

Brian BOCKING, *The Oracles of the Three Shrines: Windows on Japanese Religion*. Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 2001. xvii + 142 pp. \$55.00 cloth, ISBN 0-7007-1384-0.

THIS IS A STUDY of one particular element in Japanese religious art, the “oracles of the three shrines” (*sanja takusen*). In scroll form, these usually comprised the names of three deities—Amaterasu, Hachiman, and Kasuga—with short oracular texts and portrayals of the three deities. Although all three deities are represented on the scrolls, not all three elements are necessarily employed. There are examples of scrolls having just the names without oracles or portrayals, and so on in other combinations. The publication includes many photographs illustrating the history of the scroll, and a translation of “A Brief Summary of the Oracles of the Three Shrines” (*Sanja takusen ryakushō*), dating from 1650 and attributed to Matsumoto Kiyofusa. Bocking’s work makes contributions both to the study of Japanese religion *per se*, and to the study of religion generally.

For the study of Japanese religion, there is first of all the information about a particular element of religious art—its origins and its development into its contemporary form. The methodology employed—taking a specific item and examining how it changes over time—is noteworthy as it provides a solid basis for making more general statements about the history of Japanese religion. The focus on a single element of Japanese religious art is reminiscent of Ouwehand’s *Namazue and Their Themes* (1964).

Bocking frames his study in terms of the nature of Shinto. He begins by noting that although the term Shinto has no definition, this “is not really a problem until the term is used as a part of an explanation of, or label for something else” (2). In other words, it does become a problem when it is given explanatory or causal force, or is used as a name for a delimitable category of religious phenomena. He also points out the fallacious logic of the modern conception of Shinto as separable from Buddhism: “In accordance with the ideology of the ‘separation’ of Buddhas and kami the implicit claim... is that what is ‘not Buddhist’ is ‘pre-Buddhist,’ and therefore ‘Shinto.’” (105).

Although the creation of an understanding of Shinto as indigenous, autonomous, emperor-centered, and ancient in the late nineteenth century may be familiar to specialists, the intransigence of this understanding in the Western literature makes it well worth repeating. Bocking’s presentation is clear, concise, and accessible to non-specialists with an interest in Japanese religion. His explanation of the efficacy of the Meiji government’s utilization of the educational system—newly created as universal and compulsory—instead of the shrines themselves is particularly illuminating (102–3).

For the study of religion generally, Bocking’s work makes at least three important contributions. The first is the political origin of the oracles of the three shrines. The second is the malleability of religious symbols; and the third is the close integration of religion and economics.

The earliest of the scrolls that Bocking has located dates from 1341, right after the end of Emperor Godaigo’s attempt to restore direct imperial rule (Kenmu restoration, 1333–1336). This shows Godaigo as a Shingon priest,

above whom are arrayed the titles of the three shrines: Ise, Hachiman, and Kasuga. Thus, it appears to be an exercise in religio-political propaganda. The scroll implicitly claims for Godaigo the authority of the three most prominent deities, who, according to legend, agreed to jointly rule Japan. At the same time the scroll claims the institutional support of the three most important shrines, as well as highlighting Godaigo's personal religious status as a Shingon priest.

The same kind of religio-political propaganda occurred in connection with the origins of Rosicrucianism. In her study *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment* (1972), Frances A. Yates has detailed the intended role of the Rosicrucian Manifestoes in re-ordering popular religious conceptions for the purpose of supporting a political and marital alliance between Britain and Bohemia, one opposed to Hapsburg Spain. It was, in other words, a piece of religio-political propaganda, but one which became an enduring, albeit marginal, religious tradition, and which far outlived Bohemia as an independent state—for very shortly after the publication of the Manifestoes the Thirty Years War broke out and destroyed any hopes for a Protestant League opposed to the Catholic Hapsburgs. Given the longevity of both the oracles of the three shrines and Rosicrucianism, one issue that seems to need further research is how such religio-political propaganda can apparently take on a life of its own, continuing long after the political situation that created it has been forgotten.

It is often the case that religious symbols are treated as if they are invariant in meaning. By examining the same symbol over more than six hundred years of its history, Bocking details not only that the meaning of the symbol of the oracles of the three shrines changes over that time, but also gives indications of how and why those changes occur. The clearest transformation of meaning is with the Meiji era promotion of the emperor as divine descendent of Amaterasu. As Bocking puts it, "Though *kō* members or pilgrims contemplating the *sanja takusen* before the Meiji restoration might well have been drawn to ponder the sublime splendour of the ancestral deities of the imperial line insofar as this was a facet of the Ise cult, they would not have given much thought to the current emperor dwelling in obscurity in Kyoto.... By contrast, from 1868 until at least 1945, to visit Ise as a devotee was principally an act of participation in the imperial cult" (101–2).

The character of the scroll itself was altered in the second half of the nineteenth century when the Buddhist elements were excised and more politically acceptable "Shinto" elements replaced them. For example, while the title previously given to Hachiman had been *daibosatsu*, he was now called *ōkami*. Similarly, in their older form, the oracles were moralistic exhortations to honesty, purity, and compassion. These were replaced by extracts from the *Nihongi*. One of the most interesting results of Bocking's research is the identification of the source of the unique representation of Amaterasu—standing, bejewelled, holding sword and mirror—as the esoteric Buddhist deity Uhō Dōji. This latter figure was the deity worshipped as Amaterasu at Kongōshō-ji, a Zen temple that had once formed part of the standard pilgrimage to Ise. The round wish-fulfilling jewel and jewelled staff held by Uhō Dōji are

replaced by the mirror and sword of Amaterasu, while the five-element stupa (*gorintō*) on top of Uhō Dōji's head has disappeared and a jewelled necklace appeared instead. Thus, three traditionally Buddhist symbols have been displaced by the three imperial regalia.

As with the invariance of symbols, the study of religion all too often fails to attend to the economics involved. Indeed, this could be considered a congenital blind-spot for religious studies as it is one of the more tenacious consequences of the notion of religion as *sui generis*—an idea created in the nineteenth century to protect religion from supposedly destructive reductionist explanations, perhaps especially Marxist analyses.

One of the vehicles for the increasing popularity of the oracles of the three shrines in the Edo period was the religious associations (*kō*) that enabled association members to travel as pilgrims to Ise, one of the few forms of travel allowed during the Edo period. One of the activities of such associations was the construction of lanterns at each of the three shrines. These were kept burning night and day, requiring the designation of part of village land to finance the purchase of oil, retainer for a shrine attendant to maintain the lamps, a twice yearly fee to the pilgrimage master, as well as funds for association representatives to make monthly pilgrimages to the shrines to monitor the condition of the lanterns. Thus, far from existing in some realm free from economic and social concerns, the cult of the oracles of the three shrines was deeply enmeshed in a complex of economic relations as well as the effects of the shogunate's attempts to control the movement of people within Japan during the Edo period.

Bocking's *The Oracles of the Three Shrines* will be of value to anyone interested in the nature of Japanese religion and its transformation in the nineteenth century into the form familiar to us today. The clarity of writing and concise character of the treatment make it a work that could easily be used as a text in upper division and graduate courses on Japanese religions. Despite the fact that the contributions to the general study of religion are in a sense incidental to Bocking's more explicit focus on the nature of Shinto, this work will also be of interest to those in the broader field of religious studies, as it contributes to several of the ongoing debates concerning the nature of religion and its proper study.

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