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The Allied Occupation of Japan after World War II is normally credited with making Japan a peaceful, democratic nation and putting it on the path to becoming an economic powerhouse in the modern world. In his excellent article “A Defense of Faith: SCAP and Japan’s Religious Rehabilitation in the Early Cold War,” Brandon Seto argues that historians of foreign relations should consider another element of the occupation: the concerted attempt to Christianize Japan in the service of United States national security.

Seto focuses on the words and actions of General Douglas MacArthur, Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP). The occupation’s mission was to democratize and demilitarize Japan. Seto notes that while Christianizing Japan was not a formal goal of the occupation—and was largely disregarded by U.S. leaders like President Harry Truman—MacArthur and others understood Christianization as a necessary condition for democratization, which in turn made Christianization a necessary part of SCAP’s mission (374, 379). Seto shows how the push for a ‘Christian Japan’ was not simply a function of personal religious belief. Christian ideology was, instead, deployed for its presumed peacemaking and democratizing powers. In Seto’s telling, MacArthur was determined to effect powerful and permanent changes in Japanese society that would render the Japanese unable to pursue further war by virtue of their newfound religiosity. MacArthur understood Christianity as a kind of spiritual stay-behind operation that would keep Japan on the right path even after U.S. occupiers departed. Through MacArthur’s influence over occupation policy and his persuasive—if necessarily unofficial—support for private missionary endeavors, Seto demonstrates MacArthur’s powerful faith in Christianity’s democratizing influence.

According to Seto, MacArthur saw the ultimate battle between Christianity and Communism as a conflict already decided. With a sense of historical certainty that Communists might appreciate, MacArthur knew Communism was fated to lose. Communism lacked the crucial “intangible spiritual fortitude” possessed by Christianity, and would thus ultimately fail in any conflict with the Christian democracies (380). While this encouraged MacArthur to Christianize Japan, it did not prevent the missionizing from being carried forward in racialized ways. Seto makes clear that MacArthur’s vision of Japan was an Orientalizing one, hearkening back to earlier U.S. imperial ventures. Reminiscent of English writer Rudyard Kipling’s message in “The
MacArthur saw the Japanese as a race of underdeveloped children, desperately in need of the civilizing—and spiritualizing—lessons provided by the United States (382-3). The irony, then, is that even as MacArthur stressed the importance of Christianizing Japan, the General treated the Japanese more like ‘little’ brothers in Christ than as equals in fellowship.

Seto mines MacArthur’s speeches and correspondence—as well as the recollections of those who served under him—to chronicle his determination to fundamentally reorganize the religious culture of Japan. This was not merely a desire to see Japanese conversions to Christianity but instead a determination to, in the General’s own words, to “erect upon the ashes of Japan’s discredited past a Christian nation dedicated to God” (385). MacArthur’s goal was to effect a profound change in Japanese religious culture that would be felt for generations to come, since he passionately believed that to be a necessary condition for a lasting peace. MacArthur was able to attempt this since he had wide-ranging authority to make decisions about the occupation. Seto contends that MacArthur faced no censure from Washington, D.C. over his blatant devotional favoritism and violation of Japanese religious freedom (390).

Seto concludes (392-3) that while “economic, social, political, and military aspects of the U.S. occupation are unquestionably vital” in historical analysis, so too is MacArthur’s ‘spiritual crusade’ since it informs the cultural and religious ideology of the occupation. This is certainly true, but I think Seto’s work warrants taking this claim a step further. In much the same way that the occupation’s economic, political, and military concerns were wrapped up together, so too were questions about ‘spiritual rehabilitation.’ Seto convincingly argues that MacArthur, at least, did not see a distinction between a peaceful, democratic Japan and a Christian Japan.

Seto’s work fits alongside a recent surge in interest in the role of religion in U.S. foreign policy, including excellent scholarship by Andrew Preston, William Inboden, Seth Jacobs, Elizabeth Shakman Hurd and others that examine how U.S. policymakers understood religion. Seto’s contribution to this growing area of scholarship is valuable because he investigates SCAP’s handling of religion beyond issues of religious freedom, the new Japanese constitution, and American efforts to restrain State Shinto (and its presumed connection to Japan’s militaristic past) that other work on the occupation has examined. Seto’s work suggests there is still much to explain about the relationship between religion and SCAP’s mission.

