

Ideology and Christianity in Japan, by Kiri Paramore (London: Routledge, 2009; pp. 230. £75).

In common with other regions of the world which witnessed the arrival on their shores of European Christian missionaries—in this case Iberian Catholics in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, followed by a theological and ecclesiastical smörgåsbord of competing denominations in the nineteenth—the significance of Christianity in Japan is to be measured primarily in terms of cultural impact rather than conversion rates. At one time this was discussed in terms of an ‘East-West’ encounter, occurring against the backdrop of the broad European cultural and technological chauvinism with which the modern missionary movement had a close, though distinctly mixed, relationship. Recent scholarly attention has, however, tended instead to focus on local ‘agency’: the ways in which converts or interested intellectuals in Japan, India, Africa and elsewhere appropriated, reinterpreted, and deployed for their own cultural or political purposes certain elements of Europe’s eclectic Christian tradition. Europeans could, of course, be similarly self-referential, enthusiastically wielding imperfectly understood Asian cultural traditions as sticks with which to probe or beat enemies at home—from Church leaders or Christians in general to aristocrats, scientists, and political rivals.

Kiri Paramore’s book forms in many ways part of this trend in scholarship, setting out to track the domestic Japanese ‘development and political utilization’ of anti-Christian discourses between 1600 and 1900. He notes that the high tide of such discourses in Japan’s early modern period came *after* the practice of Christianity had been stamped out (or, in some cases, driven underground) and foreign missionaries expelled, and that their real purpose was not so much to criticise Christianity as to express forceful views about the lines upon which the new Tokugawa state (c.1600–1868) should be run. Similarly, a second wave of anti-Christian literature, in the 1800s, appeared just at the time when the Tokugawa regime was starting to look weak and Japanese intellectual life was turning once again to fundamental questions about the structure of the nation’s politics. Paramore points particularly to the Mito School, some of whose thinkers used Christianity as a convenient shorthand for all things barbarous and non-Japanese and whose influence on imperial ideology and ultra-nationalism in the twentieth century went on to be significant.

Although continuities from the Tokugawa into the Meiji period (1868–1912) and beyond have increasingly been recognised in recent decades, the majority of historians interested in social, political or intellectual history have nevertheless continued to focus their efforts primarily within one of these two periods. The present volume’s attempt to transcend this boundary in its analysis of trends in the deployment of anti-Christian discourses, and at the same time to unearth the processes by which a hitherto largely unquestioned ‘canon’ of anti-Christian literature was formed over the course of three hundred years, is fresh and ought to be very welcome (as the author himself reminds readers on a number of occasions). Among the trends it serves to highlight is the recurrence of key themes and tropes across the period, including the assertion that the popularity of Christianity in Japan is symptomatic of weaknesses in the established order and that strong government necessitates the taming of religious institutional power, easily understood to incorporate not only Christianity but also Japanese Buddhism—which was perennially unpopular in some quarters of Japanese

intellectual life. Then there is the overlaying of old Tokugawa concerns with complementary newer ones, including a range of Meiji-era critiques drawn from Europe, such as the notion that Christianity was anti-scientific and anti-evolutionary.

Students and academics already familiar with Japan in this period will enjoy Paramore's choice of texts and thinkers, and his discussion of the connections between them. Readers less familiar with this subject matter may have a number of concerns, however, stemming from the inevitable need for a volume so ambitious in scope to be selective. While grateful for Paramore's broadly chronological treatment of anti-Christian discourses and his inclusion at the outset of two chapters on Japanese Christian and Confucian thought, they might have wished for a little more space to be given to the establishment of a social-historical backdrop—both for ease of understanding and for reassurance that intellectual history is here being related consistently and convincingly to its broader historical context. More might perhaps have been said, too, on why particular texts warrant inclusion at the expense of others; on occasion one gets the impression that this crucial question has been passed over too briefly. Finally, given the emergence in the modern period of major Japanese intellectuals who either converted to Christianity or were sympathetic to it, an interesting line of enquiry might have been to include some of their ideas when examining the role of anti-Christian discourses in debates about political values and state-building—not least since these ideas were often the product of strikingly similar political motivations, arguments and logic.

Perhaps this is asking rather a lot of a volume that already offers a great deal, by laying out broad trends as well as exploring in depth a number of key themes in anti-Christian discourses and opening up, in the process, new avenues for future scholarship.

doi:10.1093/ehr/ceq220

CHRISTOPHER HARDING
University of Edinburgh