

REVIEWS

Ian READER, *Religion in Contemporary Japan*. London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1991. xv + 277 pp. References, index. Paper; ISBN 0-333-52322-9.

Winston DAVIS, *Japanese Religion and Society: Paradigms of Structure and Change*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992. x + 327 pp. Index. Paper; ISBN 0-7914-0840-X.

The publication of *Religion in Contemporary Japan* and *Japanese Religion and Society* is a most welcome event for scholars interested in Japanese spirituality, particularly for those of us who reside in Japan. Both books address the world of Japanese religion in which we live and are part of—even as non-Japanese residents of this country—with the explicit aim of presenting an overall view of the subject. At a time when increased specialization has resulted in a growing number of works that deal only with limited aspects of the field, it is indeed—to use a Japanese term—*arigatai* that scholars dare to reflect upon the knowledge they have gathered and “provide a comprehensive picture of the place, workings, and perspectives of religion in contemporary society and in the lives of Japanese people” (READER, p. xiv), so that “when readers put the book down, they will have a deeper knowledge of Japanese society and culture in general, and possibly even deeper insight into the nature of religion itself” (DAVIS, p. 1). The value of the works is only increased by the fact that both Reader and Davis are academics who have done their homework as far as specific, in-depth research is concerned.

This reviewer happened to be on furlough in Europe when he read these volumes. Perhaps this accounts for the fact that I found them far more welcome reading than monographs on subjects often far removed from the interests of nonspecialists. Scholars on subjects relating to Japan are often asked to “explain” the secrets of Japanese society and culture, and it is quite pleasant to be able to say, “Well, you might find something in these volumes I just happened to read.”

Ian Reader’s overview of religion in Japan focuses upon its contemporary forms and looks in particular at religious behavior and the ways in which religious themes are found in the lives of ordinary people. Based upon direct observation and participation during the years the author resided in the country, Reader succeeds in conveying the atmosphere—one of prayer and of laughter, as he correctly points out—in which religious action is performed in Japan. After two introductory chapters on the major themes and framework of Japanese religiosity, he brings us closer to the social roles played by the two established traditions of Shinto and Buddhism, then continues with a look at the position of the individual as a religious figure. His observations are always enlivened and illustrated with concrete examples, such as the performance of pilgrimages, the use of amulets and talismans, and other religious activities often underestimated or overlooked by scholars opting for a more theoretical approach. In the last chapter he turns to the much commented-upon phenom-

enon of Japan's New Religions, concentrating largely upon Agonshū, one of the most prominent sects in recent years with its interesting blend of ancient cosmological themes and ultramodern presentational techniques. His conclusion—a little too concise, perhaps—attempts to sum up various of the themes taken up in the book and to make some overall comments on the “changing continuities” in Japanese religions. He asserts that “religion is thus not, in the final analysis, something that is out of date” but, on the contrary, something that “will no doubt continue to change in step with society while preserving and updating its inherent continuities so as to remain as relevant and responsive to Japanese needs on social and individual levels as it is at present” (p. 243).

Throughout the whole book one senses Reader's personal closeness to his subject. His vivid account of “religion in action” does not stop, however, at simply describing what is going on. Without losing himself in highbrow theoretical speculations, he enables us to locate the concrete phenomena in a broader framework that elucidates the role of religion in the social system and reveals the deeper views underlying the manifest behavior. Especially interesting is his constant attention to the problems of continuity and change and of particularism and universalism, problems with a long history yet which are also increasingly relevant in a Japan that claims to be a (post-modern?) international economic power.

Reading Reader's book outside Japan, this reviewer was constantly stimulated to compare the Japanese religious situation with that in the West, and felt a little disappointed that not even in the author's conclusions were any hints given to transcend the peculiar boundaries of Japan and to make the Western readers attentive to the fate of religion in their own rapidly changing societies. Reader talks about the “user-friendly” nature of Japan's new religious movements. Perhaps the book itself would have been a little more “user-friendly” if even a few brief references had been made to possibly similar trends in Western religions searching for a “user-friendliness” adapted to present times. And doesn't the growing emphasis that European sociologists of religion place on the importance of folk religiosity provide us a link and an opportunity for seeing that, in spite of all the differences, Japanese religiosity is much more embedded in universal human experience than it is unique, and that this applies also to its contemporary changes?

