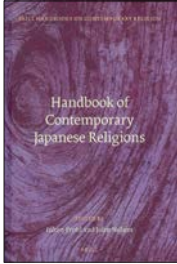


REVIEWS



Inken Prohl and John Nelson, eds., *Handbook of Contemporary Japanese Religions*

Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2012. xxii + 652 pages. Cloth €192.00/
US\$267.00. ISBN 978-9004234352.

THIS EDITED collection presents an overview on contemporary religion in Japan and some recent research on the topic. The editors have worked hard to bring together twenty-five chapters by well-known figures in the field and they provide a wealth of information within them. The book includes both an overview and introductory chapters on what are deemed to be the main religious traditions in Japan, plus other chapters examining specific topics of concern in the contemporary religious world. The book is divided into four main sections. Part I is titled “Orientations” and ostensibly provides the broader context of the topic of “religion” in Japan. Part II is titled “Transformations within Japan’s Religious Traditions,” Part III “Religious Responses to Social Change,” and Part IV “Spirituality and Religion for a New Age.” The main traditions, as defined by Part II, are Buddhism, Shinto, and Christianity; one wonders, given their extensive history and presence, at what stage the new religions (which continue to be treated as a generic category in the volume, but dealt with in Part III) will come to be seen as “traditions” rather than, as is still the case here, located within the framework of responses to social change.

Part I begins with the editors’ overview, followed by a chapter on Japanese religious statistics by Michael Roemer, which is useful in examining the reliability (or rather the reverse) of survey data. I was not in agreement with some of Roemer’s claims, however, notably his comment that “until very recently, anyone who has tried to find survey data to support his or her research on Japanese religiosity has most likely been struck by the unavailability of data” (52). I was surprised to read this, having found an abundance of such data available when I began working in the field; I used a lot in my first book and in many subsequent publications, and in examining the topic of pilgrimage have benefitted from the plentiful data-rich surveys done by Japanese scholars in that field. Next comes a chapter by Jun’ichi

Isomae and Tim Graf questioning the formation and use of the term “religion” in Japanese contexts. Basically a rerun of Isomae’s earlier published work on the topic, it critiques the development and use of the term in Japan. The irony is that, although the book thus raises an area of critical debate here, few of the authors in it appear to have taken notice of Isomae’s arguments, in that they continue to use the term “religion” in the uncritical, rather traditional and normative religious studies manner that Isomae and others who follow his line have criticized.

Later there is also a very good chapter by Urs Zachmann examining the postwar Japanese constitution and the religious issues associated with it, which, rather oddly, comes not in the opening section, where it belonged, given the extent to which it is part of the “orientations” of the topic, but at the start of Part III. It is an important chapter for outlining the parameters within which “religion” is perceived in legal contexts, and Zachmann takes us through several major court cases that have dealt with the conflicts and confusions over where the boundaries of “religion” might be drawn in contemporary Japan. As he shows, this involves a continuing process of cases and litigation, for attitudes and perceptions are constantly changing, and the courts thus continue to be needed to produce contemporary definitions and distinctions in this disputed area.

In the chapters that follow there is a general weighting towards the notion of “traditions,” with Buddhism coming out especially well in several senses. Its practices and activities are the focus of numerous chapters scattered throughout the book, several of which overlap in a variety of ways, and that hint at a degree of redundancy. There are, for instance, two chapters (by Duncan Williams, and by Jonathan Watts and Masazumi Okano) on contemporary Buddhist social activism that in effect cover similar areas while seeking to counter the notion that Buddhism overall is in a moribund state. The associations of Buddhism and death are articulated in several chapters too, from George Tanabe’s witty chapter on death rituals, to Satsuki Kawano’s discussion of contemporary mortuary practices, to John Nelson’s discussion (in an abridged reprint of an article initially published in *JJRS*) of contemporary household altars. Other chapters on temples and priests also are provided by Stephen Covell and by Jørn Borup, while Noriko Kawahashi contributes a lively and forceful discussion of the situation of Buddhist women. There is also a chapter on “Zen Art” by Gregory Levine that, to me, seemed speculative, engaged in the sorts of mystification of Zen that I thought the field had moved far beyond, and that, given its lack of any clear relevance to contemporary religion in Japan, seemed out of place.

Other traditions received fewer chapters. Shinto is treated mainly through an overview of Shinto shrines and what one sees there, by Bernhard Scheid, and—a standout chapter—John Breen’s study of Yasukuni Shrine. This focuses not on issues of religion, politics, and the state, but on how the shrine presents (via rituals, its museum, and pamphlets) a highly sanitized narrative that excludes any account of the horrors of war, of citizens who died, and of Japanese sins. Breen shows how the shrine subverts notions of propitiation and mourning, while using the dead for

political purposes tied to nationalism. As such, the shrine obliterates actual memories of war traumas and deaths and replaces it with a fetishized narrative in which Japanese soldiers are heroes, war is a noble undertaking against Western imperialism, and suicide pilots form the moral cornerstone of modern Japan. Breen concludes by recognizing that while Japan needs a place to memorialize the war dead, Yasukuni is not and should not be it.

