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## *Religion and the Making of Modern East Asia*

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# A Review of *Religion and the Making of Modern East Asia*

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*Religion and the Making of Modern East Asia*. By Thomas David DuBois. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011, xii+ 259 pages, ISBN 987-1107400405 (paperback), ISBN 978-1107008090 (cloth) \$81.00.

Thomas David DuBois states that the goal of his book, *Religion and the Making of Modern East Asia*, is to show “how religion also shaped the big themes of history—the economic, political and military transformation of modern East Asia” (3). He feels this is important because scholars who write on Asian history usually pay attention to popular themes, such as modernization, political change, and the “clash of civilization” between Asia and the West, but overlook the significant role that religion played in shaping the development of modern East Asia. As a historian of East Asian religion, DuBois observes that religion has played a similarly important role in the history of East Asia as it played in the West. DuBois argues that religion lives and breathes in human society, and it is not simply an idea, but an idea in action. Consequently, religion not only gives people a way to structure their world, mark time, and express their deepest fears and desires, it also “shaped countless historical process, as

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well as millions of ordinary lives over thousands of years” (5). In this book, DuBois aims to show the influence of these forces on modern East Asian history.

DuBois chooses to focus on the influence of religion on both Chinese and Japanese history as the target of inquiry, and points out three important characteristics of their religions at the outset of his book: first, the religion that caught the attention of Japanese elite was Buddhism whereas in China, it was Confucianism. DuBois’s second observation is that religious doctrine in East Asia differs from the Western Judeo-Christian tradition, which is characterized by deities, angels, and other divine actors. Many Asian religions are “either agnostic or even atheistic, at least in their orthodox, scriptural form” (6). DuBois, thereby, defines East Asian religion as “an intellectual tradition of teachings and beliefs,” or as “any community that organizes around religion” (5-6). It consists of both sacred and worldly institutions, and the latter may have “significant political and economic interests,” and its representatives may “find their way into government and exert considerable influence” (5). Defining religion as such, the meaning of religion used in his book is larger than formal ecclesiastic institutions. This is because what DuBois articulates in this book is not confined to the religions in both Chinese and Japanese history, but also including their impacts on “the ideas, beliefs, and organizations that exist outside any identifiable church,” (13) as well as the way religions shapes every aspect of human society, from growing food to spending money.

DuBois’s third observation is in regards to the co-existence of the three teachings (Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism) in China. DuBois maintains that although each of these three religions has its own intellectual and organizational entities, in reality, “[t]he idea of exclusive religious membership, that one should be a Buddhist or Taoist, but not both, simply does not apply” (15). This means that even though some believers might be particularly devoted to one teaching, they would still incorporate elements of the other two, both consciously or,

unconsciously, into their lives. This is because these three religions are “inseparable parts of a single system of beliefs, morals, and rituals that pervades Chinese life” (15). By identifying these three characteristics, DuBois lays a solid foundation for the reader to understand the core components and the major foci of his argument.

The layout of DuBois’s book is primarily chronological, covering important religious events in the histories of China and Japan. Additionally, it connects the influence of a religion to its impact on politics and specific topics, such as Confucianism in Ming China, Buddhism and the shōgun in Sixteenth century Japan, the failure of Christianity during 1550-1750, and religion in the late nineteenth century. With regard to the religious influence on modern Chinese history, DuBois articulates three points: first, the influence of the Ming Dynasty Confucian revival on innovations in law, governance, culture, and diplomacy, which remained in place for centuries until the moment that the whole imperial system came crashing down in 1911. Second, the destructive power of the rebellions of popular folk religions (such as the Taiping Rebellion and the *Yihe Tuan*) and their impacts on the later development of the Qing Dynasty. The influence of these events were so profound that they sent the country into a spiraling decline, and eventually led to the end of both the Qing Dynasty and the entire imperial system (142-143). Third, DuBois points to the different interactions that took place between government officials or elites and religion, especially, Buddhism and Christianity. DuBois mentions that from Fourteenth century to early Twentieth century, although Confucianism was the official political orthodoxy of the imperial order, Buddhism never lost its influence on the government. This is because the generous patronage of Confucian gentry who provided not only land or money, but also presented the monasteries with gifts of literary compositions, calligraphy, poetry and painting. As a result, Buddhism was many things in late imperial China— a “source of solace for the faithful, a cultural diversion for the gentry elite, and a cultural idiom for the Qing and its allies” (105). However, this was not the case for Catholics

and Protestants. Thanks to cultural misunderstanding and the negative influence of the Taiping Rebellion led by Hong Xiuquan, who claimed to be the younger brother of Jesus, Christians were either banned or forced to leave China. Many Chinese felt that the missionaries were up to something much more sinister and took action to keep them out.

