Introduction

When we think of "religion" (or, more particularly, "religious tradition"), we seldom associate it with terms like "modernity," except in contrast. At least in common parlance, a "religious" person or a "traditional" practice is more commonly seen as threatened by — or at least in tension with — the unrelenting pace of change that characterizes the modern world. Indeed, for many years, scholarly consensus seemed to be that modernization and secularization always proceeded hand in hand. Not everyone welcomed this process, but many agreed that one of the defining features of the modern era would be an irreversible weakening of the authority of tradition and the influence of religious worldviews, values and practices.

Instead of falling into terminal decline, however, religion continues to be one of the central forces shaping the modern world. Despite significant changes in their political roles around the world, for instance, religious institutions (from churches and shrines to religiously-affiliated foundations) continue to wield considerable influence as political agents. Similarly, religious belonging (whether understood in terms of formal sectarian membership or as a more-or-less coherent set of shared ideals) is often affirmed as a touchstone of national identity and social coherence in the face of global diversity. And religious symbols continue to shape how we view the world, even when we lose sight of their traditional origins.

To be sure, religious ideas and institutions have undergone considerable change since the beginnings of the modern era. Many facets of the contemporary world — including nationalism, global capitalism, and rapid technological change to name a few — continue to pose new challenges to old ways of thinking and acting. Rather than a threat to religious traditions as such, however, we should perhaps understand modern history as a new context (or confluence of contexts) for what these traditions have, in fact, always done: presenting authoritative resources and precedents from the past that each generation uses to understand and respond to the challenges of a changing world. Indeed, claims for the unchanging character of religious institutions or the unalterable verities of doctrine often turn out to have their own histories, unfolding in contexts that themselves continue to change over time.

The articles collected in this volume explore some of the ways in which religious traditions have shaped, and been shaped by, the history of the modern Asia Pacific, from the late nineteenth to the early twenty-first century. Although much of the focus is on Japanese history, the issues that they address are by no means limited to Japan, but rather bear on the larger experience of the region and the world. Part I ("Imagining a Usable Past") lays the foundation for discussion, by considering some of the ways in which elements of religious tradition (from doctrines and symbols to institutions) have been interpreted and applied to the challenges of the modern world, from war and social inequality to capitalism and the formation of modern nation states. The appropriation of these traditional resources, we will see, is often selective, and seldom goes without being contested by others, who may apply the same traditional authorities to different ends. Part II ("Imagining Community in a Changing World") continues this analysis by examining the ways in which modern evocations of religious belonging have taken place in the context of national and international politics, from imperial cosmopolitanism and religious nationalism to the rivalries of the Cold War and global capitalism.

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