

Part II: Imagining Community in a Changing World

When we speak of “religion,” we often associate it first and foremost with matters of belief: to be “religious” is commonly understood in terms of the doctrines we accept, and the extent to which our actions are rooted in those doctrines. Indeed, our behavior (whether ethical or ritual) often makes sense precisely in the context of the religious world(s) we inhabit. As we found in Part I of this reader, religious traditions provide some of our most fundamental orientations to the world, profoundly shaping how we understand and respond to our experiences, even as those experiences influence the way we perceive the meaning of our traditions.

Nevertheless, our understanding of the role of religion traditions in modern history would be severely impoverished if we were to view religion solely as a matter of personal faith or doctrinal adherence. Images of religious belonging are also an important element in the construction of social identity, often serving as a marker of national, ethnic or socioeconomic divisions. If, as Benedict Anderson has famously suggested, the modern nation-state can best be understood as an “imagined community,” many of the authoritative symbols by which communities create and maintain that shared sense of identity have been rooted either in the resources offered by one’s own religious traditions, or in the (often stereotyped) images of others’ religious commitments.

The reciprocal relationship between religious tradition and social identity is inevitably shaped by the larger historical contexts in which they appear. One of these was the imperialism that affected (and afflicted) much of the modern history of the region. Western imperialist powers (most notably the Portuguese, Dutch and English) operated in the Asia Pacific since the sixteenth century, and were joined by a rapidly expanding Japanese empire at the beginning of the twentieth. This had an enormous impact, not only on the political fortunes of the Japanese nation, but on Japanese images of religious belonging. For scholars like Miyazawa Kenji, for example, the opening of Japanese interests to a larger world permitted, not only an enthusiastic exploration of world culture (from Beethoven to Esperanto), but a reframing of his own Buddhist commitments from a global perspective. Moreover, as Cemil Ayden and Michael Penn point out, the geopolitical vision of Japanese imperial ambition – conceived, by the 1930s, as a pan-Asian movement against Western imperialism to be led by Japan – supported the rise of Islamic Studies in Japan. To be sure, the ideologically-driven desire of some to find a partner against Western imperialism in the Islamic world occasionally led to problematic interpretations, but the vantage permitted by that particular historic perspective may continue to offer insights from which we might learn today.

With the end of the Pacific War in 1945, religious identity often came to be formulated in the idiom of the Cold War. Japan, only recently defeated by the Allies (which had included both the Soviet Union and China) was quickly reimagined as an ally in a new global struggle.

As Vladimir Tikhonov argues, the exigencies of the Cold War – which, for many in the West, was viewed as a contest with “godless” communism – also helps to explain the striking growth of Christianity in South Korea. Government support for Christian military chaplains (backed by American aid and assisted by internal divisions within the South Korean Buddhist establishment), he suggests, played an important role, not only in the establishment of the South Korean state as a Cold War ally, but in the size of its Christian

minority, which remains by far the largest in the region. In a similar fashion, the article by Kawakami Yasunori describes the experience of the small but cohesive Japanese Muslim community. With a history extending back roughly a century, this community is comprised largely of immigrants who arrived in Japan during the “bubble economy” of the 1990s. Those who remained (often by starting families with Japanese spouses) have built strong ties with their new home, but remain connected to the majority Muslim countries of their birth.

This continually shifting imagination of community creates novel opportunities for asserting shared identity, both within and across national boundaries. Yet it also creates new outliers, minority groups whose relation to the social center is often fraught with uncertainty. At the same time that Japan was setting out on its rise as an imperial power, for instance, it also set about annexing nearby territories (including the islands now known as Okinawa and Hokkaido) and consolidating its cultural influence over the local populations. The Ainu people of Hokkaido, for example, are a native group that has struggled to retain its own language, religion and culture in the face of a century of policies by the Japanese government designed to assimilate them into a national culture. In recent years, these efforts to preserve Ainu culture have been bolstered by technology, including digital recordings of traditional songs and televised Ainu-language programs. Yet the work of Chiri Yukie – a young Ainu woman who traveled to Tokyo in 1922 to work with Japanese linguists to translate the ancient songs of the Ainu into Japanese – bears poignant witness to the changed world in which those songs live on. Her song of the owl god, presented here, not only provides fascinating glimpses into the religious world of the Ainu, but can also be read as an expression of her nostalgia for the past and her hope for a future in a changed world.

In other cases, minority groups may be a central feature in the consolidation of national identity, as Andre Vltchek suggests in his report from Indonesia. Despite public media images to the contrary, Vltchek presents a picture of complex and volatile patterns of alliance and antagonism in the contemporary discourse of national identity, in which minority religious groups (including both Christians and Muslim sects like the Ahmadiyah) and cultural practices (like the customary clothing of the Balinese) face suppression in the name of a rising Salafist Sunni nationalism, supported by international (especially Saudi) money. He shows the way that legal initiatives, presented to further a vision of Islamic piety in the face of Indonesian religious diversity also (even primarily) serves the interests of state power.

Any discussion of religion, identity and tradition in the modern Asia Pacific must take into consideration what Mark Selden calls the “Yasukuni Problem.” First established in 1869 to enshrine the spirits of soldiers who died in the fighting that inaugurated the Meiji Restoration, the Yasukuni Shrine became a cornerstone of State Shinto, a governmental effort to imagine the Japanese nation-state on the foundations of a vision of ancient religious heritage. Today, almost 2.5 million war dead are venerated as deities (*kami*) at the shrine for their sacrifice to the nation, most in the service of Japan’s imperial ambitions during the long Pacific War. Under the auspices of the postwar Constitution – a document that both disavows war and affirms the separation of religion and state power – Yasukuni has become a private religious establishment, but the shrine continues to serve a fundamentally nationalist project, a powerful synergy of war memory, religious practice and national identity. Visits to the shrine by Japanese political leaders (if not by the

Emperor himself) suggest to many in Japan and abroad that the shrine – and the revisionist image of Japanese responsibility for the Pacific War that it upholds – has the support of the Japanese government, prompting legal challenges by Japanese citizens, as well as international protest.

Yet as Selden suggests, the “Yasukuni Problem” is not uniquely Japanese; the controversy surrounding this institution is grounded, not only in the political history of Japanese empire, but in the larger dynamics of modern nationalisms, and the global political history of the post-war period (most notably the U.S.-led rehabilitation of Japan as a Cold War ally). Moreover, responses to the shrine cut across the boundaries of national and sectarian identities in complex ways. John Breen, for example, outlines a variety of responses to the political role of Yasukuni shrine by the Catholic church, from the Vatican’s gestures of support for the shrine and its observances to the Japanese bishops’ more wary responses to the threat that the status of the shrine might pose to Japan’s constitutional separation of religion and state. Moreover, as Tanaka Nobumasa notes, the 2001 “Asia Lawsuit,” which demanded the end of visits to the shrine by government leaders, was joined not only by the Japanese, but by Korean, Taiwanese and Chinese citizens, some of whom were appalled to learn that their relatives (drafted from among the subject populations of the empire) had been enshrined at Yasukuni without their knowledge or consent. As one figure interviewed for the piece notes, the plaintiffs in this case included individuals whose parents may well have fought one another during the Pacific War, but who have united in their refusal to participate in the sort of community imagined by this vision of the wartime past, and to move forward on the basis of a different image of the past and the future.