
MacGregor’s beautifully produced book makes the interesting claim that a social context of catastrophe strongly influences if not plainly causes a shift in popular religion and its intellectual leaders. The shift begins from a position in which cultured religious practice combined with divine action can lead to salvation in this life (and the next). MacGregor takes as his test cases to compare the flourishing of esoteric Tendai Buddhism in Japan at the end of the Heian period—ninth and tenth centuries—and the flourishing of late Medieval Roman Catholicism. Both of those situations prized “numinous” personalities whose spiritual accomplishments were exemplary, “saints” who used the means of grace as laid out by Tendai and Catholicism respectively. In both instances, such achievements were open to common people as well as aristocrats. Then, in his thesis, some overwhelming social catastrophe or cluster of disasters makes the situation of rewarded religious effort implausible. In the Japanese case, the peace and prosperity of the unified Heian empire collapsed and, in a series of struggles that MacGregor traces, the Kamakura period began with many social disasters and little social cohesion or prosperity. In the European case, the plagues of the Black Death in the fourteenth century caused similar political upheavals and instabilities. In both cases, the religious sensibility developed that salvation through works was not working anymore. In Japan there was a strong surge of participation in Pure Land Buddhism according to which Amida Buddha saves those who merely (that’s a very complicated “merely”) call upon his name. Honen (1133–1212) was the great exponent of a new form of Pure Land Buddhism and Luther (1483–1546) began the Protestant Reformation according to which salvation does not come from works but from faith alone.

MacGregor has a masterful chapter comparing Honen and Luther, going back and forth page by page to interpret their spiritual journeys and the development and elaboration of their religious reforms. The salvation by faith alone position is unstable, however. How does one acquire faith? By careful cultivation? Then it is another form of religious work and will be closed to many in a catastrophic time when works do not add up. By the power of the Amida Buddha’s vow to save all people or by the grace of God (in the respective traditions)? Then are there no human virtues worth noting? The next shift, illustrated by the move from Honan to Shinran and the move from Luther to Calvin answers these questions by saying that there is absolutely nothing human beings can do on their own and they are religiously hopelessly corrupt. Salvation, including the faith to accept it, comes directly (though sometimes with the help of mediators) from Amida or...
God. Why is it, then, that only some people properly can call upon the name of Buddha or have faith? Shinran and Calvin give different answers. For Shinran, the vow of Amida Buddha that all will be saved means that those who cannot call upon his name properly in this life will keep having more lives until they do. For Calvin, on MacGregor’s reading, all people deserve damnation and God saves only so many of them as are required to give God glory, which is the reason God creates the world in the first place. MacGregor spells out these arguments with careful, comparative, theologically astute detail.

MacGregor is quick to point out that there are vast differences between the religious practices and beliefs, the cultures, cosmologies, and theologies of Japanese Buddhism and European Christianity in the two different time periods studied. He does not want to overstate the similarities. In fact, he says that the very differences in culture and religion make the similarities in the move from religions of works to religions of faith alone and to religions of divine action as the cause of faith alone all the more striking. He believes it strengthens his claim about the impact of social catastrophe.

What are we to make of this argument? First it is worth noting that the state of scholarship has advanced to such a level that very serious comparisons can be made with English language materials. MacGregor works from English translations for the most part and from English language secondary historical sources. This is not a translation project surrounded by an historical narrative, as was so common in earlier history of religion studies.

Second, we can ask about the narrative itself. How much is there an historical progression in these cases? Shinran and Calvin were a generation after Honen and Luther, respectively, but they did not displace them. Honen’s and Luther’s versions of Buddhism and Christianity survived alongside Shinran’s and Calvin’s. Perhaps all MacGregor means to say is that the later reformers were just more consistent than the earlier ones in their general tradition, which is a theological preference.

Third, just in what sense are the social conditions causal factors? Are all social catastrophes in the midst of a high spiritual situation likely to cause a retreat from human effort and a longing for the divinity to do everything? European Jewry had a very high spiritual situation in many aspects of religion and culture in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the Holocaust was an absolute catastrophe. I have not noticed many Jewish theologians or religious movements since then that have focused on looking to God exclusively for salvation. Quite the contrary, many have said that God obviously is not going to save us and so we had better be our own witnesses and warriors.

Fourth, surely social conditions play large roles in the development of religious ideas and practices and it is a mistake to consider religions only in terms of their beliefs and practices. But the social conditions are so much more complicated