant. Korea was more than just a bridge between China and Japan; it also exerted a vital political and cultural influence of its own. And while no one who has visited the temples of Hanoi could mistake the cultural impact that China had on its southern neighbor, it is equally obvious that Vietnam adapted this influence into something uniquely its own. Of course, all of these perceptions are relative. For long periods of its history, Japan considered itself to be a cultural rival of China, but this rivalry was very one-sided. Until just over a century ago (very recent history, in Asian

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terms), China's cultural elites took little notice of their island neighbor and, if anything, thought of it as more like an irritating younger brother than a true competitor.

So why focus particularly on these two countries, and why view them together? Even if China was by far the larger and older civilization, Japan was also large, powerful, and distinct enough to be a cultural, military, and economic force in its own right, even before it began its spectacular rise in the late nineteenth century. China and Japan not only influenced each other, they also underwent many of the same processes and changes, albeit at different times. This is why the book begins with the fourteenth century in China and the sixteenth century in Japan, because these are the moments at which each country founded the long-lasting political dynasty that would fundamentally transform its political, social, and economic institutions. Similarly, although Catholic missionaries were active and influential in both countries, they arrived in Japan half a century before they first reached China and experienced very different challenges in each place. Often it is the differences that are the most interesting. Cultural elites in both China and Japan were drawn to Buddhism, but in China, these elites were Confucian scholars, while in Japan they were a hereditary warrior class, the samurai. During the mid-nineteenth century the two countries began to interact with each other more closely. By its end, both were striving for economic, military, and cultural dominance of East Asia. Religion became an important component of how these two competing poles saw themselves, and an important weapon in their struggle for influence. It still is.

But before we go any further, let us step back and consider just what we mean when we talk about "religion."

The modern concept of religion is Western in origin. If you look up the word *religion* in a Chinese dictionary, you will find it translated as *zongjiao*, which comes from the Japanese *shūkyō*.¹ But neither term is native to Asia: the Japanese word was actually translated from the German *Religionsübung*.² Of course, both Chinese and Japanese

¹ It may be helpful to know something about these languages. Although Chinese and Japanese are grammatically very different, they do share a significant amount of vocabulary, rather like the relationship between English and French. Shared words are written in identical Chinese characters, which are used by both languages (and formerly by Korean and Vietnamese, as well) but pronounced differently by each. The line that appears over *o* and *u* in some Japanese words means simply that the vowel is held for a slightly longer time.

² The Chinese term *zongjiao* did exist previously, but it had a more narrow meaning. Anthony C. Yu, *State and Religion in China* (Chicago: Open Court, 2005), 5–25.

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already had words resembling religion before they decided to copy a German one, but the fact that someone felt that a new word was required suggests that the transformation of the idea was fairly fundamental. This is not simply a problem of terminology: some have argued that the Western concept of religion (for example, as scholars, governments, and human rights campaigners employ it) refers not merely to Christianity, but a particular *kind* of Christianity, the post-Enlightenment interpretation of faith as a personal dialogue with God. Thus when scholars try to compare religions (for example, by teaching a course in world religions), they are implicitly comparing other religions against a Christian standard, one that would consequently make non-Western religions look either incomplete or primitive.³ Whatever we may think of these criticisms, they should at least provide a warning: before we attempt to examine the influence of religion on history, our first task should be to establish a more precise idea of just what we are to be talking about.

For most readers, the word *religion* instinctively calls to mind an ecclesiastic institution – a church. To avoid being unduly influenced by the Christian experience, we can define a church simply as any community that organizes around religion. By this definition, any church is both sacred and worldly. As a sacred institution, it will generally have a class of priests to serve as experts on matters of doctrine and ritual, but there are no set rules for what other roles they might play. In some traditions, these priests will also have a pastoral call to serve a community of lay faithful. In others, they will not. Sometimes holymen embark on a completely private quest for salvation, sharing a tradition of beliefs and practices with other specialists, but no other relationship to them. In others, they will be arranged into a formal hierarchy of authority. A religion with a strong hierarchy will often have a clear and unified theology, a doctrine, from which springs not only the existence of heresy, but also the possibility of religious schism on theological grounds. As a worldly institution, a church might have significant political and economic interests. Its representatives might find their way into government and exert considerable influence. Churches will

³ See, for example, Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), and Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions, or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005). For a variety of perspectives on the idea of religion in Asia, see the essays in Thomas David DuBois, ed., *Casting Faiths: Imperialism and the Transformation of Religion in East and Southeast Asia* (Basingstoke, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

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often hold property, sometimes quite a lot of it, and their leadership will have to make decisions on how that wealth is disposed.⁴

Religion is also an intellectual tradition of teachings and beliefs, but what sort of ideas should a “real” religion include? If you approach the question from a Judeo-Christian perspective, you might expect that any religion is by definition theistic: that it has a concept of deities, angels, and other divine actors. If so, you would be disappointed. The distinction between religion and *philosophy*, somewhat arbitrary even in Western thought, makes even less sense in Asia. As we shall see (each of the major Chinese and Japanese religions are discussed in more detail in later chapters), many Asian religions are either agnostic or even atheistic, at least in their orthodox, scriptural form. The original texts of what would become Daoism say nothing about who lives in the spirit realm. When someone asked Confucius whether spirits exist, he responded that he had no idea, but that it is just as well to assume that they do.

