

Michael A. Williams, Collett Cox, Martin S. Jaffee, eds., *Innovation in Religious Traditions: Essays in the Interpretation of Religious Change*. Religion and Society Series 31. Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1992. viii + 373 pages, bibliography and index. 188 DM (US\$125.00). ISBN 3-11-012780-6.

This collection of essays, which grew out of a faculty research seminar of the Comparative Religion Program at the University of Washington, is broad-ranging in both subject and approach. Topics include doctrinal innovation in the Jewish Bible, thematic continuity in the Buddhist Abhidharma, and the nature of prophecy. All of the papers are grounded in such areas of the

humanities as history and philosophy, with methods ranging from textual exegesis to historical analysis. The methodological issues relating to innovation and the maintenance of tradition that underlie the entire collection will be of interest to students of Japanese religion for the insights they provide into religious innovation in Japan. Two essays in particular deal directly with Japan, and I would like to begin with a brief consideration of these.

Bardwell Smith's "The Social Contexts of Healing: Research on Abortion and Grieving in Japan" (pp. 285–317) takes up an important aspect of religious change in the Japanese context. In this update of an earlier paper from the *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* (1988, 15/1), Smith provides further reflection on the phenomenon of *mizuko kuyō* 水子供養, Buddhist rites for still-born and miscarried children and aborted fetuses (*mizuko*, lit. "water children"). Smith observes that services specifically for aborted fetuses began in the mid-1960s, and have now become a feature of most Japanese Buddhist sects. He suggests the motivations of women who seek such services span a continuum from combined guilt and fear, to a desire to be healed through grieving, to the related desire to bond with other women who have undergone similar experiences.

This essay is essentially a set of reflections on work in progress: the author and a colleague are evaluating survey data (not presented in the paper) on women who have participated in these memorial rites. The phenomenon of *mizuko kuyō* is certainly deserving of further study, for two reasons. Japan has a high number of abortions—Smith says 500,000 a year are reported, and suggests the actual number may be two or three times that figure (p. 288). Secondly, many women (no one can yet say how many) seek religious services for *mizuko*. The innovative extension of the scope of this traditional Buddhist ritual to a contemporary social phenomenon is, I believe, unique to modern Japan. Moreover, as Smith notes, the rise of *mizuko kuyō* for aborted fetuses is tied to questions of sexuality in Japan and the role of women in Japanese society.

Helen Hardacre's paper, "Gender and the Millennium in Ōmoto Kyōdan: The Limits of Religious Innovation" (pp. 215–39), analyzes a case in which doctrinal innovation was tied to the rise of a new religion, yet had limited relevance to the movement's followers. Ōmoto Kyōdan's foundress, Deguchi Nao (1836–1918), revised the Buddhist notion of gender transformation (the concept of *henjo-nanshi* 變成男子, which holds that females must become males to achieve salvation) in order to achieve authority within her movement. She claimed to have undergone a spiritual transformation to become the Transformed Male. Her son-in-law, Deguchi Onisaburō (1871–1948), is said to have become the Transformed Female, second in authority to the foundress. In spite of this putative gender reversal for the two leaders of the movement, traditional roles for both men and women were upheld. Neither figure challenged the official Meiji Era view of women as "good wives and wise mothers." Hardacre argues that "although they made an oblique assault on the system, they never questioned it directly, and hence they ended up further contributing to its maintenance" (p. 234). Through vitiating "the potential of their radical ideology," she says Nao and Onisaburō left a legacy

of schism and decline within their movement (p. 235).

The essay by the anthropologist Charles F. Keyes (“Buddhist Politics and their Revolutionary Origins in Thailand,” pp. 319–50) is a good example of the blending of perspectives of the humanities and social sciences. In the Thai case, the author sees a shift in religious doctrine—specifically, the doctrine of karma—which became a catalyst for cultural change. Keyes argues that this change in emphasis from “karma-as-heritage which determines one’s present position to karma-as-future consequences of present actions” has spurred the growth of Buddhist movements that promote “ethically-impelled practical action.” Together, the author suggests, these movements have created a “Buddhist revolution” that continues to change the face of Thai politics and society (pp. 342–43).

Keyes notes the parallel between his analysis and Max Weber’s linkage of ascetic Protestantism with the emergence of a “practical rationalism” in Europe. Indeed, Weber’s ideas on prophecy, charisma, and the institutionalization process underlie all of the essays, though in some papers the concepts are mediated by more recent theories. The Weberian perspective is explicit in Rodney Stark’s “How Sane People Talk to the Gods: A Rational Theory of Revelations” (pp. 19–34). Of the eleven essays in this book, Stark’s comes the closest to advocating a traditional “crisis” theory concerning religious innovation, arguing that the growth of religious movements is prompted by social stresses, and that the movements crystalize around a charismatic figure. In keeping with the central theme of the book, Stark views institutional change in religion as a natural and ongoing process, and he offers an interesting twist on two points in Weberian theory. First, he suggests that revelation is a natural, if uncommon, psychological process akin to the unconscious composition of a musical score by composers. He notes that some talented musicians have claimed to hear melodies in their completed form, and “they simply wrote down what they heard” (pp. 24–26). He also suggests that “heresy” (in the sense of novel doctrines) tends to be “amplified” over time; that is, a prophet’s initial credibility requires that early revelations not deviate dramatically from accepted belief (pp. 26–30). Through the later interaction of a leader and followers, a more distinctive doctrinal basis for the new movement develops and subsequent revelations become more “daring” than the first. As charisma becomes *routinized* “upon the death or disappearance of the prophet,” religious movements will curtail or restrict further revelations (p. 30).

In another engaging analysis, Marilyn Robinson Waldman and Robert M. Baum examine the function of the prophet through two case studies (of Muhammad and a twentieth-century African woman named Alinesitoué). In “Innovation as Renovation: The ‘Prophet’ as an Agent of Change” (pp. 241–84), the authors suggest that prophets are master synthesizers who are able to present innovation as a recovery of the past. This is a theme that reappears through the collected papers.

A central premise gives a sense of continuity to this scholarly potpourri: each author assumes that religious traditions are always “under construction” (p. 1). Innovation in religion, it is explained in an introductory essay and a summary “Afterward,” is not simply a reaction to crisis, either personal or

social, nor can it be explained only in terms of Weberian *charisma*. The contributors agree that innovation is not peripheral to religion; it is not an aberrant deviation from a static state. Instead, the creative process of reinterpreting ostensibly fixed traditions is central to the religious enterprise. Tradition, the editors state, is “multi-dimensional” both in its linguistic forms and in its diversity of settings, and it is therefore “the condition of its own transformation, as it is repossessed by its bearers...” (p. 353). Change, in other words, is inherent in religion, more so in some traditions or social contexts than others.

The editors of this text observe that, previously, religious innovation has been studied primarily in two settings, and largely by scholars from two branches of the social sciences. Anthropologists have charted shifts in tribal societies as they have encountered Western culture, giving rise to “nativistic” or “millenarian” movements or “cargo cults” (p. 2). Alternatively, sociologists have examined new religious movements in their modern industrial settings. The focus needs to be widened, the editors rightly argue, and humanities scholars can make a contribution. In spite of this book’s far-reaching scope in terms of subject matter, it offers coherent insights into religious innovation in Japan and other settings, and it is a useful adjunct to social science literature on the topic.

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