

Why was there no religious war in premodern East Asia?

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Abstract

In premodern East Asia, Korea, Japan, Vietnam, and China rarely experienced anything like the type of religious violence that existed for centuries in historical Europe, despite having vibrant religious traditions such as Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism, and numerous folk religions. How do we explain a region in which religion was generally not a part of the explanation for war and rebellion? A unique data set of over 950 entries of Chinese and Korean violence over a 473-year span allows granular measurement of religious violence. I argue that the inclusivist religions of historical East Asia did not easily lend themselves to appropriation by political leaders as a means of differentiating groups or justifying violence. Addressing the paucity of religious war in historical East Asia is theoretically important because it challenges a large body of scholarly literature that finds a universal causal relationship between religion and war that is empirically derived mainly from the experience of only Christianity and Islam. In contrast, it may be that certain types of religious traditions are less amenable to mass mobilization for violence. Moving beyond Christianity and Islam to include East Asian religious traditions promises both to address a potentially serious issue of selection bias and also to be a rich field for theorizing about the relationship between religion and war.

Keywords

Confucianism, culture, East Asia, International Relations, religion, war

There were no Huguenot wars in Confucian Asia. And although there were occasional ugly government repressions of Buddhism — as in ninth-century China or fifteenth-century Korea

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— there were still no large-scale holy wars, religious inquisitions, or St Bartholomew massacres in Chinese, Vietnamese, or Korean history.

(Alexander Woodside, 1998: 194)

Introduction

This article begins with an empirical observation: in premodern East Asia, Korea, Japan, Vietnam, and China rarely experienced anything like the type of religious violence that existed for centuries in historical Europe, despite having vibrant religious traditions such as Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism, and numerous folk religions. Given the abundant religious wars, crusades, pogroms, and witch-hunts that occurred in Europe throughout the centuries, the lack of religious wars in East Asian history is a puzzle. In the contemporary world as well, there is a large and growing body of literature that sees religious war and religious politics as important once again (Barber, 1996; Hill, 2011; Huntington, 1992). As Jack Snyder (2011: 3) writes, ‘religion has become a central topic in discussions about international politics.... Perhaps religious international politics had been there all along, but it suddenly became harder to ignore.’ Whether viewed as a fundamental cause of violence, or a mere pretext under which to pursue more basic political or economic goals, religion and war have been deeply intertwined in the Western and Middle Eastern experience.

How, then, do we explain regional variation in patterns of religious war? How do we explain a region in which religion has generally not been a part of the explanation for war and rebellion?

In this article, I argue that a key factor is the distinction between exclusivist and inclusivist religions, which have different relationships with their adherents and different relationships with the state. Exclusivist religions comprise one type of religion, with clearly delineated texts, institutions, leaders, and members. Yet there are, in fact, many types of religion, and inclusivist religions by definition do not have clearly delineated boundaries. Inclusivist religious traditions comprise numerous different deities and perhaps even many different types of deities, have no clear institutionalized hierarchy, leaders, or texts, and no fixed membership. While exclusivist religions have clear adherents and goals, it follows that inclusivist religions may not serve as social markers around which political groups can form to pursue their interests.

Specifically, I argue that the dominant inclusivist and syncretic religions of historical East Asia — Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism, and the numerous folk religions — did not easily lend themselves to appropriation by political leaders as a means of differentiating groups or justifying war. This article introduces a unique database of over 950 entries of both war and rebellion over a 473-year period in premodern East Asian history that allows for a fine-grained measurement of types of violence in East Asia. Religion in East Asia had a tradition of ‘nonexclusive truth, where people of different religions, and of different “followings” within a particular religion, freely adopted doctrines and forms from one another’ (Mote, 1999: 526). Religion does not serve as a sole variable, of course, but rather operates within a larger institutional, material, and cultural setting. In East Asia, the particular mix of actors, groups, and institutions combined with a particular substantive type of inclusivist religion that made religious wars unlikely. Thus, even

instrumentally, religion was not a major political cleavage within East Asia. There was plenty of war in East Asian history, to be sure, but it tended not to be religious war.

The paucity of religious war in historical East Asia is theoretically important because it directly challenges a large body of scholarly literature that finds a general and universal causal relationship between religion and war. Especially after the terrorist attacks of 9/11, religion is widely believed to be one of the root causes of war, rebellion, and terrorism (Stern, 2003). Although much of the extant scholarship on religion and war focuses on the empirical cases of Europe and the Middle East, these scholars make theoretical claims that are clearly intended to be taken as universalist statements about the role of religion across time and space. Thus, Mark Juergensmeyer (2003: xi) argues that 'Religion seems to be connected with violence virtually everywhere'; Leo Lefebure (2000: 14) sees that 'the brutal facts of the history of religions impose the stark realization of the intertwining of religion and violence'; and David Rapaport (1992: 126) concludes that, 'In some crucial respects, the capacity of religion to generate and control violence may be greater than that of the state.'¹ Yet this article will introduce evidence from East Asian history that shows that religious war was almost nonexistent. Despite consisting of territorially defined governments with long enduring religious and cultural traditions, wars in which religion were a major component are difficult to find in East Asian history.

The experience of the historical East Asian countries provides a useful test for the plausibility of the argument that different types of religious beliefs may influence the scale and intensity of warlike behavior in their followers. In short, this article contributes to debates about whether or not religion affects the onset and intensity of war and rebellion. Some scholars argue that religion has no impact on war, and that it is merely a pretext, rationale, or misidentification of underlying causes for war (Henne, 2012; Lynch, 2010). Others argue that religion is central to explaining certain types of conflict (Huntington, 1992). Yet not all religions are the same, and by emphasizing a distinction between inclusivist and exclusivist religions, the evidence presented in this article leads to the conclusion that, *ceteris paribus*, inclusivist religions are less likely to prompt the type of large-scale violence that has come to be associated with religious war. This article thus builds upon and moves beyond Kelly's (2012) important work exploring whether or not there was a historical 'Confucian peace' by examining religious traditions — rather than culture — and their effects on war, and by broadening its focus to include all of the major East Asian religious traditions.

