



**Ugo Dessi, *Japanese Religions and Globalization***

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JAPANESE RELIGIONS are increasingly shaped by global influences, their leaders actively incorporate global themes into their religious discourse, and they clearly seek to influence other cultures beyond the Japanese archipelago. Yet, very few studies have considered the interactions between Japanese religions and globalization. Ugo Dessi's monograph not only represents an effort to address this gap, but also provides a solid foundation for the understanding of these complex dynamics.

The book is ambitious in both scope and theoretical perspective, as Dessi integrates his previous work to an array of approaches to religion and cultural globalization to propose a typology of fourteen modes in which Japanese religions participate in global dynamics. He applies this typology to a broad diversity of case studies covering almost all Japanese religious expressions, both in and outside Japan: traditional Buddhism, Shinto, new religions, and even "New Age"-like phenomena like macrobiotics and Zen meditation. For each type in his framework, which I summarize below, Dessi generally provides in-depth material, systematically linking the evidence to insights from the social sciences, religious studies, and Japanese studies. Drawing from sources in English, Japanese, and German, Dessi demonstrates an admirable knowledge of Japanese religions, which he combines with recent sociological theories.

The volume, however, "is not a comprehensive overview of religion in contemporary Japan, but an analysis of the *global* implications of several selected case studies in terms of the typology presented" (10). Furthermore, Dessi acknowledges the possibility that the types outlined in his theoretical framework appear combined in certain phenomena, or even that different typologies may be valid in a given socio-religious context.

In an effort to avoid the risk of cultural bias, chapter 1 addresses two methodological issues: the definition of religion, and the periodization of globalization. First, Dessi reviews a number of definitions of religion, questioning both Western/Christian-informed definitions that prove problematic in the Japanese context, as well as extreme critiques that reject the concept of religion or overemphasize Japanese emic understandings. For Dessi, religion is a social subsystem that controls access to both worldly and otherworldly "goods" "through the authority of some super-empirical agency" (16). This working definition would take into account the characteristics of the Japanese religious culture, while it "embraces a broader variety of empirical phenomena... that are perceived by most Japanese people as

‘non-religious’” (16). Secondly, Dessi critiques social science theories that conceive globalization as deriving from Western modernity, and builds upon the Oriental globalization thesis to suggest that Japan was involved in global dynamics before the Meiji period, given the archipelago’s historical integration into the area of influence of China—the leading global power until the nineteenth century. Accordingly, processes of relativization, hybridization, and functional differentiation were already at work in Japan before the extensive import of Western modern culture. The focus of the book, nonetheless, is on the contemporary period of accelerated globalization.

Chapter 2 analyzes Japanese religions’ global-minded attitudes toward other religions. It first discusses the claims of religious pluralism (type 1) in the Religious Summit at Mount Hiei arranged by the Tendaishū 天台宗 and other Japanese religious organizations, as well as interreligious activities promoted by Risshō Kōseikai 立正佼成会. Beyond their pluralistic claims, however, examples taken also from the Japan Buddhist Federation (Zen-Nihon Bukkyōkai 全日本仏教会) and Jōdo Shinshū 浄土真宗 show that there is the tendency to religious inclusivism (type 2), by which Japanese spirituality is presented as superior. The chapter ends with the case of Sōka Gakkai’s 創価学会 *shakubuku* 折伏 campaign which illustrates the stance of religious exclusivism (type 3).

The varieties of local interpretations and hybrid forms that emerge in Japan under the influence of global cultural flows are the topic of chapter 3. The combination of the global discourse on human rights with Buddhist notions in organizations like Jōdo Shinshū, Jōdoshū 浄土宗, and Sōtōshū 曹洞宗 exemplifies a form of glocalization by which religious institutions incorporate external cultural elements to create new identities (type 4). On the other hand, the ways in which Shinto and Sōtōshū conflate ecological concerns with selective interpretations of Japanese religiosity illustrate a form of glocalization that emphasizes “native” religious sources (type 5).