With regard to the religious influence on Japanese history of politics, DuBois focuses primarily on the interactions between government and three religions: Buddhism, Shintoism and Christianity. His treatment of the influences is much more detailed than those Chinese religions. Firstly, DuBois details the century long power struggle between government and Buddhist armed monks, as well as the way in which Buddhism became the state religion in Tokugawa government. DuBois says that under the Tokugawa shōgunate, Buddhist monasteries acted as loyal agents of the state and served as the first line of defense against the rise of heresy. In return, the government gave the monasteries lavish state patronage and financial support. Yet, in Meiji Restoration period, the government elites not only banned Buddhism but also elevated Shintoism to a central political role. The emperor became not merely the head of state, but also the center of a network of ritual observances. Similar to the fate of Buddhism, Christianity was banned and ordered to leave Japan because it was closely tied to political groups, such as Ōmura. More specifically, Christians accessed wealth and weapons from overseas and attempted to form an alliance of Christian *daimyō* making the rulers, such as Toyotomi Hideyoshi and Tokugawa Ieyasu, feel threatened. Accordingly, Japan became a “sealed country,” from Christianity in the next two centuries.

From the above discussion, it is plausible to say that DuBois has done a great job with respect to contextualizing historical events in relation to religion. He skillfully connects the major historical events to a corresponding religion, be it Confucianism, Buddhism, Shintoism, or Christianity. Also, since the book is organized by theme, i.e., by a particular religion, the complex, entangled and multi-dimensional

interactions and development of Chinese modern history is clearly presented in a readable and easily understandable way. At least three noticeable contributions can be seen in DuBois's book: first, DuBois provides comprehensive historical information for the reader enabling them to study the way in which both Chinese and Japanese religions shaped and interacted with political elements. This comprehensive information relates to at least six religions: Buddhism, Confucianism, Christianity, Taoism, Shintoism, and Chinese popular folk religions. Of the Chinese popular folk religions alone, DuBois mentions around forty-five deities' names (174-175). This is significant because the folk religions are often overlooked by authors whose books focus on articulating the historical developments of Chinese politics. Second, DuBois gives a detailed account of the way in which Christianity interacted with the Chinese and Japanese governments from Sixteenth century to Twentieth century, and the factors resulted in the banning of Christianity in these two countries. These data are rarely seen in both Chinese and Japanese textbooks of history. Hence, the information presented in DuBois's book fills a lacuna in Chinese and Japanese history of Christianity. In fact, DuBois's detailed and insightful account of the up-and-down history of Christianity in these two countries can also serve as a valuable resource for missionaries to figure out a better way to interact with a foreign government and its people. Third, DuBois's book also provides several original analyses for a reader to understand some unique characteristics of Chinese religion, such as the co-existence of Chinese the three teachings, and how unemployment led to the increase of members of Chinese religious cults during wartime.

Yet, two factors of DuBois's book may cause controversies. That is, whether Confucianism and popular folk religions can be identified as religions? For a Western scholar this may not be a problem, yet, for most Chinese historians, the tendency is to see Confucianism as a moral, socio-political philosophy rather than a religion. This is analogous to that in the West, scholars would not characterize Plato's philosophy as a religion. Similarly, for the popular religions, especially, those that are

closely connected to political activity, such as *Yihe Quan*, Chinese historians tend to classify them as a secret cult instead of a religion, because these groups would disappear during peaceful times, and only become stronger in a period of upheaval. In addition, some of them do not have regular activities or scripture. Nor do they hold any systematic teachings or practices. The motives that moved people to become members might have been as simple as unemployment in a difficult time or discontentment with the government in power. Second, although DuBois's book aims to articulate religious influences on making modern China and Japan, its focus primarily concentrates on politics. DuBois rarely mentions how religious education and teachings contributes to transform the mind and the lives of modern East Asians, particularly, the interaction between Chinese intellectuals and Buddhism and Taoism in Twentieth century, and the way these two religious teachings affect those elites' lives. Instead, he discusses something that is not closely related to religions. For instance, DuBois discusses Kang Yuwei's utopian vision of Great Union (*Da tong*) and Lu Xun's novel *Ah-Q-ism* in depth but without mentioning Liang Qizhao's, Kang's student, political theory that is based on the model of the Buddhist bodhisattva, such as his article of "On New Citizenship" (Xing Ming Lun). Also, there is no word regarding how in the early Twentieth century Buddhist reform led by Taixu Shi and his theory of medical monks influenced on the politicians' view of religions, and the social role that a religion plays in a society. Accordingly, his account of the Chinese religious influences on politics and Chinese people's lives in the Twentieth century is insufficient and not as well done as his previous chapters. This insufficiency seems to suggest that DuBois's expertise is in Japanese religions, Chinese Confucianism, and folk religion, and that he is unfamiliar with the development of Chinese Buddhism and Taoism in the Twentieth century.

However, if we compare the great contributions this book makes to modern Chinese and Japanese history of religion, the deficiency is outweighed by the work's strengths, because DuBois's writing is eloquent and illuminated. He uses both stories and historical events to

illustrate how a religion shaped and channeled either modern Japanese or Chinese history toward a particular direction. As such, his book provides rich resources and well-documented evidence to argue for the religious influence of modern Chinese or Japanese politics. In this sense, *Religion and the Making of Modern East Asia* is an excellent resource for students, historians, educators, researchers, and religious professionals for the study of modern Chinese and Japanese religious history.