The distinction between inclusivist and exclusivist religions also provides a new perspective on other debates about religious politics. For example, one prominent strand of theorizing analogizes religions as firms competing for market share in explaining their expansion and contraction (Ekelund et al., 1996; Gill, 1998). But if syncretic, inclusivist religions are not focused on gaining new followers, these analogies will not hold, and are only applicable to a specific subset of religions that have expansionist and exclusivist orientations.

In what follows, I establish the importance of studying the substantive beliefs of actual religions and the manner in which those religions intersect with other, more commonly recognizable political variables, such as socio-economic class and various institutions, and describe the striking absence of religiously motivated wars among a specific

region and a specific historical era in premodern East Asia. The major, enduring, and formative religious traditions in East Asia have been Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism, and folk religions (such as Shinto in Japan). All are inclusivist and syncretic. Although sometimes considered more philosophies than religions, they all meet standard definitions of religion: belief in a supernatural being, transcendent realities such as heaven or enlightenment, a distinction between sacred and profane, a code of conduct, and a view of the world and humanity's relation to it.² These religious traditions had a fundamental impact on both state and society in East Asia — particularly China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam — and also on their relations with each other.

This article presents a plausibility probe of the potential importance of religious motivations on warlike behavior in different regions of the world. As Alastair Iain Johnston (2012: 56) argues, 'ignoring East Asian cases in IR [International Relations] might mean that many of the claims in transatlantic IR theory today have external-validity problems, and including these cases/observations might mean our theories of IR require serious revision.' The evidence presented challenges a number of relatively unquestioned conventional wisdoms in the scholarly literature: that religion is intertwined with war whether or not it is the basic motivation; that distinctive analytic categories such as 'religion' and 'state' exist across time and space; that the religious experience of the Christian and Islamic faiths is generalizable and universal; and the basis of the secularization debate.

Theories of religious war

The theoretical argument in this article rests on a distinction between exclusivist and inclusivist religions and the differing ways in which these two types of religion affect the onset of war. I define a 'religious war' as a war in which religious belief or practice or the use of religious ideas or symbols are either a central or peripheral issue in the conflict, such as whether the state should be ruled according to a specific religious tradition, or as a war in which combatants identify with specific religions and group themselves accordingly (Toft, 2007: 97).

Although scholars have adduced a 'bewildering array of explanations' for why religion becomes violent (Philpott, 2007: 505), there are two basic approaches to explaining the relationship between religion and war: those who see only a spurious correlation, and those who argue for a direct link. Many scholars reject religion's importance and argue that religion is simply a mask that hides the real motives behind states' and other actors' behavior, which are generally wealth or political power (Dalacoura, 2000; Gurr, 1996; Hasenclever and Rittberger, 2000: 645–646; Kaufman, 1996; Ross, 2008; Smith, 1993). For example, Fearon and Laitin (2003: 75) argue that 'the main factors ... are not ethnic or religious differences or broadly held grievances, but ... financially, organizationally, and politically weak central governments [that] render insurgency more feasible and attractive.' In contrast, many scholars ask whether the actual ideas and beliefs of particular religions affect the political behavior of actors (Barnett, 2011; Licklider, 1995; Onnekink, 2009; Philpott, 2007). For example, Daniel Nexon (2009) argues that religious networks and religious conflict during the Reformation influenced the scale of war and state formation in early modern Europe, while Ron Hassner (2003) shows how relevant religious beliefs about territory can increase the frequency and intensity of

conflicts. Of course, these are not mutually exclusive theoretical approaches, and much scholarship attempts to find the mix of substantive and material approaches that best explains religious war.

Those who argue that religion affects war tend to rely heavily on the key religious characteristics of *absolutism* and *exclusivity*. For example, Horowitz (2009: 163) argues that 'The ability of religion to infuse believers with a certainty of purpose and the promise of something better in the afterlife can influence decisionmaking in the military arena in ways that, for a believer, can make war a good in itself, rather than a means to an end. Given nonmaterial motivations for fighting, religiously motivated warfare can therefore last longer and impose higher costs than other kinds of warfare'; Toft (2007: 100–101) argues that 'Abrahamic religions ... tend to be uncompromising ... followers often choose to sacrifice tangible benefits for intangible ones, even to the point of sacrificing their lives'; Grzymala-Busse (2012: 422) concludes that 'because it is a belief system that cannot be disconfirmed, the claims of religion on politics can be absolute and irrefutable'; and Richard Wentz (1993: 67) argues that 'such a demon [absolutism] sits on the shoulder of people who become fanatics, crusaders, fundamentalists.' The logic is clear: although religion is only one of many social cleavages around which people might organize, it is perhaps one of the most volatile and violent of social markers.

So deeply entrenched is this contemporary view of religion that the link between religion and absolutism is often taken as inevitable and universal. However, this view comes from the experience of Christianity's interaction with politics and the use of that experience as an implicit model for all religions worldwide, and later from the experience of Islam, while in fact both are from a particular time and place (Masuzawa, 2005; Smith, 1998). For example, Jason Josephson (2012: 3) argues that religion is 'a culturally specific category that took shape among Christian-influenced Euro-American intellectuals and missionaries,' while Richard King (1999: 37) points out that Western scholars 'established the monotheistic exclusivism of Christianity as the normative paradigm for understanding what a religion is.' Even critics of the idea of religious war implicitly use Christian exclusivism as their model for all religions worldwide. Thus, Cavanaugh (2009: 21, 55) argues that 'there is no reason to suppose that so-called secular ideologies such as nationalism, patriotism, capitalism, Marxism, and liberalism are any less prone to be absolutist, divisive, and irrational than belief in, for example, the biblical God.'

