

Mark TEEUWEN, trans., *Motoori Norinaga's The Two Shrines of Ise: An Essay of Split Bamboo (Ise Nikū Sakitake no Ben)*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz (IZUMI: Quellen, Studien und Materialien zur Kultur Japans, vol. 3), 1995. 165 pp. ISBN 3-44703626-5.

MARK TEEUWEN, IN THIS SUPPLEMENT to his thesis (1996), offers a useful translation of a text composed by Motoori Norinaga (1730–1801) in 1798, along with the facsimile of a woodblock edition in Norinaga's own hand, with a transcription in Roman characters. The text intervenes in the long dispute between the two shrines at Ise, rejecting the outer shrine's claims for equal status of Amaterasu and Toyouke, though in a way that does great honor to the latter: Amaterasu worships Toyouke just as the Emperor worships the gods; but it is interesting to see something like a theological debate in Shintō. Unfortunately, the debate was stifled by the authorities, just as in the case of the Pantheon Dispute in the Meiji era, and Shinto developed in a ritualistic direction with little theological reflection.

Norinaga, who played a cardinal role in shaping Japanese aesthetics, philology, and cultural self-understanding, had some of the traits of an enlightened modernizing reformer. His discussion of the controversy acquires balance and serenity from his sober historical view of the sources. But some of his attitudes are far from modern. He strikes a theological pose of simple faith of the kind that can only flourish in a provincial ghetto. Against Neo-Confucian reinterpretations of the Shinto mythology, he insists that Amaterasu is “the great ancestress of the emperors, as well as the sun in the heavens that illuminates this world.” His contemporary Ueda Akinari (1734–1809), who had looked at the sun through Dutch telescopes, denounced him as an “ignorant old bumpkin” and pointed out how arbitrary it was to regard Japanese traditions as supreme truth, to be revered by all other countries. Norinaga robed himself in the mantle of fideism: “beyond ordinary logic there is also a mysterious logic”; the universal role of Amaterasu and Japan is a principle “that knows no bounds, that is difficult to fathom and mysterious” (p. 14).

Is his attitude naively pre-modern, or should we rather associate it with those movements of religious fideism and nationalistic chauvinism which have been so virulent a feature of modern culture in the West? Many features of his defence of tradition could be read as a parody of similar theological stances in the West. His concern for the purity of Japanese tradition, contaminated by foreign imports such as Buddhism, recalls Western polemics against

the Hellenization of Christianity. His return to authentic scriptures, as opposed to the Confucianizing “Five Shinto Scriptures” of the outer shrine lineage, which actually are no older than the thirteenth century, suggests Protestant modernity, while Catholic modernity is parodied in his inclusivist theology, according to which Amaterasu is “not only the sun god of our Empire, but the all-embracing sun god that illuminates China, India and all other lands as well.” Faced with the view that Amaterasu is “a god who has long since died in the Age of the Gods—a gross sacrilege and the extreme of horror,” he affirms his possession of a uniquely valuable revelation: “It is pitiful indeed that in other lands the true traditions of the Age of the Gods have all these years gone unknown” (p. 15). That is transparently absurd to Western readers, but it prompts the suspicion that our own traditions, when threatened, have been just as fatuous in their response.

The failure of the Chinese to understand that their food originates from “the beneficence of Toyouke no Okami” is explained as follows: “because this is a foreign country, people there have not the slightest notion of the truth” (p. 19). The xenophobia underlying exclusivist and inclusivist theologies is here laid bare. As is often the case in Christian theology too, Norinaga’s philological acuteness is at the service of an orthodoxy that feeds on shadows: “The reason I elaborate upon the matter so extensively, is that I from the bottom of my heart long to make the people who think that there is no god more prominent than Kuni no Tokotachi no Mikoto recognize their error, to correct immediately the old theory that this god resides in the Outer Shrine, and to make apparent the true, most august beneficence of Toyouke no Okami” (p. 31). History is full of such impassioned religious utterances, and they must be taken with a pinch of salt. The critical coolness that is needed to trace them back to their all-too-human sources must not however make us insensitive to whatever authentic ethical and religious experience may underlie them. Such discernment is the supreme challenge of “religious studies.”

REFERENCE

TEEUWEN, Mark

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