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10-29-2021

[Introduction to] Religion and the Medieval and Early Modern Global Marketplace

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Recommended Citation

Oldenburg, Scott K., and Kristin M. S. Bezio, eds. Religion and the Medieval and Early Modern Global Marketplace / Edited by Scott Oldenburg and Kristin M. S. Bezio. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2022.

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INTRODUCTION

Scott Oldenburg

When English East India Company man Richard Cocks arrived in Japan in 1613 with the goal of establishing a trading post there, he found that Spanish, Portuguese, and Dutch merchants had already made significant inroads and that Chinese merchants, too, had a stake in the island nation. Although neither the Spanish nor the Portuguese had established permanent trading posts in Japan, the missionaries who traveled with them had managed to convert significant numbers of Japanese to Catholicism. While the motivation for evangelizing in Japan may have been the care of souls, the merchants were not unaware of the trade benefits of spreading their religion. As Cocks traveled through Japan he observed, “Yt seemeth there is many papistes in these partes, which would doe us a mischeefe yf they could.”¹ After traveling through Omura (for Cocks, “Umbra”), he writes, “Their hatred against us (I meane them of Umbra) is per meanes of the padrese or pristes, who stered them up against us to make us odious to the Japons, for they are all, or the most part, papisticall Christians in Umbra.”² Cocks attempted to apprise locals of what for him were crucial differences among the dominant Western European religions. Although Japanese rulers found it difficult to distinguish between the theology of Catholics and Protestants, the distinction nonetheless enabled the Spanish and Portuguese merchants to stoke distrust of their Protestant competitors.

Although Cocks expresses surprise and dismay at his encounters with local Japanese Catholics, he may well have been sent to Japan precisely to destabilize the Catholic hold on trade there.³ For roughly a decade Cocks had served as a spy in France where he reported to the Earl of Salisbury, and he continued to send reports to Salisbury from Japan. Cocks actively lobbied to have the Catholics exiled—how effective he was is unclear, but the Japanese did eventually banish Christians as well as Buddhists, thus diminishing the hold Spanish, Portuguese,

Dutch, and Chinese merchants had on Japan, but this was also the prequel to the closing of Japan's ports to foreign merchants altogether.

The influx of foreign goods and the religions that came along with them appeared to pose a threat of outside influence to the recently established Tokugawa regime. Masterless samurai, dubbed *kabukimono* (loosely translated as "eccentrics"), found in their access to a new global marketplace an expression of their social and political discontent, donning flamboyant silks from abroad and smoking tobacco brought to Japan from the Americas by way of European merchants.⁴ Hyper-masculine in their self-presentation, the *kabukimono* formed the basis for the stock protagonist of the earliest of Japan's kabuki theater (named for its depiction of the samurai). Tellingly, Izumo no Okuni, the woman credited with inaugurating the dramatic form, performed her masterless samurai with rosary beads and a cross hanging from the neck, signs that he consumed not only foreign goods but also foreign religion. Okuni's standard skit involved her *kabukimono* character attempting a tryst with a courtesan.⁵ There is considerable debate about how the popular performance was received, but it seems not much of a stretch to see the prominent place of the symbols of Catholicism as rendering the samurai at least somewhat hypocritical, engaged in an empty embrace of the foreign religion as casually as he might embrace his courtesan.⁶

In this instance, religion emerges not as the sincere belief Cocks hoped he might leverage at the marketplace, but rather as just another commodity trafficked by foreign merchants. The point is furthered in the Japanese "Tale of the Christian" (1639) which describes a Jesuit missionary arriving with European merchants as a grotesque "phanstasm more terrible than the most ferocious monster," and rather like "a long-necked demon of the sort that disguise themselves as Buddhist lay-priests in order to trick people."⁷ Here the Europeans themselves are rendered monstrous others, and the trickery of the inhuman friar overlays with the empty signs of faith in the kabuki theater or deception at the marketplace.

In this brief overview of religion and the market of early modern Japan—and its encounters with the religions and markets of other nations—one may glean some of the key themes of this volume of essays, developed more intricately in the chapters that follow. Objects of religious veneration might circulate as marketable commodities; they might serve as signs of political or economic identities; matters of faith might frame (or be framed) by the experience of the marketplace; religion traveled with merchants and might be used to gain leverage at the marketplace; and, recognizing this latter point, states might attempt to enforce or banish religion from the market altogether. Political power and individual identity meet at the crossroads of religion and the marketplace.

