

PROLOGUE

The Drums of War

On September the 11th, enemies of freedom committed an act of war against our country. Americans have known wars, but for the past 136 years they have been wars on foreign soil, except for one Sunday in 1941. Americans have known the casualties of war, but not at the center of a great city on a peaceful morning.

Americans have known surprise attacks, but never before on thousands of civilians.

All of this was brought upon us in a single day, and night fell on a different world, a world where freedom itself is under attack.

GEORGE W. BUSH (2001)¹

BY NOW IT IS A FAMILIAR story. A surprise attack on American territory perpetrated by fanatical pilots wrought unprecedented material destruction and an unimaginable loss of life. Even as the smoke rose from the ashes, the American president spoke to the nation to assuage its fears and to assure the people that justice would be served. Whereas only a few people had pounded the drum of war before the attack, suddenly the press resonated with its staccato rhythm. The person on the street demanded vengeance. She was out for blood. The American people were ready for war, and the enemy would have no place to hide.

The story in the preceding paragraph is familiar not only because it is an account of the fervor that swept through the United States in the wake of

the 11 September 2001 attacks, but also because virtually the same response characterized the American response to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. I do not claim that the events were historically identical. With almost exactly sixty years between them, they effectively took place in different worlds. Yet there is a striking parallel between 9/11 and the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor of 7 December 1941. Both attacks resulted in devastating loss of life and property. Both galvanized Americans and created fertile ground for a militarist, racist jingoism that was striking in its suddenness and fervor. In both cases, influential observers identified religion as the prime motivator for the attack (Islam in the case of 9/11; Shintō in the case of Pearl Harbor). As America went to war in response, the promotion of religious freedom appeared as a way of turning such “bad religion” into “good religion.” The religiously motivated enemy spurned freedom. It was the duty of the United States to militarily chastise this intractable foe, to bomb him into submission, and then in the course of military occupation to educate him about the true nature of liberty. In the process, the enemy’s wife, his sister, and his child would be freed from the tyrannical grip of his illiberal ideology. In the process, the enemy himself would be transformed. Gentled. Made quiescent. Indeed, how could it be any other way? Such was the power of American Religious Freedom™.

Just as US president George W. Bush drew parallels between Pearl Harbor and 9/11 in his 20 September 2001 speech to Congress declaring the onset of the “War on Terror,” some American neoconservative policy makers looked back at the Allied Occupation of Japan (1945–52) in search of a model for how the Muslim-majority nations of southwestern and central Asia might be democratized. Yet as historian of United States–Japan relations John Dower presciently argued in February 2003, the invasion and occupation of Iraq that followed would not and could not reproduce the Japanese success story in the way that many policy makers evidently hoped.² For all the parallels between the respective onsets of the Pacific War and the War on Terror, fundamental cultural and historical differences militated against reproduction of the unique circumstances that allowed the Japanese to “embrace defeat.”³

I chose to study religious freedom during the Allied Occupation out of fascination with post-9/11 depictions of religious freedom as a panacea for the global ills of terrorism, Islamism, and sectarianism. My account in the following pages is not presentist, but it does have messages for readers today. Studying how the story of religious freedom in Japan has been told —

and paying close attention to who has done the telling—reveals that appeals to religious freedom have powerful political effects far beyond the tasks of making marginal religious organizations safe from persecution or freeing innocent people from the grip of oppressive ideology. Upon investigation, it becomes disturbingly clear that as much as religious freedom solves problems of inequity and oppression, it engenders new ones. This is true in international contexts, when occupying armies free religion at the point of a gun. It is also true in domestic contexts, when majoritarian claims often serve as tools for the suppression of religious minorities.

The Allied Occupation of Japan was technically a multinational endeavor, but it was essentially an American project that aimed to introduce religious freedom to Japan as a preliminary step in the democratization of the Asian country. While a number of scholars have written about the Occupation and its legacy, when I began my own preliminary research into this important period I found myself curious about the prehistory of the Occupation as much as the Occupation itself. If the American occupiers made the eradication of “State Shintō” and the promotion of religious freedom two of their primary objectives, what exactly existed before the Occupation? To what images of Shintō and statecraft were the occupiers responding? To what extent did these images correspond with reality? Finally, to what extent were scholars of religion complicit in the creation of those images prior to the Occupation, and how and why have scholars of religion perpetuated those images since?

The question of how religious freedom was conceived and protected in Japan prior to the Occupation therefore became an unavoidable topic. While the occupiers disparaged Japan’s wartime regime as being both religiously intolerant and theocratic, Japan’s 1889 constitution had included a clear guarantee of religious freedom. By the time the occupiers arrived on the archipelago, Japan had enjoyed more than fifty years of constitutional law in which freedom of religion existed both on the books and as a matter of vigorous public debate.

In this book, I juxtapose the presurrender religious freedom legal regime with that of the Allied Occupation to show that prewar and wartime Japanese practices of religious freedom were extraordinarily normal. I show that Occupation policies were at least as draconian as they were emancipatory. Indeed, throughout the book I regularly use oxymoronic language to highlight the paradoxes that I find endemic in the religious freedom endeavor. I show that religious freedom is not an ethereal *principle* that is ap-

plied to a situation or introduced to a nation. Rather, freeing religion is a mundane *project* subject to political machination and discursive manipulation.

To forestall misunderstanding at the outset, I personally celebrate religious freedom as an ideal. I think religious freedom is worth striving for. However, if religious freedom is a project rather than a principle, then like all projects it is only as effective as the people pulling it off. Like all projects, it is only as coherent as the operative terms that inform it. Like all projects, religious freedom necessitates compromise, collaboration, and contestation.