Book Reviews

Straitjacket Society: An Insider's Irreverent View of Bureaucratic Japan
Miyamoto Masao, MD
Forward by Itami Jūzō
Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1994.
197pp. Hardback.

Reviewed by J. Mark Ramseyer,
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This book is fun, readable, and cheap. Author-protagonist Miyamoto Masao studied medicine in New York. He liked the city, and stayed several years more to work. As a quintessential yuppie-in-training, however, he did not just do medicine. He also acquired a lover, a nose for Bordeaux and a taste for designer suits. All this in tow, he eventually returned to Japan for a prestigious career at the Ministry of Health and Welfare. Alas, it was a prestigious bust. He wrote the best-seller of which this book is an edited translation, and promptly blew his bureaucratic career. Fact or fiction—he claims this is all fact—it makes for a great read.

As the book opens, Miyamoto is quarantine officer for the port of Kobe. He has no responsibilities, for no one thinks him responsible. Once a fast-track bureaucrat, he has landed in this deadest of the dead-end jobs. From his Kobe desk, he begins his flashback about how all this came to be. As he explains it, the moral is simple: true intellectuals have no place in the Japanese bureaucracy. While abroad, he had learned to cherish his own preferences, to think independently, and to speak freely. A tragic mistake it was, for Japanese bureaucrats cannot deal with men so free-spirited and individualistic. Confronted in him with a man who thought for himself, they shipped him off to their in-house Gulag.

Much of the tale's delight lies in how Miyamoto describes the mindless and tasteless conformity he found in the government. He revels in stories about how bureaucrats stay late night after night, watching television, drinking beer, and waiting for calls from the Diet that may never come. He mocks their low-brow tastes in food and dress. He proudly details the elaborate scheme he invented to take a vacation to which all bureaucrats were legally entitled but which only he dared take. And he graphically recounts their group outings to the *onsen* (hot spring), their drunken dances over dinner, and their fraternity house fascination with pornographic videos. Miyamoto's Diet members are idiots, but his bureaucrats are conformist child prodigies who can run the country but who never came to terms with adolescence.

This book is a great way to kill an afternoon at the beach. Unfortunately, Miyamoto would have it be more. As a professional psychoanalyst and amateur political scientist, he would have us consider it an Important Book. Too bad for him—for it does not support the two hypotheses he most wants to prove: that Japan is a fundamentally conformist society, and that bureaucrats ultimately run Japan. Take each in turn.

CONFORMITY

To explore what the book says about Japanese conformity, consider why Miyamoto

landed in Kobe. As he tells it, the Ministry killed his career because it (and Japan generally) is so brutally conformist. Now, Japan may indeed be conformist and the Ministry brutally so, but how the Ministry treated Miyamoto tells us nothing about the issue. While supposedly working there, Miyamoto wrote and published the elaborately bad-taste polemics he recounts here. Ask yourself whether so classically American an institution as a large corporate law firm would promote a young associate who wrote such essays? Or whether the University of Chicago would tenure a junior professor who did? Or even whether the Presbyterian mission board would retain such a missionary? Others can speak for the Presbyterians, but I am pretty sure Miyamoto would not have lasted long either at a law firm or at the University of Chicago.

In fact, Miyamoto did much more than publicly embarrass the Ministry. He told his (poorly paid) bureaucratic colleagues that back in New York he made ten times as much money. He flaunted Italian suits they could never afford. And he incessantly griped about overtime. When his colleagues killed time during the late-night Diet sessions by drinking beer, he went to a nearby French restaurant and sipped wine. When they planned a weekend at the onsen, he refused to go unless they gave him Monday off. And when they passed him a pin-up magazine on one of the weekend trips, he replied (p. 54):

> These photos emphasize sex in a licentious sort of way; if the photographer had let his individuality interact more with the model, they'd be more alive, wouldn't they?

Huh? Back in New York, he claims, his employer would happily have promoted him. Maybe—but to me that is reason enough to stay in Chicago.