The new religions are covered in Part III (as I noted above, as “responses” rather than as self-standing traditions) via an overview from Inken Prohl and a chapter on Soka Gakkai by Levi McLaughlin, the latter of which traces the movement’s history and how it has moved away from its initial focus on Nichiren Buddhism towards incorporating aspects of Western humanism, always centered in the present day on its leader, Ikeda Daisaku. As is well known, the movement grew rapidly, often using controversial and coercive means to do so, in the 1950s–1970s, but as McLaughlin shows, it has somewhat stagnated in recent times. Christianity also gets two chapters, a broad overview by Mark Mullins that sums up many aspects of the tradition as it has developed in Japan, especially indicating how Japanese activists have transformed aspects of Christianity in Japan, while also noting that, despite substantial investments in proselytisation, the tradition has not exactly succeeded in attracting a major following. Aike Rots also discusses Christianity in a chapter that at the start covers very similar ground to that of Mullins, prior to looking more closely at how notions of Japanese identity are conceived in Japanese Christian contexts.

Part IV looks at some new phenomena—and in a sense the contents of it remind us of how quickly situations and themes may change. Had this book been put together a decade or so back, one would have expected a chapter on *mizuko kuyō*, which was at the forefront of controversy and discussions of contemporary religion in the 1990s. Times have changed, the practice, having been widely discussed, has become normalized (and is in decline), and is unsurprisingly left out. By contrast new phenomena relating to memorialization and spirits have arisen, as indicated by Barbara Ambros in her chapter on funeral services and the memorialization of pets (*petto kuyō*). Other recent phenomena dealt with in Part IV include Mark MacWilliams’ discussion of the religious content of contemporary manga, and their use by religious organizations for proselytizing purposes, and Benjamin Dorman’s examination of some figures who, in the post-Aum era, have acquired followings as spiritual advisers and become television personalities and celebrity figures as a result. These chapters draw our attention to the significance of the mass media as a factor in contemporary religious dynamics. Given such media significance I was surprised that there was no chapter on the internet, which is surely an area that merits study in this context.

The main focus of Part IV, certainly according to its title, is on the contentious and vaguely defined area of “spirituality.” Although the term itself has been rightly subjected to critical analysis in Western contexts (for example, WOOD 2009; 2010) and although some Japanese scholars have recently questioned how valid the notion of a “turn to spirituality” really is (for example, HORIE 2009), these issues do not

appear to trouble the authors who use the term in this section. The first chapter here is a baffling one, by Kenta Kasai on Theosophy in Japan, which provides a general history of Theosophy and mentions some Japanese writings on it, but that says little about contemporary religion in Japan, while failing to show why the topic is relevant to the book at hand. Susumu Shimazono and Tim Graf (cited as co-authors of an overview chapter on “spirituality” that at points is written in the first person singular) contribute a chapter more oriented towards asserting the existence of “spirituality” as a coherent concept and emergent tradition than it is in examining the validity and viability of the term. Lise Gebhardt’s chapter (reliant to a great degree on Shimazono’s definitions of spirituality) draws attention to what she sees as the vibrant market in writings on spirituality (even if she also mentions in a footnote on page 552 that after 1995 the popularity of writers associated with this milieu declined) and looks at works by various people, from older literary figures such as Endō Shūsaku to more recent ones such as Murakami Haruki, and to figures such as Nakazawa Shin’ichi and others.

The volume covers a commendable amount of ground, but I have several concerns about it. It was not clear to me what the rationale for the book was. It is designed as a “handbook” (indeed, a rather weighty one) and, perhaps for such reasons, presents topics via a traditional approach, with overviews of various traditions plus a selection of topics that appear to be relevant in the contemporary context. Yet it is unclear how and why these topics were chosen. The volume comes across more as a survey of what has been done recently in the field than as a study of new issues and as manifestations of new research. The chapters, for the most part, have either been published somewhere before (for example, Nelson on altars, Ambros on pet funerals, Breen on Yasukuni), or are distillations of longer published work (for example, Shimazono, Isomae, Kawano, Gebhardt), with the result that if one has been assiduous in reading recent publications in the field one will not find a great deal that is new.

The overlaps between chapters, and the over-representation especially of Buddhism, are also matters of concern, especially in the context of things that were not examined in any depth. It could, of course, be seen as nit-picking to identify topic areas that one considers important and yet are not included, but there are two massive and related issues that must be mentioned. The first is the Aum Affair. It is touched on at several points; several chapters mention it, very much in passing, inevitably hinting as they do that it has had a negative impact on the Japanese religious situation. There is, however, no focused analysis either of the affair or of its repercussions; given the extent to which it has hung like a shadow over the field (prompting also, *inter alia*, the rise of an anti-cult movement and new forms of rhetoric that are questioning the notion of what “religion” is) it surely required some fuller treatment.

Another concern is that there is very little in the book actually examining what is hinted at in the above references to Aum: that religious belonging and engagement is in decline in Japan, and that some traditions (for example, Buddhism) are

facing serious problems. On Buddhism, for example, the tendency was to present, instead, a highly positive aspect, both by having a number of chapters talking of Buddhist mortuary rituals and innovations, and by having two chapters on social activism. Yet even these chapters concerned me. There was no serious examination of the declining fortunes of many Buddhist temples or the loss of funeral market share they are experiencing even as the death rate rises due to the aging society. The chapters on activism focused mostly on individual activists, and left me wondering whether these were special examples of a few people and groups that were active in a context in which there are thousands of temples and numerous institutions that might be doing very little. Are the activists discussed representative of Buddhism today or slightly anomalous examples of people swimming against the tide of inertia or decline? It would be good to have answers to such questions.

While the editors recognize that there is institutional religious decline in Japan, they affirm that this is compensated for by a vibrant field of “spiritualities” (12). This appears to be a standard view throughout, even if there is little evidence to substantiate the point. While “spirituality” is posited as a source of regeneration and vibrancy, there are no data provided to indicate that it is a cogent phenomenon or, indeed, to counter recent claims that the so-called spiritual “boom” ended some time back, and that various “spirituality”-oriented television programs have now gone off air (HORIE 2009, 2010; ISHII 2008, 3–4). **Ambros does, in her article, mention criticisms being made of some “spiritual” teachers who appeared on television but who have now been taken off air (504–5) but this is a rare point in the overall treatment of “spirituality.”**

There is certainly no data-centered demonstration of the extent to which the so-called “spirituality boom” is really vibrant or capable of compensating for religious decline elsewhere. Nor is there any questioning of the category being used. Rather, as the book progressed, we moved from speaking—without analytical discussion—of the apparent rise of new spiritualities, to a reification of said “culture.” By the latter stages of the book contributors were talking of “the New Spirituality Culture” (490, with capitals) as if it is a specially designated and coherent phenomenon, and describing writers associated with it as “spiritual intellectuals” (again, without parentheses; 571) with little evidence to show why they qualify for the term. (Reading some of the things they write, to me, presented clear evidence that whatever qualities they possess, these people do not entail intellectualism as it is commonly conceived.) Scholars in the field here appear to be following the problematic path trod by some scholars in Western contexts, of developing a rather vague term (“spirituality”), providing relatively little empirical substance to back their claims, yet talking of it as if it were “taking over” and filling the gap left by religious decline. As I have noted above, such propositions are being rightly questioned in Western contexts, and it is important that they are properly examined, rather than merely reiterated in Japanese ones and turned into a reified category. As the work by Isomae on “religion,” outlined in this volume, reminds us, we should not uncritically accept categories and terms.

There is one more major point to make, and that concerns price. I know that commercial publishers often need to publish in expensive hardbacks to start with, in order to enable them to publish in paperback at affordable prices later. This is also a weighty tome with many contributors. Yet it is priced at 192 Euros/267 dollars (enough to keep me in clothes for a decade or more), rendering it not just impossible as a book to use in class but very hard to justify asking one's library to purchase. Given that much of the material in it is available in relatively similar form elsewhere, and the degree of overlap between chapters (and the point that some of them are not exactly relevant and could have been omitted), the price is outrageous.

For the price one would have expected some better textual editing and less mistakes. Among those that leapt out were getting the dates of Japan's two greatest postwar natural disasters wrong; the Hanshin earthquake is dated (7) as February 1995, when it occurred on 17 January, and the 2011 Tohoku tsunami/earthquake is wrongly given as 3 March rather than 11 March. Likewise Aum Shinrikyo was not established in 1987 (as is stated on page 4), but was founded initially in 1984 and took the name Aum Shinrikyo in 1986. Its English title was Aum Supreme Truth, not "Sublime Truth" (as stated on page 595). These are just a few of the inconsistencies and errors that I found. While the authors of the chapters in question ought not to have made these mistakes in the first place, the publisher's manuscript assessors and copy-editors should surely have caught and rectified them. That is, after all, one of the services that is factored into the cost of producing books, and into the price we pay for them. If Brill is going to charge extortionate sums for their books, they owe a duty to properly check the texts they produce.

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