There are, in fact, many types of religion, many of which are inclusivist and syncretic and which *by definition* are not absolutist and do not have clearly delineated boundaries. Syncretic, inclusivist religions may not serve as social markers around which political groups can form to pursue their interests. Syncretic and inclusivist religious traditions comprise numerous different deities and perhaps even many different types of deities, have no clear institutional authority or texts, no clear boundaries, and no clear approach. For this reason, they are known as religious 'traditions' rather than as a more discrete religion, and religious traditions may be more similar, and overlapping, with other intellectual, philosophical, and artistic traditions. Syncretic and inclusivist religious traditions are also more amenable to coexistence with other types of religion. When there are numerous deities, as in polytheism, or when there are loose boundaries and belief is not threatened by a different religious tradition, coexistence is also not threatened. Jonathan

Kirsch (2004: 2) perhaps overstates the case when he argues that ‘Monotheism turned out to inspire a ferocity and even a fanaticism that are mostly absent from polytheism.’

Indeed, the distinction between exclusivist and inclusivist religions helps focus on the question of how and when social groups cohere, and when they do not. As Kratochwil (2011: 160) argues, ‘Without organization and social cooperation, however, the “forces of destruction” cannot even be conceptualized, as war is, after all, a social phenomenon that presupposed groups and politics.’ As Alkopher (2005: 719) argues, ‘Wars depend ontologically on the meaning given by ideational and conceptual factors (stories, myths, explanatory theories).’ Thus, certain types of religious tradition may not be social markers around which the forces of destruction can be conceptualized. Inclusivist and syncretic religions will be less susceptible to political mobilization (Hall, 1997). If religion is not a social marker because there are many gods and many different forms of religious expression, and if these religious traditions blend with intellectual and artistic traditions, then different religious beliefs do not necessarily threaten another tradition’s existence. All things equal, religious traditions that lack clear demarcations from other religious traditions will make it difficult for political leaders to mobilize people or separate them according to their religious beliefs in order to pursue political goals or motivate and sustain violence. There may be plenty of other ways in which society cleaves, and other material reasons why groups pursue violence, but religion may not be one of those key factors.

Thus, we see the distinction between necessary and sufficient conditions for religious war. As Fearon and Laitin note, there will always be some conditions or issues that are motivating groups in society for political action. How groups become organized and why they pursue violence may depend on an interaction between material goals of wealth or power, and the type of social organization available to them (Figure 1). Material grievances may explain why at some times religious war breaks out and yet at other times there is relative peace between different types of religion. Thus, exclusivist religion may be a necessary but not sufficient cause for religious war. Yet countries with inclusivist religions may still experience war, it will just be unlikely to be along religious lines.

In sum, if one is interested in explaining religious war, it is natural to look where there is fighting with religious overtones. But that leads to selecting on the dependent variable — an overweighting of religious war — and a biased explanation for the overall patterns of *both* conflict and peace. Just as important as explaining why there was religious war in some areas is to explain why there was religious peace in other areas.

Measuring religious war in East Asian history

Any discussion of religious war in East Asia must accurately describe the dependent variable. Measurement of war is no simple task, but it is central to any defensible, valid, and reliable empirical description of patterns of religious violence. The most widely accepted methods for measuring war generally rely on the Correlates of War (COW) project on Militarized Interstate Disputes. The COW project has defined war as ‘*sustained combat* between/among military contingents involving substantial casualties (with the criterion being a minimum of 1,000 battle deaths),’ and distinguishes between interstate, intra-state, and extra-state war (Sarkees et al., 2003). As seemingly clear as are

		Type of religion	
		Exclusivist	Inclusivist
Instrumental causes	Grievances	Most violent	Potential violence, but not along religious lines
	No grievances	Violence possible	Least violent

Figure 1. Instrumental and substantive causes for religious violence.

these criteria, such distinctions are difficult to make in premodern times for a number of reasons. Not only were there rarely any counts of battle deaths, but there were often not sharp distinctions between states and non-state actors, and thus particular care must be made in measuring historical wars.

In terms of data on war and conflict in historical East Asia, scholars are fortunate because there exist excellent and voluminous historical records from Korea, Vietnam, Japan, and China.³ These historical annals, often updated daily, were the court records that covered all aspects of the kingdom's rule — from tax collections, to palace appointments, regulations, the police and military, and other aspects of ruling. Perhaps the most comprehensive record of Chinese use of force is by the Chinese Academy of Military Sciences (2003), which has published a two-volume study of war through the Chinese dynasties (*Chronology of Wars in China Through Successive Dynasties*, hereafter 'CWC').⁴ In addition, there is a similar record of Korean use of force (Institute of Military History, 1996), the *Wars of the Korean People* ('WKP'). Both the CWC and WKP are particularly useful because they provide a year-by-year count of *both* internal and external wars in China and Korea, based on the historical annals that were kept by the various dynasties at the time.⁵ Using the CWC and WKP allows for a granular analysis of events involving the use of force.

However, using the CWC or WKP necessarily involves care in interpreting the data. Most importantly, the CWC lists a wide range of activities and incidents — some major, some minor, and some not even involving the use of force — and thus one must be careful not to simply view each entry as identical, and be careful not to count each entry in the CWC as a 'war.'

Careful attention to both scope and boundary conditions is particularly important in historical research. It may seem self-evident that 2500 years of East Asian history is not simply one case, and that East Asian history is not simply the history of China. There

were numerous eras and epochs, and many other significant political units that have existed almost as long as China, such as Korea and Japan. We are now far beyond the idea that the East Asian international system was constant; rather, it can be treated as a number of different systems, thus permitting cross-system comparisons (Kang, 2013). Each era and each region merits study in its own right, but it is important to carefully explore one epoch before beginning comparisons, and to avoid careless conclusions and dubious claims: what was true in the 17th century may not have been true a millennium earlier.

