

## ***Faking Liberties: Religious Freedom in American-Occupied Japan.***

**By Jolyon Baraka Thomas. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019. Pp. 336. \$32.50 (paper); \$31.99 (digital). ISBN: 9780226618791.**

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*Faking Liberties* is an impeccably researched and compelling account of the development of religious freedom in Japan both before and during the US occupation. Jolyon Baraka Thomas does a masterful job researching and analyzing an array of Japanese and US sources from the Meiji Era through the US occupation. He argues that there was more religious liberty in Meiji Era Japan than many Western and Japanese scholars have suggested and that the concept of religious freedom that came to the fore during the US occupation, which is reflected not only in Japan today but also in many Western democracies, was invented somewhat on the fly. The story he weaves is historically and theoretically compelling. Moreover, Thomas grapples with the underlying problem of defining what constitutes “religion” and what constitutes “not religion,” and with the myth that “religious freedom” exists as a metaphysical concept for which there is some Archimedean point outside of given societies, periods of time, or contexts that can demonstrate true religious freedom.

On the first topic—religious liberty during the Meiji Era—Thomas makes many compelling points. First, he argues that contrary to many accounts there was robust debate about religious freedom during the Meiji Era, and that various stakeholders both inside and outside of government took the concept of religious liberty seriously. Second, he argues that despite the many abuses of religious liberty, especially by modern standards, Meiji Era conceptions of religion and religious liberty were par for the course in many European countries and elsewhere at that time. Thirdly, he argues that “State Shinto” was an invention of the US occupiers. Without denying the many abuses by Japanese authorities during the colonial and wartime periods, he argues that the Meiji Era government’s view of what later became known as “State Shinto” was secularist practically and perhaps theoretically. This is the least convincing argument in the book both at a practical and at a theoretical level, but there are still important insights in Thomas’s discussion of the malleable and theoretically troubling line between the secular and the religious, and the historical sources he masterfully assembles and discusses. In fact, one of the great strengths of this book is that one can agree or disagree with a given point and yet come away far more knowledgeable about all sides of an issue and with fresh, important insights.



Thomas explains that religious liberty under the Meiji constitution was complex and that the diversity of opinions on the topic among Buddhist clerics and secularist officials was less clear-cut than many accounts suggest. He brings the words of these important figures to life for an English-speaking audience. Thomas structures parts of the book in an almost Talmudic fashion, allowing discussion among a variety of important figures who were sometimes speaking directly to each other, but other times provided different views of the mountain and may have only interacted at the horizons, if at all. In doing so, he frames the argument that what later became known as State Shinto was not as monolithic or religious as later occupation era authorities and scholars suggest. Thomas is certainly correct that what became known as State Shinto was perceived by many—and mandated by law—to be “secular.” Yet, this is question begging. If the demarcation point between the religious and the secular is impossible to pin down, calling what became known as State Shinto “secular” is to accept one position in the debate as much as calling it “religious” would be.

Thomas seems comfortable enough with this and acknowledges that the “secularist” argument is not the only vantage from which to view the mountain. This is a good thing, because there are many contemporary voices from that time, some of which Thomas masterfully discusses, that demonstrate the line between the “secular” and the “religious” was not important to some as long as what became known as State Shinto was claimed to be secular, thus avoiding obvious violations of the Meiji constitution. The writings of Nobushige Hozumi, among others in both English (making the case to foreign audiences) and Japanese (explaining and debating the concepts domestically) demonstrate an understanding of State Shinto as religious and secular. In fact, some members of the Meiroku Society, an influential group of intellectuals at that time, were uncomfortable with government enforcement of what became known as State Shinto. This helps demonstrate the unease some intellectuals and officials had with the argument that the concept that later became known as State Shinto was secular and thus government support and compulsion regarding it did not violate the Meiji constitution. Here, too, however, Thomas makes an important point, namely, that given the malleability of the religion/secular dichotomy it is at least plausible in light of common Western norms at that time to view what was happening in Japan as secular or perhaps “civil religion.”

Thomas explains that at that time several European systems that influenced Meiji Era Japan had their own ingrained religious practices and religiously affected claims to monarchical power. The United States also had its share of church/state issues during that period. It is worth noting, however, that in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, before the Establishment Clause of the United States Constitution was incorporated to apply to the states, several state courts found practices such as public-school prayer unconstitutional under state constitutions. These courts often cited concerns about public schools mandating sectarian prayers that could have a negative impact on religious minorities or simply concerns about government controlled religious practices. Interestingly, this is in stark contrast to the Meiji Era use of the public schools to inculcate some aspects of what later became known as State Shinto. Of course, the state cases in the United States during this era are a small sample size, and it seems clear that Meiji Era Japanese authorities were more influenced by a combination of European models and uniquely Japanese ideas and concepts. These Japanese ideas and concepts are too often ignored in Western accounts but receive excellent analysis by Thomas.

On the second and third points—the invention of a new concept of religious freedom during the occupation and the innate definitional and conceptual problems with demarcating between religion and nonreligion—Thomas makes a strong case, and while scholars and historians might disagree with aspects of his discussion his research and careful weaving of various sources is so compelling that it cannot be ignored. *Faking Liberties* is

groundbreaking in its careful discussion of the occupation era development of “religious freedom,” and the problem with universalist claims about religious freedom. In fact, Thomas sets the stage for a potential sequel about the role that religious minorities and the US experience with navigating religious pluralism in the early to mid-twentieth-century United States played in the debates between Douglas MacArthur’s Evangelical view of religious freedom and William Bunce’s more pluralistic views. Importantly, Thomas’s detailed and careful discussion of the role Bunce played in the development of the concept of religious freedom during the occupation should be helpful to scholars in religious studies, political science, law, sociology, anthropology, and other areas. Of course, this is just one highlight from this amazing book.

As scholars of law and religion have pointed out and debated, the early twentieth century was an era in which the United States was coming to terms with what it means to be a religiously pluralistic society and the role of separation of church and state, as well as religious liberty, developed a more cosmopolitan take during this era. The influence this had on Bunce and others would be fascinating to analyze, especially since the occupation authority had some prominent religious minorities involved in constitution drafting. Some, such as Charles Kades, also helped offset some of MacArthur’s worst Christocentric instincts, albeit not completely.

Importantly, Thomas argues that the US occupation authorities created the concept of “State Shinto” as a foil to further US interests in moving away from nationalism and strong imperial rule, as well as imposing US-style concepts of religious freedom. Thomas makes a compelling case that the term “State Shinto” was predominately a US creation. Yet the militaristic, nationalistic version of Shinto (that had very little to do with traditional Shinto) that evolved during the Meiji Era and became even more draconian during the Taisho and Showa periods actually existed. The label “State Shinto” served US interests, but it was describing something real. Thomas’s fascinating discussion of whether that thing was “religion” or something else is important. The key is that—even after removing the label—the US occupation authorities did not just make up the phenomenon they pigeonholed as State Shinto from whole cloth.

*Faking Liberties* is an exceptional book that cannot be ignored by scholars interested in the development of religious freedom during the occupation era, the extant religious liberties that arose during the Meiji Era, or the current state of religious freedom in Japan. Moreover, *Faking Liberties* is important to those interested in the topic of religious freedom generally because it suggests that, contrary to popular conceptions, the Western concept of religious freedom was impacted by the development of religious freedom in occupation era Japan. Simply put, Thomas has written an important work that is a must-read for those interested in the history and nature of religious freedom in Japan and more generally.