It is no surprise, of course, that religion and economy comprise significantly overlapping spheres in pre- and early modern life. Indeed, the notion of an autonomous economic and religious sphere might well be deemed anachronistic to the early modern period.⁸ Whether attending a mosque, synagogue, church, or temple, early modern subjects heard about the evils of avarice and the importance of redistributing one's wealth. They read about injunctions against interest,

or about prophets objecting to enslavement. Still, this was a period of major investment in trade with the expectation of returns, the establishment of joint companies, and the horrors of the transatlantic slave trade. And these economic activities gave rise to encounters with non-Western religious outlooks and thus perceived opportunities for evangelism, which would, in turn, as Cocks and those like him understood it, result in preferred access to the marketplace. It should further be noted that religion was not merely gilding of filthy lucre. The conversion of enslaved peoples to Christianity may have aimed at greater control over the enslaved, but the enslaved also often developed their own vital, theologically informed critique of enslavement.⁹ Similarly, in his *Nueva Corónica y Buen Gobierno* (1615), the Inca Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala petitions Spain for better governors and priests, at one point presenting the image of an Inca and a Spaniard conversing; the Inca asks the Spaniard what he eats, and the Spaniard replies, “Este oro comemos” (we eat this gold). Not unlike the interpretation of Okuni’s *kabukimono* above, the *Corónica* thus held the Spanish colonial project up to the religious standards they had imposed on the Inca.¹⁰

This volume might usefully be compared to the *Religion and Trade: Cross-Cultural Exchanges in World History, 1000–1900*, edited by Francesca Trivellato, Leor Halevi, and Caátia Antunes.¹¹ Building on the tradition of Fernand Braudel and Philip D. Curtin, the essays that make up *Religion and Trade* focus primarily on trade with a sense that religious concerns were ultimately dwarfed by the lure of commodities and profit. While we do not necessarily contest this framing, the present volume is interested in the manifold ways matters of faith interacted with marketplace phenomena—anxieties about the intermixing of secular markets and the sacred objects, the trade in altar pieces and religious imagery, and the economics of such images, as well as the ways in which religion helped or hindered market activities and, conversely, how market activity facilitated or complicated the spread of specific religions. By the same token, while several of the following chapters delve into cross-cultural encounters, others explore specific regional intersections of religion and the market, inviting readers to draw their own comparativist conclusions. Finally, the exceptionalism that came along with faith (not to mention national mercantile projects) frequently led to racialization and attempts to legitimate conquest and enslaving of peoples.

The dual focus on religion and marketplace, the chapters that make up this volume do not easily fall into what Sanjay Subrahmanyam calls “ersatz Weberianism,” a de facto Eurocentrism that sees Christianity as the preeminent force behind modern economic development.¹² Several chapters delve into exclusively Western European, Christian material, but others investigate the intersection of religion and the marketplace in Syria, Ethiopia, and Peru without giving precedence to European perspectives. Moreover, this volume does not attempt to present a comprehensive history of the interrelations of religion and the global marketplace, nor could it given the diverse religions, cultures, and economic practices across continents and centuries that comprise its scope. Even the very best of largescale scholarly examinations of religion and economy,

like Joost Hengstmengel's *Divine Providence in Early Modern Economic Thought* or Silvia Federici's remarkable *Caliban and the Witch* have their blindspots—nuances within their scope and whole continents outside of it. Such largescale narratives of economic and religious change have their place, but this volume sets out to examine particularities, episodes, and phenomena that might support or undermine or offer alternatives to distant readings of religion and the marketplace. This volume provides a series of case histories, which, it is hoped, will lead to further investigations into the complex interplay of religion and the marketplace in different regions and moments, particularly those that transcend or challenge the historical tendency of centering European Christianity.

Despite the diverse approaches and regional focuses of the chapters that make up *Religion in the Medieval and Early Modern Global Marketplace*, these ten chapters can be usefully grouped into three distinct categories. The first four chapters chart the tensions between religious and economic thought in specific locales or texts. The next three chapters look at the complex ways religion and economy interacted with one another as markets became increasingly global, particularly in colonial or proto-colonial settings. The last three chapters look at the way matters of faith, economy, and race converge in religious images of the pre- and early modern periods.

