

Donald F. McCallum, *Zenkōji and Its Icon: A Study in Medieval Japanese Religious Art*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995. xviii+ 268 pp. ISBN 0-691-03203-3.

ZENKŌJI 善光寺 IN NAGANO is one of those great temples that has played a seminal role in Japanese religious history. Its religious cult is centered upon an icon, the Zenkō-ji Amida Triad, as is the nationwide network of Shin Zenkō-ji temples, each of which houses a copy of the icon. Zenkō-ji's cult has had an influential role in the development of Amidism in Japan, and the temple remains widely revered as one of the sacred gateways through which one can gain rebirth in the Pure Land.

The Zenkō-ji Amida Triad is a hidden icon (*hibutsu* 秘仏), and, as author Donald McCallum notes, this very concealment is an important factor in the icon's supposed power. Indeed, the icon may not even physically exist: there

have been so many fires at the site that the original image could well have been lost centuries ago. What marks this particular icon—or, since it is unseen, the *idea* of this icon—is the belief of its worshipers that it is not an icon at all but rather a “Living Buddha” (as McCallum calls it) radiating spiritual power and offering salvation in the next world and practical benefits in this. Legend has it that as a Living Buddha the icon is able to act as an animate being, flying, for instance, to another location in order to escape such temporal disasters as fires (p. 159).

As McCallum makes clear, it is this aspect of the icon—its life—that is crucial to its cult, not its aesthetic qualities. His purpose is thus to “focus on the beliefs and practices connected with the cult of the Zenkōji Buddha, with the aim of elucidating relations between worshiper and icon” (p. 4). In emphasizing this point he challenges others in the discipline of art history (and especially Japanese art history) to look beyond the traditional aesthetic confines of their discipline and to view icons as things that can be discussed in terms of their cultural value and religious functions.

In order to do this McCallum examines the social, political, and religious environment in which the icon emerged and clarifies the factors that served to give it power. He describes, for example, the complex set of foundation myths (*engi* 縁起) that developed around the icon, underpinning and reinforcing its sanctity. His study also looks at the question of replication—of why a particular icon became a sacred prototype for numerous copies and gave rise to the network of Shin Zenkō-ji temples that extends throughout much of Japan. By showing how the icon with its sacred power was reproduced and taken to those unable to go to the central temple McCallum further demonstrates the icon’s centrality in the cult.

Scholars of religious studies might argue that the volume provides few new insights into Japanese religious history. McCallum does, however, raise a number of important themes that have been attracting increasing attention in the field. In showing, for example, that the cult emerged from the Amidism of the late Heian and early Kamakura periods he indicates the deceptive nature of the traditional “Heian” and “Kamakura” dividing lines, with their suggestion of sudden changes in the religious environment rather than subtle and gradual shifts. His analysis of the cult’s development reaffirms the position of those scholars who see as inadequate the traditionalist reading of Kamakura religion, which focuses on the emergence of new Buddhist movements and thus produces a sectarianized image of the period. As the existence of the Zenkō-ji cult demonstrates, there were many other vigorous popular traditions in Kamakura religion that straddled the historical borders of the eras and provided some continuity between them.

McCallum’s most important contribution is, perhaps, his demonstration of the falsity of the notion that religious and cultural ideas necessarily emerge from the center of society, as it were, and spread to the peripheries. McCallum demonstrates that the “marginal” can be extremely “central” in terms of dynamics, formulating religious cults and forces that may subsequently influence the higher echelons of society. The Zenkō-ji cult developed in Shinano, a region far away from the major cities and locations of political power, yet in

the ensuing centuries it became an important destination for pilgrims and drew the attention of political leaders (for, as much as anything, the power of the icon). McCallum's work shows that the supposedly peripheral areas of Japan, far from being the passive recipients of a culture disseminated from the political center, are often the producers of cultural influences that are exported to the center and the upper social realms.

McCallum stresses the influence of the shamanic *hijiri* 聖, the wandering holy men, in the spread of the Zenkō-ji cult, thus underlining their importance in the development of Japanese religion. It was they who may have brought the Amida Triad to Zenkō-ji in the first place (although this is uncertain), and it was they who were primarily responsible for spreading the word about the Living Buddha throughout Japan, for promoting the replication of Zenkō-ji icons and temples, and for encouraging people to make pilgrimages to the temple itself.

These and other subjects are set out in chapters that follow their themes through the centuries and that are often rich in detail. In his description of the travels of the Zenkō-ji icon in later centuries (chapter 7), for example, McCallum demonstrates the fusion between political power and religious symbolism in the period spanning the Kamakura to the Tokugawa eras, clarifies the ways in which temples raised money to finance their building activities, and describes the travels of the icon itself as it was seized by a succession of political leaders (the description, it is worth noting, shows how possession of the icon during the warring states period and shortly thereafter brought little but ill-luck to its possessors).

In his conclusion McCallum reiterates the importance of a broad, multidisciplinary perspective when studying cults like that of Zenkō-ji. Understanding the Zenkō-ji cult requires a knowledge of much more than just texts and aesthetics—one must also be familiar with myth, ritual, pilgrimage, and much more besides. McCallum accomplishes much of what he sets out to do, and succeeds in showing how an icon need not be particularly worthwhile as a work of art (and, indeed, need not even physically exist) to constitute a significant religious phenomenon.

