



Garrett L. Washington, *Church Space and the Capital in Prewar Japan*

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IN CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGICAL and scholarly circles, a somewhat satirical perspective often prevails, which tends to discuss Christianity in Japan as a nearly extinct tradition. The rationale behind this sentiment lies in the fact that Christianity experienced its last significant growth in Japan during the 1950s and early 1960s. This period saw the prominent social reformer and Christian Kagawa Toyohiko (1888–1960) launch his campaign of “saving three million souls for Jesus.” Although Kagawa fell short of reaching the three million mark, the momentum generated by his efforts, along with others, was reflected in the postwar years as churches experienced a surge in membership. This trend built upon a century-old tradition of utilizing church spaces for meetings, innovation, and social critique. As the previous generation of Christians ages and passes away, the number of Christian followers registered in churches continues to

decrease, counting for less than 2 percent of the population. Still, Christianity in Japan today is intertwined with some of Japan's largest institutions, including its healthcare system, higher education, and government.

But how exactly is this possible? While recent studies have broadened the conceptual horizons of religious studies to look into the boundaries of “religious spaces” in terms of historicity, ethnicity, and geography, their scope is predominantly within the bounds of Buddhist or Shinto studies (THAL 2005; ROTS 2014; DEWITT 2020; STORTINI 2021). In *Church Space and the Capital in Prewar Japan*, historian Garrett L. Washington turns the concept of religious space into a unique insight into the distinctive physical settings of Protestantism in Tokyo during the turn of the century. The primary goal, he states, is to comprehend how this religious movement and their churches were embedded in the spiritual, political, and social fabric of Japanese society (7).

The first two chapters highlight the physical aspects of four specific churches—Renanzaka, Banchō, Fujimichō, and Hongō. Washington specifies the urban positioning of these churches, the external architecture and style of these structures, and the internal layout of worship and gathering spaces by bringing attention to the crucial role churches and structures had in establishing a credible and impactful presence for Christianity in Tokyo. Especially important for the early churches were their strategic placement in Tokyo's city center, which became centers for emerging political and educational institutions (44–45). In contrast to Buddhism and new religions like Tenrikyo, whose headquarters were in the Kansai area, the early churches took the risk of moving their organizations to the new capital and found themselves in a beneficial position within a burgeoning community of “middle-class intelligentsia” (17) consisting of students, educators, and professionals, who became their primary devotees and recruitment targets for these congregations.

Chapter 2 delves into the architectural expressions of Tokyo's Protestant churches, showcasing a diversity reflective of the pastors and architects who designed them. With Japanese architects and pastors, these churches, Washington states, came to “possess a notably Japanese meaning” (97) and purposefully demonstrated the autonomy of the Japanese Christian communities. The churches deliberately fashioned spaces tailored to their unique needs and aspirations. Notably, the Tokyo Protestant churches featured large worship halls that doubled as meeting and lecture halls, as well as clusters of small rooms for women's groups and youth group meetings. These venues facilitated gatherings and interactions on various levels.

Chapter 3 shifts focus to the activities inside the churches. Here, Washington illustrates the strategies employed by Protestant Christianity to secure its powerful position in Tokyo. Introducing several sermons consisting of five themes, including “eyes ahead,” “brotherhood,” “equality in theory,” “gender equality in

practice,” and “Eastern morality,” he analyzes emerging discourses that significantly influenced these church spaces. Sermons, argues Washington, “were a form of spoken discourse” (105) which played an important role as they were harder to regulate by the Japanese government compared to written text. They also provided an ideal platform for pastors to exert influence on their communities.

Building on the arguments from the previous chapter, chapter 4 demonstrates the diversity of these church spaces. For instance, this is where Uemura Masahisa (1857–1925) criticized Japan’s occupation of Taiwan and Korea for contradicting the Christian concept of brotherhood (145). The churches were also a place where one could hear words of support for imperial expansion. Ebina Danjo (1856–1937) preached that the country had a moral obligation to extend its bushido spirit to the rest of Asia (152).

In chapter 5, the author turns away from the famous pastors to the communities. It is in this context that Washington manages to show the influence of the churches that extended beyond their physical spaces. Especially interesting is the section on *enzetsukai* (speech meeting) and *kōenkai* (lecture meeting), types of public lectures held in the churches. Here, Christianity itself was not the main focus but rather the idea of public enlightenment and engagement, as experts in various fields such as physics, mathematics, medicine, social studies, and even Buddhism and Shinto were invited to give talks at the churches.

In chapters 6 and 7, the author discusses social movements such as *fujinkai* (elder women’s societies) and *seinenkai* (youth movements), which emerged within the walls of the churches but came to function as vital channels for the social and political activities of Christianity in Japan. During this period, *fujinkai* fought against prostitution and voiced criticism against alcohol consumption (185), while *seinenkai* conducted fundraising efforts following disasters like the famine in Tohoku in 1907 (196). Many of the members of these church groups, such as Suzuki Bunji (1885–1946), went on to play pivotal roles in reforming the country’s education, public health, and justice systems. Still, however, the number of Christians remained low. Washington, perhaps unintentionally, suggests an answer to why so few people converted to Christianity, stating, “belonging at church is not the same as belonging to the church” (203). This statement, I believe, goes a long way to explain the nature of Christianity in Japan today. Christianity, to borrow the a term from Raimon PANIKKAR (2004) never became a *Christendom*, but instead through active political groups such as *fujinkai* and *seinenkai* was *Christianized* into various spheres of Japanese society.

*Church Space and the Capital in Prewar Japan* presents a significant and much-needed contribution to not only Christian studies but also religious studies and modern history more broadly. As a scholar of church history, I particularly appreciate Washington’s detailed attention not only to the famous pastors of the churches but also to their communities and their efforts to translate

Christianity into different cultural contexts. The author presents a time when church spaces functioned as discourse makers, often putting societal and environmental problems first and the message of Christianity second. The historical chapters are engaging, and the content is clear, comprehensive, and accessible for students and non-specialists. I strongly recommend *Church Space and the Capital in Prewar Japan* and hope that it inspires further interest in the history of churches in Japan.

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