Seto further documents how domestic changes in American religion were negotiated by Americans abroad like MacArthur. According to him MacArthur understood Christianity to serve as a kind of political inoculation against Communism, since Christian institutions and ideas would “ensure that Communist ideas and infiltration would find no favorable reception among the Japanese populace” (378). Though Seto does not make this connection directly (as it is beyond the scope of the essay), MacArthur’s ideas connect to then-burgeoning ideas about the role of American religion as a shield against communism. Historians like Kevin

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Schultz have investigated how categories like ‘Tri-Faith’ and ‘Judeo-Christian’ were constructed and maintained to protect against Communism by collapsing differences among familiar religious traditions. Popular organizations like the National Conference for Christians and Jews worked to redescribe ‘being American’ as ‘being tolerant.’ While there were certainly Americans who worked toward this goal out of a concern for just treatment and religious tolerance, this religious cooperation was thought to strengthen democracy by shielding the American people from atheistic Communism. Seto’s work suggests these ideas were exported and applied during SCAP’s work in Japan.²

Seto’s article can also contribute to the work of historians tracing how the category of ‘religion’ has evolved in Japanese culture, and how these changes have affected the U.S. relationship with—and foreign policy toward—Japan. In this respect, Seto’s work joins scholarship by Jason Ananda Josephson and Jolyon Thomas in considering how Japanese ideas about ‘religion’ have conditioned both Japanese responses to the outside world as well as how the outside world has related to Japan.³

Seto’s work raises generative questions and his article points to two areas for future work on this topic. How did MacArthur understand Shinto and Buddhism? Seto notes that for MacArthur, Shinto and Buddhism betrayed the Japanese since it led them into war and encouraged violence. He quotes MacArthur speaking in 1950 about the need for Japanese religious groups to “rebuild upon a higher plane of spirituality or yield before the inevitable Christian advance through Asia” (390). To be sure, both of these traditions were different from the Abrahamic faiths most familiar to U.S. policymakers. Still, both Buddhism and Shinto were understood as ‘religions’ and it was during this period that ‘religion’ writ large came to be synonymous with anti-communism. Did SCAP have internal debates about the role of either religion in complicating American efforts at Christianization? At the very least, it suggests there remained an implicit religious hierarchy in the minds of U.S. policymakers. Second, what was the Japanese response to this Christianization effort? Seto acknowledges the absence of these voices in his conclusion, but even an additional source or two would have helped readers understand MacArthur’s actions by including voices of the people he purported to be spiritually reforming (392).

One area where Seto distinguishes his work from existing scholarship in diplomatic history is in his methodological handling of MacArthur’s personal religious belief. To his credit, Seto carefully paints a picture of MacArthur’s religious practices (372-3). MacArthur was not publicly religious (though he was apparently personally devout) and Seto preempts criticism about the necessity of personal religious belief when deploying religious ideas strategically. However, could it be that MacArthur—whatever his personal beliefs may or may not have been—simply suspected that Christianity would condition Japanese politics in a way the occupation found attractive? Seto’s article understands religion beyond a simple causal mechanism in which personal (and sincerely-held) beliefs condition predictable behaviors. While there is certainly value in investigating MacArthur’s personal ideas about Episcopalianism, for example, Seto’s carefully-researched article makes clear that MacArthur had well-developed ideas about the necessity of Christianizing Japan as a matter of national


security. Did this mean MacArthur had strong beliefs about, say, The Book of Common Prayer or that he squared his beliefs with the doctrines of a particular Episcopal diocese? Perhaps, but the evidence Seto compiles regarding MacArthur’s words and actions suggests strongly that such concerns are beside the point. This portrayal helps us move past understanding religious history exclusively as the domain of individual belief. In this respect, I hope future scholars continue to follow Seto’s lead.

Seto’s work is an important contribution toward the history of SCAP and understanding General MacArthur’s “dream of a Christian Japan” (374). In a larger sense, however, this essay also contributes toward a broader history of the relationship between religion, national security, and foreign policy after World War II.

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