

Lecture Synopsis: "Is East Asia Secular?"

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Religion was not the reason I studied Chinese and Japanese at Leyden University. Neither Zen, nor Taoism, nor any claim to Oriental wisdom held much attraction for me. In some ways, it was the opposite. East Asia seemed to offer a secular respite from the society I grew up in, which, at least until the 1960s, was heavily colored by organized religion.

Since the 19th century Dutch society was organized in so-called pillars. Every form of organized activity, from cradle to grave, was based on religious affiliations: schools, sports clubs, social clubs, universities, political parties, newspapers, broadcasting companies, all were tied to a religious denomination. The only non-religious pillars, also with their own clubs, societies, papers and parties, were the “free-thinking liberals” and the socialists.

The pillars began to crumble in the 1960s, when youth rebelled against traditional forms of authority. This was not always an easy process. In 1962, a mildly satirical TV program poking gentle fun at the new middle-class infatuation with television (the TV set as an altar to modern affluence, placed prominently in the living room), by substituting the words “TV screen” for God in the Lord’s Prayer, provoked death threats, protests in parliament, calls for the resignation of the culture and education minister, etcetera.

Many rebels of the 1960s and ‘70s replaced their religious beliefs with secular dogmas, such as Third World Marxism, Maoism, and multiculturalism. The multiculturalist ideology, which condemned all criticism of non-Western cultures as neo-colonialist, or imperialist, only began to falter in the face of the growing presence of Muslims in Europe.

The Salman Rushdie case, in particular, split the ranks of the Left. Those who stuck to multiculturalism blamed Rushdie for his – in their view – unnecessary, even offensive provocation of Muslim sensitivities. Others defended this typical figure of the

metropolitan, cosmopolitan Left against religious bigotry by turning against what began to be seen as the Islamic threat. Exactly the same phenomenon could be observed in the Netherlands after the murder by an Islamist extremist of Theo van Gogh.

Does this point to a clash of civilizations? I would say not. For the first generation of Muslim immigrants, migrant workers from villages in Turkey and North Africa, was not radical in any way. It is the children and grandchildren of these workers, born and bred in Europe, who are vulnerable to faith-based political extremism, originating in the Arab world and often downloaded from the Internet. Revolutionary Islamism is not so much part of a traditional civilization as a modern political phenomenon born from the resistance against secular dictatorships in the Middle East.

Is this type of faith-based political extremism a characteristic of monotheism? Many people think it is. Polytheism leaves room for negotiation, one might assume. Japanese, Indians and Chinese hedge their bets by believing in many gods, derived from a variety of faiths.

And yet, two upheavals in East Asia suggest otherwise: Japanese Emperor Worship (state Shinto) and Maoism. Neither is ancient, although traditional beliefs played a part in both. Both came from the collapse of traditional orders.

When Japan was confronted by the threatening force of Western imperialism, nativists and reformers debated, often violently, how to respond. Nativists wanted to throw out the barbarians and restore the imperial throne to the center of politics. Reformers wanted to learn from the West in order to protect Japan from its threatening power. Both schools agreed that Christianity was the key to Western politics, just as Confucianism had been of politics in China and Japan.

State Shinto, as a politicized national religion, was in some ways a nativist response to the Japanese perception of Christianity's role in the West. The Japanese Emperor, as the divine patriarch of the family state, was the main focus of State Shinto. In the 1930s this

cult became more and more militant, resulting in a form of Asian fascism. It was at least as intolerant of other faiths, including Buddhism, as any monotheistic faith had ever been in Europe or the Middle East, and it resulted in a “holy war” against the West..

In China, the collapse of the imperial order in 1911 was more radical than the Meiji Restoration in Japan. A cosmological order had been overturned with nothing to paper it over. The May 4th Movement in 1919, which began as a student protest against concessions made by the Chinese government at Versailles, became a cultural and political movement, which extolled science as a dogma. Traditional religions and philosophies were blamed for China’s backwardness and vulnerability. Scientific socialism, and later Maoism, followed the same logic.

Maoism was also a restoration of the most authoritarian form of imperialism. Qin Shi Huangdi, the first emperor of China, was Mao’s model. Maoist orthodoxy combined the harshest aspects of traditional authoritarianism with modern, ideological extremism. Mao now lives on as a traditional Chinese folk deity.

In post-imperial Japan religion has been privatized in many new forms of worship, mostly harmless, but sometimes violent. Similar attempts to privatize faith in China have been resisted by the Communist Party, which seeks to control all forms of organized life, and fears the kind of political millenarianism that has wreaked such havoc in the past.

Desire to believe in a higher order is as human as making war. We cannot wish it away, in West or East. The important question is how to tame it. Attempts to eradicate religion can be as dangerous as giving it too much space. Religious institutions must be given their place, which should be kept separate from political institutions. It is not always an easy balance to achieve. The problems with Muslims in Europe show that we are far from getting it right. But a glance at the modern history of China and Japan should cure us from the illusion that superior wisdom is to be found in Asia.