Except for this consideration and a few minor reservations—Reader's statement, for example, that most people in Japan have a “recognized sense of belonging to Shinto and Buddhism” (p. 6), that Tenrikyō is (still) classified under Shinto (p. 244, note 11), and especially his frequent use of secondary sources instead of primary materials for statistics—this volume can certainly be highly recommended as an up-to-date introduction to “religion in contemporary Japan,” both for general readers and, of course, especially for students interested in a deeper study of Japanese culture and religion.

The historical and comparative dimensions, not present in Reader's work, find a place in Winston Davis's study. Although his book is similar to Reader's in that it deals “with the relationship between Japanese religion, culture, and values on the one hand, and society, social change, and economic development on the other” (p. 1), Davis's approach falls under the rubric of what he calls

"historical sociology" since it takes up problems in Japan's religious history from the Tokugawa period to the present. It is moreover "poly-paradigmatic," i.e. it proposes theories, images, and methods eclectically adopted from various disciplines. Since his book is in fact a collection of materials previously published elsewhere, Davis takes pains to define what he means and does not mean by "paradigms" in order to convince the reader of the unity of his work. Paradigms, in his words, simply refer "to patterns of thought, behavior, or values which can be used to explain and/or understand still other thoughts, behavior, or values" (p. 4). Yet when he tries to elucidate further, the simplicity of this and other terms breaks down, leaving fairly intricate speculations that betray a penchant for theorization and require more than a superficial reading.

The eight chapters of Davis's book cover a wide spectrum of Japan's religious scene. The first chapter, "The Structure of Religious Groups," sets forth some of his basic presuppositions concerning the social organization of Japanese religion. It makes prolific use of Alfred Schutz's distinction between *in order to* motives and *because* motives, and leads to a breakdown of religious affiliations into "motivated," "obligated," and "mixed" categories. This breakdown is then compared with the religious scene in the West. In the following chapters, Davis considers the subjects of pilgrimage and of the struggle in the United Church of Christ in Japan during the last two decades, thus introducing the reader to the dynamics of social conflict. In the next three chapters, on the dynamics of social and economic change, the Weber thesis is critically revisited and illustrated by a sharp analysis of the relationship between Buddhism and modernization and, particularly, the work ethic in Ittōen. It goes without saying that these chapters also constitute a corrective to the one-sided view of Japan as a land of peaceful harmonious piety. The last two chapters on secularization and "Japan Theory" bring us back to contemporary Japan and the problems this country faces in defending its national identity.

Unlike Reader's work, Davis's book is certainly not an introductory volume to the world of Japanese religion and culture. The author's penchant for delving into problems of a highly theoretical nature make it a study that stimulates reflection and discussion but also limits it to specialists in the field. A discussion of specific points goes beyond the scope of this review and one can only express the hope that the issues raised by Davis will be taken up in further research, particularly by Japanese scholars—a vain hope? Scholars familiar with Davis's previous publications will not be surprised by its provocative, if not irritating, manner of expression, betraying the tension that exists not only in the reality of Japanese society and culture but also in the heart of the foreign observer who tries to make sense of it and to live with it. At the same time, Davis is extremely careful to maintain a balanced view. Both his "poly-paradigmatic" approach and, within the respective paradigms, his attention to and weighing of opposite views—e.g. conflict versus harmony—function as equilibrating mechanisms. Some might criticize this way of dealing with the tension as an escape, as somehow similar to the approach of those who claim that Japanese culture as such is characterized by the paradoxical coexistence of opposite value orientations, and thereby solve nothing. Others—including, to a certain degree, this reviewer—will agree with Davis that this method, while not solving all prob-

lems, "at least helps us to penetrate the allegedly inscrutable cultural patterns of Japanese society" (p. 4).

Although the papers in this collection have been "rewritten and updated," the result is not as completely tuned to the contemporary situation as Reader's book. For example, in chapter 3 (on the struggle in the United Church of Christ in Japan) no mention is made of more recent research or even existent studies like those of David REID (1979; 1991, pp. 71-96). Chapter 7, "The Secularization of Japanese Religion" uses old statistics which, although still valuable, could have been supplemented by later findings. Notwithstanding these minor shortcomings, Davis's *Japanese Religion and Society* is undoubtedly one of the most important recent contributions to this field of study. Especially when read after the "introductory course" of Ian Reader's *Religion in Contemporary Japan*, its stimulating value can be appreciated to the fullest. Both books, therefore, deserve a place in the library of every student of Japanese religion and culture.

REFERENCES

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Jan Swyngedouw

Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture