

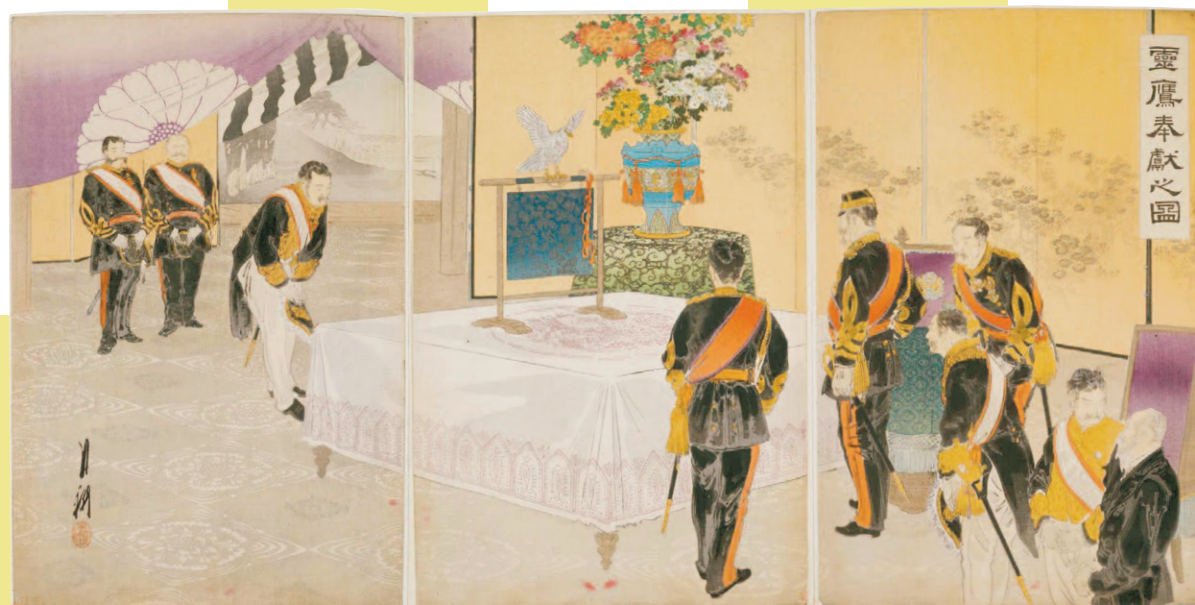
Pull-out supplement

theFocus

Religion and Global Empire

Scholars working on issues relating to the place of religion in Asia generally share two rather basic problems: 'religion' and 'Asia'. The tendentious nature of both of these categories as they have been used in the history of the modern academy, the Eurocentric origins of their formulations and the political background to their inventions intertwined with the history of 19th century imperial expansion are generally well acknowledged in the field. Research that looks to the relationship between religion and Asia also needs to confront the history through which these two categories have been interrelated and symbiotically manufactured in the modern academy.

Kiri Paramore



Top: Oguni Masa, 'Negotiations During the Visit of the Qing Peace Envoy' (1895). Japanese in the western style sit across the (unequal-) treaty negotiating table from Chinese Qing dynasty bureaucrats in the 1890s.

Middle: Ogata Gekkō, 'Presentation of the Auspicious Eagle' (1895). An 'auspicious eagle' is presented to the Meiji Emperor's military command. This eagle was said to have appeared on a Japanese battleship during

their engagement with the Chinese in the Yellow Sea recalling the auspicious visit of an eagle to the mythical ancestor emperor Jinmu in the formation myths of the Japanese nation used in state Shinto.

Bottom: Yōshū Chikanobu, 'Our army captures the Qing troops' base at Asan' (1894). The Westernized Japanese army crushes one of the Qing dynasty's elite units at Asan, south of Seoul.

All three pictures are from the Japan-Qing (First Sino-Japanese) War Woodblock Print collection of the National Diet Library of Japan.

Politics and religion in Asia: comparative frameworks

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THE EMERGENCE OF 'RELIGION' as an academic category and indeed 'religious studies' and 'religious history' as disciplines, occurred partly through the imagination of a concept of Asia in 18th and 19th century Europe.¹ Asian religions themselves were used to construct the dichotomy of Asia as an oriental alterity, just as the academic concept of 'religion' was forming due to the impact of these same traditions in Europe.² The symbiotic relationship between the emergence of the parameters of the Western academy itself, and of the categories of 'Asia' and 'religion' within it has, thereby, made study in this field a conceptually complex venture.

This complexity is doubled when we focus on scholarship dealing with the relationship between religion and politics. The embedding of the religion versus politics dichotomy in modern academic literature – particularly through Weber, but also earlier in at least Marx – was necessarily preceded by the problematic categorisation of 'religion' alluded to above, and most famously deployed to denote a rupture between Western Europe and 'the rest' – notably Asia – in the canonical texts of Western history and sociology.³ The contemporaneous self imagination of 'the West' constructed by its academies included the idea inherent in modern academism that Western categories held an intellectual monopoly as universal standards of scholarly enquiry. It is important to note that this creation of a binary between an active West and passive East in the parameters of modern academic discourse was paralleled in the binary division between 'religion', as a discrete field of activity, and 'politics'. In the same way that cultures in regions other than Western Europe were rendered passive by being divorced from the agency associated with 'the West' as the origin of universal categories, so too was religion allocated a certain political passivity by being defined apart from the political realm in a specialised sociological category.

This construct underlay the cohesive visions of social development of many of the most influential Western thinkers, from Montesquieu to Hegel, from Marx to Weber. It thereby influenced the development of the entire gambit of humanities and social sciences disciplines. This had two effects which lethally debilitated the ability of the Western academy to study issues relating to the relationship between religion and politics in Asian societies. One was the fact that the construction of Asian alterity, even in assertively progressive and universalist Western academic streams like Marxism, basically categorised the experience of Asian societies out of the mainstream of sociological analysis, predetermining societies as diverse as Persia, India and China to be analysed in terms of orientalist and particularist categories like 'despotism'.⁴ Secondly, the fact that the category of religion was constructed both in a Christocentric (monotheistic) framework, and through the Western re-imagining of Asian religions like Buddhism and Confucianism as symbols of Asian alterity, meant that from the beginning the Western scholarly approach to religion in Asia became an over-determined product of the academy's own self-construction.⁵

Thankfully, the days of scholars quoting Hegel or Weber to describe the religious or political reality in China or India are over. The tendency to use such theoretical prisms in the analysis of social and political reality is, however, still present. This brings us to a problem much more difficult to overcome: how can research on religion in Asia based in real society then be reintegrated into broader discourses of the Western academy without conforming to the major theoretical and normative models of that academy – norms that include the exclusion of Asia from active universalist social models, and a reductionist construct of religion.

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I would suggest there have been two major reactions to this over the past 20 years. One is simply to refer to new, more modern and less politically-laden Western theoretical literature in place of that condemned in the second half of the 20th century as orientalist. The rise of the use of postmodern theory to analyse Asian societies is a classic example of this reaction. Foucault and Derrida (to use just two examples) are as Eurocentric in the historiographical basis of their theories as anyone earlier (in fact, probably more so, as unlike Hegel or Marx, they did not even engage studies of non-European societies). Yet some have regarded it acceptable to use them as universalist norms in much the same way that Marx or Weber were employed earlier. This is why I refer to the postmodern trend in scholarship on East Asian history as 'neo-orientalism'. It forced a variety of human experience into limited theoretical constructs which were conceived only in relation to Western experience, while also aggressively denying the validity of alternative academic approaches, in a similar manner to the classic orientalism described by Said.

The problems inherent in the Western academic tradition of the study of politics and religion in Asia have also, however, been answered in a very different way by scholars who have approached the issue in a more transnational fashion. The systematic critique of what came to be called orientalism during the 1970s, led by the likes of Perry Anderson, and institutionalised by Said, led to scholars in the 1990s who sought to narrate a history which rewrote the role of both religion and Asia in the world, including in the global empires of the 19th and 20th centuries. Scholars like Peter Van Der Veer have challenged the very idea of being able to narrate a British history without India and vice-versa – thereby removing the basis of otherness which underlay the construction of Asia as an alterity. His positioning of religious experience to the centre of the workings of modern empires and nationalism similarly broke the chains that had formerly shackled the religious sphere to the realm of passive interiority.⁶

Most of the articles in this special issue follow this trend by showing how interaction between religion and politics was often affected by issues which crossed borders, not only in terms of interactions between colonised and coloniser, but also in the exchange and development of both secularist and state religious ideas between different countries and regions, including before the modern period.