In order to address these issues, this article takes one discrete time period from East Asian history — 1368 to 1841 — and provides a detailed empirical assessment of the rate, scale, and patterns of war and conflict that occurred during that time. This era represents the culmination of centuries of state-building in East Asia and begins with the foundation of the Chinese Ming dynasty in 1368 and ends with the arrival of the West and in particular the Opium wars between the UK and China in the mid-19th century. In Vietnam and Korea, this era roughly corresponds to an era in which both states emphasized neo-Confucianism, while in Japan, the era covers the end of the Ashikaga regime, the ‘warring states’ era, and the Tokugawa shogunate. As Woodside (1998: 196) observes: ‘starting no later than the fifteenth century, the rulers of all three societies [China, Korea, and Vietnam] organized their central administrations around six specialized ministries,’ while Park (2008: 5) argues about this era that ‘Mounting recent evidence maps an early modern East Asia encompassing not just Japan but also China and Korea.’

Central to the research presented in this article was the creation of a database on the use of force in historical East Asia containing over 950 entries from 1368 to 1841.⁶ Built from a number of sources, the database summarizes events listed in the CWC and WKP and combines them with more qualitative assessments of all types of war, including religious war, in the region (Davis, 1996; Dupuy and Dupuy, 1993; Graff and Higham, 2002; Kohn, 1999; Scobell, 2003).

The absence of religious wars

The data reveal an interesting pattern. As has been pointed out in other scholarship, relations among the four major and enduring East Asian countries of China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam from 1368 to 1841 were quite peaceful (Kelly, 2012; Womack, 2010). During this time period — from the founding of the Ming dynasty to the Opium wars between Britain and China — there were two wars between China, Korea, Vietnam, and Japan: China’s invasion of Vietnam (1407–1428), and Japan’s invasion of Korea (1592–1598). There was plenty of fighting during that time along China’s northern and western borders, to be sure, with 244 border skirmishes with Central Asian peoples. George Childs Kohn (1999) finds a total of six Chinese wars over the time period in question, including the Manchu invasion of China, the defense of Korea during Hideyoshi’s invasion, and the decades-long Qing conquest of Xinjiang and Tibet. China’s western expansion arose from security motivations, not religious zeal (Table 1). As Perdue’s (2005: 4) masterful history of the Qing conquest of Central Asia summarizes, ‘the security threat from the northwest was indeed long-lasting, in every ruler’s mind.... the Qing [were] able to eliminate the Mongol threat once and for all.’ Neither does the CWC contain any

Table 1. Major wars in East Asia, 1368–1841.

Years	War	Comment
1407–1428	Chinese invasion of Vietnam	
1592–1598	Japanese invasion of Korea	Imjin war
1618–1644	Manchu conquest of China	
1627, 1637	Manchu invasions of Korea	Manchu goal was pacification, not conquest
1690–1757	Chinese conquest of Xinjiang and Tibet	Gradual eradication of various Mongol tribes, culminating in destruction of Zhungar empire
1839–1841	Opium wars	UK expeditions against China for trade relations

Sources: Compiled from author's translation of Academy of Military Sciences (2003), along with Kohn (1999), Dupuy and Dupuy (1993), and Davis (1996).

mention of religious war. Between 1368 and 1841, out of a total of 331 uses of force of any scale or type that occurred between China and external actors, there were 61 pirate raids, 244 border skirmishes and campaigns against Central Asian peoples, and 26 large-scale interstate battles from the six major wars listed above. In short, religion appears to be absent as a factor in these major wars (Table 2).

Korea also appears to have remarkably little experience with religious wars. The WKP lists 327 incidents of inter-, extra-, and intra-state war between 1392 and 1841 (Table 3). A large portion of these occurred during the Japanese invasions of 1592–1598 (100 separate incidents listed), while the largest absolute category was pirate raids (110 raids and skirmishes). Over this 449-year period, the WKP does not list a single incidence of internal or external conflict in which religion was a factor of any type.

The paucity of religious rebellions

If religiously motivated interstate war appears to be largely absent in historical East Asia, what about religious conflicts internal to countries, such as insurrections, pogroms, and rebellions? William Crowell (1983: 322) distinguishes several different types of peasant rebellion in China: uprisings resulting from natural disasters; protests against government exploitation; religious rebellions; separatist rebellions; ethnic disturbances; and ordinary banditry and piracy. In most cases, the classification is obvious, such as mine worker or peasant revolts as a result of repressive local officials or heavy tax burden. Between 1368 and 1841, the CWC lists 488 incidents of internal conflict in China. Of those, religion is mentioned in only 24 instances (5%). Korea did not have the same experience with local rebellion as did China. The WKP lists seven local rebellions during the time frame under study, none of which can be considered motivated by religion.

Thus, while internal rebellions were somewhat common in China (and Vietnam and Japan) during the era under study, *religious* rebellion was not. Korea faced almost no insurgencies in the premodern era, while Vietnam and Japan occasionally faced rebellions based more on family or clan lines. A materialist approach explains many of the rebellions in historical East Asia; what it does not do is help explain why *religious* uprisings were rare while other rebellions were not.

Table 2. Chinese opponents, 1368–1841.

Ming dynasty		
Type	Number	Percent
Conflict with Central Asian peoples (nomads)	192	33.22
East Asian state conflicts*	26	4.50
Wako pirate raids	60	10.38
Non-Chinese/diplomatic	13	2.25
Internal rebellion, dynastic change, or other incident	287	49.65
Religious rebellion	7	2.44**
Total	547	100.00
Qing dynasty		
Conflict with Central Asian peoples (nomads)	52	22.13
East Asian state conflicts*	0	0.00
Wako pirate raids	1	0.43
Non-Chinese/diplomatic	5	2.13
Internal rebellion, dynastic change, or other incident	177	75.32
Religious rebellion	10	9.60**
Total	260	100.00
Total, 1368–1841		
Conflict with Central Asian peoples (nomads)	244	30.01
East Asian state conflicts*	26	3.20
Wako pirate raids	61	7.50
Non-Chinese/diplomatic	18	2.21
Internal rebellion, dynastic change, or other incident	464	57.07
Religious rebellion	24	5.17**
Total	813	100.00

Notes: * East Asian states = Japan, Korea, Vietnam, and China.

