PART ONE

CONVERTING STATES:
NATIONALISM, RITUAL AND RELIGIOUS IDEOLOGY
THE CRISIS OF “CONVERSION” AND SEARCH FOR NATIONAL DOCTRINE IN EARLY MEIJI JAPAN

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If we do not transform them, they will transform us
—Aizawa Seishisai, Shinron

INTRODUCTION

Peter van der Veer observes that “the colonial era makes new imaginations of community possible, and it is especially in the religious domain that these new imaginations take shape.”1 Japan’s modern nation-state, centered on the imperial institution and forged under the semi-colonial conditions of the unequal treaty era (1858–1911), was indeed a novel product of political imagination. Its direct and complex relationship with the “religious” domain, moreover, constitutes a central node in the ongoing conversation regarding the nature of an imagined community defined in relation to the emperor. Is the imperial institution a “religion” in its own right? How do the ritual components of the imperial institution relate to questions of “religious” identity and liberty in modern Japan? Such questions, often cast in the light of a nationalism representative of the 1930s and 40s, strike at the core of the Japanese national imagination. That imagination has never been monolithic, however, and the modern imperial institution has functioned best by positing itself above a wide array of identities and imbuing them with an imperative to prove their compatibility with itself.

The emperor did not always “stand above the fray,” however. At its inception, the modern imperial institution was shaped by a political imagination concerned with the specter of Christian conversion, and the threat it purportedly posed to the “national body.” Ironically, the attempt to counter Christianity with a “national doctrine” capable of capturing the hearts of the people (jinshin) led to a crisis of a different

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