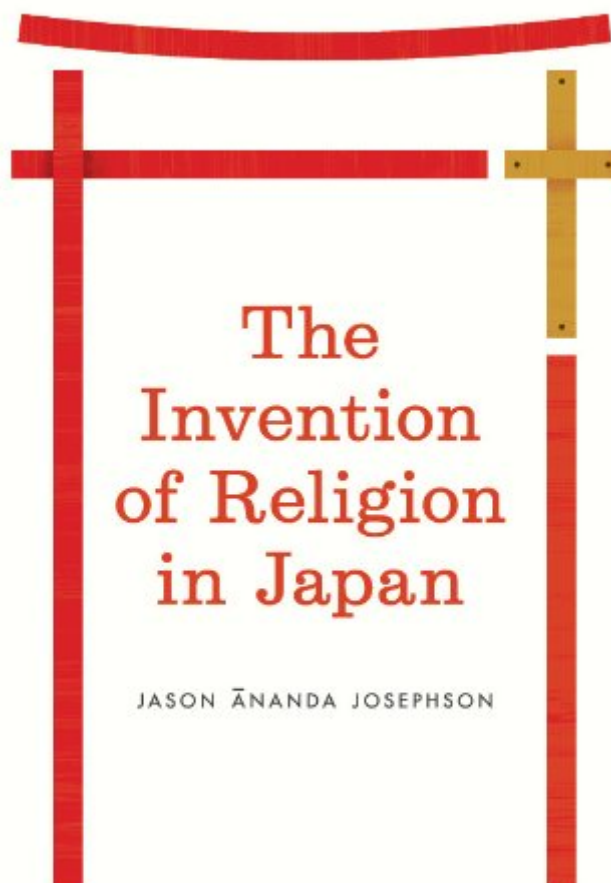


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The Invention Of Religion In Japan



Synopsis

Winner of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion: 2013 Distinguished Book Award

Throughout its long history, Japan had no concept of what we call "religion." There was no corresponding Japanese word, nor anything close to its meaning. But when American warships appeared off the coast of Japan in 1853 and forced the Japanese government to sign treaties demanding, among other things, freedom of religion, the country had to contend with this Western idea. In this book, Jason Ananda Josephson reveals how Japanese officials invented religion in Japan and traces the sweeping intellectual, legal, and cultural changes that followed. More than a tale of oppression or hegemony, Josephson's account demonstrates that the process of articulating religion offered the Japanese state a valuable opportunity. In addition to carving out space for belief in Christianity and certain forms of Buddhism, Japanese officials excluded Shinto from the category. Instead, they enshrined it as a national ideology while relegating the popular practices of indigenous shamans and female mediums to the category of "superstitions"--and thus beyond the sphere of tolerance. Josephson argues that the invention of religion in Japan was a politically charged, boundary-drawing exercise that not only extensively reclassified the inherited materials of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Shinto to lasting effect, but also reshaped, in subtle but significant ways, our own formulation of the concept of religion today. This ambitious and wide-ranging book contributes an important perspective to broader debates on the nature of religion, the secular, science, and superstition.

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Customer Reviews

Josephson makes a profound argument about the nature of the category of religion through a detailed examination of how that category was formulated in Japan following Japan's encounter with The West. The implications of this work spill well beyond the bounds of Japanese religions, and "The Invention of Religion in Japan" can be read as a study of how a new shared concept comes into being. However, unlike many books making arguments about that nature of human culture, Josephson supports his arguments with a detailed historical narrative. I found the book to be extremely readable and many of the stories of early Japan-Western interaction are downright entertaining. I heartily recommend it to anyone interested in religion, Japan, or the formation of shared conceptual categories.

Written by a friend from high school, The Invention of Religion in Japan was a requested Christmas gift for my son. Sixty pages into the book he called me to say that the book is amazing. He told me that it opens new territory in the understanding of the development of Buddhism in Japan and the effects of the intersection with Christianity on both the Japanese and Europeans who brought Christianity to Japan. Included are old Japanese documents and accounts that the author translated into English.

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