I found certain aspects of the book less informative, however. Although this may stem in some cases from the fact that I am not an art historian (and thus do not always share McCallum's concerns), I think these points should be mentioned. For example, one wonders why it is necessary to have two chapters detailing the specifics of various replicas of the Amida Triad when McCallum clearly demonstrates that the locus of the cult is in the icon's powers and not in its aesthetic qualities. The two chapters in question (5 and 6) were not especially enlivening reading, getting rather bogged down—at least in the eyes of this self-confessed philistine reader—in material that adds little to the understanding of the icon cult. This question is especially pertinent in that, despite the emphasis on the icon's power, we are provided with very little information regarding the experiences of its worshipers. Apart from occasional glimpses into legends like that of the "flying icon" mentioned above, we learn very little of how the Living Buddha actually worked, of what the experiences of its worshipers were, and of what benefits they gained from

venerating the icon. These questions are central to an understanding of how a cult and a center of religious power develop. One would certainly have hoped for more than the one page we get on ritual.

I found rather problematic the divisions made between “popular religion” and its proponents the *hijiri* on the one hand and sectarian, orthodox Buddhism with its priesthood on the other. McCallum relies too heavily here on the work of Hori Ichirō, who tended to place the *hijiri* wholly outside the religious establishment and to suggest a distinct division between popular religion and Buddhist orthodoxy. McCallum would have drawn a slightly different picture had he looked at more recent work in this area, such as SHINNO 1991 and GOODWIN 1987, 1994 (although the last-mentioned may have appeared after McCallum completed his manuscript). Goodwin’s work in particular is important in showing that far closer links existed between *hijiri* and temples than implied by Hori. The interactions (rather than divisions) between *hijiri* and priests, and between popular religion and official, hierarchic religion, tend to get lost in McCallum’s account, especially when the respective sides are forced into diagrammatic boxes as is done in the conclusion.

There are several areas of possible further investigation that I would like to suggest. The links between Zenkō-ji and the Saikoku 西国 pilgrimage route are not explored despite evidence in popular religious practice that connects the two, evidence that might deepen our understanding of why the Zenkō-ji cult developed as it did and of why it emerged as an important popular religious practice in the Heian-Kamakura transition period. For example, in certain parts of Japan it is customary when someone dies to recite the *goeika* 御詠歌 (pilgrimage songs) of the respective Saikoku temples, followed by that of Zenkō-ji; this practice is believed to lead the soul through the entire Saikoku pilgrimage (generating enough merit for it to enter the Pure Land), then to guide it to Zenkō-ji, the Pure Land’s gateway.

The connection between Zenkō-ji and the Saikoku pilgrimage suggested by this practice is confirmed by the scrolls (*kakejiku* 掛軸) carried by Saikoku pilgrims. These scrolls are stamped at every temple on the pilgrimage route, then embossed and mounted. The latter process involves sending the scroll to Zenkō-ji, where its container, usually a wooden box, is stamped with the temple seal.¹ As such it would appear that Zenkō-ji is seen as an end destination beyond, yet connected to, the Saikoku pilgrimage. The apparent connection is especially relevant in light of the possibility that both Zenkō-ji and the Saikoku pilgrimage gained prominence during the late Heian/early Kamakura periods. McCallum cites the links between Onjō-ji (Mii-dera) and Zenkō-ji in this era, and notes that the earliest recorded pilgrimage to Zenkō-ji was by Onjō-ji’s head priest Kakuchū (1118–1177; pp. 35–36), a figure also associated with the Saikoku route (indeed, his pilgrimage there in 1161 might have been the first journey around the entire route). Further examination of the possible links between Zenkō-ji, Onjō-ji, and the Saikoku pilgrimage would undoubtedly yield much useful information.

¹ I have discussed this issue with a number of firms that emboss and mount such scrolls in the Kyoto and Osaka regions, and it appears that this is fairly standard practice.

There are two areas where some comparison might have been beneficial. First, additional light could have been shed on the issue of icon replication in the development of the Shin Zenkō-ji network if a look had been taken at another very major process of replication in Japan: that of pilgrimage routes (most notably the Saikoku and Shikoku routes), especially during the Tokugawa period. The use of replication to bring Zenkō-ji's icon to those unable to visit the temple itself reflects the practice, common in Japan and elsewhere, of bringing sacred locations and objects to the faithful. Second, interesting parallels might have been drawn between Zenkō-ji's icon and Kōbō Daishi. I was struck by the similarities between the two, Kōbō Daishi being another "living icon" who is hidden from view in a sacred center, who is the focus of a huge and influential cult in Japan, and who provides a variety of benefits, guards over the spirits of the dead, and serves as the subject of numerous legends and miracle stories. Although from the perspective of art history it might be irrelevant to compare a statue and a body (as it were), such an analysis might yield many interesting new angles for understanding the dynamics of the Zenkō-ji cult as a religious phenomenon.

In conclusion, McCallum's book is a worthwhile study of the factors and issues involved in the formation and growth of a cult centered on a statue. Whilst it is written in part to address an important methodological issue in the field of art history, it is of value to students of religious history as well. In its attempts to transcend disciplinary boundaries it augments our growing understanding of the religious dynamics of premodern (particularly Kamakura-period) Japan, and provides further information about the ways in which popular religious cults have arisen and played an influential role in Japanese religious history.

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