In alluding to Matthew 22:21 (“Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar’s”) in chapter one’s title, David Beeler reminds us that scripture long involved itself in political economy. Beeler charts the way the economic decision-making of the Dutch province Groningen was informed by Calvinist leaders in a province with a significant Catholic population throughout the seventeenth century. Through analysis of Groningen’s domestic as well as international trade, Beeler shows a gradual yet fraught process of secularization of the early modern marketplace in the Netherlands. In chapter two Ian R. Simpson reveals the ways that, despite the centrality of mosques, markets in medieval Syria-Palestine facilitated not only trade, but also interreligious contact. The various kinds of contact at the market made for fluid identities irreducible to particular religious affiliation. Here the confluence of various religions at the marketplace ruptures traditional identities. Similarly, in chapter three, Manuel Ortuño examines King Enrique’s 1474 letter establishing an annual trade fair in Paradas, Spain. Although the letter infused political and religious authority, the trade fair was ordained to be a space where Christians, Muslims, and Jews could freely trade without interference. This is all the more surprising given that the *Reconquista* of the southern region of Spain was still incomplete at the time. It would seem that economic pressure to keep the marketplace open overrode preoccupation with xenophobia until Granada fell to Catholic Spanish powers. Still, that Enrique ordered local magistrates to protect the religious diversity at the market suggests at least some antipathies about matters of faith as they became entangled with trade. Sara Aponte-Olivieri’s reading of Michel Montaigne’s *Essays* in chapter four pursues such anxieties. Committed to his aristocratic identity, Montaigne, argues Aponte-Olivieri, regards with disdain the intermingling of the sacred

and the profane from the domestic space of the middling sort's shop in France to attempts at conversion in the New World.

If allowing merchant adventures to go forward with missionary adjuncts produced anxiety in aristocrats in Europe, the meaning of “heathen” goods imported to Europe introduced another kind of anxiety. In chapter five Maya Mathur examines the writings of East India Company men Sir Thomas Roe and Edward Terry who try to allay such fears by framing their mercantile project as fulfilling God's purpose, a holy war by other means, which would break up the stronghold the Ottoman Empire had on trade routes. We have then dual anxieties—for Montaigne a worry about mingling religion and the market, for Terry and Roe a fear of the consequences for not doing so. Chapter six picks up where these anxieties leave off. Here Sara González Castrejón traces the history of unique Catholic icons in Peru from the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries. In what she cautiously compares to market pressures, what began as evangelical efforts to convert and subdue indigenous peoples of Peru gave way to subtle negotiations whereby saints' images were imbued with local meaning and indigenous aesthetics. It is perhaps this autonomy once religion enters the market, that so worried early modern subjects like Montaigne, in some ways the corollary to efforts by the likes of Cocks to use religious affiliation as a way of opening up markets.

As one may detect in the examples of Peru and India, efforts at conversion that went with commerce were not always purely aimed at the saving of souls or merely facilitating exchange but rather at attempts at domination. In Chapter 7, Luis Salés shows that intense Jesuit attempts at converting Abyssinians to Catholicism were imagined as a prelude to broader colonial efforts in Ethiopia and its surroundings. Salés documents the successful resistance to this incursion led in part by Wälättä Peṭros, memorialized by the seventeenth-century Ethiopian hagiography about her, the *Gädlä Wälättä Peṭros*.

Despite attempts at promoting tolerance at the marketplace (observed in the first three chapters of this volume), inter-religious encounters might also create animosity. Salés points out that the Jesuit missionary Pedro Paéz looked with disdain on (among other things) the Abyssinian practice of teaching girls to read scripture, while Gälawdewos, the author of the *Gädlä Wälättä Peṭros*, frequently refers to “the filthy faith of the Europeans.”¹³ Righteousness coupled with competition for resources might thus lead to claims of racial or cultural superiority. In chapter eight, Anne Williams explores such instances in depictions of Joseph of Nazareth, associated as he was with the material well-being of the household. As market capitalism developed alongside increased contact among disparate peoples in the Mediterranean, notes Williams, depictions of Joseph as the household's saintly treasurer at times gave way to, among other things, anti-Semitic satire. A similar dynamic appears in chapter nine where Lorenz Hindrichsen examines the commodification of race in an altarpiece and a baptismal font found in a parish church in Northern Iceland. The baptismal font features an irenic scene of Ethiopian conversion while the altarpiece frames two Black Africans

as Christ's sadistic torturers. As Hindrichsen shows, the images participated in broad patterns of European fantasies about racial difference and domination but also retained local meanings for the congregants of the remote Parish Church.

Finally, from the market for racialized religious images, chapter ten by Cecilio M. Cooper examines antiblack racism in depictions of the Miracle of the Black Leg. The pre-modern vision of a (non-racialized) leg being amputated from one person and surgically attached to another was, as cross-cultural encounters, colonial enterprises, and the transatlantic slave trade increased in the early modern period, racialized into the image of an Ethiopian's leg amputated and grafted onto a white European body. Cooper's careful exegesis exposes the ways religions, markets, and medical discourses combined to mystify antiblack racism as the miraculous triumph of Christianity and science.