** As a proportion of internal rebellions and other incidents, not total incidents.

Source: Author's data set, based mainly on author's translation of Academy of Military Sciences (2003), along with Kohn (1999), Dupuy and Dupuy (1993), and Davis (1996).

Table 3. Summary of wars and rebellions in Korea, 1368–1841.

Rebellion	Religious rebellion	Waegu (pirate)	Incidents of inter-state war*	External skirmish
7	0	110	175	35

Note: * Battles within two wars: 100 of the entries involve the Imjin Wars of 1592–1598, and the other 75 involve the Qing pacification of Korea, 1627–1640.

Source: Author's data set, based mainly on author's translation of Institute of Military History (1996).

It is true that members of inclusivist religious traditions occasionally fought with each other over more typical material issues such as land or wealth. What they did not do is fight over the substance of religion. For example, inter-temple rivalry in Japan occasionally led to furious competition, although it is not clear whether this involved actual

violence. Buddhist temples in Japan during the Heian era (12th century) often maintained their own military units composed of priest-warriors, and there were almost 250 ‘major displays of force’ between 981 and 1549, and 25% of all Japanese lands were owned by Buddhist temples during this period (Harris, 1999: 14). ‘Monastics were fighting for the same reasons as secular elites, and anyone looking for larger religious motivations will be disappointed’ (Adolphson, 2007: 37). Japan, Korea, and Vietnam have almost no experience with religious rebellions; China almost none. Monks in Buddhist temples fighting each other in medieval Japan was different from inciting a rebellion against the Japanese emperor or the Shogunate. Adolphson’s (2007: 162) observation about monastic warriors in Japan could easily apply more generally across China, Korea, and Vietnam: ‘the absence of religious rhetoric is itself of great interest, in view of our current assumptions about holy wars and crusaders. It suggests that other factors played at least as important a role as religious commitment for those fighting in the name of the Buddha.’

Although there is almost no record of religiously motivated rebellions in Korea, Japan, or Vietnam, some notable exceptions exist in Chinese history (Palmer, 2008: 116). The White Lotus rebellions are perhaps the most widely known religious uprisings in premodern Chinese history. As the Yuan dynasty fell into disarray in the mid-14th century, many different rebel groups, some of them claiming religious origins or intent, sprang up. More consequential was the White Lotus rebellion of the late 18th century. Loosely tracing their religious ideas back to the movement of centuries earlier, the White Lotus goals were political and economic in nature, and there was no intention of imposing any type of new religious order on society as a whole (Spence, 1990: 113–114). As Frederick Mote (1999: 527) observes, ‘their followers were not, however, consciously “confined to a particular sect”.... Many of them ardently believed the teachings promoted by their sect leaders but might simultaneously accept many other familiar features of the popular religious landscape.’

In sum, East Asia between the 14th and 19th centuries experienced few instances of the type of religious war and rebellion that dominated Europe during that same time. Not only were there no religious wars between countries, but there is a marked absence of religiously motivated internal rebellions. To be clear, this article’s argument is not that Buddhism and Confucianism are inherently more peaceful religions because of their teachings — there was plenty of political intrigue and symbolic and ritual violence in the experience of East Asian religious traditions (Faure, 2011; Skya, 2011; Boretz, 2011; Tikhonov and Brekke, 2013). Rather, the argument is that major wars and rebellions appear to be largely lacking in religious overtones.

Inclusivist religions in East Asia

Explaining why there was no religious war in East Asia requires addressing a central question: what does an inclusivist religion look like? It is important to avoid essentializing East Asian religions by assuming that they were constant, unchanging bodies of thought. These religious traditions were not just malleable and adaptable to local conditions, but also incorporated many different religious ideas, practices, and deities. Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism were general terms to describe religious traditions that varied widely across time and space and that encompassed numerous divisions.

So loose were these traditions that Benjamin Elman (2002: 524) cautions, ‘it remains unclear whether the current terms we use in English, such as “Confucianism” or “Neo-Confucianism”, in imperial China, shogunal Japan, and royal Korea and Vietnam were entirely appropriate to generalize about scholarly and religious traditions in East Asia before 1900.’

The Western definition and image of what comprises a religion — formal, centralized, and institutionalized — arise from a different historical experience than do East Asian religious traditions. East Asian religious traditions of all types conform more to the model of teacher–disciple, with numerous unconnected teachers providing various types of approaches, and are thus difficult to classify. There was no centralized order in Buddhism, Daoism, or Confucianism. Rather, there were different schools with different approaches to religious, intellectual, philosophical, and social traditions. In each of these, there was a mix of philosophical, theological, artistic, and humanistic ideas, which used different texts, and between which the boundaries were unclear. In this way, these ‘teachings’ have more in common with tea ceremony, martial arts, calligraphy, and other humanistic pursuits than they do with the clearly demarcated Christian and Islamic religions.

This lack of a clear definition — by Western standards — has given rise to an enduring question about whether Confucianism, and even Buddhism and Daoism, can be considered ‘religions’ as something equivalent to Christianity and Islam. Although it was a philosophical, political, and intellectual tradition, Confucianism clearly contained a cosmology as well. Confucianism contained: a distinction between supernatural and natural; moral values that endure across time and space; ancestor worship and burial rituals; and other cosmological concerns—and many of its historical adherents approached it as such (Ching, 2000; Poceski, 2009: 36–37; Yao, 2000).