Nonetheless, an American law firm probably would not have ostracized Miyamoto the way the Ministry did, and it is worth asking why. I doubt it is because American lawyers "are accustomed from a very early age to using logic in their dealings with one another and have accordingly mastered techniques of controlling their anger and envy" (p. 42). I suspect it is because they would have fired him. Not having him around, they would have had no reason to ostracize him. Perhaps, in other words, the difference between an American firm and the Japanese Ministry is not the greater American individualism. Perhaps it is the Japanese civil service rules against firings.

BUREAUCRATIC SUPREMACY

Miyamoto would have us believe that bureaucrats are the masters of Japan. "It is no exaggeration to say that the Diet is the highest power of the state in name only," he writes. "In actuality, it is little more than a branch of the bureaucracy" (p. 111). This is not a theory Miyamoto invented. It is a notion observers of Japan routinely advance. To prove the point, however, Miyamoto primarily just notes how bureaucrats draft the laws that legislators pass and script the speeches that legislators make.

Suppose now that Miyamoto were dead wrong. Suppose that the majority party in the Diet firmly controlled the bureaucracy. Then ask whether the legislators in that party would write their own bills and speeches. The answer is probably "no," for if the Diet controlled the bureaucracy, then the majority party could use it as its private staff. Because it ultimately ran the bureaucracy, it would staff it with people whom it trusted and could demand that they write the bills and speeches that it needed. It could even ask them to look routinely for new initiatives that would promote its (the party's) own electoral interests.

In short, a party controlling a legislature would generally control the bureaucracy—and controlling the bureaucracy, would

generally use it exactly the way Miyamoto describes. It would have bureaucrats draft statutes because it stacked the bureaucracy with loyal and capable people. It would have them write speeches for just the same reason. And it would pass the bills they drafted because they drafted the bills it wanted to pass.

Indeed, several passages in this book suggest just this counter-hypothesis. According to Miyamoto, for example, when bureaucrats write a Prime Minister's script, they "cover every angle [they] can think of, knowing that a slip-up could well cost one of [them] a promotion" (p. 40). They treat the other legislators with deference as well, for the "Diet has absolute sway over every member of the government bureaucracy.... For some reason, bureaucrats respond to Diet members with unconditional obedience. Requests for materials cause general pandemonium, disrupting normal operations entirely" (pp. 28–9).

Crucially, however, bureaucrats show this deference only toward the legislators who control their careers: those in the majority party. Those in the minority parties they treat with disdain (p. 29):

> A representative of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), for example, who might have sway over office personnel decisions, receives an extraordinarily thorough reply, with page after page of extra information that no one is ever likely to read. At the opposite extreme is the Japan Communist Party (JCP), which gets no more information than the average person could get with a minimum of effort. These are not bureaucrats who independently make policy. These are bureaucrats who answer loyally the bidding of majority legislators.

Miyamoto's story is lots of fun. It is too bad he took himself so seriously, for it could have been even more fun. When he pillories bureaucrats and brags about his elaborate vacation schemes, the book is genuinely amusing. And one should accept it as just such a book. This is not a book for which the realistic test is whether the author will win the Pulitzer equivalent or a tenured spot at the University of Tokyo. It is a book for which the test is whether it matches a Stephen King for an afternoon on the beach. To be honest, it does not; but it does pass the hours painlessly enough and spares one the nightmares a good King generates. In the end, that is not a bad deal.

Religious Pluralism and Truth: Essays on Cross-Cultural Philosophy of Religion

Thomas Dean, ed.
Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995. xii, 271pp. Hardback US$19.95. (pbk.).

Reviewed by Joseph S. O'Leary, Sophia University, Tokyo

Though these essays date from the 1970s and early 1980s, their publication is beautifully timed, for the question of truth is imposing itself more and more as the central one in religious studies. Faced with Aum Shinrikyō, with its misery of madness and crime that carries the mask of religion, even government bureaucrats are being forced to discern true from false religion, and even sociologists are likely to find their value-free observations contaminated by worries about truth. In the more genteel sphere of interreligious ecumenism, the question of truth has proved more troubling than one would have wished. The generous recognition of a parity among the world's great faiths, all of them true in their distinctive styles, has been contested by such thinkers as Paul Griffiths, Gavin D'Costa, Kenneth Surin, Joseph DiNoia and Harold Netland, who insist on the logical incompatibility between the truth-claims of different religions. In these debates a fundamental philosophical