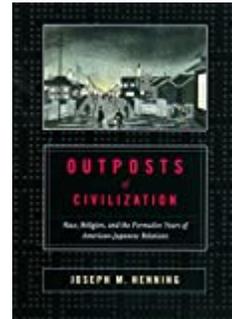


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Joseph M. Henning.** *Outposts of Civilization: Race, Religion, and the Formative Years of American-Japanese Relations.* New York: New York University Press, 2000. 243 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-3605-0.



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Joseph Henning is one of relatively few scholars who studies the formative years of American-Japanese history, generally considered to extend from Commodore Matthew Perry's mission to Japan in 1853-4 to the end of the Meiji Era in 1912. His first book, *Outposts of Civilization*, is a splendid work on the cultural dimension of the relationship between Japan and the United States during this era. More specifically, this work analyzes how Americans (and some Japanese) constructed, re-constructed, and contorted their racial and religious images of the Japanese as it became increasingly apparent that Japan (at least on a national level) was becoming an economically and militarily modern country.

When Americans first started coming to Japan in the second half of the nineteenth century after Commodore Perry had "opened" Japan to the West and "western" civilization, they came in the certainty that, as Caucasians and Christians, they were civilized and the Japanese were not. These diplomats, missionaries, scholars, and artists believed it was their mission to bring Japan out of its exotic barbarism and towards civilization, and out of heathendom and towards Christianity. Throughout *Outposts of Civilization* Henning carefully describes the racial and religious worldviews of white Americans in the second half of the nineteenth century, and then he analyzes how they tried to "fit" the Japanese into these

pre-conceived, seemingly determinist ideas of a racial hierarchy with Anglo-Saxons at the top, and Christianity (usually Protestantism) as the only true path to "civilization."

By the start of the twentieth century, however, these racial and religious worldviews of who was civilized and who was not had become moot. After defeating China and Korea in 1895, and especially after defeating white, Christian (albeit Orthodox) Russia ten years later, it was clear that, "Japan had assimilated Western secular institutions without a national religious conversion. Its military and commercial prowess seemed to contradict the American belief in Asian inferiority" (p. 137). How to explain the dilemma that Japan had become an industrialized, "modern" country with its own colonies, and yet barely one percent of its population was Christian and clearly not of Anglo-Saxon origin? William Griffis and others answered by asserting that Japanese actually weren't "Mongolian" as all other East Asians were racially classified at the time. The Japanese were a composite race, even part Caucasian, Griffis and others claimed. Meanwhile, Japan's political leaders became more helpful to American missionaries, and allowed Japanese Christians to serve as chaplains during the 1st Sino-Japan War and the Russo-Japan War. Even Emperor Meiji, who began his life as a Buddhist and then

became the high priest of State Shinto, donated money to the YMCA in 1905. "Instead of accepting Japan as a modern power that disproved these beliefs," Henning writes, "they [Americans] stretched the terms Christian, 'Anglo-Saxon,' and 'white' to co-opt the Japanese" (pp. 163-64). And the Japanese had learned how to co-opt Americans.

Although Americans knowledgeable about Japan, such as William Griffis and Alice Mabel Bacon, and Japanese such as Fukuzawa Yukichi and Kaneko Kentaro had worked for decades to promote a special relationship between Japanese and Americans, the constructions, re-constructions, and intellectual contortions to interpret Japan within the sphere of western civilization and modernity would ultimately crash against the Oriental Exclusion Act of the 1924 Immigration Law. In the conclusion, Henning reminds us that, "How we define others ... says much about how we define ourselves. Much of our own identity is invested not only in the qualities we ascribe to our particular people, but also in the allegedly unchanging differences between these qualities and those we ascribe to other peoples" (p. 172).

In *Outposts of Civilization*, Henning utilizes a vast array of primary and secondary material from government, missionary, and education sources. Moreover, he employs recent science, philosophy, and social science material to buttress his interpretations. For example, Clifford Geertz, Jared Diamond, Stephen Jay Gould, Michel Foucault, and Edward Said all make at least a brief appearance in Henning's analyses. And he has carefully read the works of Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer in order to discuss nineteenth-century views of evolu-

tion, race, and the concept of Social Darwinism. By looking at just the extensive endnotes and bibliography (pp. 175-233), somebody might think that Henning took a scattershot approach to finding sources for this study. That may be. With one partial exception mentioned below, however, *Outposts of Civilization* is a coherent study that never strays far from its fundamental theme of how Americans (and some Japanese) constructed, re-constructed, and intellectually contorted images of Japan during the Meiji Era.

In my view, there is little to criticize in *Outposts of Civilization*. There is a noticeable error on page 22 concerning the earliest Chinese documents about Japan being called "the land of Wo." It should be Wa. Because Henning's description of the meaning is correct, this must have been a typographical mistake. It seems to me that Chapter 5, "A Dance of Diplomacy," is less a cultural study and more of a political study and, therefore, is somewhat distinct from the other chapters in this book. Nevertheless, this particular chapter is an excellent overview of how and why the "unequal treaties" of the 1850s were finally re-negotiated with Japan receiving equal trade and tariff rights alongside its Western counterparts.

Despite its relative brevity—which makes it ideal for classroom use—*Outposts of Civilization* is well-researched, well-written, and full of insightful interpretations. Joseph Henning has made an important contribution to the literature on the cultural dimension of American-Japanese relations.

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