It is this looseness that defies easy categorization that lies at the heart of East Asian religious traditions. The three most well-known traditions are Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism, known as ‘teachings’ (*jiao*) rather than as discrete religions separate from other intellectual categories. Indeed, the non-rivalry of these traditions has been noted for some time. In the 6th century, scholar Li Shiqian made one of the earliest references to the three teachings (*sanjiao*), writing that ‘Buddhism is the sun, Daoism the moon, and Confucianism the five planets’ (Teiser, 1996: 1). Sharpe (1994: 82) argues that ‘to talk of syncretism of religious thoughts or threads, and particularly in any discussion about the “three religions of China”, any scholar had to admit that it was possible for a Chinese to belong to all three systems at the same time.’ Yet even that description implies too clear a distinction between these religions, and privileges those three traditions over the vast array of folk religions which often coexisted and comingled with each other. Teiser (1996: 19–20) notes:

Common rituals as offering incense to the ancestors, conducting funerals, exorcising ghosts, and consulting fortunetellers; belief in the patterned [sic] interaction between light and dark forces or in the ruler’s influence on the natural world; the preference for balancing tranquility and movement — all belong as much to none of the three traditions as they do to one or three.

Although Confucianism eventually became the dominant philosophical and theological East Asian intellectual tradition, it remained inclusivist and syncretic. Confucianism

interacted with and borrowed from other folk religions as well as Buddhism and Daoism. What Frederick Mote (1999: 527) observes about China is applicable to all countries in the region: ‘one must not rush to assumptions about the implications of “popular” in describing religion in later imperial times.... Many members of elite families, men and women, participated in the cultic and sectarian practices of “popular religion”.’ Valerie Hansen (1990: 31) relates a 12th-century story written by government official Hong Mai about a visit of a ghost to his father’s house in which:

Representatives of all elements of the Chinese supernatural world appear in this extraordinary tale: ancestors, ghosts, and gods associated with Buddhism (the Buddha), Daosim (Zhenwu), and popular traditions (stove and earth gods).... Nothing in Hong’s tale suggests that his father categorized the gods according to the religious tradition with which they were originally associated. Because China’s religious traditions were not mutually exclusive, lay people did not have to choose just one. Faced with a given problem, they looked to all the gods for help.

Buddhism often interacted and merged with local folk religions in Korea, Vietnam, and Japan as well. Robert Buswell (1987: 22) observes that Korean Buddhism was a ‘thoroughgoing amalgamation of the foreign religion and indigenous local cults,’ and continued to coexist with Confucianism during the subsequent Choson dynasty, and at times receiving explicit support of the royal court (Haboush, 2002: 234). John Duncan’s (2002: 85) fascinating study of the higher civil service examination in Korea (*munkwa*) finds that between 1392 and 1800, although the majority of questions concerned practical matters such as politics, the economy, or borders, the examination also included questions about heterodoxy (Buddhism), prophecy and portents, and rituals.

Similarly, Holcombe (2011: 78) notes that ‘early Japanese Buddhism also retained aspects of local native culture ... many local pre-Buddhist spirits (*kami*) were absorbed into Japanese Buddhism.’ Perhaps the most well-known folk religious tradition in East Asia is Japanese Shintoism, which was not a distinct religion but rather a general term that describes the wide variety of indigenous animistic and folk religions in Japan. Buddhism in Japan merged with and interacted with the various indigenous folk religions until distinctions between the two became difficult. As De Bary (2008: 709) observes, Buddhist syncretism ‘readily combined with other beliefs, whether the Buddhism of other sects, Shinto, or even disparate teachings like yin-yang. And a place for some new god could always be found in its spacious pantheon.’ Buddhist and Shinto shrines were simply merged together, and local Shinto gods were called the Japanese manifestation of Buddhist deities. Kate Nakai (2002: 281) notes that, ‘By the Tokugawa period, what was called Shinto — whether practice or theory — consisted largely of a mixture of elements drawn from esoteric Buddhism, Chinese cosmology, and Song metaphysics.’

In Vietnam, numerous scholars have noted the flexible, syncretic nature of Vietnamese social and political institutions, and Mahayana Buddhism was the prevailing religion well into the Le dynasty. Although the Tran and Le dynasties used strict patrilineage for royal succession, primogeniture did not become deeply rooted until the Neo-Confucian reforms of the 15th century, for example (Jansen, 1992). Alexander Woodside’s (2002) study of Confucianism in Vietnam emphasizes the ease with which the Vietnamese incorporated Confucianism into existing belief systems.

In sum, distinctions among East Asian religious traditions and between religious traditions and other intellectual and philosophical traditions were far more vague in premodern East Asia than they were in the Western experience. These East Asian traditions were neither centralized with an overarching institutional hierarchy and leadership, nor did they use a canonical set of texts. The teacher–disciple model manifested itself in numerous diverse temples with different teachings; temples themselves developed different martial arts; and even Japanese tea ceremony traditions and temples were closely interlinked. Religion was not a social marker, it did not distinguish or divide groups of peoples, and thus was rarely viewed as a way to organize political or social movements.

Moral authority: Religion and government in historical East Asia

Why was religious war so rare in premodern East Asia? Explaining a non-event is often harder than explaining an event. The key empirical finding presented in this article is the absence of religious ideas or symbols used to justify or incite either war or rebellion. It appears that while other causes for war existed, such as the desire for land, power, wealth, or prestige, differences over religious belief systems were generally not a factor. Why religion did not lead to war involves not only the substance of the religious traditions, but also the way in which religious traditions interacted with their adherents and with the state. Distinctions between religion and the state, and explicit membership in a religion — so central to European history and the contemporary world — were notably absent in premodern East Asia.

In contrast, rulers in premodern East Asia were seen as the chief mediator between heaven and earth since at least the Zhou dynasty (1046 BC–256 BC) in ancient China (Zhou, 2009). Most visibly embodied in the concept of the ‘mandate of heaven,’ the ruler’s legitimacy and right to rule was based on his moral authority and the blessing of heaven. Heaven would bless a just ruler and be displeased by a despotic ruler, and a central duty of the ruler was engaging in rituals and sacrifices as the legitimate intermediary between heaven and earth. The mandate of heaven was an overarching cosmological idea — neither Confucian, Buddhist, nor Daoist — and presaged these later religious traditions. So important was the ruler’s cosmological role that the Board of Rites was one of only six governmental ministries in China, Korea, and Vietnam. Vermeersch (2008: 9) notes that ‘according to the most ancient formulations of this doctrine, Heaven (Ch. *tian*) selects someone of outstanding virtue and ability and confers a mandate on him to rule “all under Heaven”.’

