

Willis STOESZ, ed., *The Living Way: Stories of Kurozumi Munetada, a Shinto Founder*. New York: Altamira Press, 2000. xxxviii + 256 pp. \$62.00 cloth, ISBN 0-7425-0341-0. \$17.95 paper, ISBN 0-7425-0342-9.

KUROZUMIKYŌ is one of the earliest of the new religions in Japan and has been the subject of both scholarly work and inspirational material. In various publications the religion has functioned as a means through which to view and understand Japanese new religions as a whole and as a source of inspiration to bolster the faithful. One finds elements from both types of writings in the recent work edited by Willis Stoesz, *The Living Way*.

*The Living Way* is the third collaborative effort between Stoesz and the Kurozumikyō leadership and is published as part of The Sacred Literature Series of the International Sacred Literature Trust. This collaboration may account for the varying approaches found within the text. According to the opening pages of *The Living Way*, for example, the Trust was established in part to make available texts from different faiths that “have the power to inspire, console, enlighten and transform.” The editor’s introduction, on the other hand, states that “most readers’ understanding of ‘Shinto’ will be considerably broadened” by reading the stories about Kurozumi Munetada (xxi) and that these stories allow readers “to gain entrance to the wider Japanese religious tradition” (xxii).

The editor’s introduction offers a concise but helpful outline of some of the major aspects of Kurozumikyō, beginning with the life of its founder, Kurozumi Munetada (1780–1850). As Stoesz notes, Kurozumi’s “life and work took place almost entirely in Okayama and the surrounding countryside” (xxii), where “the region was affected by the same social and economic trends that were bringing winds of impending change everywhere in the closing years of the Tokugawa shogunate, opening Japanese culture to new levels of development” (xxi). Although there is no elaboration on what these specific changes were nor how they affected Kurozumi and his religion, we learn that Kurozumi was able to “extend his thought toward world-wide horizons” and therefore Kurozumikyō “may be called a universal religion, not in its geographical extent but in its intention” (xxxi).

A summary of Kurozumi’s teachings, especially his understanding of the universal presence of Amaterasu, then follows. Kurozumikyō teaches that Amaterasu, symbolized by the sun, is the guiding spirit of the universe and

energizes life at all levels. Amaterasu is present in every thought and action but is accessible especially wherever true sincerity is found (xxix, xxxii). The teachings of Kurozumi are expressed in two important rituals practiced in the religion: *nippai* (worship before the sun), which is the “paradigmatic ritual expression of Kurozumi spirituality” (xxv), and *majinai* (healing ceremony), in which the founder communicates the vital force of Amaterasu’s presence to the sick and ailing (166). Stoesz suggests that as a faith healer and teacher of faith in Amaterasu the founder shared similarities with others of his time. Yet Kurozumi expressed these ideas and practices in the extraordinary way he related to others and in the manner in which he taught his followers to do likewise.

The centerpiece of *The Living Way* is a collection of 127 stories about Kurozumi Munetada, and here there is a shift from the introduction and its consideration of themes common to Kurozumikyō and other Japanese religions to stories that focus almost entirely on Kurozumi the individual. These stories and sermons represent the religion’s authorized understanding of its founder as collected, told, and rewritten by leaders and staff of the religion, including the Kurozumikyō School of Theology. The stories continue to be actively used in the religion today and function as the religion’s canon (xxxv). The collection of stories and sermons then tell us as much about how the leaders of Kurozumikyō intend their followers and others to view their founder as they tell us about the character of Kurozumi himself.

The stories do not seem to be arranged in any specific order nor by any particular category. Indeed the editor informs the reader that one “can start reading this book almost anywhere” and “begin with any of the stories” (xiii). One can find, however, three general themes intermingled throughout the stories: conversion, healing, and morals and ethics.

The thrust of the stories collected in *The Living Way* is to provide readers with a sampling of the charismatic persona of Kurozumi and his teachings. As such the founder is seen as a guide to living. Since the collected stories are utilized in Kurozumikyō to instruct and inspire its followers, not surprisingly many of the stories end with an assortment of people becoming devout followers of Kurozumi after meeting the founder and being profoundly moved by the sincerity of his spiritual character. Indeed, stories that have as their focus conversion or missionary themes number roughly 40 in all.

Religious founders are often associated with signs and wonders and Kurozumi is no exception. *The Living Way* tells of Kurozumi performing a variety of miracles, including healing the crippled and curing the afflicted of smallpox (story 31), tuberculosis (story 39), leprosy (story 37), and blindness (story 48). There is even a story of Kurozumi bringing a dead man back to life (story 42). The prominence of healing stories (nearly 30 in all) in *The Living Way* suggests that Kurozumikyō still views healing as an important aspect of its faith.

Part of the reason the stories in *The Living Way* were collected and translated is so that they could reach the “English-speaking world” (xix). Profoundly moving as the stories may be, the charisma of Kurozumi’s personality is less

accessible today than when the founder was alive. So too are the miracles and healings received as a result of direct meetings with Kurozumi. Yet the fact that Kurozumikyō continues to emphasize stories of the founder that stress his personality and spiritual powers suggests that the religion is rooted in the process of memorialization and reflection on the past. This can affect the growth and vitality of a religion as Kurozumikyō has suffered serious decline among some of its membership, for example in Hawaii where the religion has died out. In this regard, the content of *The Living Way* works against its intended function: to reach across ethnic and cultural divides and connect with those living today (xviii).

Yet the stories presented in *The Living Way* are poignant testimonies to the sincerity, compassion, and wisdom of the founder of Kurozumikyō. That *The Living Way* provides insight into the spirituality of a remarkable man living in the late Tokugawa period is clear. To what extent it broadens one's understanding of Shinto and illuminates the important issues surrounding Japanese religion and culture of that time, however, is less so. The stories focus on the spirituality and charisma of Kurozumi and because they are meant to guide and inspire the faithful today, the stories for the most part transcend any particular historical, social, or economic context.

In short, two different books can be found in *The Living Way*: the one anticipated by the introduction that has comprehension as its goal, and the one presented to the reader that seeks to inspire and transform. As an aside, there is a curious reference to the cover of *The Living Way*, asking the reader to consult stories 14 and 30 for an explanation of why straw sandals appear on the book's cover (xiii). The reference is odd because sandals do not appear on the paperback cover of *The Living Way*, a portrait of a seated Kurozumi Munetada does instead. In the case of *The Living Way*, the adage of not judging a book by its cover certainly applies.

**Jay Sakashita**  
*University of Hawaii*