The intellectual legacy of religion is larger and more expansive than scripture – but how *much* larger depends on the degree of authority wielded by its ecclesiastic institution. A religion that is highly decentralized may have no single authority responsible for deciding the fine points of theology. It may have a sacred text, but no mechanism for controlling how people interpret what they see in writing. But even when there is a strong church, belief is almost impossible to control. Leaving aside religious schisms and wars, any church will face an uphill battle in restraining the creativity and devotion of its own flock. A good example is the medieval Catholic Church, which at the time was about as tight an organization as one could hope to find. In many cases, the biggest problem the church faced was not pulling people in to Mass on Sundays. Just the opposite, it was reining in the excessive piety of the country folk, who became enthusiastically devoted to unauthorized local saints and unsubstantiated miracle tales.⁵ The difficulty of controlling belief, of course, is that religion poses questions that are too

⁴ This introduction follows the example of sociologists such as Joachim Wach, who pioneered the idea that religion and religious institutions follow predictable rules, across times and across cultures. Even if this approach might not satisfy historians, it is still an excellent way to understand the big picture. See his frequently reprinted classic, *Sociology of Religion*.

⁵ This theme runs through a number of excellent studies of European history. See, for example, William A. Christian, *Visionaries: The Spanish Republic and the Reign of Christ* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); David Blackbourn, *Marpingen: Apparitions of the Virgin Mary in Bismarckian Germany* (New York: Knopf, 1994); and David Warren Sabean, *Power in the Blood: Popular Culture and Village Discourse in Early Modern Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

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important to ignore. Who inhabits the unseen world? Where did the world come from? When and how will it end? What constitutes moral transgression, and how far can I go before I will be punished? A church may answer these questions in its formal doctrine, but the believer will also answer them for himself, in his own heart and in his own way.

But does religion *create* history, or does it somehow follow along behind? Is it an agent of change, or merely a symptom? The answer is that it does and is both. Starting with politics, any sufficiently powerful ruler can, with a stroke of the pen (or brush, since we are in Asia), christen one creed as the state religion and have another outlawed as a vile and contemptible heresy. On the other hand, kings and presidents are people, too, and their decisions are themselves shaped by religious beliefs and ethics. Even if we live in too cynical an age to trust the religious sincerity of our politicians, the fact is that it does not matter whether they are speaking from the heart or simply to their political base. The effect is the same: religious fervor is an extremely potent political force. In the end, it does not make sense to ask whether events such as the Spanish Inquisition, the Islamic Revolution in Iran, or the support of the Christian Right for George W. Bush was more political or more religious in nature. They were fully and equally both.

Beyond politics, religion has always been serious business, financially speaking. Imagine that a national church is (for whatever reason) exempted from paying tax on its landholdings – this was in fact the case at different periods of history in much of Europe and Asia. Such an arrangement is, of course, very good news for the church, in more ways than one. Not only does the church now save money on its own tax payments, but nearby landholders will also discover that they can share the same benefits by placing their own lands under the church's name, as well. As a result, the church becomes a major landholder, perhaps *the* major landholder. This is exactly what happened in medieval China (especially the Tang dynasty, 618–907), a time when powerful Buddhist monasteries owned as much as a third of all arable land. These policies starved the dynasty for revenue, as well as for soldiers, since the tens of thousands of Buddhist monks were exempted from military service. Buddhism alone did not destroy the Tang dynasty, but later Chinese dynasties would remain acutely sensitive to the dangers of allowing religion ever again to become *imperium in imperio*.⁶ This includes the modern Chinese state, which remains deeply cognizant of the lessons history has taught it, a fact that we in the West might do well to understand.

⁶ Arthur F. Wright, *Buddhism in Chinese History* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1959), 60, 83–5.

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The two-way influence of religion and economics can be seen not only on property, but also on a variety of services. In medieval Europe, it was very common for wealthy gentry to will their lands to the church as a deathbed atonement for what had perhaps been a less than pious life. For similar reasons, they also made very significant donations to the poor. But these donations were not charity – they were an advance payment for prayers that the recipients would endeavor to say for the soul of their patron. This practice (what the historian A. N. Galpern called “a cult of the living in service of the dead”) was more than just a quaint local custom – it was a significant engine of exchange between rich and poor. By 1482, as many as one-sixth of the twelve thousand residents of the French city of Reims may have relied on such donations for their livelihood.⁷

Under the right circumstances, an organized church could corner the market for ritual services. The key was usually an alliance with political power. Under the Tokugawa shogunate, the military government that ruled Japan from the seventeenth through the mid-nineteenth century, Buddhist monasteries acted as loyal agents of the state. They kept administrative records and served as a first line of defense against the rise of heresy (or, even worse, Christianity). In return, the monasteries received lavish state patronage, as well as a lucrative monopoly on religious services. For two and a half centuries, every Japanese, from the lowliest commoner to the imperial family, was required to register as a member of a Buddhist sect. When he died, he received a Buddhist funeral. And for every amulet, blessing, and ritual it provided, the monastery received a payment. Over two and a half centuries, this added up to colossal wealth.

Of course, wealth breeds power and corruption, and, over time, disaffection among the rank and file believers. Perhaps the most dramatic example of this is the corrosive effect that a monopoly on lucrative religious services had on the medieval Catholic Church. Abuses of this monopoly, such as the sale of indulgences, were the spark that ignited the Protestant Reformation. But even after the Church had curtailed its worst abuses, the specter of gilded papist corruption continued to haunt later Protestant groups, such as the English Puritans, who came to regard material simplicity as a cardinal virtue. In Japan, as we shall see, the uneven favor of the Tokugawa government ended by souring centuries of good relations between the priests of Buddhism and those of Shintō, the native religion. It also led to a popular tradition of belief

⁷ A. N. Galpern, *The Religions of the People in Sixteenth Century Champagne* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), 20.

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in a higher teaching, one that the Buddha had revealed in secret only to the laity, not to the monks.

This final example leads us to what I would argue to be the most important interaction between religion and history – the power religion has to transform *ideas*. These are not just ideas about the divine realm, but about the human world as well. Ideas are the glue that holds a culture together over time. Individual governments, economic systems, and even religions themselves (in the sense of ecclesiastic institutions) may come and go, but this substrate of ideas remains and evolves. This is the real continuity of history. Consider two of the foundational ideas of Judeo-Christian tradition: the existence of free will and the individual soul. Look hard enough, and you can trace a great deal of Western cultural history to one or both of these beliefs. Humanism, democracy, natural rights, capitalism: each relies on a particular understanding (one that is so fundamental that it often does not need to be expressed) of individual human dignity. This includes even the right *not* to believe in God. The principle of religious freedom, itself a relatively new idea in most Western states, derives from a post-Reformation understanding of belief as a personal quest for God. (The medieval Catholic Church viewed matters very differently, hence its persecution of heresy.) The Reformation view was itself not new: its roots can be seen in biblical stories such as the conversion of Paul of Tarsus or the temptation of Jesus, each of whom made a choice to follow God. But to be significant, that choice had to be made freely and willingly.

The most graphic – in a literal sense – and immediate reflection of the interaction between religion and ideas is in art. The next time you find yourself in an art museum, take some time to marvel at the overwhelming transformation of European painting that took place between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries. Certain changes are obvious: techniques become more sophisticated; the figures develop depth and proper perspective; classical themes come to join religious ones. Yet even within staid Christian iconographic themes, such as paintings of the Virgin and Child, the evolution is striking. Earlier paintings such as the altarpiece shown in Figure 1.1A tend to depict both figures as radiant but distant, calmly staring directly at the viewer. These clearly are objects to be worshipped. In later ones, such as Figure 1.1B, the figures are equally holy but take the form of a much more accessible and familiar family. The focus shifts from the divinity of the figures, and instead to the affection of a mother for her child; they are quite naturally looking at each other, rather than staring at the viewer. The reason for the change is obvious. The first painting is meant to inspire devotion; the latter, affection for the Holy Family, and respect (and



Figure 1.1 Two views of the Virgin and Child. **A.** Italian (Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem), *Diptych with Madonna and Child and Crucifixion*, 1275/85, Mr. and Mrs. Martin A. Ryerson Collection, 1933.1035, The Art Institute of Chicago. Photography © The Art Institute of Chicago. **B.** Jacopo (Jacopo da Ponte) Bassano, Italian, c. 1510–92, *Virgin and Child with the Young Saint John the Baptist*, 1560/65, Oil on canvas, The Art Institute of Chicago. Photography © The Art Institute of Chicago.