This volume ends with an epilogue by co-editor Kristin M. S. Bezio reflecting on the connections between these chapters on religion in the medieval and early modern market and our present moment. What is the legacy of early modern economic and spiritual exceptionalism? In what ways does prosperity still entangle itself with righteousness? Bezio offers some insights on these questions. None of these chapters should be seen as end points, however. On the contrary, it is hoped that these ten case studies covering disparate locales and centuries might provide useful starting points for considering the intersection of faith and economy in a wide variety of disciplines.

Given the brutal record of colonization that followed so many joint incursions of merchants and missionaries, it was perhaps not unwise, then, for the early modern Japan encountered by Richard Cocks to be suspicious of and ultimately close its markets to foreign merchants. Okuni's satirical presentation of the masterless samurai, after all, pointed to anxieties about the influence of foreign goods on the social and political stability of the island (similar, perhaps, to Montaigne's own anxieties about change manifested in the mingling of the sacred and the profane). Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, English, and Chinese merchants all converged on Japan, as they had done elsewhere, conflating the conversion of resources to profit with the conversion of souls. The demand for exotic goods went along with a desire to efface differences of belief. Like Ethiopia, Japan resisted such attempts. While we may see the economic and cultural exchanges of the global marketplace as abundantly progressive, when it came to the respect of diverse cultures, absolute faith in the market risked being at the same time recklessly regressive.

Notes

- 1 Richard Cocks, *Diary of Richard Cocks, Cape-Merchant in the English Factory in Japan, 1615–22*, Vol. 1, Ed. Edward Maunde Thompson (London: Printed for the Hakluyt Society, 1883), 171.
- 2 *Ibid.*, 139.
- 3 Timon Screech, "The English and the Control of Christianity in the Early Edo Period," *Japan Review* 24 (2012): 3–40 and 13–15.

- 4 Harry Harootunian, *Uneven Moments: Reflections on Japan's Modern History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 79–80.
- 5 Yoko Takakuwa, “Performing Marginality: The Place of the Player and of ‘Woman’ in Early Japanese Culture,” *New Literary History* 27.2 (1996): 213–25 and 213–15; and Galia Todorova Gabrovska, “Onna Mono: The ‘Female Presence’ on the Stage of the All-Male Traditional Theatre,” *Asian Theatre Journal* 32.2 (2015): 387–415 and 389–92.
- 6 On debates on how subversive or conservative early kabuki theater was, see Takakuwa, 215–8; Gabrovska, 389.
- 7 Alexander Curvelo, “The Disruptive Presence of the Namban-jin in early Modern Japan,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 55.2/3 (2012): 581–602 and 592.
- 8 Recent work suggests that even today religion and economy might not be as separate as we would like to think. See Daromir Rudnycky and Filippo Osella (eds.), *Religion and the Morality of the Market* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).
- 9 See, for example, Kristen Block, *Ordinary Lives in the Early Caribbean: Religion, Colonial Competition, and the Politics of Profit* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012), 51–64; Jon F. Sensbach, *Rebecca's Revival: Creating Black Christianity in the Atlantic World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).
- 10 Felipe Guamán Poma de Ayala, *El Primer Nueva Corónica y Buen Gobierno*, Vol. 2 (Mexico: Fundacion Biblioteca Ayacuch, 1980), 371. On this reading of the text, see Francisco Ramírez Santacruz and Héctor Costilla Martínez, “Diego Muñoz Camargo y Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala,” *Revista de Crítica Literaria Latinoamericana* 43.86 (2017): 151–70 and 162–5; and Rocío Quispe-Agnoli, “‘Yo y el Otro’: Identidad y Alternidad en la ‘Nueva Corónica y Buen Gobierno,’” *MLN* 119.2 (2004): 226–51.
- 11 Francesca Trivellato, Leor Halevi, and Caátia Antunes, *Religion and Trade: Cross-Cultural Exchanges in World History, 1000–1900* (Oxford University Press, 2015).
- 12 Sanjay Subrahmanyam, “Introduction,” *Merchant Networks in the Early Modern World, 1450–1800* (London: Routledge, 2016), xii.
- 13 Gälawdewos, *The Life and Struggles of Our Mother Walatta Petros: A Seventeenth-Century African Biography of an Ethiopian Woman*, Trans. Wendy Belcher and Michel Kleiner (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 152, 154, 155, 180, and 228.

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