Ritual and state cult as moral authority

As the center of human communication with the gods, the ruler was directly responsible for conducting numerous rites and sacrifices. Legitimacy — the mandate of heaven — was manifested in a stable political and social order, and instability challenged the ruler’s authority. Sacrifices, rituals, and virtuous study and behavior by the ruler were more than Geertzian symbolism. Rather, they were the source of moral authority and the

embodiment of both action and belief. ‘Ritual in the world of imperial Chinese politics aimed much higher than the theatrical effect of power evocation. Chinese rituals initiated, animated, and constituted imperial power itself’ (Kuo, 2008: 71). Andrew Yu (2005: 34–37) notes that ‘ancestor-making was much more than a ceremonious act dictated by the obligations of kinship. It was, rather, a ritual designed to recruit and invoke agencies of transcendence, wherein ancestors were to be transformed from a term of kinship to become symbols of divine power.... the significance of the ancestral shrine for imperial governance remained constant from pre-Qin times to the Qing.’

Rebellion, famine, or other calamities were seen as an indication that the ruler had lost the mandate of heaven, and were ‘Heaven’s way of removing the mantle of leadership from immoral rulers and bestowing it instead upon those who were virtuous enough to replace them’ (Perry, 2008: 39). Thus, although China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam are often called ‘Confucian,’ in fact, the moral authority of the ruler derived from a much deeper cosmological belief. Since the 7th century, Chinese homage to Confucius was ranked as only a middle sacrifice, for example. The ‘grand sacrifices’ included Heaven, Earth, imperial ancestors, and the Spirits of Land-and-Grain. Confucius as a middle sacrifice coexisted with the Sun, the Moon, and the God of Agriculture. Lower sacrifices included the God of War, the God of Literature, the God of Fire, and the Dragon God, among many others (Kuo, 2008: 71).

Even in Japan, although an attempt to copy Chinese institutions was abandoned by the 13th century, a main function of the Japanese emperor was to perform similar rites. Duara (2008: 47) notes that ‘Like China, Tokugawa Japan (1600–1868) had a similar mold of state cult based on Confucian ideas of Heaven; Shinto rites and control of Buddhist temple structures shored up the authority of the shogunate.’ In sum, the state’s moral authority in premodern East Asia was built upon religious ideas that were overarching and interacting with many different religious traditions. The key point is that the mandate of heaven itself is a syncretic amalgam of beliefs, belonging to none of them. Political authority, like the various religious traditions, was inclusive and syncretic.

Inclusivist politics and religious traditions

Moral authority through the mandate of heaven and the syncretic nature of East Asian religious traditions meant that even when Confucian ideas became the dominant intellectual, philosophical, and religious milieu within which rulers governed, there remained a remarkable mixing and interaction among numerous religious and philosophical ideas, even within the state itself. As an example of the ease with which even Confucian scholars used and interacted with other religions, Frederick Mote (1999: 527) notes that Zhu Xi (1130–1200), an important Neo-Confucian scholar whose commentaries came to be regarded as definitive by Ming and Qing governments, also patronized a cultic shrine with his family. An ‘astounding’ number of Chinese emperors regularly consulted Daoist authorities (Yu, 2005: 76). Keith Taylor (2002: 343) points out that some of the seminal Confucian literati in Vietnamese history — 11th-century Ly Dao Thanh and Le Van Thinh, were ‘devout Buddhists ... there is nothing unusual in such intellectual and cultural syncretism.’ Indeed, even while Confucianism became more clearly emphasized among the literati and the court in Vietnam through the Tran (1225–1400) and Le

(1428–1788) dynasties, the number of Buddhist temples and monks continued to increase. Andrew Yu (2005: 54) perhaps describes it best when he writes:

Even those members of the official elites who succeeded in their careers and writings in establishing a permanent reputation as devout advocates of the Way of Ruism (Confucianism), like Han Yu of the Tang or Ouyang Xiu and Sima Guang of the Song, might in their private and family lives engage in activities contradicted or even condemned by their own ‘official’ and articulated beliefs. Similarly, the person of the emperor could be as ardent a sponsor and promoter of two different religious traditions at the same time.... in Europe of medieval Christendom, on the other hand, it is hard to imagine one Holy Roman Emperor privately engaged in observing the rites of Judaism or Islam.

The inclusivist nature of religious, intellectual, and philosophical traditions may appear to modern eyes as a bewildering or even contradictory set of beliefs and actions, because the modern notion of religious beliefs as absolutist is deeply ingrained and taken for granted. One way of explaining the interplay between religious ideas and politics in East Asian history may be by analogy to the contemporary manner in which economic advisors attempt to influence policy. While there are different macroeconomic schools of thought, most advisors and the policies they advocate are a mix of different ideas at different times. Although premodern East Asian politics had religious ideas at the core of their moral authority, they were not ‘theocratic’ states in the Western exclusivist sense of clearly elevating one religious tradition at the expense of another.

State control of religious institutions

When the state did interact with religious traditions, such as regulating the wide array of Buddhist temples, the aim was not to control the content of the teachings, but rather to extract taxes and force them to interact with the state in a manner similar to any other civil institution. Thus, Buddhism and Daoism were ‘licensed’ religions (Duara, 2008: 47), institutionalized under control of the state in Korea, Vietnam, China, and Japan. There were government-led repressions of Buddhism, to be sure — most notably, China in the 9th century, Korea in the 15th century, and Japan in the 16th century (McMullin, 1984). In all three countries, the aim was not to control belief systems, but rather to extend state control and taxation to a diverse set of temples and monks which had previously been loosely regulated or were beyond taxation altogether.

