

RELIGIONS AND JAPANESE FOREIGN POLICY

1. Contemporary international relations

Contemporary international relations is a mixture of complex trends: security issues that have been transformed since the end of the Cold War; globalization that includes finance and trade, terrorism and criminal networks, energy and food, diseases and disasters, environment and resources; the human dimensions of migration, refugees, networks, human rights, and human security; new social phenomena of communications, culture, and movements; challenges of political mobilization and democratization. And then there is the issue of religion. Whatever future history books will say some day about the changes that are now sweeping across North Africa, through the Middle East, to Afghanistan and beyond, no one will doubt that an undercurrent of religious allegiances is part of the background to those changes. While sociologists have been reevaluating, if not discarding entirely, their hypotheses from an earlier era about “secularism,” students of politics have been slower to delve into the role of religion. (Robertson 1992) (Beyer 1994) While this reluctance is still evident in the study of international relations, there has been growing attention to religion in global politics in the last few years. ((Wessels 2008) (Wessels 2009))

2. Japanese foreign policy

Whereas religion was mixed with questions of nationalism and national identity in Japan before World War II (Maruyama 1979 (1963));(Schad-Seifert 2003), its post-War domestic political settlement (Beer and Maki, 2002) has consciously sought separation of religion and politics. Reflecting that domestic settlement, Japan has avoided religious identifications and pursued the international equivalent of a separation of politics and religion in the public sphere of its foreign policy. Since the end of World War II, Japan has pursued a foreign policy aimed at national prosperity and international diplomacy in harmony with global trends. Its relationship with the United States, gradually identified as one of alliance, has been complemented by its staunch participation in the United Nations and ever-expanding contacts with countries throughout the world in development, environment, culture, and other fields. As religion has gradually become a more prominent issue in the public sphere in recent decades (Katzenstein 1996; Jepperson 1996), Japanese foreign policy has maintained a stance of tolerance toward religions, but little engagement with them. Little, if any, attention is given to issues of religion in studies of Japanese foreign policy, with the exception of the impact of visits by government officials to the Yasukuni Shrine on Japan’s relations with its neighbors in Asia. The limited aim of the present research is to understand better the context in which Japan has encountered religions in its foreign policy.

3. Images and reality

Images do affect foreign policy by channeling perceptions of events and of partners

in diverse ways. Governments and peoples have their own self-images, as well as their images of others. Through surveys and other means, they try to understand those images; and by various tools of diplomacy, they try to influence the images and perceptions of others. In the twentieth century, Japan saw itself as defeated in war and a champion of peace. It was reduced to rubble and raised to economic heights. It was shunned by nearby countries, and it tried to be the model of a good neighbor. While eschewing military power, particularly nuclear weapons, it has sought to project soft power through trade, aid, and cultural interactions.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, Japan's foreign policy is still frequently caught in the middle of some of these conflicting images due to both its own self-evaluations and others' views of where it stands. One reason for the diverse images is, of course, the actual pluralism in Japan which defies notions of a unified state, and the practical political facts of complex bureaucracies and institutions which lead to divergence rather than convergence in projections of the nation. Also, the world is changing. For example, China's rising position in the world, and especially in East Asia, has had an impact on Japan's own image of where it stands in the world and others' ways of dealing with these two countries. Is Japan a leader of a "flying geese" model of economic development? (Heng Siam-Heng 2010) How can Japanese thought and foreign policy contribute to a globalized world? (Heng Siam-Heng 2011) Is a policy of pragmatism (Singh 2011) or of values the way of the future? Is Japan's peace-building diplomacy in Asia a temporary phenomenon or a long-term trend? (Lam 2009)

Summarizing the reality of Japan foreign relations in contemporary global currents is no easy task. It is both enabled and constrained by its long-established alliance with the United States. Its financial, economic, and technological power is substantial, but limited by an aging population and difficulties in welcoming migrants. Its contribution to international cooperation is significant, but its human resources for global efforts are incommensurate with its lofty ideals and material assistance. Since religion has been largely ignored as an aspect of both domestic and foreign policy, Japan has not imagined itself as an active participant in the sphere of public religion.

4. Past and present

One way to clarify the context of Japan's foreign policy is to see it in the flow of history, from past to present. If summarizing the status of Japan's diplomacy today has been a daunting task, briefly presenting its history is even more difficult. So I will concentrate on trends since the early twentieth century, particularly in the intersection with religious affairs.

From the time of the Meiji Restoration, domestic Japanese politics struggled with the position of religion in public life. A Department of Divinity (Jingikan 神祇官) was established in 1868, but demoted to a Ministry of Divinity (神祇省) in 1871. The meaning and role of State Shinto (国家神道) are an important part of Japan's history until its abolition during the post-war Occupation. In terms of foreign policy, two issues are noteworthy. One is the establishment through treaties and constitutions of religious

freedom. East Asian political culture and Japanese historical practice did not easily understand or assimilate the right to religious freedom as it had erratically evolved in the West. During the Meiji period, treaty relations with the Western powers involved a formal public settlement about issues of “religion” and “freedom,” while the mobilizing state used State Shinto as a tool of domestic control. Later, militarism and authoritarian domestic policies of control toward religious groups developed hand-in-hand with similar control of religions in colonized and occupied territories of Asia. These were the main issues concerning religion in Japanese foreign policy of those periods..

