“What religion is” and stories of “religion” are two quite different things. Just as Tomoko Masuzawa has unmasked the production of “world religions,”¹ so here I query “religion” in places that did not and still do not speak that word. Yet in their “un-speaking” it, translations still did and do break out in different directions—and in more than one way.

When in 1854 Commodore Matthew Perry obtained, with the show of force the year before, a “Peace and Amity Treaty” in the Convention of Kanagawa with the Tokugawa Shogunate (1600–1868), the Japanese did not yet have a word for “religion.” Nor, in fact, did the rest of East Asia, or much of the rest of the world (though this should not be presumed a “lack”). It would still be decades before a coinage from the heavy impress of colonial hegemony would gain uncontested currency. As that language evolved, two things could be noted. One was the peculiarity of the terminological choices along the way—all having to do with ancestors and the ancestral. The other was the generative effect of the emerging terminology translating “religion” both in inventing Japanese “religion” and in controlling and performing it.² What I would like to do here is first unfurl the history of the original context, sense and deployment of the winning term in Japan and then China, showing it as a story of powerful mutual effect of language and its associative realities, and second, in a postcolonial, inverse gaze, suggest how that imbricated, Möbius dynamic informs the reliopolitics of our times even far beyond East Asia.³

In doing this work, I will be using the terms “religiopolitics” and “religiopolitical” in a strategic and critical way. Just as Timothy Fitzgerald in his Discourses

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¹ See her The Invention of World Religions (Chicago, 2005), the telling subtitle of which is Or How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism.

² As will become clear below, what I imply by the quotation marks around the word “religion” is not only something problematic but a floating signifier that never undergoes translation without major transformation. On this point I would like to thank Dr. Horii Mitsutoshi for offering his critical questions on my use of core terminology throughout this essay.

³ Thus my chief purpose here is not to (re)narrate a “history of religion,” however splendidly and with great theoretical astuteness Jason Ånanda Josephson has done it for Japan in his The Invention of Religion in Japan (2012), which I was able to peruse only after drafting the penultimate version of this essay. That said, much of the first half of this intervention would not have had its focus and inspiration without his earlier and very fine essay of 2006, “When Buddhism Became a ‘Religion’: Religion and Superstition in the Writings of Inoue Enryō.”
on Civility and Barbarity has attacked the categories of “religion” and “politics” as assumedly sustainable, autonomous and universal categories, so here I use their composite to refuse both categories, and their conspired division of the public and private, state and communal formations, and rationalist and extra-rationalist institutions. At the same time, I do not assign a substantive meaning to the religiopolitical, as if it equated and comprised two definable realms or yielded neatly to some substitute called the “ancestral.” Rather the comma in my title is meant to provoke an open inquiry to the differential relations between what could be intended by the ancestral or the religiopolitical.4

Ringing the Changes of “Religion” in Japan

First, then, on the choice of terms of translation in Japan. As the “culture of Western Ocean” with its many new technologies invaded Japan in the post-Perry, Meiji Era (1868–1912), turning from what had been mostly a Dutch trickle in Nagasaki into an Occidental flood through the isles of Nippon, many Western words (including then-neologisms) had to be translated. For the Hellenic and Latinate words, the etymologies were often reperformed in the kanji or Chinese characters that had been core to the “literaturization” of Japan.5 Thus theology reappeared as shingaku, 神學, the study of God or spirit/divine beings, and the fine arts as bijutsu, 美術, from les beaux arts in French (Gallic impressionism being then the vanguard influence), and so forth. This mode of trans-literation was not, however, always possible or advisable. So when it came to “religion,”6 a Latinate term the Japanese encountered in the international trade treaties in the 1850s,7 things worked differently (Josephson 2006: 144). Rather than fashioning a calque of the Latin religio meaning either that which (1) chooses (or considers) again or scrupulously, or (2) binds together, as Cicero and

4 In contrast to the doubly punctuated “religion,” I do not here place quotation marks around the term religiopolitical, not because it is not also problematic, but because it is not my primary target of critique; I use it instead as, a foil and portal for a new critical concept which is porous with what in French theory is called “the political” (le politique, sharply distinguished from the conventional term politics, la politique), but with a strongly marked patriarchal, “ancestral” edge.
5 The modern Japanese translation for “culture” was bunka 文化, an anticipation in its ideographic elements of v. Florescu’s 1971 neologism letteraturizzazione.
6 The Latinate English word “religion” had its cognates in most European tongues, including Romance, Germanic and Slavic languages (the Greeks alone sticking with their ancient word for cult/ritual, ἰδρυκτής θρέσκεια). Thus the word served as the shared term “donated” by the Western colonial powers that the Japanese had to attempt to understand and translate.
7 Josephson’s text has “treatises,” presumably a typographical error.