In the first article in this collection, Peter Van Der Veer argues the necessity of looking through what he calls the archive of imperial knowledge to understand what he sees as the particular modern encounter that links the study of religion in Asia to modern, global structures of knowledge. The critical lens through which he formulates this 'archive' and the agency for different players around it is made clear through reference to what he sees as the common global experience of modernity. The subsequent piece by Prasenjit Duara, conversely, looks beyond modernity back to earlier periods of Chinese history. His paper confronts what he calls the 'Abrahamic tradition' with the history of religion and politics in pre-modern China. Instead of focusing on a 'modern encounter', he examines the development of the religion-politics relationship across a much longer breadth of history, employing and then significantly reforming Jaspers' 'axial age' theory in the process. The opening two articles thereby present us with an interesting methodological tension between approaches centring counter-narratives and critique on the globalised political context of a shared modernity versus those who want to also look at earlier history and therefore choose comparative frameworks which elicit parallels of experience.

There exist similar tensions in the next three articles, each of which span up to three centuries of history in examining the role of Christianity in indigenous political discourses of modernity in China, Japan and Korea, respectively. Ya-pei Kuo follows Van Der Veer in making modernity the centrepiece of her article on the encounter between Christianity and Confucianism in China. Kuo digs into the 17th century history of Christianity in China to formulate her analysis of the late 19th early 20th century. In doing so, however, she makes clear not only the parallels between the two, but also the completely different nature of the late 19th century as a world dominated, militarily and conceptually, by the apparatus of Western imperialism and its teleology. In contrast, although on the one hand acknowledging the critical role of 19th century imperialism on Japanese modernity, my own article seeks to locate the primary role of religion in modern Japanese politics in changes that occurred in earlier Japanese thought. By pushing the critical period of change back out of the 'encounter' of the 19th century into the 17th and 18th, I am searching for another model of development, one that acknowledges not only modern encounters, but also pre-modern parallels. Boudewijn Walraven engages both methods in a tour de force analysis of modern Korea's struggle with the place of religion in politics. He covers the pre-modern Confucian state of the Choson, the massive social role of Christianity and Buddhism in modernisation, and the new religions and practices which emerged from them. Walraven points out certain parallels to recent theories on secularism in the West, notably that of Charles Taylor, but ends his article with an intriguing comparison between the two Koreas, North and South, a comparison which invokes the pre-modern influence of Confucianism as much as the ultra-modernity of Marxist-Leninism.

The last four articles, all by PhD candidates, present more focused and empirical research on important issues relating to religion-politics relations in post-war Vietnam, pre-war fascist Japan, and Japanese occupied colonial Korea. Edyta Roszko looks into an intriguing recent example in Vietnam's attempt to mediate the place of local religion in the state through Marxist-Leninist frameworks. Aike Rots, by contrast, shows how a millenarian Christian group in fascist Japan employed Zionism to justify 1930s military expansionism. Dermott Walsh looks at the issue of dualism in the works of a Japanese philosopher of the same era – Nishida Kitarō. Rather than the usual focus on politicised Buddhism, Walsh instead uncovers a progressive Confucian orientation to Nishida's philosophy that offers something beyond the cliché of fascist nihilism within which this philosopher's work is so often read. Jung-Shim Lee likewise rewrites a Buddhist leaning history of the colonial period Korean nationalist novelist Han Yongun to uncover his advocacy of Confucian values – but in this case ultra-conservative ones. In doing so she illustrates disturbing parallels between Han and the Japanese colonial administration's own discourses on women, causing her in the end to reflect critically on the violence inherent in anti-imperialist nationalism.

In addition to the breadth of disciplinary and area speciality represented in this Focus section of the IAS Newsletter, an edited volume containing several papers with a more contemporary focus is currently being prepared in Tokyo. Expanded versions of at least six other papers presented at the conference are also currently awaiting publication in refereed journals.

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Religion



Identity



Power



THE ARTICLES IN THIS ISSUE of The Focus are based on papers given at the inaugural conference of the Consortium of African and Asian Studies (CAAS) held in Leiden 2009 on the topic Religion, Identity and Power. CAAS was established in 2005 through an agreement between Leiden University, SOAS University of London, INALCO Paris, The National University of Singapore (NUS) and Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, and has since been joined by Columbia University. The conference was supported by the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science International Training Program through the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, Leiden University through the Leiden Institute of Area Studies and the Leids Universitair Fonds, as well as by INALCO and NUS.

The conference drew together scholars from six different disciplines, studying more than eight different regions of Asia. The theme was the relationship between religion and politics. The premise of the conference was to put the often assumed comparative referent of 'the West' in the theoretical work on this topic into perspective by offering a new comparative lens that confronted the experiences of different Asian societies with one another.

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