Religion did have an impact not only on Japan’s identity, but on that of its colonies. Chinese religions played an important role in unifying Taiwan as a political unit from 1895 to 1945. (Sung 2011) Attempts were made in Taiwan and Korea to impose Shinto worship on the colonized peoples. Opposition to this sometimes became violent, especially in Korea. Shinto shrines were erected for the benefit of the Japanese occupiers, but pressure was put on Koreans to worship in these shrines as part of the attempt to eliminate Korean identity and replace it with a Japanese imperial identity. The more gradual assimilation policies on Taiwan can be divided into three periods (Sung 2011): (1) toleration of local religions in the early colonial period, during which attempts were made to study and record local traditions; (2) an interim period marked by incidents that occurred when Japanese authorities met resistance to imposed practices; (3) wartime practice which became more focused on submission to the religious status of the Japanese emperor. In Singapore and elsewhere during wartime, the occupying Japanese forces imposed reverential bows toward the Japanese emperor and infiltrated religious assemblies as a method of social control.

As we at Sophia University are aware, the Yasukuni Shrine Incident of 1932 led to an affirmation by Japanese governmental authorities that bowing toward the Emperor (or his photograph) or visiting shrines had a social (rather than religious) meaning. (Nakai 2010) This interpretation was based on the bureaucratic distinction in the Ministry of Education and the “teaching” role attributed to social rituals. Even after this “compromise” solution for Christians in Japan, the ambiguity of the practices associated with Shinto rites created problems both inside and outside Japan. Due to the abolition of State Shinto during the post-World War II Occupation of Japan, the Declaration of Imperial Humanity (人間宣言、January 1, 1946), and the Constitution of Japan (1947), a new religious toleration has been fostered in Japan. Military defeat and withdrawal of Japanese administration from colonies and other occupied territories have made the issues of imposition of religion in foreign territories moot.

Another point worth noting is the association between religion and education in Japanese practice both inside and outside Japan. The Imperial Rescript on Education had an important ideological role inside Japan. In both Taiwan and Korea, Japanese administrators attempted to impose educational system that broke with local traditions and used quasi-religious routines to foster attachment to Japan. (Tsurumi 1984) Administrators gradually increased pressure on even Christian educational institutions with links abroad, in particular during wartime. (Richardson 1972) Traditionally East Asian polities sought social control through religion and education. The “foreign policy” of pre-war Japan showed the same tendencies. (Sung 2011)

Japanese foreign policy today does not face issues of overseas administration as it did in the first half of the twentieth century. But it does face issues of understanding religious trends and religious forces that are evident in the public sphere throughout the world. (Casanova 1994) (Tsushiro 2005) If politics is about authority as well as power, the need to understand authority which is inherent in religious identities is an essential feature of politics, including international politics, today.

5. Reconsideration of religions

The “secular” model of the relationship between politics and religions is challenged in many ways today. Politics throughout the world are responding to civil society and citizens’ movements related to religions by various policies: repression, cooption, control, toleration, cooperation, and so forth. Given the manipulation of religion in Japan in the early twentieth century and the tradition of social control in East Asian politics, the question of the place of religion in Japanese public life and in Japanese foreign policy remains an open one. Freedom of religion is highly valued in Japan today, and toleration is generally the practice. But “public religion” as a positive concept is not widely understood, and various events in recent decades show that accommodations between religions and politics are ongoing: the Sokagakkai-Komeito connection, the Aum Shinrikyō incident and its aftermath, Mori Yoshirō’s “country of the gods” (神の国) comment, Ozawa Ichirō’s comments at Kōyasan about Christianity and Islam as exclusive (排他的) and Christianity as self-righteous (独善的) are cases in point.

Specialists, and to some extent the general public, in Japan are aware of religious movements that affect politics in other countries, from India to Nigeria, throughout the Islamic world, and in countries like Israel and the United States. Given international norms of non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries, it is not surprising that the Japanese government does not speak out extensively on religious matters in other countries. But attention to religions (especially fundamentalist movements) has increased in many countries’ foreign policies, as it has in the case of Japan, particularly since the terrorist acts of September 11, 2001. One challenge for Japanese policy is to go beyond a simplistic equation of “religion” with “fundamentalism,” and consider religions as a positive force in diplomacy. (Johnston, Sampson, and Center for Strategic and International Studies (Washington D.C.) 1994) (Johnston 2003) (Albright and Woodward 2006)

In addition to the statements on religious tolerance adopted by the United Nations over the years, the United Nations Human Rights Council approved a resolution on religious tolerance in March 2011 that shifts the focus of human rights protection to the problems of “intolerance, discrimination and violence” aimed at believers rather than its previous resolution that had included “combating defamation of religion.” This and other developments in matters affecting the public practice of religion will undoubtedly affect global politics into the future, including Japan’s foreign policy. The traditional policies toward public expression of religion are changing even in countries like France and Turkey that have long championed public settlements of a “secular” style. The

political changes that have been sweeping countries in North Africa and the Middle East since early 2011 will have to include new negotiations of the politics-religion relationships in these countries and new institutions. The need for greater awareness of religious issues in foreign relations is challenging not only Japan, but many countries. How this can be integrated into positive encounters across national borders is a major new challenge.

As the impact of globalization increases in the world, encounters of cultures, values, and religions will undoubtedly become more important in foreign relations. Formal political structures are changing, and politics as authority means that the global impact of religions as sources of authority in the contemporary world needs to be reconsidered. Governmental power at the national level is one feature of foreign relations, but there are other features like networks of believers and the attraction of moral ideas and religious symbols. Integrating these features into diplomacy and foreign policy is a challenge for Japan (and many other countries).

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