In Korea, Buddhist temples lost their tax-exempt status and were not allowed in the capital city, women were banned from Buddhist temples in 1404, and legislation was introduced to force citizens to create Confucian ancestral shrines along with laws restricting various aspects of Buddhist funerals. However, Buddhism itself and Buddhist funerals were never banned, temples continued to exist, and even the Confucian kings of the era continued to partake in indigenous religious practices along with Confucian rites. King Sejong (r. 1418–1450), ‘acknowledging that the Confucians’ arguments were reasonable, nevertheless reminded them that Buddhism had been part of the people’s spiritual life for a long time’ (Deuchler, 1992: 106). Buddhists remained important in Korea, and members of Buddhist temples were famous for fighting against the Japanese during the 1592–1598 Imjin Wars, for example.

The Chinese Tang dynasty (618–907) also took measures to suppress Buddhism. In 845, Emperor Wuzong enacted a ban that included dismantling all the temples and forcing up to 150,000 monks to return to life as laymen. Thereafter, the state controlled appointment to the temples. The Tang court used administrative means to control the Buddhist temples, including clerical examinations under the Ministry of Rites. As Mark Edward Lewis (2009: 215) observes, ‘Apart from Emperor Wuzong’s attempted suppression and mass confiscation of Buddhist property in 845, which lasted only a year, no emperor ever questioned the place of Buddhism within the Tang state.’ As Fairbank and Goldman (1998: 81) conclude, ‘no struggle between church and state developed in medieval China comparable to that in the West.... [Buddhist] priesthoods and temples remained loosely decentralized, dependent on modest local support but without organized lay congregations or any nationwide administration, and passive in matters of politics.’

In Vietnam, Japan, Korea, and China, the government’s preference for Confucianism over Buddhism did not lead to wholesale killings, inquisitions, or fanatical mobs against Buddhists, but rather a series of somewhat legal and institutional restrictions that were biased against Buddhists. The scale and intensity of these two suppressions was categorically different from and less violent than those which occurred in Europe between Catholics, Protestants, and Jews in the 14th–17th centuries. Furthermore, there is almost no record of violence between various Confucian or Buddhist sects, nor is there evidence of attempts to force other countries to adopt different beliefs.

Conclusion and implications

The research presented in this article leads to the conclusion that, all things equal, inclusivist religions are implicated less frequently than exclusivist religions in the scale and frequency of war. The different content of religions is central to any explanation for varying patterns of religious war across or within regions. The empirical and causal findings presented in this article lead to a number of implications for further research. Perhaps most provocatively, does the empirical relationship between inclusivist religious traditions and lack of religious war obtain across time and space outside of East Asia? What was the particular mix of material, substantive, and institutional factors that explain variation in outcomes? For example, what appears to be religious conflict in contemporary Sri Lankan Hindu–Buddhist conflict and Thai Buddhist–Muslim conflict is also deeply interwoven with issues of nationalism, class, ethnicity, and modern conceptions of the nation-state (Scupin, 2013). While Hinduism and Buddhism are inclusivist religious traditions, further research should investigate the ways in which these religious traditions have interacted with other factors to result in violence. In short, the most obvious next step for research is to engage in cross-regional and cross-religion comparisons in different time periods. This would permit more precise testing of the hypothesis that exclusivist religions may be a necessary but not sufficient cause for religious war.

That different regions of the world might have different substantive religions that lead to different patterns of religious war might not be that surprising. Indeed, scholars are increasingly acknowledging that different regions of the world experience different patterns of war and other international behavior (Buzan and Wæver, 2003).

Writing about different patterns of war across regions, Scott Bennett and Allan Stam (2004: 174) argue that ‘it is *not* [emphasis in original] that the actors are not rational, even though a universal model may fail. Rather, they simply are not playing the same game with the same preferences.’

Even today, religion serves as a relatively unimportant aspect of East Asian political life. Elections in Korea and Japan are notably absent of religious discussion or concerns about the religion of the politician. Even in the relatively religious societies such as South Korea, one is hard-pressed to find evidence that a Buddhist candidate or a Christian candidate appeals to different types of voter for whom religious affiliation is an important element. This stands in stark contrast to the United States, where concern about a politician’s religion continues to be a central concern. Explaining how East Asian religious traditions have transformed and evolved in the modern era can yield insights into the nature of contemporary politics in East Asia, whether democratic or authoritarian. For example, Elizabeth Perry (2008: 39) traces a link between the mandate of heaven from ancient times and popular protests in China today. She argues that ‘The idea that good governance rests upon guaranteeing the livelihood of ordinary people has been a hallmark of Chinese political philosophy and practice from Mencius to Mao—and beyond. It is reflected not only in government pronouncements and policies, but also in grass roots protests.’

When exploring the relationship between religion and politics, widening the set of cases to include the enduring East Asian religions may challenge or extend numerous theories of religious politics in many ways. From questions about why some religious institutions and their religious leaders become involved in politics and others do not, moving beyond Christianity and Islam to include the East Asian religious traditions promises to be a rich field for theorizing.

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Notes

1. See also Tibi (1998), Stern (2003), and Gurr (1994).
2. Definition taken from Toft (2011: 115). Grzymala-Busse (2012: 422) defines religion as ‘a public and collective belief system that structures the relationship of the individual to the divine and supernatural.’

3. The Japanese and Vietnamese royal court also kept such records, such as the *Chronicles of Japan* (*Nihon shoki*), written around 720 AD.
4. International Relations scholars have relied extensively on the CWC in exploring East Asian history (Bai and Kung, 2011; Hui, 2005; Johnston, 1998; Ma, 2010).
5. The CWC and WKP are multi-volume books. The CWC, for example, proceeds chronologically by year, listing each incident or event under a separate heading with the specific date and a detailed description. Some events are described sparsely, others are quite detailed. The length of the entry reflects both the importance of the event and the information available in the historical records and official annals.
6. The full data set is available from the author.

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