

REVIEWS

Ian READER and George J. TANABE, Jr., *Practically Religious: Worldly Benefits and the Common Religion of Japan*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1998. xii + 303 pp. \$22.95 paper, ISBN 0-8248-2090-8.

OPINION POLLS ON religious attitudes in Japan present what is often taken to be an anomaly: low levels of religious affiliation combined with high levels of religious participation. A recent study commissioned by the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture offers yet another anomaly. Although 19% of those responding to the survey described themselves as atheist, fully one-quarter of these "atheists" professed belief in the existence of kami or buddhas. Clearly we are in need of better tools or concepts if we are to continue to speak of and understand Japanese religious belief and practice.

In *Practically Religious*, Reader and Tanabe suggest that *genze riyaku*, translated as this-worldly or practical benefits, is a useful tool towards a comprehensive understanding of Japanese religion. Far from being an aberrant form of religious practice—a compromise with, or exploitation of, the superstitious practices of the masses—"the practical and conceptual framework of this-worldly benefits," the authors convincingly argue, "is the matrix within which much of Japanese religion thrives and must therefore be understood," (257).

The rather lengthy Introduction presents the framework of their argument. Although often associated with new religious movements, *genze riyaku* is, in fact, integral to the faith and practice of Shinto and the established Buddhist sects. The centrality of this element illustrates that Japanese religion is governed by a world-affirming viewpoint, despite the emphasis placed on funeral rites and ancestor veneration. Indeed, such veneration is often understood as contributing to the this-worldly happiness of the present generation. However, the benefits sought are not exclusively materialistic; they also relate to spiritual states and entail ethical obligations. Finally, *genze riyaku* provides the foundation of the Japanese "common religion," a term offered as a more useful substitute for popular or folk religion.

This argument is fleshed out in the subsequent chapters that deal with the nature of the benefits sought and their ritual settings, scriptural supports for *genze riyaku*, the ethical implications of benefits, the role of deities and other religious figures in granting benefits, practices engaged in to receive benefits, the marketing of benefits, and a review of popular guidebooks plugging various popular benefits. From these chapters I will cull four points to indicate how the authors use *genze riyaku* as a key to the understanding of Japanese religion.

Although syncretism, especially the assimilation of Shinto deities into the Buddhist pantheon through the doctrine of *honji suijaku*, is often described as one characteristic of Japanese religion, questions can be raised as to the extent, or practical implications, of this assimilation. In fact, few examples of a specific kami being worshiped as a particular buddha can be found in shrines or temples in Japan. Reader and Tanabe argue that the real syncretism takes place in *genze riyaku*.

Kami and buddhas are fused together with the torch of pious expectation that both are equally capable of providing benefits. The assimilation of the kami and the buddhas takes place not in Shinto and its shrines, nor in Buddhism and its temples, but within the conceptual and ritual dynamics of practical benefits that lie at the heart of Japanese common religion. *Shimbutsu shūgō* takes place, not because people think of *honji suijaku*, but because they think of *genze riyaku*. (151)

Secondly, the authors rely on a distinction between affective belief and cognitive belief to explain how it is that people who profess to have little faith in the efficacy of amulets, or *omamori*, still engage commonly in the purchase of these instruments of *genze riyaku* at shrines and temples throughout the country. While still in need of some refinement, as the authors themselves seem to acknowledge (129), this distinction could be useful in explaining the above-mentioned pattern of religious participation without religious belief.

In their exploration of the marketing of benefits, Reader and Tanabe shed the light of common sense on a topic that is often either ignored or used as a club to attack Japanese religious practice. If *genze riyaku* is central to the common religion of Japan, then it should be no wonder that benefits are offered to attract people, and their financial support, to religious institutions. As the authors point out:

In examining the commercial dimensions of the sale of practical benefits—and the economic imperatives that underpin the activities of religious institutions in Japan—one has to recognize that economics, marketing, and commercialization are part of the religious process: they go hand in glove with the ethical and spiritual meanings of religious practice.... These activities are essential to the well-being of the temple or shrine and therefore to the continued practice of religion itself. The promise of practical benefits is not, in any case, simply a matter of securing economic stability; it is also a prime means of making faith and asserting religious truth. (229–30)

Finally, attention is drawn to the ludic element of Japanese religion. Particular temples or shrines become associated with certain benefits through puns—and the authors engage in some word play of their own in describing temples that offer relief from hemorrhoids (238). In the practice of *genze riyaku*, concern with bodily functions and sexual relations is encouraged and raised to a level “worthy” of religion.

[I]t is essential to recognize that such elements are not marginal to an ethical and logical system; they are central manifestations of a common religious process. The earth and the magical are part and parcel of the fabric of contemporary Japan, not aberrations from it. (254)

The wealth of examples and wide range of topics pertinent to religion in Japan covered in this book in itself offer a comprehensive introduction to contemporary Japanese religiosity, as well as supporting the authors’ claim to the centrality of *genze riyaku*. Indeed, so much detail is presented that it can

be overwhelming—like trying to pack too many shrines and temples into a day-trip to Kyoto. But it is still worth the experience.

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