Chapter 4 offers an informative discussion of the appropriation of Christian and Theosophical elements by new religions like Mahikari 真光 and Kōfuku no Kagaku 幸福の科学 to show how glocalization may be combined with cultural chauvinism in Japanese religions when these adopt foreign themes to reassert the superiority of Japanese culture (type 6). By contrast, foreign cultural ideas can be rejected as a reaction to homogenization and cultural imperialism (type 7), as evidenced in the critique of “Western” individualism in the rhetoric of religions like Shinto, Shingonshū 真言宗, and Sōka Gakkai.

The issues presented in the previous two chapters are discussed in chapter 5 in the context of glocalization overseas. After noting that until the 1960s Japanese religions abroad resisted cultural homogenization and served as identity markers for Japanese migrants (type 11), the analysis focuses on how Japanese religions abroad reshape new identities and ensure a following among non-Japanese by incorporating foreign cultural themes (type 8) or even Japanese themes from different religious traditions (type 9). This is the fascinating case of the incorporation of Zen

meditation techniques in North American Jōdo Shinshū to satisfy the demands of spiritual “seekers,” a hybrid form that could to some extent have a back influence to the Jōdo Shinshū tradition in Japan. But even in their glocalization overseas, Japanese religions can manifest attitudes of cultural chauvinism (type 10) when processes of hybridization are accompanied by an emphasis on the superiority of Japanese culture.

Chapter 6 deals with the role of Japanese religions as bearers of globalization, which contribute to global flows and provide resources to reshape new identities in other societies (type 12). Through the case of Zen meditation for Christians, Dessì demonstrates that Japanese religions are active in the globalization process “in forms that are independent from direct proselytizing and the acquisition of growing membership overseas” (88). Other examples are the Macrobiotics movement and the activities of organizations that promote academic work in the “West,” such as the Society for the Promotion of Buddhism (*Bukkyō Dendō Kyōkai* 仏教伝道協会), the International Shinto Foundation (*Shintō Kokusai Gakkai* 神道国際学会), and the Shinnyo-en Foundation.

Chapters 7 and 8 analyze how Japanese religions negotiate borders and compete with the dominant subsystems (type 13) such as politics, science, and education. Dessì offers a nuanced exposition of the secularization thesis and its relation to globalization, as well as its expression in the Japanese context. Here, the examples cover the political involvement of movements like Sōka Gakkai, Kōfuku no Kagaku, the issues of Yasukuni shrine and Shinto nationalism, as well as different attempts by various religious organizations at introducing their religious views into Japanese public education and the medical sphere.

The last chapter elucidates how Japanese religions and religious NGOs/NPOs reaffirm their function by engaging in the solution of global problems (type 14) like poverty, war, and social welfare. It closes with some interesting “interrogatives” concerning the potential support that Japanese religions may provide to the interests of the actors who dominate the global political subsystem. Dessì refers, for instance, to those Japanese religious organizations that support Tibetan affairs and promote the figure of the Dalai Lama, and he asks whether Japanese religions could instead cooperate with the hegemonic agendas of Western powers. In this perspective, “under certain conditions, Japanese religions might not only play an ancillary role but even contribute to some degree to the perpetuation of the very global problems for the solution of which they are mobilizing intellectual and material resources, if they approach global dynamics with an uncritical attitude” (141).

Besides providing detailed descriptions and convincing explanations of the types of global involvement, Dessì’s work shows that the study of religion in modern and contemporary Japan—as elsewhere—could hardly ignore the dynamics of globalization, even when dealing with “traditional” religions. For this, Dessì’s volume constitutes an indispensable reference that is already bearing fruit (see the recent contributions in AMSTUTZ and DESSÌ 2014). I can only hope that since the book’s

unit of analysis is basically the institutional level, future research would attempt to further integrate these insights into the individual level.

In a broader perspective, Dessì's outline of a periodization of Japanese globalization could be further applied and developed in the fields of Japanese history and society, while his typology may be useful for the study of religion and globalization in other contexts. The book is thus recommended for scholars and (advanced) students of Japanese religions, Japanese Studies/Asian Studies, and sociology of religion.

#### REFERENCES

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