

Considering Globalized Christian Supremacy in our Discourse about Higher Education Internationalization

Dr. Sachi Edwards
Soka University, Tokyo, Japan

Earlier this year, I moved from the US to Japan and started a new position at Soka University—an overtly Buddhist institution in a country where Christians make up less than 2% of the population. When I reviewed the academic calendar, I was shocked to learn that our fall semester (which begins mid-September and ends in late January) has a full two-week break scheduled, starting a few days before Christmas. Of course, since I have spent the bulk of my academic career researching how Christian supremacy is embedded in higher education (both in the US and globally), this piqued my interest. I started asking around and learned from my Japanese friends and colleagues that having Christmas off is not common in Japanese universities; after all, it’s not a recognized national holiday, and it’s right in the middle of a semester! “*Ahh, yes,*” many of them said, “*but perhaps it’s an effort to make the academic calendar internationally compatible.*” What they didn’t say, but what I knew all too well, was that (Western) Christian culture is globally dominant and that having a two-week break over Christmas would be pleasing to the kinds of international students and faculty Japanese universities may be trying to recruit.

Indeed, the Japanese government has been actively promoting and funding higher education internationalization initiatives for the last 30 years or so, and concerns about the (in)compatibility of the academic calendar are often cited as a barrier to student and researcher mobility (Ota, 2018). When I dug deeper, I realized that among those institutions receiving special government funding for the express purpose of raising their international profiles (my university is one of them), many of them similarly have a two-week break over Christmas. This is particularly interesting to me because, in discourse about the Christian supremacy embedded in US higher education, the academic calendar is regularly one of the most prominent topics raised. So, how does the example of my Japanese Buddhist university’s Christmas break open up a conversation about how Christian supremacy in higher education is increasingly a global phenomenon, perpetuated in part by internationalization efforts? Where do Christianity and Christian supremacy fit into our discourse about how dominant models of internationalization are entangled with the spread of Westernization, marketization, and neocolonialism? I offered my reflections on these questions in my [recent presentation to the Critical Internationalization Studies network](#), and will summarize

them briefly below.

A core tenant of critical religious studies scholarship is that theistic belief and rules governing behavior are inappropriate metrics for defining religion. Instead, a more inclusive and accurate way to understand religion is to examine the way it shapes a society's norms and values. From this perspective, the Christian cultural worldview is foundational to what we understand as modern Western secularism and science. Sociologists explain this (Durkheim, 1912/1995; Spickard, 2017), decolonial scholars explain this (Mignolo, 2011; Quijano, 2000), and those who approach the study of religion from a non-Christian framework explain this (Deloria, 2003; Masuzawa, 2005). Christian supremacy, then, is the idea that the Christian cultural worldview at the heart of Western secularism and science is superior to other onto-epistemologies; and it is spread around the world in part through internationalization efforts that attempt to universalize Western approaches to teaching, learning, inquiry, mobility, financing and determining quality.

Western models of teaching, learning, and inquiry, for instance, emphasize liberal education and positivist empirical science, along with the assumption that these approaches are culturally neutral and universally applicable. Liberalism and rationalism, however, are products of the Enlightenment—i.e., they developed in a culturally Christian context—and maintain important elements of the Christian worldview such as individualism, universalism, anthropocentrism, and linear time. Yet, we rarely name liberal education and Western science as being Christian. Instead, their supposedly neutral, secular status is used to position them as modern and *superior* to any pedagogy or philosophy deemed religio-culturally rooted.

Likewise, the idea that we can and should develop instruments to compare education systems and institutions across disparate contexts relies on the universalizing logic of the Christian worldview. Tröhler and Maricic (2021) explain how ideas about standardization that began with the Scottish Protestant Reformation were then institutionalized by Christians at Teachers College and the Carnegie Foundation, and eventually led to the creation of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). The same movement led to the creation and popularization of global university rankings that are so influential today—rankings that consistently place Christian-origin institutions at the top; e.g. Oxford, Cambridge, Columbia, Yale, Harvard, and others. As Shahjahan and Edwards (2021) note, those institutions then guide the aspirations of institutions around the world.

The marketization that comes along with the spread of Westernization and competition for high ranking should also be recognized as a Christian export. Capitalism, after all, was developed by the Church and imposed on colonies as a system of labor and economy that would ensure the maintenance of the Church's financial and political power. Both then and now, acceptance of capitalism is seen as a marker of modernity and progress, manifesting in higher education through, among other things, the promotion of innovation and entrepreneurship.

Even the way we understand mobility is shaped by Christianity. Through colonialism, and the process of political decolonization in some places, the Church established nation state borders that did not previously exist and were usually quite arbitrary. The creation of those borders has had extremely violent effects that many

communities around the world are still experiencing; the partitioning of India/South Asia, for example. Yet, these borders are how we define what is (inter)national, erroneously homogenizing diverse communities within those arbitrary borders.

My work in Japan has exposed me to histories and current practices of internationalization within higher education that exemplify both the global nature of Christian supremacy and resistance to it. I encourage others to consider the ways Christian supremacy functions in the forms and contexts of internationalization you operate within. Then, importantly, I encourage you to overtly name Christian supremacy when you write or talk about internationalization. Ignoring it—the way it masquerades as secularism; the way it intersects with White supremacy, patriarchy, capitalism, and colonialism; and the way it perpetuates epistemicide—simply allows Christian supremacy to proceed unchecked. To be sure, there's much more we need to learn and understand about Christian supremacy in higher education internationalization, and we need to be willing to talk about it in order to do that.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sachi Edwards, Ph.D., is a Lecturer (tenure-track) in the Graduate School of International Peace Studies at Soka University in Tokyo, Japan. With graduate degrees in religious studies and international education policy, she brings an interdisciplinary perspective to the study of internationalization, globalization, and inter-cultural education.
